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Dave Eggers and Human Rights Culture

Proefschrift voorgelegd tot het behalen van de graad van
Doctor in Letterkunde

2016

Acknowledgements

As much as the myth of the solitary and confined doctoral researcher may seem to confirm it, this research project on human rights culture and Dave Eggers would not have been possible without the considerable support of a great many people. Indeed, I have been able to count on a wide range of colleagues, friends, and family who were always there to celebrate every victory – however small – and overcome any obstacle – however daunting. First and foremost, I would like to mention my supervisors, Prof. Stef Craps and Prof. Pieter Vermeulen. I want to thank them both for the faith they placed in me to take on this FWO-funded research project and for the convivial relationship we maintained throughout. In an academic world where a PhD depends so heavily on the working relationships researchers and their supervisors have, I was exceptionally lucky to work with two who were eminently approachable and intellectually engaging in equal measure.

My thanks also go out to the members of my Doctoral Guidance Committee (DGC), Prof. Lyndsey Stonebridge, Prof. Gert Buelens, and Prof. Eva Brems, who made time to read parts of my research at every stage of the process and who involved me in relevant networks and events whenever they had the chance. I would specifically like to thank Prof. Stonebridge for inviting me to take part in the Humanities in Human Rights collaborative skills project and Prof. Brems for providing me with the unique opportunity to interview Dave Eggers as part of his being awarded the UGent's 2015 Amnesty International Chair. I am also indebted to Prof. Buelens, both for his valuable critical voice on my DGC and, more broadly, for supporting my research interests and projects since my undergraduate degree. It is a testament to his wide-ranging expertise that he has continued to provide me with invaluable guidance, even though this

dissertation on contemporary American literature differs quite markedly from the Victorian and, especially, Dickensian topics we worked on for my BA and MA theses.

In this respect, I also owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my erstwhile co-supervisor for those undergraduate theses, Dr. Jasper Schelstraete, who soon became a close colleague once I crossed the Rubicon that separates students from staff. Thank you for your excellent advice, banter, and friendship. I would also like to single out Dr. Birgit Van Puymbroeck and Dr. Sarah Haas for their much appreciated generosity of spirit and friendly chatter. Additionally, thanks go out to all the (former) colleagues who made coming to work a pleasure: Dr. Maaheen Ahmed, Christine Bezari, Holly Brown, Joanna Britton, Dr. Koenraad Claes, Prof. Philippe Codde, Charlotte D'Eer, Marita Dierick, Dr. Gero Guttzeit, Tom Parlevliet, Dr. Sarah Posman, Sevda Salayeva, Dr. Tobi Smethurst, Cedric Van Dijck, Dr. Deborah Van Durme, Prof. Marianne Van Remoortel, Vicky Van Steenbrugge, Dr. Stijn Vervaet, Gilles Weyns, and Beatrijs Wille. Thanks also to the two secondary school teachers who sparked my interest in literature, Marc Verdoodt and Anne Van Daele.

Finally, thank you to my friends and family for their love and support: my parents, my grandparents, uncle John, Bram, Bart and Elise, Laurien, Sam, Sien, and – most of all – my partner Veerle.

List of Abbreviations

AU – African Union

DGC – Doctoral Guidance Committee

FBI – Federal Bureau of Investigation

ICC – International Criminal Court

NSA – National Security Agency

PATRIOT Act – Uniting and Strengthening America By Providing Appropriate Tools
Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act

UDHR - Universal Declaration of Human Rights

UN – United Nations

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Introduction

In 2015, the American author Dave Eggers was awarded Ghent University's Amnesty International Chair for his work in the field of human rights. This Chair is awarded each year to someone who has "made exceptional efforts in the fight for human rights" (Furniere). Ghent University's choice of laureate begs a number of questions that go to the heart of this American author-activist's place in the contemporary American cultural field. How can a literary author make an "exceptional" effort in the fight for human rights or have a meaningful impact on human rights related issues? There seems to be an obvious answer to this question. Dave Eggers is prolifically active, not just as a writer, but as a publisher, editor, and activist. In addition, his literary success is intricately bound up with collaborative testimonial projects such as *What Is the What* or *Zeitoun*, which testify to human rights issues in Central Africa and the United States respectively. Yet it is not immediately clear *why* Eggers's different forms of activism, from charitable foundations and organizations to collaborative testimonial works, warrant the label of "human rights activism" or how his involvement as an intermediary affects that activism. Nor is it obvious how the themes addressed in his novels and short stories, such as global inequality (*You Shall Know Our Velocity*), the impact of globalization (*A Hologram for the King*), or privacy (*The Circle*), are affected by their being focused through the lens of human rights. Moreover, how does his largely literary contribution to the "fight" for human rights relate to more formalized legal and political human rights projects? The question as to why Eggers was distinguished by Amnesty and Ghent University thus ultimately comes down to the following: how do Eggers's various forms of storytelling relate to the multifarious discourse of human rights? This dissertation grew out of a need to address these interconnected questions.

Questioning the deceptively “obvious,” it traces and maps the interconnections between this contemporary American author’s (extra-)textual activism and the prominent discourse of human rights.

The specific reason for Eggers’s selection for the Amnesty International Chair seems to lie in two aspects of his prolific activities in the contemporary American cultural field. First, he is the founder of a number of charitable foundations and organizations, the most important of which centre on education. 826 Valencia and ScholarMatch seek to provide educational opportunities for people from disadvantaged backgrounds in the United States. In addition to these, there is also the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation and the Zeitoun Foundation, which Eggers founded with the victim-collaborators of his books *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun* respectively, and to which he has donated all royalties from these best-selling books. The Valentino Achak Deng Foundation built and operates a school in Deng’s home village in South Sudan, while the Zeitoun Foundation funded reconstruction projects in New Orleans and promoted interfaith understanding. Second, Eggers has sought to translate his success on the literary scene into additional activism. In 1998, he founded McSweeney’s, which has since grown into a well-respected non-profit publishing house. Based in San Francisco, McSweeney’s produces books (including Eggers’s own works), an influential literary journal (*Timothy McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern*), a bi-monthly magazine (*The Believer*), and Voice of Witness, a non-profit book series that depicts human rights crises around the world through the stories of the men and women who experienced them.

It is perhaps his authorial persona and output though that comes closest to explaining why he was nominated for a contribution to the “fight for human rights.” Indeed, Eggers himself seems convinced that storytelling is the central axis around which his activism turns. In mine and Stef Craps’s interview with the author regarding his being awarded the Amnesty International Chair, Eggers expresses his firm belief in providing the means for those whose human rights have been violated to “reclaim their narrative” (qtd. in Bex and Craps 559). The traumatic pasts and presents disempowered people recount are likely to be perceived by a contemporary audience, especially a Western one, as human rights issues. More broadly, his work as an author, editor, and publisher, most of which is centred on telling or amplifying the stories of disempowered others, highlights the conceptual importance of narrative for the human rights project.

In this broader sense, James Dawes has argued that the act of bearing witness through stories lies at the heart of the human rights movement as a whole (Dawes, *Evil Men* 8). This helps to refine the scope for this dissertation's central questions in that narrative and storytelling thus become the nexus of the interconnections between Eggers and human rights. Similarly, this coalescence of narrative form and human rights forms the basis for a partial reconceptualization of human rights that emphasizes its cultural in addition to its legal and political roots. In order to bring Eggers's ties to human rights into focus, in other words, my analysis examines the affordances and obstacles his use of narrative – and his role in shaping those narratives – faces through its embedding in the cultural field of human rights.¹

In doing so, the analyses in this dissertation position themselves at the crossroads of a number of prevailing theoretical, methodological, and analytical approaches in the recently emerged field of human rights and literature. In terms of theory, the field of human rights has swelled beyond its original, legal borders as a result of concerted interest on the part of, amongst others, humanities scholars. The humanities have sought to bring their expertise with regard to trauma narratives, (trans)cultural memory, restitution, and commemorative practices into touch with the world's foremost legal, political, and moral discourse.² Some of the field's foundational texts include Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith's *Human Rights and Narrated Lives* (2004), Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider's *Human Rights and Memory* (2010), and Andreas Huyssen's "International Human Rights and the Politics of Memory: Limits and Challenges" (2011).

¹ The first chapter of this dissertation is devoted to delineating this broader understanding of a "human rights culture" within which Eggers's oeuvre and activism can be embedded.

² Pheng Cheah sums up one of the main impetuses for the humanities to study human rights in "Humanity in the Field of Instrumentality" when she writes:

The proliferation of discourses on human rights after the end of the cold war indicates that globalization raises the deepest anxieties about the continuing preservation of our humanity. Because the humanities does not take the humanity of the human being as a given but sets as its basic task the inquiry of how humanity is constituted, it can help us assess whether the vicissitudes of globalization compel a radical rethinking of what it means to be human. (1552)

The latter's focus is typical of such studies. Huyssen contends that the abstract, legalistic discourse of human rights may be enriched by the "memory of rights violations" so as to provide it with a historical grounding that can confront the promise of universal rights with less utopian realities (607-608).³ Similarly, scholars working in history or law have sought to develop histories of the legal and political development of human rights against the backdrop of – mostly Western – history and culture. Samuel Moyn's *The Last Utopia* (2010) and Lynn Hunt's *Inventing Human Rights* (2007) can be considered emblematic, even if they severally embed the history of human rights in respectively a strictly contemporary and broader historical context. I will contextualize and engage with these works throughout this dissertation, qualifying some of their optimism and expanding their disciplinary purview at times so as to allow for a more comprehensive discussion of how literary rights-work takes place. Indeed, my positioning of Eggers vis-à-vis human rights provides a case study through which to explore some of the core assertions and assumptions upon which the coalescence of the humanities and human rights are based.

What makes Eggers's oeuvre and activism so apt as a means of contributing to the field of human rights and literature is how the theoretical concerns of this field manifest themselves on a formal level in his work. Even as his commitment to human rights issues makes him recognizable as a "human rights activist," his adept exploration of narrative form in service of those issues ties him to the processes and problems of human rights storytelling on a deeper level. In and of itself, Eggers's projects may seem typical with regard to human rights activism by authors. His penchant for collaborative testimonial work, contributions to human rights charities at home and abroad, and gentle coaxing of the reader's affective engagement with victim-subjects in, for instance, *What Is the What* or *Zeitoun* are commonplace in this respect. It has also been pointed out that his tendency to explore the insecurities and postnational identities of

³ In a special issue of PMLA on *The Humanities in Human Rights: Critique, Language, Politics*, Domna C. Stanton specifies what is meant by this abstraction in relation to human rights as they were universally proclaimed by the United Nation in 1948: "Human rights discourse openly embraces the universal ("the Universal Declaration of Human Rights"), though it is far from clear what the term specifically means in covenants and charters and, most especially, in practice" (1519).

American protagonists in the world is typical of twenty-first century American fiction.⁴ The innovation and peculiarity of Eggers is located on a more formal level, where the dynamics of his collaborative storytelling, affective engagement, and cross-cultural encounters are laid bare in his use of narrative voice, focalization, structure, dramatic tension, and character development. The mechanics of narrative voice as it is complexly constructed by the author and distortedly heard by the reader in *What Is the What* mimics the difficulty of engaging the subaltern's voice in the global public sphere. Similarly, the problematization of the relationship between charity, cross-cultural encounters, and human rights work in *You Shall Know Our Velocity* is poignantly played out in a series of silent dialogues between the Western protagonists and the disempowered subjects in the novel which run counter to the individual isolation of those characters as they undergo the narrative's events. The formal features of Eggers's works, in other words, call into question the basic premises with which his activism – and the human rights project more broadly – is engaged.

A key critical touchstone in this respect is the field of postcolonial studies, which provides a sceptical lens through which to survey the use of narrative form in aid of a global rights project which, as Moyn's and Hunt's studies reinforce, has its origins in the West. If the coalescence of the humanities and human rights has turned up some productive dynamics between the two, postcolonial theory provides a necessary foil to those optimistic conclusions. Edward Said's landmark study, *Orientalism* (1978), exposed the force of cultural imperialism, showing how a discourse of inequality between civilization and savagery paved the way for the colonial *mission civilisatrice*. A key part of the discourse of colonialism, as Homi K. Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture* (1995), is the exclusion of the subaltern from the hegemony through a fixed "ideological construction of otherness" (66). This is especially relevant in the context of human rights and narrative. As long as the concept of universal rights is a promise rather than a reality – a last utopia, as Moyn terms it – the relationship between those whose rights

⁴ See Peter Boxall's *Twenty-First Century Fiction* (2013), Caren Irr's *Toward the Geopolitical Novel* (2013), Timothy Galloway's *Understanding Dave Eggers* (2014). I will engage at length with all three of these studies in the first chapter as a means of positioning Eggers in the contemporary American cultural field.

are guaranteed and those who are perpetually at risk of having their rights violated is integral to the story of human rights. The issue at hand is that of how proclaimed equality and protections can be made real and can be sufficiently entrenched in a social, cultural, and political sense. The concept of narrative is key to untangling this issue. Joseph Slaughter's seminal work, *Human Rights Inc.* (2007), traces the interconnection of the *Bildungsroman* and the rise of human rights, noting in particular how the former helps subjects narrate their inclusion into a society of rights-bearers. Slaughter makes a valuable connection between the human rights project and the cultural field within which it operates, thereby plotting the course for subjects to secure recognition and protection of their rights. However, this process can also be tied to the postcolonial concern with regard to the hierarchy-reinforcing discourse that emerged from that culture in the past and which prevents such a process from ever taking place. The narrative route to inclusion must bridge those cross-cultural distinctions that facilitate exclusion if it is to be successful. It is this dissertation's ambition to bring the recent interest in human rights and literature into sustained contact with these postcolonial concerns so as to pave the way for a formal analysis of the politics of rights as it plays out in Eggers's oeuvre.

A critical point in this respect has to do with Eggers's own role in helping disempowered subjects reclaim their narrative. It is unclear whether or not his mediation facilitates an expansion of the purview of human rights or constitutes a mere incorporation of the victim-subject into the existing hegemony without challenging the exclusionary limits of that hegemony. The work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak helps throw this question into sharp relief, given her focus on the possibilities and salience of subaltern speech in the face of hegemonic exclusion in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, and her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"⁵ As such, postcolonial theory

⁵ Another key critical voice in this respect will be Judith Butler, who brings the issue of subaltern speech into contact with human rights in her afterword to the aforementioned special issue of PMLA on the subject: "The claim of human rights is articulated in a speech situation in which someone can speak in a language that is not only understood but also engaged, received, responded to. Thus, the conditions of possibility of making a claim already raise the problem of address and translation—of communicability; the norms of reasonableness; the conditions for utterability, aural registration, and a more generalized response" (1659).

serves as a litmus test for the potentially positive impact of Eggers's personal narratives within contemporary human rights culture by measuring the promise of generalized rights against the hierarchies and neo-colonial flows of power that preserve inequality. It opens up an important and underexplored angle on what constitutes as "human rights work" such as Eggers's. It uncovers, clarifies, and questions the role of literature, or literary activism, in staging the encounters in the global public sphere upon which the human rights project relies. This helps to position Eggers's collaborative and other literary works in human rights culture within the broader field within which human rights operates. The reinsertion of human rights culture into the postcolonial public sphere makes up the dissertation's main theoretical contribution, as it is precisely the relationship between the formal characteristics of human rights texts and the political work of the human rights project that remain undertheorized.

These formal characteristics of Eggers's oeuvre are also central to the contribution this dissertation makes to the study of literary texts in conjunction with human rights, on the one hand, and the study of this major contemporary American author, on the other. In doing so, this dissertation forms the first book-length study of this major contemporary American author that brings his work into contact with the discourse of human rights through a sustained analysis of narrative form. With regard to his collaborative testimonial works, the key formal features to be considered are the construction of narrative voice in his collaborative texts, the role and impact of the author as mediator, and the soliciting of readerly identification through focalization and dramatic tension. When it comes to the remainder of his oeuvre, the thematic representation of the global public sphere and the nature of the cross-cultural relationships within it are of paramount importance, given that they confront the transnational human rights project with the spectres of imperialism. My discussion of narrative form across Eggers's oeuvre unsettles the optimistic view put forward by Hunt or Schaffer and Smith with regard to human rights storytelling by exposing the ambiguity of literary activism in a human rights context. In Eggers's oeuvre, the intricacy of narrative form throws the complexity of the politics of rights into sharp relief. In the case of his collaborative testimonial work, it sharpens the perception of these projects as double-edged swords that both help and hinder those he hopes to serve. Similarly, his novels and short stories consistently thematize the insecurities and

distrust that mark the global public sphere within which the human rights project operates in their exploration of stunted Western protagonists in search of meaningful cross-cultural encounters.

Exploratory Case Study: J.M.W Turner's *The Slave Ship*

The cover of this dissertation provides a brief case study for how the theoretical concerns outlined above are taken up in a methodological and analytical sense. Given its contemporary focus, it may be considered strange at first for this dissertation to be framed by Joseph Mallard William Turner's *The Slave Ship, Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On* (1840), a mid-nineteenth-century painting dedicated to the abolition of chattel slavery and the slave trade.⁶ Nevertheless, this iconic painting, through its back story, production, and impact forms a microcosm of those questions that drive this dissertation's study. In fact, Turner's painting brings into focus precisely how the broad lines of enquiry set out above can be pursued in relation to cultural activism such as Eggers's. Thematically and diachronically, the two cultural actors, Eggers and Turner, are linked by their artistic representations of suffering in service of the politics of rights. *The Slave Ship* can be seen as a decision on the part of one of Britain's most celebrated artists, Turner, to depict the plight of disempowered subjects whose protest against the inhumanity they were being forced to endure he felt was worth amplifying. As such, it constitutes an aestheticization of human suffering designed to galvanize a British audience in support of the abolition of the slave trade. John Ruskin, the influential Victorian art critic, helped Turner achieve this aim by writing up an extensive review of the painting in the first volume of his monumental work *Modern Painters*, where he praised its "daring conception" and dedication "to the most sublime of subjects and impressions" (572, 573). Commenting on the chilling scene, Ruskin notes how the dramatic depiction of the sea makes it seem as though "the lurid

⁶ Henceforth referred to by its common abbreviated title *The Slave Ship*.

shadows of the hollow breakers are cast upon the mist of night, which gathers cold and low, advancing like the shadow of death upon the *guilty* ship as it labours amidst the lightening of the sea” (572, my emphasis).⁷ Ruskin’s description, as if to echo the nature of the sublime, marries the awe-inspiring beauty of the painting to the overwhelming, disturbing inhumanity of the scene, its aesthetically pleasing façade thereby masking its ethically unsettling reality.

Compositionally, *The Slave Ship* uses vivid red and blue colours to depict a harrowing oceanic scene in which a slave ship is in the process of perishing in a ferocious storm. The scene is split into two spatial sections. In the background, the eye is initially held by a ship being engulfed by waves, its crew waiting to be swallowed by the ocean. At the front, far less obvious at first glance, limbs pleadingly rise from the water even as chains weigh them down towards a watery grave. In case the title of the piece left anyone in doubt as to what exactly the scene was depicting, Turner wrote seven lines of verse to accompany it for the Royal Academy exhibition in 1840:

Aloft all hands, strike the top-masts and belay;
Yon angry setting sun and fierce-edged clouds
Declare the Typhon's coming.
Before it sweeps your decks, throw overboard
The dead and dying – ne'er heed their chains
Hope, Hope, fallacious Hope!
Where is thy market now? (qtd. in Shanes 222)

The poor souls drowning in the foreground are thus identified as slaves who have been thrown overboard by the captain. The storm serves as a sublime symbol for nature cleansing the seas of the slave trade. It makes no distinction between slaver and slave, reducing man to his essential humanity in the face of such an awe-inspiring display of nature’s indiscriminate force. The “market” referred to in the final line, in addition to being a reference to the slave trade more generally, specifically clarifies the reasoning behind casting the slaves overboard. This practice ensured that insurance payments

⁷ He famously concludes this section by writing that if he were “reduced to rest Turner’s immortality upon any single work, I should choose this” (572).

could be claimed for lost slaves. If they were to have died at the hands of those transporting them or of disease, for instance, no such payment would have been forthcoming. Turner's condemnation of this horrible practice on canvas poignantly raised awareness of this inhuman treatment, bringing it to life in dramatic fashion for all to see.

The Slave Ship has clear ties to the abolitionist movement, both in its inspiration and provenance. Two possible explanations have been given as to what inspired Turner to commit this tragic scene to canvas. The first relates to a particular historical incident said to have occurred in 1781, when the captain of the slave ship *Zong* threw overboard the sick and dying slaves so he could claim recompense for cargo lost at sea. As Leo Costello writes in "Turner's *The Slave Ship* (1840): Towards a Dialectical History Painting," *The Slave Ship* is noteworthy for how it brings the past into the present, thereby bringing the issue of slavery and abolition into focus in a nation, Great Britain, that had legally dealt with that issue through the 1807 Abolition of the Slave Trade Act (210). As such, the painting forced its audience to consider the past in light of the present and shocked them into action by connecting the on-going struggle for abolitionism to the horrific practices that had accrued sufficient political currency to force action in the past.

The second, alternative prompt for the painting's production is solely the broader and more contemporary issue, namely of the continuing suffering caused by the slave trade even after Great Britain had withdrawn from it earlier that century.⁸ In "Turner's *Slave Ship*: Abolition, Ruskin, Reception," John McCoubrey places the painting squarely in this mid-nineteenth-century period and sees it as part of the campaign against the continuing international slave trade, thereby severing its connection to the particular history of the slave ship *Zong* (320-329). In this case, the painting is a direct

⁸ In fact, the slave trade persisted in the British colonies until it was abolished there in 1838. Other nations, such as Spain, Portugal, and France, also continued with the practice, which imbued the fight against the international slave trade with additional ferocity in the 1830s and beyond. McCoubrey suggests as much when he points out that the blue and white flag in the centre of the painting most likely belongs to that of a Portuguese or Spanish slaver (324). As such, Turner's unveiling of *The Slave Ship* in 1840 is a timely reminder to his British audience that the problem of the trading of slaves had not by any means been rooted out.

representation of the continuing inhumanity on the high seas that was happening right under the nose of the nation that had sought to abolish the slave trade and whose navy was said to rule the waves. In this reading, the painting serves as a disruption to the narrative that the slave trade had been dealt with and required no further attention.

The Slave Ship continued to serve the struggle for black rights across the Atlantic when, in 1876, it was sold to Alice Sturgis Hooper, who shared it with the then newly founded Museum of Fine Arts in Boston which, she insisted, should “display pictures with an elevating message” (qtd. in May 183). In the final half of the nineteenth century, however, its affective force as a call to activism seems to have fallen short of its mark. *The Atlantic Monthly*’s 1877 review of the piece provides a glimpse into American popular and critical impressions of the painting’s heart-wrenching scene, blaming Turner for ruining a vivid seascape with the ugliness of human suffering: “It is difficult to imagine why the artist should have disfigured his picture by this story of ‘man’s inhumanity to man,’ – marring one of the most glorious aspects of nature by the introduction of one of the most hideous of crimes” (“Art” 510). What Turner, Ruskin, and Hooper clearly shared was the belief that *The Slave Ship*, by depicting the scene so vividly, could contribute significantly to the moral fight against slavery and the slave trade. However, *The Slave Ship*’s transatlantic reception, illustrated by the representative review in *The Atlantic Monthly*, shows how art’s call to arms can also fall on deaf ears.

The brief case study of Turner’s *The Slave Ship* underscores four intriguing aspects of how artistic depictions of suffering intersect with the process of claiming rights. First, it shows that the act of securing recognition for one’s humanity by disrupting the discourse that marginalizes certain subjects resonates beyond the legal and political sphere and into the cultural, with which it seems to be engaged in a mutually reinforcing dynamic. If the political movement and act of parliament that triggered the abolition of the slave trade in the early nineteenth century prompted Turner to get involved in the issue, his painting imbued the cause with additional cultural capital so as to allow it to continue to effect social and political change. Second, even a concise overview of the inspiration and provenance of *The Slave Ship* reveals how the power of a compelling and emotively charged narrative can be appropriated and reappropriated diachronically to serve the politics of rights. Third, in a more synchronic sense, it points towards the ways in which shocking images and stories can broach rights issues not

only through fact, but also through affect. Finally, *The Slave Ship*'s own transatlantic journey and mixed reception questions the premise of the sentimental thesis upon which this form of cultural activism relies as it begs the question as to why certain audiences are seemingly immune to being shocked or affectively impacted.

The chapters of this dissertation will bring precisely these four considerations to bear on Eggers's texts through a complementary mix of close and distant readings. These readings will be framed by the theoretical debates and questions that come out of the intersecting fields of human rights, literary studies, and postcolonial theory. Chapter one sets out to define the concept of human rights in a broad sense, paying particular attention to its cultural dimension(s). It goes on to trace Eggers's relationship to human rights culture so as to ascertain on what terms his activism engages with the influential discourse of human rights as well as how he is helped and hindered by it. His collaborative testimonial works and fictional stories, I argue, broadly adhere to the basic principles and practices of human rights culture within the discursive spaces of the narrative worlds they create. The ideal of cross-cultural encounters as a means of expanding the circle of rights-bearers prevails, both thematically and in terms of focalization and narrative voice. As I go on to show in subsequent chapters, however, he sometimes goes against the grain of that culture when those same principles and practices seem to prevent or impede egalitarian cross-cultural engagement.

Chapter two seeks to unpack Eggers's use of the personal narrative by understanding the way in which the form has been used historically as a rights-space creating tool. It starts from the observation that disempowered subjects have made use of narrative forms to claim rights in the face of discrimination for centuries. The power of the story is that it allows these subjects to speak directly to an audience they found it hard to reach out to politically. As such, a discussion of the narrative route to salience as well as why their pleas were variously (re-)silenced or went unheard sheds further light on the required effort on the part of disempowered subjects and rights-bearing readers alike for rights to be claimed successfully. This study of the personal narrative in history brings the dissertation back to the issue of slavery, focusing this time on how slave narratives sought to disrupt the hegemonic discourse of racial inequality so as to make room for black rights. A discussion of the fraught relationship between the abolitionist movement, (former) slaves, and United States culture around the time of Emancipation

provides a useful perspective from which to survey Eggers's own collaborative testimonial efforts to secure the recognition of rights for disempowered others. Moreover, a more extensive corpus of personal narratives across distinctive historical periods begins to map out the particular formal features that mark the personal narrative's diachronic use in the context of rights. I show that, despite their widely different contexts, slave narratives and Eggers's contemporary narratives display a marked formal similarity in how they seek to affect and move the reader towards recognizing rights and social action more broadly.

Chapter three delves more deeply into the affective aspect of personal narratives as they are variously explored in trauma studies (Caruth; LaCapra) and postcolonial studies (Spivak; Attridge). The close readings of the author's collaborative testimonies in this chapter allow Eggers's texts to be reconceived of as fully-fledged discursive spaces that comprise but are not limited to the rights claim contained within disempowered subjects' recollections of past trauma. Even if that is the primary function of the text in approaching the reader, the use of narrative techniques and devices that facilitate these acts of collaborative witnessing and the staging of rights violations resonates beyond that primary function. Indeed, simply by approaching the reader with the request for them to engage with someone else's traumatic experiences and recognize their right to rights, questions are raised as to the terms on which that engagement takes place, what the reader's relationship is to the disempowered subject's trauma, and to what extent the reader is able to grant the victim rights. In this chapter, I argue that Eggers's texts work hard to destabilize the straightforward identificatory reading practices that underlie human rights culture's premise of putting rights-bearers in touch with the suffering of disempowered others as a means of generating socio-political change. Form is key to unpacking this process. For instance, *What Is the What* makes use of its collaborative authorship to generate an ambiguous narrative voice that guards against the reader's ability to appropriate the victim's voice through straightforward identification. This destabilizing process is significant because it seeks to provide interpretative cues for the reader that lead away from appropriative or patronizing engagements with the disempowered subject's narrative.

The final chapter further scrutinizes the effectiveness of human rights culture by investigating the competition to its efforts it faces in the global public sphere. This

competition comes in the form of countervailing discourses, practices, and mindsets that are perpetuated culturally in the form of neo-colonial stereotypes that fix the subaltern as a passive and helpless collective that exists in the lawless borderlands of the global rights-community. What makes these modes of thinking so pernicious is how they effectively counteract some of the core aims of human rights by stressing fundamental differences between human beings and by entrenching racialized hierarchies of Enlightened and primitive cultures. Whereas Eggers's collaborative testimonial work aims to overcome these countervailing discourses, his fictional work often exposes how cross-cultural relationships and engagements struggle not to be inflected by neo-colonialism. This chapter takes this discrepancy as a cue to instigate a dialogue between the various narrative forms that mark Eggers's oeuvre. It deploys the author's novels and short stories as caveats and qualifications to his collaborative testimonial work, thus weighing up the value of the latter's efforts to salvage its rights-work from the issues raised in those novels and short stories.

The issues thrown up by this final chapter neatly converge with the poignant postcolonial interrogation of the human rights project. This interrogation is helped by the dissertation's broad geographical and historical range, which inserts Eggers's literary activism into the global aspect of the human rights project and relates his literary output to previous such rights-work in literary history. A discussion of the difficulties and possibilities in facilitating empathy and understanding for human rights crises through narrative as staged by Eggers's texts emerges from the diachronic and synchronic studies in chapters two and three respectively. At the same time, Eggers's use of the personal narrative is also marked by its embedding in a specific contemporary iteration of the discourse of rights, which poses specific challenges to the subaltern's ability to speak. Earlier sections of chapters three and four were published as journal articles in respectively *Cultural Critique* and *The Journal of Human Rights* and were concerned precisely with postcolonial analyses of Eggers's embedding in the contemporary American cultural field and human rights culture. Having thus staked out Eggers's position within human rights culture both in a contemporary and a historical sense, I further tease out the implications of such postcolonial scrutiny for Eggers's work within that culture. As I will show, these implications reach beyond the particular

cases, practices, and narratives as they are tied to Eggers and provide a window onto how literature and human rights interact with the global public sphere.

1 Dave Eggers and the Cultural Space of Human Rights

This chapter traces the intersections of the contemporary American author Dave Eggers's various literary and non-literary works and the influential discourse of human rights. Eggers has both directly and indirectly engaged with human rights issues throughout his varied career as an author, publisher, editor, and activist. His collaborative testimonial works, *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun*, have garnered significant interest for how a successful white, male, American author and a disadvantaged person of colour have joined forces in bearing witness to the latter's traumatic past, often pushing the boundaries of style and genre-conventions in the process. The Voice of Witness series, which Eggers co-founded and which publishes edited volumes in which victims of a wide range of rights abuses testify to their experiences, is similarly committed to the power of the personal narrative in furthering the reach and recognition of human rights. In addition to this, his works of narrative fiction such as *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, *A Hologram for the King*, or the short story "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly" show Eggers's broader preoccupation with the concept of global citizenship, postnational identity, and cross-cultural encounters.

In this chapter's preliminary exploration of the author's works, I show how his fictional and non-fictional works can be read productively within the context of the cultural dimension of human rights. It does so in order to set up a further analysis of how the author's oeuvre is embedded in a culture of human rights that is simultaneously related to, interconnected with, and yet distinctive from legal-political iterations of human rights. Both his collaborative testimonial work and his fictional stories graft the central tenets of that human rights culture onto the discursive spaces

of the narrative worlds they create. Within these discursive spaces though, the basic principles and modern applications of human rights are subsequently engaged and interrogated by confronting its abstract and legalistic precepts with the (partially) fictionalized representations of the diffuse experiences of disempowered others whose rights have been abused, or the trials and tribulations of rights-bearing citizens exploring the boundaries and limitations of the global rights project.¹

As such, Eggers's relationship with human rights culture turns out to be mutually inflectional. Even if his narratives betray the extent to which they have internalized the principles and practices of human rights culture in the rights-work they perform, they also go against the grain of that culture when those same principles and practices seem to prevent or hinder egalitarian cross-cultural engagement. Eggers's commitment to amplifying the lesser heard voices of victims of rights abuses is reflected in the narrative culture surrounding human rights. Much of his work is indebted to the belief, central to human rights culture, that personal narratives told by disempowered subjects have a sufficiently impactful affective charge to convince readers to recognize the rights of victims and join them in advocating for the safeguarding of rights in future. When these encounters between disempowered subjects and readers are staged across his oeuvre, however, they come up against many of the issues that have plagued and continue to plague human rights as a global moral code and framework. These issues include the accusation that human rights is simply the latest incarnation of imperialist discourses or that it is so abstract and legalistic that it is rendered inaccessible to the vast majority of victims in need of a means of articulating their grievances and claiming recognition of their rights.

¹ Throughout this dissertation, I will refer to human rights in conjunction with the singular form of verbs so as to make the distinction between human rights as a conceptual entity and as a series of specific rights. As a result, when I am referring to a set of particular rights, the plural form will be used. This is important because, even though Eggers's works tend to focus on a certain subset of basic civil and political rights set out in the Universal Declaration, his works are often concerned on a more fundamental level with negotiating access for disempowered subjects to the discourse of human rights in general and, more conceptually, for those subjects to be considered first and foremost as qualifying as the "human" covered by human rights.

Often, Eggers's texts actively seek to expose such issues and provide narrative cues that lead away from cross-cultural engagements grounded in neo-colonial stereotypes. Similarly, as a novelist and writer, Eggers also puts his talent for compelling narration in service of the subaltern by turning disempowered subjects' experiences into easily accessible and thought-provoking stories. Overall, his oeuvre seems to want to help disempowered subjects tell their stories or engage with rights-related issues in other ways in his fictional works in such a way that his publications benefit from the socio-political capital attached to the discourse of human rights while mitigating the detrimental impact of the continued influence of global hierarchies and power dynamics that undermine such rights-work at every turn.

In this, Eggers is only partially successful. At their best, Eggers's narratives manage to nestle into human rights culture and deploy the discursive force of imaginative writing to secure recognition for disempowered subjects, to challenge neo-colonial reading and interpretative practices, and to navigate successfully the treacherous waters of human rights work in a global context. In subsequent chapters, I bring into focus some of the ways in which these successes are achieved. I explore how works such as *What Is the What* or *Zeitoun* make use of the genre characteristics of the personal narrative as a rights-space creating tool in order to secure a place for the testimonial subject within the hegemony of human rights. Simultaneously, the form of the personal narrative is used to push the boundaries of that discourse and to question whose lives fall outside of that hegemony. Part of this happens through the intricate use of textual cues that guides the identificatory process at the heart of human rights culture towards a more egalitarian, affective interaction between the disempowered subject and the privileged reader. The carefully crafted structure of both the texts and paratexts are similarly instrumental in maximizing the potential rights-work that his narratives can achieve.

At their worst, however, Eggers's narratives remain marred by a Western bias and pernicious neo-colonialism that continues negatively to inflect the ever-fraught relationship between privileged readers or activists and disenfranchised others. Despite his best intentions, Eggers's collaborative testimonial endeavours remain bound by the strictures of a book market, and – as I go on to show – rights culture more broadly, that is more attuned to the artistic machinations of a white author than the plight and plea of his subaltern collaborators. This unhelpful dynamic is underscored by the realities of

co-publication, in which the rhetorical force of the rights-claiming protagonist in the narrative competes for socio-cultural capital with the purchase the successful author has on the Western literary marketplace and readership.

Interestingly, the exploration of precisely these failings of cross-cultural dynamics is at the centre of many of Eggers's fictional works, such as *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, *A Hologram for the King*, or the short story "Up the Mounting Coming Down Slowly." In these narratives, insecure Western protagonists venture out into the world seeking to engage disempowered others. These engagements take the form of charity, silent sympathy, and stunted conversations, through which the protagonists continually struggle to step out from the shadow of the negative connotations of the (neo-)colonial cultures and structures from which they hail. The mutually reinforcing logic behind this lies in how the Western characters cannot think beyond the familiar hierarchical global power dynamics that govern their interpretation of disempowered others, and how those disempowered others remain wary of Western humanitarian impulses and interventions that solidify rather than tear down the hegemonic boundaries that render some lives more valuable than others.² Accordingly, the postnational identities imagined for these protagonists are often less reflective of a freeing transnational aspiration towards global citizenship than they are of a strenuous and anxiety-ridden search for what lies beyond the unequal divisions of rights amongst the varying degrees of incorporated citizenship available across the globe.³ What makes the analysis of these

² This solidification is usually the result of a hierarchy-reinforcing logic whereby those being helped are characterized as being less developed, weaker, and perpetually in need of assistance. The slave narratives in the next chapter provide a good example of this, as black subjects in nineteenth-century America suffered not only from slavery but also from the race theories that determined their inferiority and, therefore, need for structural direction and management. In the case of Eggers's *What Is the What* or *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, this issue manifests itself on the level of African subjects. These narratives problematize the notion that African subjects exist in a pre-civilizational state that simultaneously makes them dependent on the charity of Westerners and underscores their fundamental exclusion from the Enlightened hegemony, from which human rights emerged in an intellectual sense.

³ The concept of the rights-bearing human as an incorporated citizen whose rights are guaranteed within the context of the nation state is taken from Joseph Slaughter's seminal work *Human Rights Inc.* In this study, Slaughter traces what he calls the mutually enabling fictions of the *Bildungsroman* and human rights in

fictional works in the context of global citizenship and human rights culture particularly relevant is how they inflect the rights-work Eggers sets out to do with his collaborative testimonial projects.

In order to bring together these various analyses in the context of human rights, it is useful to find some clarity with regard to how one defines and distinguishes between broad, related concepts such as “human rights” and “human rights culture,” as well as what Eggers’s relationship is to both. In what follows, I deal with each of these in turn. The first section provides a broad discussion of contemporary human rights discourses, its attendant strengths and weaknesses, and the recent surge in studies of human rights in conjunction with cultural studies and literary studies in particular. On the basis of this, it becomes clear that human rights has an important cultural dimension that cannot simply be equated with or seen as an extension of its more abstract, legalistic one. As a result, this chapter goes on to investigate the particular cultural manifestation of human rights in order to introduce an expanded, fluid, and more experiential socio-cultural understanding of rights discourses. This tentative definition of “human rights culture” will then be used to frame the chapter’s final section, in which Eggers’s work as an editor, author, publisher, and activist is broadly introduced. As such, the aim is not to provide a holistic picture of Eggers’s various entanglements in the literary field, but to uncover the degree to which his work can be read in conjunction with a broader conception of human rights as a cultural discourse that creates certain opportunities and raises certain obstacles to the type of activism in which Eggers engages.

Western culture. Both are fundamentally tied up with incorporating the individual into the nation state, which then becomes the ultimate arbiter of whose rights are recognized, granted, and protected. The finer points of Slaughter’s work will feature prominently in the next chapter, and will be further elaborated on and contextualized at that stage.

1.1 What Is Human Rights?

Over the course of the past few decades, human rights has become the global moral and legal discourse for victims of atrocity to claim recompense for violations of what are seen as their innate rights as human beings. As such, it has become an aspirational set of ideas that, as Andrew Clapham writes in his popularizing *Human Rights: A Very Short Introduction*, “provide the vocabulary for arguing about which interests should prevail and how best to achieve the ends we have chosen” (“Preface”). The extent to which human rights has permeated the global consciousness in this respect is illustrated by David Rieff’s assertion in *A Bed for the Night* that the “claim that most humanitarian emergencies have their origins in human rights abuses is almost always correct and demonstrable” (323).⁴ Regardless of where or how specific human rights are (ab)used, the human rights movement is driven at its core – even if sometimes only rhetorically – by the appealingly decisive and clear basic principles outlined in the United Nations’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was adopted by the UN in 1948. Further legal developments of the Declaration – which, arguably, has no legal clout in and of itself – consistently maintain ties to the articles set forth in the original declarative document.

Accordingly, modern activists and humanitarians couch their efforts and protests in the language of human rights so as to allow their claims to resonate with the international conception of those rights. Some of the most prominent international NGO’s have risen to prominence in recent decades carrying the banner of human rights, such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch. Often, these NGO’s are in the business of trying to effect international human rights agreements that cannot be enforced by law without the consent of nation states, many of whom are guilty of rights-abuses themselves or who see international human rights law as infringing upon

⁴ In *Human Rights and Memory*, Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider give the example of how past and on-going ethnic and national conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and in the Middle East “are being interpreted by a global audience as human rights problems rather than as existential and ethnic divisions” (3).

their sovereignty.⁵ They are thus both made necessary by the weakness of human rights as a legal-political framework nation states *choose* to enforce and given weight by the rhetorical and cultural force of the principles and agreements to which nations across the globe have signed up.

Despite the wide-reaching resonance of the Universal Declaration, both in activism and in law, human rights remains weak in a (geo-)political sense as a result of its continually seeking a balance between the varying interpretations of human rights put forward by normative international organizations, such as the United Nations, and regional institutions', or, more often, nation states' concerns over sovereignty. Ultimately, this delicate balance is laid bare in the extent to which universal principles and agreements on human rights are often perceived to be at odds with regional or national commitments and interests, even if national and regional institutions remain instrumental in guaranteeing and enforcing human rights law so long as international organizations operate on an inter-state consensual basis.⁶ In effect, this raises the

⁵ A recent example of the tension between efforts, both global and regional, to establish an international human rights framework that can be enforced, on the one hand, and the perceived safeguarding of national sovereignty on the other, has risen to prominence in the United Kingdom. Before the 2015 election, its then prime minister, David Cameron, promised to scrap the Human Rights Act, which integrates UK law with the European charter on human rights, and replace it with a British Bill of Rights, answerable only to the British parliament. Cameron's motivation for the move highlights the extent to which interpretations of human rights vary between countries and regions. At the 2014 Conservative Party conference, he stated the European Court of Human Rights' "interpretations of that charter [Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union] have led to a whole lot of things that are frankly wrong" (Cameron). The two examples he gave were of prisoners' having the right to vote and human rights law applying to war zones. This suggests that while supporters of the Universal Declaration may share its broad and universal ambitions, they may still wish to maintain control over how those ambitions are translated into individual countries and cultures. It should also be noted that the European Court of Human Rights, a dependency of the Council of Europe, is by no means the same as the European Union, a distinction often unhelpfully blurred in the UK's relationship with both.

⁶ Regional interests can clash with the transnational human rights project's institutions, such as the ICC, in the case of, for instance, the African Union. Whereas the AU has committed itself to defending human rights – and has even set up an African Court of Justice and Human Rights to that effect – it is increasingly reluctant to accept any intrusion into African affairs by the ICC. This led to Human Rights Watch reasserting the necessity for the human rights project to maintain its global outlook in favour of regionalism in an open letter to the AU in July 2012: "To preserve the effectiveness of the International Criminal Court and its ability to deliver justice,

question of how human rights are to be meaningfully distinguished from civil rights, since the former's universality is dependent on the individual guarantees provided to citizens by nation states. At the same time, Levy and Sznajder rightly point out that "[h]uman rights declarations are formulated as a set of rules, regulations, and norms challenging sovereignty" (2). Human rights and civil rights, intricately tied to national sovereignty, thus coexist uncomfortably, as Huyssen notes, because the nation state's position in a globalizing world as the sole "guarantor of rights" is challenged by transnational rights institutions such as the European Court of Human Rights or the International Criminal Court (ICC) (610).⁷ The tenuousness of this relationship is exemplified by the ICC, an international tribunal able to prosecute individuals on charges for war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity. This intergovernmental institution has continually come under fire from African nations and regional institutions such as the African Union (AU) for its perceived bias in prosecuting African warlords and dictators. The chairman of the AU, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, has called the ICC's efforts "condescending," defining the institution as "a political instrument targeting Africa and Africans" (Ghebreyesus). This serves as a useful illustration of the extent to which the global public sphere within which human rights operates at a geo-political level is highly contested, despite the more prolific penetration of human rights into the public sphere as a weighty discourse.

there must be cooperation with the ICC and respect for the court's decisions" ("Letter to Foreign Ministers in Advance of the 19th African Union Summit"). Even if this transnational focus coalesces with the universalist aspirations of the human rights movement, the risk in these cases is that such a rebuke helps to maintain (perceived) colonial distinctions between the West as a civilized haven of Enlightenment and Africa as a barbaric place of violations on the borderlands of the global rights project.

⁷ It could be suggested that in framing his activities as an author and activist through human rights rather than civil rights, Eggers is challenging the primacy of the nation state as the guarantor of rights in a contemporary context. Then again, it is also clear that the issues he deals with in *Zeitoun* are explicitly issues of civil rights pertaining to the protagonist's position and citizenship within the United States in addition to those human rights that are violated upon his imprisonment. In this sense, *Zeitoun*'s engagement with the politics of rights goes to the heart of this issue. This will be explored further in the final chapter, which deals with the implications for human rights culture caused by the tensions between the national and global contexts as explored by Eggers in his fictional works.

1.2 Literature, Human Rights, and Human Rights Culture

The discrepancy between the weakness of the legal incarnation of human rights and the less tangible cultural impact of it forms the stepping stone for a further investigation of how human rights operates at a cultural level and what impact its non-legal conception has on the discourse more broadly. The scholarly interest to this effect followed once human rights had established itself as a firmly entrenched global political and moral discourse. Indeed, there has recently been an explosion in research from various fields and disciplines tracing its history, politics, and culture as well as some of the issues touched on above. Scholars with backgrounds as diverse as literary studies, social sciences, history, law, and philosophy have all refocused their research through the lens of human rights. Newer fields such as literature and human rights, transcultural memory studies, and histories of human rights have begun to question, expand, and criticize the foundations of what is now the world's principal social, legal, and political framework. In *The Last Utopia* and *Inventing Human Rights*, Samuel Moyn and Lynn Hunt respectively provide diverging accounts of the contemporary human rights moment and its history. Moyn studies how human rights crystallized as a social and political movement in the late 1960s as an internationalist alternative to other “failed” utopian systems such as communism or nationalism. In her book, in turn, Hunt attempts to find earlier traces of the human rights movement in a survey of developments from late-eighteenth-century philosophy, literature, and politics to the modern age. Literary scholars such as Joseph Slaughter, meanwhile, have taken a similarly historical approach in order to show how human rights latched onto evolving socio-cultural attitudes and ideas as they are expressed in popular narrative practices. In *Human Rights Inc.*, he makes the case for reading the development of the *Bildungsroman* and the evolution of rights discourses in Western culture as mutually enabling fictions that fundamentally seek to incorporate the individual into existing social structures. Finally, Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider take their cue from memory studies in *Human Rights and Memory* to investigate how human rights impacts upon the way in which narratives of suffering circulate within global memory cultures.

At the same time, human rights has thrown existing concerns and questions into relief. The continuous use of victims of rights abuses testifying to their suffering in the

global public sphere reinvigorates questions concerning the possibility and salience of subaltern speech as articulated by postcolonial theorists, most famously Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In her aptly titled essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” she asks whether Western desires to represent the subaltern, who are periodically silenced within or excluded from the global public sphere, risk perpetuating their invisibility by speaking *for* subaltern subjects rather than allowing them to speak for themselves and thereby overcome their exclusion (“Can the Subaltern Speak”). This exclusion, Spivak notes in her essay, is part of what she calls a “heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other” and thereby erase its already “precarious Subjectivity” (“Can the Subaltern Speak” 24; 25). Edward Said similarly remarks on this problem in *Orientalism*, where he writes that subaltern subjects are always thus constructed in colonial discourse that they cannot speak or represent themselves, thereby opening the door to their continued distorted representation by the West (21). Jacques Rancière essentially rephrases Said’s and Spivak’s concerns in terms of human rights when he notes rather critically that less sophisticated understandings of the human rights movement lead proponents to think that “if those who suffer inhuman repression are unable to enact the Human Rights that are their last recourse, then somebody else has to inherit their rights in order to enact them in their place” (308). Traditionally, such problems feature within postcolonial studies’ wider concern that the exclusionary discourses of the West, such as colonialist or imperialist ones, rely on what Homi K. Bhaba describes in *The Location of Culture* as a “‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness” that firmly secures the subaltern subject as fundamentally different from Western subjects (66). This clearly gains significance with regard to human rights’ foundational principle of universal equality, but it also addresses the equally important issue of how that principle can be promoted without reinforcing existing hierarchies that counteract it.

Notably, however, this issue has also inspired arguments that qualify the postcolonial arguments of Spivak and Said. Kwame Anthony Appiah has argued in *Cosmopolitanism*, for instance, that theories of cultural imperialism are based on the flawed and condescending assumption that the “other” is a tabula rasa being inscribed by global capitalism (111). His point, in other words, is that critiques that accuse the human rights project of neo-imperialism take for granted that there is no local culture with which

that project can engage and that could potentially reconceive of that project in a more local context. The tension surrounding this crucial point will guide the further discussion of Eggers's collaborative testimonial work in its exploration of whether or not human rights culture exacerbates or ameliorates these issues.

The terminology used to describe the relevant sections of Eggers's oeuvre has a significant part to play here. After all, it must be sufficiently open or broad in order to accommodate this wider outlook and treat these important concerns. As such, the descriptive term needs to reflect the conscious effort to avoid "othering" the testimonial subject by framing their narrative in such a way that their subjectivity is only reductively represented. Accordingly, I will refer to Eggers's collaborative testimonial work and other similar texts as "personal narratives" throughout this dissertation, even though the term "testimony" is widely used in research to describe the practice of storytelling in human rights culture. For this, I partly take my cue from Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith's seminal work *Human Rights and Narrated Lives*, in which they explain their choice for yet another term, "life narrative," as "an umbrella term that encompasses the extensive array and diverse modes of personal storytelling that takes experiential history as its starting point" (7). What makes this choice of terminology appealing is the reductive nature of other terms that solely emphasize the testimonial aspect of personal narratives in human rights culture. The term "life narrative" has its own problems, to which I will return shortly.

First, though, the risk of a reductive categorization is twofold. First, one may reduce the complexity of the testifying subject to the mere act of speaking. Second, one risks restricting the discursive force of the narrative to the abuses to which it speaks by framing it solely as an act of testimony, with all its attendant implications of a single subject testifying to a very specific set of lived experiences. Even though both of these things may be the primary function of a testimonial text, other aspects of it may have a great impact on the rights-work a personal narrative does within human rights culture.⁸

⁸ The precise nature of the term rights-work as well as how Eggers's texts conduct it will be the subject of the next chapter. For now, it can be taken to mean the way in which a text contributes to the victim-subject's ability to have their rights recognized and protected.

What Is the What provides a useful example in this respect. It is an autobiographical novel that deals with the life of a victim of the Second Sudanese Civil War – Valentino Achak Deng – collaboratively told by Eggers and Deng. It is notably framed by a multitude of factors of which testimony is only one. In terms of genre, it is a novel, biography, autobiography, and testimony. Its contents also cover far more than the protagonist's experiences of rights abuses during the Second Sudanese Civil War as a child, most overtly by its inclusion of an extensive frame narrative set during the protagonist's adult years following his resettlement in the United States. As a text, it is collaborative both in terms of its production, because Eggers authored the written version of Deng's verbal testimony, and in terms of its narration, with the narrator's voice not reflecting directly the testifying subject's voice. The term "testimony," even when collocated with the term "collaborative," needlessly limits our initial understanding of the complexity of this text, even if, as I will argue in subsequent chapters, its intricacies lie at the heart of the rights-work it sets out to do as well as the problems it encounters in doing so.

This is not to suggest that the issues with derivations of the term testimony necessarily find their way into the works of other studies of the genre. In *Can Literature Promote Justice?*, for instance, Kimberley Nance defines her object of study, the Latin-American genre of "*testimonio*" writing, in a non-restrictive way. Her choice to maintain the term *testimonio* has the advantage of linking her study explicitly to the Latin-American context of such writings as well as the broader use of testimony as a tool for social justice. She defines her corpus as a

body of works in which speaking subjects who present themselves as somehow 'ordinary' represent a personal experience of injustice, whether directly to the reader or through the offices of a collaborating writer, with the goal of inducing readers to participate in a project of social justice. (7)

Indeed, Nance's further discussion of her corpus – which is often similar to Eggers's testimonial work in that it is collaborative in nature – shows her awareness of the attendant complexities of published personal narratives in a social justice context that I alluded to in relation to *What Is the What* and to which I will return throughout this dissertation. She is aware that the texts' appeals "neither end with the production of the text nor even with its enthusiastic reception" (14) and that they are both didactic and

persuasive in tone in their efforts to educate readers and convince them to act (19). In fact, it is this intricate attention to the various aspects of *testimonio* works that allows her to think through the question posed by her book's title with regard to the possibility of literature promoting justice.

The reason I nevertheless insist on avoiding a similar use of the term "testimony," which could take on an equally open and comprehensive meaning as Nance's, is that testimony takes on additional connotations when used in the context of human rights. One of the major interests that unites the diverging interdisciplinary perspectives on human rights is the centrality of witnessing and testimony. As Dawes puts it in *Evil Men*: "Atrocity both requires and resists representation. The argument that we must bear witness to atrocity, that we must tell the stories, is the core of the catechism of the human rights movement" (8). Testimonial narratives, in their various cultural and legal incarnations, have become pervasive as the main tool for making people aware of rights abuses in the era of human rights. Testimonies activate rights discourses; they make them real. Culturally, this dovetails with the philosopher Richard Rorty's famous assertion in "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality" that "sad and sentimental stories" have the power to wake us up and make us take note of humanitarian crises (185). Perhaps even more saliently, testimony is also an intricate part of legal rights discourses, as a witness' or survivor's account in court, as a narrative constructed by victims to acquire certain legal statuses – one could think of displaced people applying for refugee status – or more broadly as a means to claim the subjectivity to which human rights entitle all human beings by reaffirming the uniqueness and irreplaceability of the speaker.⁹ As this example already suggests, uses such as these have a profound impact on the form of these narratives. As Schaffer and Smith point out, there is a real pressure for personal narratives to conform "to the protocols for codification of human rights abuse" in order for them to complete the rights-work they are intended to do (37). Because of these specific legal and cultural connotations and restraints of what "testimony" is and can be in a human rights context, the broader

⁹ The relationship between testimony and subjectivity is also discussed by Jacques Derrida in *Demeure*, where he writes that in the act of testifying, the subject is "unique and irreplaceable" (40).

awareness shown by Nance is difficult to maintain in a study such as mine, even though Eggers's narratives seem to be similar to Nance's testimonios.¹⁰

The reason I prefer the term "personal narrative" over "life narrative," moreover, is that the latter has an overly holistic connotation that seems to suggest that narratives such as *What Is the What* provide a direct account of an entire person. This may seem less problematic overall than the reductive nature of the term "testimony," but it becomes so when human rights are considered from a postcolonial perspective concerned with ways in which the subaltern can be re-marginalized, homogenized, and deprived of its subjectivity. The issue with the term "life narrative" is that it sets up an impossible task for a text to fulfil, namely that of providing an account of a particular, unique, and culturally embedded human life. Tales of human rights abuse, while they can speak to more than simply the testifying subject's experience of victimhood as they often do in Eggers's works, seldom capture in their entirety the context-specific particularity of a life. Dawes identifies a central problem with human rights discourses in *The Language of War* as being their innate tendency to frame unique individuals in terms of generalized persons entitled to rights but "devoid of personhood, and of cultural and linguistic thickness" (213). Furthermore, human rights "institutes an empty formalism that obliterates the space of difference, of the individual, the unique, and the context-dependent" (*The Language of War* 213). The risk, in other words, is that the specific

¹⁰ The alternative would be to impose a confusing distinction on what the term "testimony" can or cannot mean that is dependent on the context within which such narratives are used. Brian Yost suggests such a distinction in "The Voices of Others: Dave Eggers and New Directions for Testimony Narrative and Cosmopolitan Literary Collaboration," when he writes: "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" (152). There are two issues with such a use of the term "testimonial narrative." First, it is unclear why testimonies in a legal context such as those in a Truth and Reconciliation context do not fall under his understanding of the term "testimonial narrative." Second, the premise that a testimonial narrative used in a non-legal context should seek to be representative of an entire community through what Yost later calls a "metonymic" (153) form of representation risks effacing the particularity of the disempowered victim-narrator, an issue to which I will return at length in the next chapter.

experiences to which a narrative testifies are embedded in a broad conception of the “human” in human rights, and thereby taken out of their specific social, cultural, and historical context. This would then be considered a sufficient representation of the subaltern subject to consider their narratives as “life narratives,” with further enquiry into their specificity becoming optional. The term “personal narrative” finds a middle ground between “testimony” and “life narrative” by allowing the discursive space of a text and its paratext to be more than a strict testimonial account of experienced suffering without burdening it with the need to provide a holistic account of the human person at its core.

The affective force of literature and how it is understood has also taken on new meaning in light of the rise of human rights. The term personal narrative draws attention to the textual quality of personal narratives spotted by Schaffer and Smith, namely that of an individual’s words affecting, inter-personally, readers in such a way that they take the first step towards creating social change (226). As Huyssen argues in “International Human Rights and the Politics of Memory: Limits and Challenges,” the task for scholars in the fields of memory and trauma studies is to bring their insights about the ways in which literature engages with traumatic memories and engenders various forms of commemorative practices into contact with the broader cross-disciplinary interest in human rights. This exercise would be mutually beneficial, he points out, in that it would prevent memory studies from “becoming a vacuous exercise feeding parasitically and narrowly on itself” while also grounding the “abstract universalism of human rights” in specific memories and histories (608). In *Human Rights and Memory*, memory scholars Levy and Sznajder begin to address this issue, arguing that the “language of human rights provides us with a framework to begin to understand why pictures of strangers being beaten and tortured by other strangers concern us” (2). The issue at stake is essentially how human rights discourse allows one to adopt a vocabulary through which the suffering of others can be articulated in terms other than those of trauma and memory, a vocabulary that focuses on recognition, reparation, and rights. The ultimate aim is the extension of the protective mantle of human rights as facilitated by raising awareness for those who suffer outside of the hegemony. This also explains in part why the use of personal narratives in human rights discourses has reinvigorated theories of “cosmopolitanism” that see cross-cultural

encounters, facilitated by the culture of human rights, as a means of generating social change.¹¹

However, the concern more broadly that human rights is the latest incarnation of Western imperial discourses that created the conditions for the atrocities of the colonial era adds a bitter inflection to this hopeful cosmopolitan belief that is meant to facilitate the ambitions of the human rights movement. Gilroy notes in *Postcolonial Melancholia* that the discourse of human rights makes the concept of a shared humanity “accessible to political debate and legal rationality,” but in doing so belies the extent to which the universal values and principles of human rights lack neutrality because of the “foundational investment that the West has made in the idea of rights” (59). Gilroy comments on this phenomenon in the context of the practical geopolitical shift by which “initiatives that derive directly from American strategic objectives” are coming to replace rather than augment what he calls “the waning authority of bodies like the United Nations” (59). In many cases, therefore, the transnational rights project can just as easily justify a far less productive cross-cultural engagement that underpins the Global North’s continued invasions and interventions in the Global South, thus reinstating a negative inter-national global dynamic rather than replacing it with a progressive transnational one. What makes this particularly pernicious, he adds, is that these initiatives cloak themselves in a universalist rhetoric that maintains the “benign and seductive language of humanitarianism” even when it takes on a more belligerent character (59). In a similar vein, Slaughter begins his discussion in *Human Rights Inc.* by referencing the myriad ways in which the discourse of human rights is often used in service of “the palliative rhetoric of humanitarian intervention” to invade countries, open markets, ensure “equal consumerist opportunity,” and promote democracy (2).

However, in *The Postcolonial Constellation*, Jürgen Habermas urges human rights scholars not to mistake criticism of the human rights regime and its Western bias for an

¹¹ The final chapter of this dissertation will provide a more detailed discussion of the term “cosmopolitanism” in relation to personal narratives in human rights culture. For now, it is simply important to note that it provides a certain level of philosophical underpinning to the affective drive within and premise of that culture.

absolute rejection of the human rights project as a whole. Even non-Western critics who accuse human rights of remaining “imprisoned, despite everything, in the original European context” would not “reject human rights lock, stock, and barrel” (121). Habermas explicitly tries to overcome this issue by placing the notion of Western bias in a global context. His approach is one that seeks to figure the universal standards of human rights, which Gilroy sees as inherently tied up with Western ethnocentrism, as part of a global response to the “specific challenges posed by social modernity” (*The Postcolonial Constellation* 121). Regardless of whether one sees human rights as a vehicle for the negative developments outlined by Gilroy and Slaughter or simply as a discourse seeking to overcome its own Western bias in the face of an already biased global public sphere as Habermas suggests, it is important at least to consider these biases and the project together in order to grasp the global dynamic of which the human rights project has become a part.

Pheng Cheah makes the further point in *Inhuman Conditions* that the continuing socio-economic inequality between the Global North and the Global South means human rights operate differently in different areas. This has a significant impact on the extent to which the cosmopolitan project of universal citizenship and equality can be rolled out across the globe. She argues that human rights are enforced through their “link to the civil rights provisions of individual nation-states,” which differ widely (*Inhuman Conditions* 5). She goes on to say that their positive impact is further regulated by “the shifting material linkages and interconnections created by global capitalism at a particular historical conjuncture” (*Inhuman Conditions* 30). One of these, for example, is that “new cosmopolitan subjects of Northern multiculturalism can already rely on an existing organizational framework for the regulation of social and political conflict and economic redistribution that is lacking for the world as a whole” (*Inhuman Conditions* 63). In other words, while the Global North has an established framework human rights can latch onto, the Global South has no such organizational security. As such, it is left solely as a place where rights can be violated and their violation can subsequently be condemned by the makeshift transnational rights frameworks set up by the North. The cosmopolitan drive’s first task, in Cheah’s thinking, would be to unmoor human rights from this “historical bondage to the instrumentality of sovereign nation states” that causes many of the problems she outlines (*Inhuman Conditions* 5). It is therefore crucial

for Eggers's use of the personal narrative to achieve such a denationalization and protest this setup, where the guardians of rights in the North gaze at violations in the South. If not, his efforts risk merely reinforcing a negative and hierarchical global dynamic.

The accusation levelled at the ICC that it is a white man's tool used to castigate Africa becomes especially relevant in this respect. This risks creating a perception, at least politically, that human rights works through the sovereignty of nation states in the Global North, but works around or against them in some areas of the Global South.¹² This adds a disturbingly neo-colonial dimension to Jean L. Cohen's point in *Globalization and Sovereignty* that the radical idea behind human rights is that "the international community may articulate and enforce moral principles and legal rules regulating the conduct of governments towards their citizens (when their human rights are at stake)" (2). The neo-colonial risk, in other words, is that the promotion of human rights may come to resemble the colonial *mission civilisatrice* in an unhelpful way. Partly as a result of this issue, human rights activism is often explicitly apolitical so as to divest itself of this accusation levelled at the ICC and other rights institutions that they are a continuation of the colonial dominance of the Global South by the Global North. Wendy Brown describes this in "'The Most We Can Hope For...': Human Rights and the Politics of Fatalism," when she writes that human rights activism has become

something of an antipolitics – a pure defense of the innocent and powerless against power, a pure defense of the individual against immense and potentially cruel or despotic machineries of culture, state, war, ethnic conflict, tribalism,

¹² The case of the AU is a relevant example in this respect, given that the global push for human rights comes to coincide with an intrusion into regional affairs by Western powers whose transnational institutions "outrank" local ones. A more fundamental example would be the perceived incongruity between "Western" individual rights as they are put forward by supranational bodies and so-called "Asian values," which – though not necessarily as widely accepted – emphasize collectivism and assert a specifically regional set of values. In this case, the human rights project is ideologically at odds with nation states who are said to hold different values, making the assertion of human rights a political rather than a moral act. While these examples are not by any means representative of a broad rejection of human rights by the Global South, they do point to continued tensions between parts of the globe on the point of a universal rights project.

patriarchy, and other mobilizations of instantiations of collective power against individuals. (453)

The focus on the defence of individual rights both sidesteps the muddle of intergovernmental geopolitics, with its attendant remnants of its colonial past, and conveniently reiterates the strong individualism of the movement's foundational document.

Even though these individual rights are intricately bound up with the nation states that grant or violate them, human rights themselves, like the philosophical notions of natural rights to which I will return shortly, are an articulation of the universal rights of individuals regardless of where they are born or live. This contributes to the non-legal, wider understanding of human rights as an inspirational set of universal values as well as a broad tool that allows the world to pursue those values outside of the quagmire of geopolitical turmoil. It is also at the heart of one of the central criticisms of the human rights regime, as explained by Schaffer and Smith: "Critics of the human rights regime have pointed to the ways in which human rights discourse is a globalizing project, part of a Western and particularly American-oriented imperial project that emphasizes individual freedoms and civil and political rights" (227). As such, even the apolitical values of the UDHR itself become embroiled in the politics of the rights project, which further underlines the need to conceptualize human rights more holistically in order to consider its various intersecting dynamics.¹³

As part of my argument for a broader understanding of the cultural dimension of human rights, it is worth considering for a moment the relationship between the two versions of human rights that have already emerged from this brief discussion. That is,

¹³ Judith Butler makes a related in point in the preface to *Precarious Life* when she writes that the hegemonic understanding of whose lives are ultimately considered to be worthy of attention and consideration in the public sphere is at the heart of public policy (xx). As such, I would add, human rights activism is always embedded in political reality, even if its aspirations and principles claim to be apolitical. Butler goes on to argue that "[t]he articulation of this hegemony takes place in part through producing a consensus on what certain terms will mean, how they can be used, and what lines of solidarity are implicitly drawn through this use" (4). The struggle for visibility within such a regulated public sphere by victims of rights will return as a core concern in my discussions of personal narratives throughout this dissertation.

the one in which a weak international legal framework seeks to secure the generalization of supposedly already universal rights, and the one used by an apolitical activism actively seeking to dissociate itself from a problematic rights-dynamic in which universal rights become caught up in the global hierarchies that still govern and haunt international relations. The tension between the political act of declaring universal rights in a legally binding way by nation states and the apolitical argument for those rights as predating society itself has an illuminating history that can partially help frame the contemporary rights moment. Before the salience of the term “human rights,” the notion of universal rights was usually framed in terms of “natural rights.” A typical example of this older, natural rights tradition is provided by John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government*, which he opens with a chapter “Of the State of Nature” in which he elaborates on the states of “perfect freedom” and “equality” into which all are born and which are only curtailed by “the law of nature” (116). The nineteenth century proponent of utilitarianism and social reformer Jeremy Bentham famously described the concept of “natural rights,” seen by many as the precursor to contemporary human rights in a philosophical sense, as “nonsense upon stilts” in his “A Critical Examination of the Declaration of Rights” (501).¹⁴ It is worth considering the context of this oft-used quote in a little more detail. In his essay, Bentham explains that

Natural rights is simple nonsense: natural and imprescriptible rights, rhetorical nonsense – nonsense upon stilts. But this rhetorical nonsense ends in the usual

¹⁴ While it is true that many see in the concept of natural rights, as put forward by Locke for instance, the natural foundation for contemporary understandings of human rights, others have argued against such an interpretation. As early as 1982, the period in which Moyn argues human rights rose to prominence, an article by Jack Donnelly appeared in *Human Rights Quarterly* titled “Human Rights as Natural Rights.” Donnelly’s argument is that those seeking alternative philosophical groundings for human rights, specifically Charles Beitz’s “Human Rights and Social Justice,” need to accept or take into account at least the link between human rights and natural rights. The article is an illustrative example of the need felt by some to defend natural rights interpretations against those who sought a different philosophical grounding for the concept, thereby showing that either interpretation is contested. Nevertheless, the natural rights argument tends to prevail, as is borne out by Andrew Clapham’s *Human Rights: A Very Short Introduction*. There, he writes that the seeds of the human rights movement lie in the “sense of injustice when governments resort to measures which invade the perceived natural rights of the individual” (9).

mischievous nonsense: for immediately a list of these pretended natural rights is given, and those are so expressed as to present to view legal rights. And of these rights, whatever they are, there is not, it seems, any one of which any government *can*, upon any occasion whatever, abrogate the smallest particle. (501)

Bentham thus insists that basic innate rights – such as those covered by the UDHR – cannot logically be secured in a legal sense outside the context of nation states or inter-governmental accords. These rights are, in effect, part of the foundational principals of a society and the social contract, not a precursor to that society. Bentham's point is valuable here because it points out that the fight for natural rights, or human rights, cannot be grounded solely outside of socio-political reality.

Rights, even innate ones, can only be guaranteed when they become part of the social contract citizens settle on with the institutions that govern them. In that respect, it is important to note at this stage that social contracts are not necessarily consensual or peaceful. In his criticism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* and Locke's explanations of the social contract, "Of the Social Contract," David Hume notes that such contracts are often messily enforced or violently imposed rather than mutually agreed upon:

The face of the earth is continually changing, by the increase of small kingdoms into great empires, by the dissolution of great empires into smaller kingdoms, by the planting of colonies, by the migration of tribes. Is there any thing discoverable in all these events but force and violence? Where is the mutual agreement or voluntary association so much talked of? (216)

As I have argued, the contemporary rights regime, with all its various incarnations, is engaged in a complex struggle to make global citizens part of its global legal-political project, sometimes through mutual agreement (the United Nations or rights activism) and sometimes through less peaceful means (humanitarian interventions). The latter explains some of the mistrust for globalizing projects and ideologies in sections of the world that suffered under colonial rule, as well as the unwillingness of nation states to allow a transnational system to intervene in its sovereignty to impose supposedly universal values.

The basic premise of Slaughter's *Human Rights Inc.* can help further to disentangle this complex process, with its positive and negative sides, of building the socio-cultural consensus for human rights. He uses the term "incorporated citizenship" – hence the "Inc." in the title – in his study to show how the literary genre of the *Bildungsroman* and human rights align the individual with society. The *Bildungsroman*, he points out, is a narrative in which the individual's pre-social desires are eventually brought in line with the place of citizens within society, making such novels "a particularly dependable ally in human rights law's globalizing designs . . . that disseminates its norms" (25). The fact that the two are inextricably linked in terms of rights, securing "natural" or "human" rights within the context of the nation state, is significant to his argument. He writes that, broadly, "literature and law take on the character of an international and intertextual system" (25) and that, specifically, the "complicity of human rights and the novel means that the field of literature is itself implicated in the discursive regime of human rights" (43). In order to make this point, he shows that the human rights project of teaching individuals to recognize that which they already are – human beings endowed with certain inalienable rights – is figured in a narrative way.¹⁵ He writes that the culture of human rights revolves around generating a "self-saying, self-incorporating citizen-subject" able to narrate their entitlement to rights as a result of their having integrated into the society that guarantees those rights (249).

To restate this in the terms set out above, it pays to understand the cultural dimension and the culture surrounding human rights for two separate reasons. First, it sheds light on the ways in which cultural artefacts work in tandem with legal-political aspects of rights movements and are indeed often a critical part of those movements.¹⁶

¹⁵ I deliberately use the well-known turn of phrase from the American Declaration of Independence here to underscore the extent to which the politics of rights is always caught in the limbo between the universal promise of its foundational declarations and the inequalities that pervade the realities those documents seek to govern. This tension lies at the heart of the next chapter's exploration of how narratives are used by disempowered subjects to confront declarative practices and promises with their own suffering.

¹⁶ Huyssen calls for a similar type of understanding when he writes that "the active prosecution of human rights violations in the court also depends on the strength of memory discourses in the public sphere – journalism, films, media, literature, the arts, education, and even urban graffiti" (612).

Second, whereas the legal-political or activist framing of human rights often seeks to avoid confrontation with the colonial spectres that haunt international relations, a cultural perspective comprises the fluidity of the dynamic and complex public sphere in which human rights and other discourses compete, coexist, and coalesce. Moreover, it takes into account the point raised by Robert Meister in *After Evil* that a restrictive legal focus on individual perpetrators of rights abuses has drawn the focus away from the political demons that plague the rights project, even if that politics informs many of the problems that project encounters in its engagement with the global public sphere more broadly (315). Gilroy makes a related point in *Postcolonial Melancholia* when he writes that the human rights project needs to confront histories of inequality more explicitly if it is to extend and consolidate its reach (xvi). In what follows, I want to lay the groundwork for a cultural perspective that addresses these issues. In order to do so, it is important to come to grips with how human rights culture itself currently operates and what the attendant assumptions are of that culture.

1.3 Short Case Study: Amnesty International

Amnesty UK's programme of human rights education through books forms a valuable case in point at this stage, in that it draws on personal narratives to ground abstract human rights. As such, it also begins to lift the veil on important aspects of the cultural dimension of human rights more broadly in which Eggers can be grounded. It is useful to consider three aspects of the language used by Amnesty in explaining its thinking around literary texts in relation to human rights-work. These are the affective and theoretical aspects of those texts as well as the bridging towards Amnesty's activism. Amnesty UK explains its decision to endorse certain books as part of an effort "to help readers take that next step into activism – to empower them to consider **what comes next**" ("Fiction for Human Rights Change," bold in original). The general principle that governs this faith in literature is described as follows: "Reading fiction develops our empathy and social understanding. Empathy helps us stand up to prejudice and discrimination" ("Literature and Human Rights"). On its practical page on how to teach

human rights fiction, it then goes on to provide short summaries of endorsed novels with explicit references to abstract human rights made tangible through the texts or, to use their words, stories that “personalise human rights that may otherwise seem abstract” (“Fiction and Human Rights”). It is evident from these descriptions that Amnesty UK believes that literary works, and personal narratives in particular, have a key function in their rights-work.

The clear linear thinking process behind the endorsed fiction campaign provides a first articulation of the central tenets of human rights culture. The core idea is that stories of suffering can ground the abstract language of human rights in such a way that non-specialist readers are moved to action. Any of the summaries on the “Resources” page underscores this principle. For instance, the blurb for Jane Mitchell’s *Chalkline* reads as follows:

Soldiers of the Kashmir Freedom Fighters are in search of new recruits at nine-year-old Rafiq’s school in rural Kashmir. Rafiq becomes the first boy in his class to be forced into a life of brutality and terrorism. So begins Rafiq’s transformation from child to boy soldier, indoctrinated into a cause of fanatical belief. *Chalkline* explores the themes of **slavery**, **child soldiers**, **freedom of belief**, and the **right to an education**. (“Fiction and Human Rights,” bold in original)

What is particularly noteworthy about these descriptions is the way they explicitly point to rights, emphasized in bold, to which the narrative is meant to draw attention. The selected texts are also clearly marketed towards a Western audience, who are meant to become aware of the universality of rights as a result of reading about individualized and specific rights abuses. The victim-protagonists in these stories thus become vessels, propelled by the affective charge of their suffering, that bring readers an acute awareness of human rights in general and the need to protect them in specific contexts. In this sense, these personal narratives are emblematic of what Robert Eaglestone describes as “forms of engaged literature that seek to influence, explain, and educate” readers about acute human rights issues (84). These narratives are fundamentally individualistic, which has led them to be criticized. However, Eaglestone goes on to say that those critics who suggest this individualistic focus misses the point in terms of addressing the broader “political and global issues,” further miss the point that these narrative forms constitute a productive means of making legible the

complexities of these broader crises (84). Eggers would seem to share this view when, in discussing his involvement in the publication of oral history collections, he says that “you almost always have a better understanding of a situation through a first-person narrative—seeing what one person says and then seeing a broader view of it” (562). Amnesty UK’s endorsed fiction initiative thus illustrates a key dynamic that drives human rights’s cultural dimension. There is an interplay between abstract rights, particular victim-narratives, and the affective engagement of the reader, and this interplay forms the central premise of human rights culture’s efforts to mitigate the weakness of its legal-political dimension. In order to discuss Eggers’s works in relation to that culture, it will be crucial to unpack precisely how his works position themselves vis-à-vis that premise and how his narratives play out the dynamic between its various actors. This requires an in-depth discussion of his engagement with that human rights culture, the prerequisite for which is a working definition of the concept that will serve to frame the further investigation of Eggers’s oeuvre.

1.4 Mapping Out Human Rights Culture

In many ways, conceiving of human rights as a culture in addition to recognizing its status as a legal concept lays bare that which the vast majority of studies into human rights have taken for granted. That is, that human rights have their basis in the dynamic social, cultural, and historical roots of the countries and cultures to which its rigid, universal claims apply. The influential histories of human rights by Hunt and Moyn form a useful case in point here. Regardless of their differing conclusions, both base their explorations of the rise of human rights on a tumultuous public sphere that covers the literary, political, and social in addition to the legal-historical developments of various periods of history. It is important to make this more fluid cultural definition explicit, however, if one is subsequently to analyse just how an author such as Eggers participates in and plays with the conventions of human rights culture. Peter Burke’s discussion in *What Is Cultural History* with regard to the implications of what it means to take a cultural historical approach is useful in this respect. He notes that the concept of

culture “implies the idea of tradition, of certain kinds of knowledge and skills handed down from one generation to the next” (26). This, he goes on to argue, allows cultural historians to do away with the presumed “homogeneity of an ‘age’” (26). If one takes this type of approach to cultural history, it is possible to discern from the conflicting aspects of human rights outlined above a broad, working definition of human rights culture.

Therefore, by human rights culture I mean the multifarious field within which personal narratives circulate in service of the human rights movement, as well as the opportunities and restrictions placed upon those narratives by the tenets of that movement and the global public sphere within which it operates. This means that this dissertation’s conception and study of human rights culture is inevitably skewed by how Eggers engages with it, the types of activism he undertakes, and the mode of storytelling he prefers. It does not deal with the many other media or means found by others to operate within that culture. In this sense, the conclusions are telling only as case studies of how personal narratives fare within the diverse and complex global public sphere of which human rights culture is a part, but should not be mistaken for generalizations about the nature of that culture more broadly. They do, however, provide a useful means of measuring the basic premises of human rights culture against the impact of personal narratives that make use of it. In this sense, my analysis of Eggers is not strictly focused on the discursive space created by the text and paratext of his personal narratives, but is also concerned with what that discursive space’s relationship is to the extra-textual field within which it is solicited, produced, marketed, and read.

By exploring human rights culture in this way, I aim to take into account the warning put out by Sophie McClennen and Joseph Slaughter in “Introducing Human Rights and Literary Forms; or, The Vehicles and Vocabularies of Human Rights,” that “humanities-based human rights scholarship has a tendency to ignore, devalue, or discredit the law” (6). In fact, my working definition takes their incentive one step further by including not only the legal dimension of human rights, but the various other concerns outlined above that intersect with the human rights project at the social, national, cultural, and geopolitical levels. Art and culture more broadly are an integral part of that project. In “Human Rights and Literary Studies,” Dawes even finds grounds for this in the UDHR itself when he notes that art is protected in its 27th article (399). What makes this

concept of a “cultural dimension” so important is precisely that it can bring into focus the multifarious nature of the field within which the human rights movement operates. As Michael Galchinsky writes in “The Problem with Human Rights Culture,” the civic and ethical functions of the cultural and legal aspects of human rights may be shared, but their concerns differ in terms of scope: “while the orientation of the law is vertical, reaching down from government bodies to individuals, the orientation of rights culture tends to be horizontal, the artist appealing as a human being directly to his or her fellows” (5). He argues that this, linking back to my point, puts human rights in touch with the broader public sphere in the way it is conceived by Habermas more broadly, and by Slaughter specifically in relation to human rights (5). As such, the cultural dimension of human rights can help to conceptualize how the rights project goes about convincing global citizens to claim, respect, and defend universal rights.

Given the focus on Eggers as a case study, this dissertation looks mainly at a specific type of cultural artefact, the personal narrative, and its place within the global public sphere as a human rights tool. Personal narratives, in a basic sense, provide disempowered subjects with the chance to engage a wide, often Western, audience through a compelling narrative in which they put forward their experiences of rights abuses, enter into an affective dialogue with their readerships and, on that basis, demand recognition for their basic humanity and rights. In terms of the readership, personal narratives play a double role in human rights culture according to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. In “Witness or False Witness: Metrics of Authenticity, Collective I-Formations, and the Ethic of Verification in First-Person Testimony,” they write that such narratives convince readers that the suffering experienced by the victim matters and is real, as well as positioning readers as ethical subjects whose engagement with the human rights project can make a difference to this or similar victims (590). In this sense, as well as in terms of the postcolonial critique outlined above, the personal narrative is a particularly fruitful point of entry into studying human rights culture and how it operates.

There are at least three major areas of interest that the personal narrative helps illuminate based on the discussion thus far. First, the tendency towards collaboration between privileged Western authors and disempowered subjects in the context of human rights culture provides a means of addressing postcolonial critics’ concerns

about neo-colonial appropriation and the position and salience of the subaltern in the global public sphere. Eggers's often necessary role in providing his disempowered collaborators with a platform from which to address a Western audience as well as his interventions in how that address is structured and phrased are of particular interest in this respect. Second, the reliance on cross-cultural affective engagement to effect change is often taken for granted, especially by cosmopolitan theorists, but remains under-theorized at a textual level in the specific case of narratives seeking to contribute to social change in a human rights context. One example of this lack of textual theorization is Brian Yost's discussion of Eggers's *What Is the What*, in which he loosely reconfigures literature "as an ethically motivated cosmopolitan engagement" that allows its contents to become relevant "beyond the constraints of any specific territorial or national boundary" (150). According to Yost, this means that cosmopolitan literature has the power to cultivate notions of a shared humanity by "continually exposing one national readership to the literary consciousness or voices of other nationalities" (166). Part of what human rights culture contributes to the human rights project as a whole, Galchinsky argues, is the means to "craft a universal structure of feeling for a global audience" that puts universal values in touch with the distinctive experiences of individuals across national and cultural boundaries (15). The promotion of universal values on the basis of particular experiences as well as the preservation of particularity in the light of human rights' universalizing tendency are respectively at the heart of Eggers's collaborative testimonial works and his fictional works.

Third, both the struggle for salience undertaken by disempowered subjects and the affective dimension of personal narratives as relied on by human rights culture bring into focus those questions relating to human rights' role in the global public sphere. To ask why the voices of victims go unnoticed – why their lives are less grievable, to use Butler's terms in *Frames of War* – or whether empathic engagement is enough to remedy that or indeed prevent future abuses, is to enquire why human rights struggles to assert its universal values in a more binding, global, and egalitarian way. The core premise for the question at the heart of Butler's study into the lack of visibility for certain lives revolves around the ways in which certain types of victimhood are obscured or excluded from the global public sphere: "Forms of racism instituted and active at the level of perception tend to produce iconic versions of populations who are eminently

grievable, and others whose loss is no loss, and who remain ungrievable” (24). Disempowered subjects who write personal narratives seek to break through these forms of exclusion and have often seen, or been made to see, the opportunities afforded by human rights culture as a means of doing so. I will introduce these particular aspects of human rights culture as they come to the fore through a study of the personal narrative in subsequent chapters, each of which will tackle one of the three issues outlined above head on.

The finer points of how human rights culture operates will be further uncovered through a close reading of Eggers’s works. The mutually beneficial reasoning behind taking a cultural perspective on human rights and then considering Eggers within that framework is twofold. First, it allows the analysis of Eggers’s works to take into consideration the fluidity of the global public sphere, of which human rights is only one part, into which the rights-work performed by his texts enters. Furthermore, it thereby becomes possible to consider how his personal narratives aim to contribute to making real the universal promise of human rights, as well as why or how such efforts struggle or fail. In his fictional works, Eggers is often the first to raise the potential risks and problems cross-cultural rights-work runs into, thus underscoring once more the need for a definition of human rights culture to include an understanding of its weaknesses as well as its strengths. Second, the role of Eggers in human rights culture can be juxtaposed with narratives that circulated in different historical contexts so as to gain a better understanding of how human rights culture has changed as well as how Eggers’s engagement with it in the present is either typical or innovative. This is useful in that the continuity of practice in deploying cultural means, such as testimonial narratives, in the context of rights-work highlights the development of this socio-political tool in relation to the contemporary human rights moment. In this way, an argument begins to form for considering Eggers’s texts as discursive spaces in themselves that not only convey the rights-claim of victims but also reimagine and push the boundaries of human rights culture itself even as they take up that culture’s extra-textual impetus to rights activism. In addition to this, a comparison of Eggers’s collaborative rights-work to other such collaborations in the past provides a valuable means of gauging the consequences of the author’s involvement in retelling the stories of others in human rights culture.

1.5 Dave Eggers in Human Rights Culture

In an abstract way, Eggers's oeuvre mimics the narrative path of the protagonists in *Bildungsromane* that Slaughter sees as forming one half of the mutually reinforcing dynamic between human rights and literature. In this case, the story of an individual who discovers their subjectivity and comes to define that subjectivity in terms of how their individuality meshes with the social order through which their rights are granted is echoed by Eggers's literary output. As an author, he has gradually developed a study of the individual's place in and relationship with the globalizing society in which they live, focusing specifically on the North-American context. Eggers's study evolves in scope from his highly personal breakthrough memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, published in 2000, to a broader concern for the individual's place in a new, globalized world order in works such as *A Hologram for the King* or *The Circle*, published in 2012 and 2013 respectively. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* can be seen as an exercise in self-discovery in which the author constitutes his subjectivity through an account of the tragic loss of his parents to cancer and his subsequent struggle to find his way in life with his younger brother Christopher. To cast this in terms of human rights culture, one could see this memoir as the author's construction of a fictional version of himself as a fully-fledged human being as demarcated by his traumatic childhood. This is not to suggest that *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* should be read purely biographically or indeed be analysed so as to uncover the traces of the intentional process behind the way the protagonist relates to the real author. In fact, the distorted link between Eggers and the protagonist of his memoir, who is more clearly and more exclusively shaped by his traumatic past, lays bare one of the central problems with human rights culture's assumption that personal narratives can attest sufficiently to the particular lived experiences of complex human beings marked but not defined by trauma. Indeed, it is precisely the discrepancies between the biographical subject and the protagonist that forms the basis for much of the analysis of Eggers's collaborative testimonial projects in the context of human rights culture in later chapters.

A Hologram for the King and *The Circle* are both emblematic of what Timothy W. Galow, in *Understanding Dave Eggers*, calls the author's increasing focus on "the interaction of individual voices and larger social structures" (98). The emphasis in these novels is not

so much on the subjectivity of its protagonists as on their engagement with others and their engagement with society at large. In doing so, they often explore some of the basic tendencies with which human rights culture intersects, such as the consequences of globalization for the individual as well as the tension between that globalization and notions of sovereignty. *A Hologram for the King* is an allegorical novel about the decline of America in a globalized world. It tracks the story of a washed-out businessman, Alan Clay, as he engages in a last ditch effort to rekindle his fortunes in the global economic arena by selling a holographic communications system to the king of Saudi Arabia. The decline of America and the character of Alan are tied up with one another, Galow argues, in that the protagonist's "displacement in this new culture allows him to consider the implications of globalization in a new context" (102).¹⁷ The novel, largely told from the perspective of the perpetually insecure and increasingly obsolete Alan, explores its protagonist's bumbling efforts to establish meaningful connections with a multitude of different characters he encounters.

The Circle concerns itself with the topical issue of privacy in the age of social media. This dystopian novel warns against the erosion of privacy by large multinational tech companies which, in their adherence to the mantra of openness and transparency, may in fact be reshaping the world in a less benign way than its enthusiastic users, such as the novel's naïve protagonist Mae Holland, are willing to admit. In a review of the book for *The New York Review of Books*, Margaret Atwood praised it as a "novel of ideas" in which Eggers "holds up the mirror of art" to a society in danger of embracing uncritically the social media revolution ("When Privacy is Theft"). Eggers himself explicitly describes the issue with which his novel is concerned in terms of rights in a 2016 interview for *Contemporary Literature* with Sean Bex and Stef Craps. The right at stake here is not only the novel's discussion of the right to privacy, but the way it intricately connects that right to the fundamental freedom of the individual in society. Eggers suggests that his aim was to create through *The Circle* a feeling of horror around

¹⁷ Galow also points out that this is a recurring theme in many of Eggers's short stories, in which American protagonists wrestle with the anxieties and fears spawned by globalization (82). I will discuss one such short story in particular, "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly," in the final chapter of this dissertation.

the conglomeration of power and wealth into a very few hands and the temptation toward submitting to this central funnel of all information where, in exchange for having all of your banking, your voting, and your social life in one place, you give up access to some third party, some capitalist company that uses it for means beyond your control and knowledge. That is where we are at right now. In exchange for “freedom,” in exchange for “free things,” we allow ourselves to be spied on. (qtd. in Bex and Craps 554)

Put together, *A Hologram for the King* and *The Circle* investigate both the decline in traditional means of framing the individual’s relationship to society, such as clout in a cultural, economic, and technical sense derived from the nation state, and the dangers of newer frames, such as rootless cosmopolitanism and the rise of social media with its attendant monetization of personal data.

In his other works, as well as in his work as an editor and activist, Eggers has often considered the relationship between the individual and society more explicitly in terms of human rights. He followed up the success of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* with *You Shall Know Our Velocity* (2002), a novel in which two young Americans, Will and Hand, seek to overcome personal tragedy by travelling around the world and, along the way, distributing money to those in need. The novel poignantly balances descriptions of abject poverty with ludicrous schemes devised by the stunted protagonists to donate money to the poor. It ingeniously brings together the highly individual plot of personal development through its main protagonist, Will, even as it inserts that plot into a broader story of cross-cultural engagement and charity. Galow describes the plot as one in which Will, blinded by his own background and traumatic past, struggles “to overcome his privilege and find a new language for encountering the ‘other’” (39). As such, the novel forms the starting point for an exploration of the dynamics of global charity as it is personified in the charity quest plot of its two stunted protagonists.¹⁸ As I

¹⁸ Charity and human rights activism often coexist uncomfortably in Eggers’s works, as the former is mostly shown up as running counter to the impact sought after by Eggers’s narrative efforts in the context of the latter. This is closely connected to my discussion in chapter three of the distinction between sympathy, empathy, and identification that governs much of the affective engagement pursued by narratives in human rights culture.

go on to discuss in the final chapter of this dissertation, the subsequent failure of the protagonists to achieve anything meaningful either in terms of working through their own trauma or in terms of helping disempowered others becomes a powerful critique of the cosmopolitan faith in cross-cultural encounters in human rights culture.

This critique provides a valuable lens through which to study Eggers's own activism, which is often also grounded in the possibilities and opportunities afforded by cross-cultural engagement. Consider in this respect the similarity between Hand's call to action in *You Shall Know Our Velocity* with regard to activism and Eggers's own reflections on the subject. In a chapter narrated from the perspective of Hand in the novel, the character says:

There's nothing to be gained from passive observance, the simple documenting of conditions, because, at its core, it sets a bad example. Every time something is observed and not fixed, or when one has a chance to give in some way and does not, there is a lie being told, the same lie we all know by heart but which needn't be reiterated. (134)

In this plea, Eggers's character is clearly expounding the view that it is better to engage with the issues at hand – in *You Shall Know Our Velocity*'s case that would be the poverty in the Global South – rather than simply look on as a bystander. In his interview with Stef Craps and myself, Eggers makes a similar appeal:

Don't allow yourself to become cynical, especially before you've tried. The cynicism that I felt in my twenties, that nothing would have an impact—that was a terrible mistake. . . . The cynics usually are not directly engaged in anything. . . . You can have a profound impact, but it's about where and how and when. It's about being serious and putting in the time, staying, and being courageous and fierce and true about it. (567)

As such, the author clearly shares the view of his character in *You Shall Know Our Velocity* that it is better to try to do good and accept whatever positive impact you may have as a small victory than refrain from action for fear of failure. It is noteworthy, however, that by aligning his views on activism with one of two protagonists in his novel, Eggers offers his readers a critical window onto this type of activism. The characters in *You Shall Know Our Velocity* end up wasting a large sum of money in fruitless charity throughout their

adventures in the Global South, yet achieve neither personal nor cross-cultural success in alleviating suffering. This is not to suggest that Eggers must therefore be equally unsuccessful in his efforts, but it does raise significant questions with regard to his attitude to activism that demand answers.¹⁹

The place one could look for these answers is in the competitive global public sphere of which human rights culture is a part, with its neo-colonial resonances and geopolitical complications. Much of Eggers's most salient activism, which centres on finding the means to narrate individual trauma, is bound up with this global human rights culture.²⁰ The two key examples of this are *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun*, for which Eggers collaborated with victims of human rights abuses in Sudan and the U.S., respectively, in order to give a voice to their suffering, to allow them to articulate a claim to rights, and to recruit a Western audience for their cause. *What Is the What* tells the story of Valentino Achak Deng, one of the so-called "Lost Boys" of Sudan, who survived the Second Sudanese Civil War and was subsequently airlifted to the United States as part of a resettlement programme. Eggers and Deng's collaboration was extensive both on and off the pages of the book. Most noteworthy in this respect is the way Eggers chose to narrate Deng's story through a fictional narrator whose speaking voice does not entirely reflect either of the partners, but nevertheless claims to provide an accurate representation of Deng's particular experiences. The reason this narrator cannot simply be equated to Deng is because there is extensive involvement on Eggers's part in the story's structuring, and because the disempowered other, Deng, explicitly states in the preface that parts of the story were made up by Eggers so as to streamline

¹⁹ In "Paratextuality and Economic Disavowal in Eggers' *You Shall Know Our Velocity*," Sarah Brouillette reads the novel as "a text about Eggers' career" designed "to police the reception of future works and control the way we read Eggers' position in the literary marketplace" (Brouillette). The central tension she describes centres on him trying to avoid being perceived as either a hack working for profit or an author who is part of a cultural elite. This gains further importance for Eggers, I would add, because neither position is conducive to his work as an author-activist inviting readers to join him in agonizing over how to engage productively with those to whom rights are not yet extended or whose rights have been violated.

²⁰ Indeed, Galow identifies as some of the unifying characteristics of Eggers's literary output the continued interest in traumatized protagonists as well as a broader preoccupation with the role of Americans on the global stage (98).

the narrative and make up for those events of which Deng himself had little recollection (*What Is the What* 2008 xiv).²¹

Despite these narratological oddities, which move the book away from the more straightforward testimonial strategy of having a victim simply tell their story, critics have read and received the book as a clear piece of activism in addition to its being a well-crafted story. Galow sees it as evidence for “Deng’s gradual transformation from scared child into a highly visible representative of the Lost Boys” (51). Yost even focuses on the formal features of the book as part of his argument that it forms “a positive model for the testimony narrative as a form of cosmopolitan humanitarian collaboration” (150). He also makes the case for extrapolating from Deng’s experiences in some respect as part of the reading process. Yost focuses not so much on how the protagonist comes to represent the Lost Boys more broadly, as Galow does, but argues instead that the premise of the book is that readers can “extract” universal values from the “specific, local, and unique experiences” described in the story (159). Bringing these two points together, in “Humanitarian Narrative and Posthumanist Critique: Dave Eggers’s *What Is the What*” Michelle Peek argues that the novel constitutes a rewriting of the “terms of testimonial writing” in which the unique and particular is retained in terms of Deng’s story, but the resonance of the narrative extends to the “universalizing genre of ‘Lost Boys’ testimonial” (115).²² As a result, proponents of the book tend to praise Eggers’s skills as a writer for making legible and compelling the rights-claims of the narrative’s disempowered subject as well as for educating readers about a broader rights crisis.

²¹ Unless explicitly stated otherwise, all citations are taken from the 2008 Penguin edition of *What Is the What*, which contains a revised preface in which Deng explains in more detail how his relationship with Eggers developed. In order to counter criticism their collaboration received following the book’s initial publication, he also makes clear that all the proceeds from the book go directly to the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation (*What Is the What* 2008 xiii-xv).

²² Peek explicitly notes Eggers’s engagement with the universalizing humanism of the human rights movement and reads *What Is the What* as an effort on the part of the author to think beyond some of the “value-laden frames of humanitarian witnessing” even as it embeds itself within the culture of life writing as it functions within the discourse of human rights (116). This point is taken up in chapter three of this dissertation.

Less favourable reviews are similarly concerned with how the book is more than just a story and is also part of a campaign for social justice. In a review for *The New Republic*, for instance, Lee Siegel accuses Eggers of “post-colonial arrogance” and the “expropriation of another man’s identity” (53). Siegel claims that, in *What Is the What*, Deng has his identity “erased” (50), that Eggers’s interventions create a discord between “whimsical . . . artistic license” and “a genocidal historical event” (51), and that the narrative thereby weakens and confuses the reader’s engagement by making it impossible to tell whether Deng’s emotional appeals are “his own or not” (53). In many ways, the specific criticisms laid out by Siegel can be brought back to the criticisms of human rights culture. After all, the faith in providing salience for rights abuses through personal narratives – which is exactly what Eggers tends to do in some form or other in his activism – reframes but does not rebut postcolonial concerns about subaltern speech. Both the positive and negative reviews thus slot *What Is the What* into the dynamics of human rights culture. They cover the metonymical requirements of personal narratives – the extent to which Deng’s experiences are “representative” – as well as the imperial spectres that haunt the West’s cross-cultural engagement with non-Western subjects in the pursuit of the universalization of rights.

Zeitoun similarly embeds itself within these tenets of human rights culture. It tells the story of Abdulrahman Zeitoun, a Syrian-American migrant who survives Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans only to be arrested, detained, and abused without due process under the guise of counter-terror measures in the chaotic aftermath of the storm. While this collaborative narrative is less experimental in terms of form – everything is narrated by a journalistic third person narrator – it nevertheless works hard through its structure and style to cajole readers into taking part in its rights project. The novel blends the perspectives of Zeitoun and his wife Kathy, who struggles to find out what has happened to her husband following his arrest, in such a way as to humanize the dehumanizing stereotypes and treatment to which the protagonist is consistently subjected. As such, it attempts to guide the reader into engaging Zeitoun affectively and recognizing his humanity in his being stripped of that humanity. In this sense, as Valerie Thomas points out in “‘Dust to Cleanse Themselves,’ A Survivor’s Ethos: Diasporic Disidentifications in *Zeitoun*,” the narrative seeks to provide a foil to the stereotyping and repression of the particular experiences of people such as Zeitoun in

the storm's aftermath, which rendered their suffering invisible whilst simultaneously using them as scapegoats for the ills in U.S. society (284). Its scope is, just like *What Is the What's*, both individual and universal in terms of the rights-work it is trying to do. It asks for the recognition of its protagonist's humanity and attendant rights, but also asks that readers understand the reasons behind the rights abuses Zeitoun suffered so as to make a wider point about the need to amend the unequal treatment of people by the state based on their ethnicity, religion, or race and reinforced by a counter-terrorism discourse that emphasizes rather than bridges those divisions.²³

In this case, the extra-textual reality surrounding the book's protagonist provided the main bone of contention for critics debating the effectiveness of *Zeitoun* as a rights project. Following the publication of Eggers's account of Zeitoun's story, which gives an altogether positive account of the protagonist as an honest, hard-working man wrongfully accused and abused, real-world revelations caught up with the representation of the character in *Zeitoun*. Kathy was forced to take out a restraining order against her husband after he allegedly tried to beat her to death with a tire iron and subsequently ordered a hit on her from prison, though Zeitoun himself contests these allegations ("Zeitoun Lawyer: restraining order 'flawed'"). The charges and allegations against Zeitoun reveal a darker side of the character Eggers chose to create in his narrative and leaves *Zeitoun* open to the accusation that the text whitewashed the character in order to smooth the path for the rights-work the text sets out to do. Indeed, some critics leapt on the revelations as discrediting entirely the book's endeavours. Robbie Brown wrote in the *New York Times* that the events marked a "series of dark turns" that call into question the relationship between Kathy and Zeitoun as described in the book ("Katrina Hero Facing Charges in New Orleans"), while Victoria Patterson's article published on *Salon.com* asked more bluntly "Did Eggers get Zeitoun Wrong?" ("Did Dave Eggers get Zeitoun Wrong?"). Other critics, such as Galow, have

²³ The specific context for the story of Zeitoun is the so-called PATRIOT act, which effectively places counter-terrorism investigations beyond the normal legal restraints and thereby allows the types of abuse in the narrative to take place. The particular implications of this for *Zeitoun* will be introduced as they become relevant to the analysis of that narrative in subsequent chapters.

chosen to separate the extra-textual events from the narrative proper in order to analyse the text's depiction of the story without muddling the analysis with events outside of it (64-81). However, the revelations following *Zeitoun*'s publication cannot form the basis for a simple dismissal of Eggers and Zeitoun's collaborative project nor can they simply be ignored in order to simplify the analysis of what they set out to achieve.

The revelations are a key part of the discussion about how Eggers engages human rights culture and how that culture in turn affects and shapes his activism. They reveal the extent to which these collaborative efforts make it so that author and disempowered subject are mutually invested in each other's success. As far as Eggers is concerned, as Liesbeth Korthals Altes writes in *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation*, the author's "writing programs with underprivileged people arguably provide a strong backing to his posture of sincerely committed writer" (54). This posture of the sincere writer, in turn, helps soften the audience for the projects to which books such as *What Is the What* or *Zeitoun* are linked. In part, this is achieved by the way in which these texts, especially *What Is the What*, echo the playful and self-deprecating style of Eggers's popular breakthrough narrative *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, which also blends stylistic play with serious subject matter to form a compelling narrative. In this way, his work with Deng and Zeitoun is a continuation of previous artistic projects. Altes, describing *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, notes how the formal play at work in the book acts as a means of drawing the reader into the sincere communicative effort at the heart of the book. In this sense, the style may be particularly suited to the type of work literature can perform in human rights culture in making incomprehensible and complex suffering of victims sufficiently legible so as to activate readers in an affective sense and, beyond that, to engage them for social change.

As far as Deng and Zeitoun are concerned, the affectively engaging articulation of their suffering as facilitated by Eggers makes their appeal stronger. Kevin Brooks makes this point in "Dave Eggers's *What Is the What* as World Literature" when he writes that after Eggers rewrote Deng's story, "the story gained significantly as a work of art" (36) to the extent that it tells the story of the Lost Boys more "fully" and "vividly" than the first-hand accounts he has heard (37). Through Eggers and the clout he has on the Western, especially North-American, book market, *Zeitoun* and *What Is the What* reach a

far larger audience and can make use of the reading public's desire to consume the latest text by a likeable author. In her analysis of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Altes notes how Eggers's authorial posturing is characterized by an appealing oscillation between irony and sincerity that captivates the reader and challenges them to discern the author's true voice and persona amidst the narrative's many formal gimmicks and experiments (62). Moreover, she argues, the cover for the memoir, a red curtain crossing a sunset, shows the extent to which the author is aware of the marketing conventions in the U.S. book market in its parodying of that marketing style (232). It is this acute knowledge of the book market that makes Eggers so successful in helping the disempowered subjects with which he collaborates augment the salience of their appeals and rights claims. When this dynamic is successful, as it was for *What Is the What*, artist and disempowered victim lift each other's efforts to new heights. But when either side is shown to be faulty in some respect, as was the case for *Zeitoun*, the entire endeavour collapses.²⁴ Indeed, in *Zeitoun*'s case the revelations eventually caused the Zeitoun Foundation, set up as a recipient charity for all the book's proceeds, to close down.

Zeitoun and *What Is the What* provide intriguing examples of the drive, taken up by Eggers, towards personal narratives in human rights culture, both in their successes and failures. *What Is the What* is part of a compelling effort to make legible an extraordinarily complex conflict in and around South Sudan through the story of a single Sudanese man's experience. This conflict, which has its origins in the tensions between the deeply held ethnic and religious identities of groups of people across what was then still a single country, Sudan. Deng, for instance, is part of the Dinka people, an ethnic group in what is now South Sudan, whose faith and lifestyle, mostly made up of cattle-herding, differ markedly from that of the Islamic North. They further differ from the Nuer, a different ethnic group that makes up a significant part of South Sudan's demographic,

²⁴ Another well-known example would be Rigoberta Menchú, whose life story appeared as *I, Rigoberta Menchú* under the editorial guidance of Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. Even though the book, considered a classic in the Latin-American *testimonio* genre, received the Nobel Peace Prize, Menchú and Burgos-Debray's account was heavily criticized by David Stoll in *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, in which he finds fault with the accuracy of Menchú's account and the way it was sensationalized for maximum publicity.

with whom relations remain difficult. Even if the novel devotes attention to these particularities as a means of providing context through exposition for the events in which Deng gets caught up, the character himself is less bound by these ethnic or religious strictures in his functioning within the narrative. In the section set in the United States in particular, Deng seems to be stripped of much of his local rootedness in South Sudan so as to facilitate the process of his becoming a representative character through which the reader, as he himself notes in the preface, can “learn” about his country (*What Is the What* 2008 xiii). This raises questions as to whether personal narratives in human rights culture provide access to or erase and supplant the local context of human rights crises. One could argue the point that such narratives distort the reader’s image of the conflict and of the parties involved in it. In terms of human rights activism, however, one could also suggest that this process reframes the conflict and its victims in more abstract terms, with local divisions being relinquished in favour of a more universalistic conception of suffering human beings entitled to rights and the protection thereof.

The case of *Zeitoun* can help further disentangle this issue, as it came to be deployed on either side of this argument. The story of *Zeitoun* was taken up elsewhere before it was transformed into a stand-alone story by Eggers, in *Voices from the Storm*, a volume in the Voice of Witness series co-founded by Eggers that publishes oral history collections relating to various human rights crises across the globe. I will return to the specifics of how the series, which focuses on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, engages with human rights culture in chapter three, where I investigate the affective dimension of personal narratives as a critical part of the human rights-work they seek to perform. For now, however, it is useful to consider how this different embedding of *Zeitoun*’s story engages with the issue surrounding the local and the global as it exists within human rights culture. In *Voices From the Storm*, *Zeitoun*’s experiences are a smaller part in an extensive collection of narratives covering a wide range of disempowered subjects’ experiences of Hurricane Katrina. The volume has a total of thirteen diverse narrators, including a Vietnamese pastor (Father Vien The Nguyen), a wrongfully convicted father of four (Dan Bright), a local activist (Jackie Harris), a Cuban immigrant (Sonya Hernandez), and an African-American New Orleans native trumpeter (Kermit Ruffins). In addition to his Syrian-American perspective, therefore, the reader is also confronted

with those of other New Orleans residents of different ages and genders with different racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds. As a cross-section of representatives, the volume is able to speak to the overall experience of Hurricane Katrina by its inhabitants, with its attendant complications for the poorer sections of the community that were unable to flee the city in time or whose houses were built on natural flood plains. In this sense, Zeitoun's experiences, whilst extraordinary as an impactful example of human rights abuse in a broad sense, are put in touch with the particularities of the local context that made such abuses possible through the use of extensive appendices.

In *Zeitoun*, the stand-alone version of this personal narrative, the embedding is vastly different. In this case, the character is largely unmoored from his specific ties to New Orleans rather than connected to them through the mosaic of narratives in *Voices from the Storm*. In his second engagement with Zeitoun's experiences, Eggers chose to explore the multinational and multicultural background of the character in order to address more specifically the racial profiling that underlies his arrest and abuse in the storm's aftermath. While I will deal with this issue in more detail in chapter three, it is worth noting the extent to which Zeitoun becomes a multi-rooted yet rootless individual in Eggers's more focused non-fiction adaptation. It draws more extensively on his Syrian background, which features in lengthy flashbacks and perpetually resurfaces, as certain motifs in the narrative remind him of his complex roots. For instance, photographs play an important role in *Zeitoun* as a prompt for the protagonist to recall his past life as a sailor and his childhood in Syria. These photographic memory-prompts are intricately connected to his experiences of being a New Orleans resident in that the storm, and his subsequent efforts to secure his possessions from the flood, quite literally bring these forgotten photographs to the surface (139-146). Syria and his past life at sea thus function as an escape for the character in *Zeitoun*. It is also an integral part of his identity, explained at length in the narrative's exposition which explores the character's experiences of being a Syrian-American Muslim in New Orleans that will later link to the narrative's major event, his arrest and detention on the basis of racial profiling.

In *Voices from the Storm*, Zeitoun's Syrian background is never more than one of the many diverse background stories that all the narrators seem to have. It seemingly does not affect the character in any significant way other than as an anecdotal part of his

experiences of the storm, such as when it helps him understand the flooding in the storm's aftermath: "There is a Syrian island close to Tripoli named Arwad Island. My grandmother lived there and that is where I grew up. So I know that when the sea level high in the ocean, we got one foot above the sea level from the wave pushing the water inside the city [sic]" (131). The focus on the character's hyphenated identity as a Syrian-American in *Zeitoun* suggests that the narrative attempts to think beyond the categorizations and stereotypes that govern the way he is perceived in the context of the American nation state. Indeed, Thomas argues as much when she suggests that in telling of the protagonist's "immigrant experience," the narrative "democratizes routes to inclusion and agency by expanding public knowledge and dialogue" (272). Furthermore, as I go on to show in my analysis in chapter three, the entire narrative works hard to find means of framing the protagonist as a human being, stripped of nationality and particularity, in its efforts to open him up to affective engagement on the part of the audience. The key issue at work here is, to use Butler's terms, that of overcoming the hegemonic boundaries that render certain lives and peoples less recognizable and grievable. The crucial point being that *Zeitoun's* status as both a Syrian and a Muslim, in addition to his status as a New Orleans inhabitant, make his suffering less visible. Indeed, Eggers's drive towards the personal narrative is informed by a belief that the hegemony excludes the voices of certain people, such as *Zeitoun*, and the need he feels to redress that injustice (Bex and Craps 565-566). In a broader sense, therefore, the act of distancing the character from his local ties unshackles the human rights-work of the narrative from the chains of the nation state, with all its attendant hegemonic divisions along ethnic, religious, and cultural lines. In doing so, it similarly seeks to address the way those divisions are replicated in the neo-colonial relationships and hierarchies between nation states that render the rights violations described in *Zeitoun* invisible by placing his suffering beyond the scope of the incorporated citizen-subject of the global human rights regime.

Yet the abandonment of local specificity and context can also work against this very process when that specificity and context contradict the champion of human rights put forward by the personal narrative. This was most strongly the case for *Zeitoun*, where the extra-textual revelations concerning the protagonist's conduct stood in stark contrast to the character sketched by Eggers in his narrative. In the aftermath of the

book's release, these new facts clashed with the emerging news story of domestic violence and court charges surrounding Zeitoun. Once the man was shown to be more complex than the character portrayed in the book, a process that essentially reinserted the transnational abstracted character into a specific local situation and series of events, the personal narrative lost its ability to use him as a conduit for human rights-work. In other words, once Zeitoun was no longer open to affective engagement as the idealized "human" of human rights, his claim to inclusion in that hegemony evaporated. In some way, the criminal allegations laid at the feet of Zeitoun became linked to his human rights claim and the abuse he suffered. As Patterson's article suggests by its title, "Did Dave Eggers Get Zeitoun Wrong?," the implication of these revelations prompted questions about whether or not Eggers had misled his audience or simply misread the issue himself. This is not to suggest that these revelations unfairly sullied Eggers's portrayal of Zeitoun. The allegations provide important additional information for the reader to judge Zeitoun's particular case, even if they do not diminish, as the narrative seeks to show, his right to be free from discrimination on the basis of his religion or nationality, as well as his right not to be unlawfully detained or tortured. Rather, the question must be why Eggers's personal narrative, in its appeal to human rights culture, constructs its subject in such a way and why the text's audience seems so willing to dismiss the rights-claim within once that narrative construct falls apart. What this lays bare, in other words, is the fickle status of the disempowered subject in human rights culture, measured against an idealized standard but always at risk of being re-grounded and subsequently dismissed on the basis of any complexities and particularities that form the context of their testimonies.

The same issue applies to *What Is the What*, which carefully navigates the ambiguous figure of the child soldier – who is both victim and perpetrator – in the discourse of human rights. Accordingly, the work of claiming rights by or on behalf of victims through the narrative requires a certain amount of re-grounding or abstraction so as to make the narrative and its incorporated rights-claim legible and amenable to a Western audience. Even though the protagonist is explicitly spared the need to contend with this problem by distinguishing Deng from other characters who do become child soldiers, the need to salvage their claim to absolute victimhood is, even for these peripheral characters, paramount. They are constructed solely as children: the agency in the tale of

their coercion into becoming soldiers is laid entirely at the feet of the rebel leaders recruiting them, and any potential atrocities committed following their induction are omitted from the narrative. This is not to say that the use of child soldiers is whitewashed in the novel, but rather to suggest that becoming a child soldier must be slotted into the overall victim-centred focus of a narrative that will not accept any ambiguity.

Despite this meticulous navigation though, the reader is reassured that Deng's victimhood need not be recovered in this way. The novel provides no evidence to suggest that Deng himself was a child soldier. Indeed, as I go on to show in the final chapter of this dissertation, the protagonist consistently stresses his not being part of the rebel army that recruits many of the other refugee children. In fact, this is one of the reasons he is eligible to be relocated to the United States. He sees himself as an exemplary candidate for resettlement because, as he writes, "I had not been a soldier" (490). Deng's victim-narrative is subsequently interlaced with one in which he struggles to be accepted in the United States. This creates a mutually reinforcing dynamic in the novel whereby the child-protagonist's suffering in Africa becomes a claim for having his human rights recognized, and the rejection the adult-protagonist contends with in the United States brings that claim into a recognizable setting and situation. His Sudanese experiences give readers a compelling reason to care for the plight of the character and also reassure them that he is worthy of their affective engagement, whereas the American ones make the character recognizable and accessible. The fact that Eggers steers Deng's narrative clear of any association with child soldiers further ensures that the rights-work performed by the novel cannot so easily subsequently be undermined. Thus, Deng can take up the role of the ideal human rights victim and the story becomes safe for consumption in human rights culture. As a result, the protagonist can be inserted into the process of claiming rights on behalf of himself and similar victims. Human rights culture offers a blueprint for that process to take place, but seems to require a certain amount of mediation for it to be successful. In *Zeitoun's* case, the vulnerability of this process was shown up when criminal allegations seemed to disqualify the narrative from claiming rights on behalf of its protagonist, thus calling into question the nature of Eggers's mediation. Part of this mediation comes back to the tension between the generalization of the victim's testimony and the particularities of

their experiences which, in *What Is the What*'s case, involve engaging or circumventing the complex issue of child soldiers.

Another part of the necessary mediation is Eggers's own intervention in the writing, editing, production, and marketing of these personal narratives. As a popular American author with a guaranteed access to the North-American marketplace, his involvement is invaluable in terms of providing people such as Deng or Zeitoun with the necessary salience and reach for the rights-work of their narratives to be impactful. As Deng writes in the preface to *What Is the What*, he called on Eggers to help him reach a bigger audience and transform his many experiences into a coherent and intriguing story (*What Is the What* 2008 xiii). This bigger audience is largely located in the United States and the West more broadly. This can be further gleaned from the preface, which stresses the wish to educate readers about African issues (*What Is the What* 2008 xiii) and includes a helpful map of Sudan and its neighbouring countries for readers unfamiliar with African geography (*What Is the What* 2008 xi). Eggers's ability to craft compelling stories and market them to this audience makes him invaluable to the rights-work these narratives set out to achieve. In this sense, Eggers's mediation also relates to the issue of engaging the local in a cross-cultural dialogue, or of reframing the violations of particular human beings in specific contexts in terms of universal values and their global application. This raises two questions. First, to what extent does Eggers's involvement in writing these personal narratives constitute an erosion of the particular voice or context of the victim or, conversely, help to accentuate it? Second, and relatedly, to what extent does the framing of these personal narratives as collaborative affect the rights-work they perform and the terms on which the audience is engaged? A comparison to similar such collaborations in the past in different rights-contexts can help address these questions. The slave narratives introduced in the following chapter provide a useful point of comparison as a means of gauging four aspects of collaborative personal narratives. How are these cultural artefacts engaged in rights-causes? How are they shaped by existing rights discourses and cultures? How do they contribute to the further shaping of those discourses and cultures? Finally, what role does the collaboration between a privileged author or editor and a disempowered subject play in the three previous questions? An answer to these questions sheds light on the function of personal narratives and their collaborative dimension in developing rights cultures

and provides the tools with which to approach such collaborations and narratives in contemporary human rights culture.

1.6 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I began by exploring the various incarnations of contemporary human rights discourses and their application in order to sketch some of the most important ideas that underpin them, functions they (seek to) fulfil, and agents that make use of them. Both in its grounding in the philosophical roots of natural rights and the foundational document of the UDHR, the discourse of human rights has come to represent a universal standard by which fundamental issues relating to human equality, justice, and peace are judged. Yet the application and strength of that standard in (geo)political, legal, activist, and cultural contexts has been markedly distinctive. Whereas human rights law and the institutions that support it, such as the UN or the ICC, struggle to apply the legal articulation of the UDHR to individual nation states in the shifting shoals of the geopolitical landscape, activists have found the common language and understanding provided by human rights a useful means of articulating their concerns and recruiting people for their cause. Cultural engagement with human rights has similarly relied on a broad understanding of basic rights so as to present the suffering of individual victims as a violation of an agreed upon standard. This discrepancy between a strong socio-cultural understanding of human rights and a notoriously weak legal iteration of it gives rise to a need for a separate conception of human rights culture. This culture covers the multifarious field within which personal narratives circulate in service of the human rights movement as well as the opportunities and restrictions placed upon those narratives by the tenets of that movement. Indeed, Eggers's efforts to amplify the voices of victims of rights abuses already reflects one of the central tenets of human rights culture, that of using the testimonies of disempowered subjects to affectively engage readers and recruit them in the push to effect change on their behalf. As such, it is less concerned with the strict legal interpretation of human rights or the legal-institutional context within which that

interpretation operates. Rather, it gives shape to the set of assumptions and possibilities that undergird the many other applications of human rights that fall beyond the scope of legal definitions, but which nevertheless provide it with its socio-cultural base and grounding.

By gauging Eggers's position within this human rights culture, this chapter has subsequently brought into focus some of the criticisms and concerns levelled at human rights more broadly, especially from a postcolonial angle. In his exploration of the function of the personal narrative as a rights-space creating tool, Eggers runs into many of the issues with regard to subaltern speech, othering, and neo-colonialism that are brought into play by postcolonial critics to express concern about some of the central ideas and practices that underlie the human rights project. The focus on the textual analysis of Eggers's works in subsequent chapters brings these concerns down to a specifically textual level and seeks to put them in touch with the field of human rights culture. An analysis of the textual practices and narrative structures in works such as *What Is the What* or *Zeitoun* helps uncover how the affective relationship is cultivated by personal narratives and navigates the problems of voice appropriation. Similarly, a study of *You Shall Know Our Velocity* or "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly" brings the neo-colonial dimension of cross-cultural engagements into focus by playing out various interpersonal encounters and thereby questions the cosmopolitan faith in such engagements that pervades human rights culture.²⁵ Beyond the text, the relationship between the discursive space created by the text and the extra-textual circulation and reception of that text sheds further light on the global dynamics of human rights culture as well as the extent to which personal narratives can engage, are shaped by, or help (re)form the discourse of human rights itself beyond the cultural sphere. In this

²⁵ "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly" is part of the short story collection *How We Are Hungry*. This collection also contains a short story sequel to the novel *You Shall Know Our Velocity* titled "The Only Meaning of the Oil-Wet Water" in which the protagonist, Hand, and one of his friends, Pillar, meet up in Costa Rica. The story retains the motifs of self-absorption and emotive encounters, focusing this time on the anticipation and resolution of the sexual tension between the two Western protagonists rather than their meeting of others. For the analytical purposes of this dissertation, however, they do not offer any further textual material to add substantially to the analysis of *You Shall Know Our Velocity*.

respect, the way in which such narratives have undertaken these various actions in the past provides a fruitful place to start.

2 Forging Rights-Spaces: Form, Intertextuality, and Cultural Politics

This chapter takes a diachronic approach to understanding how Eggers's use of the collaborative testimonial form in *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun* intersects with the function of personal narratives in the historical development of human rights. It does so by tracing the intertextual links between Eggers's narratives and the genre of the nineteenth-century slave narrative and the historical debate surrounding the abolition of slavery more generally. I take my cue for such a genre-genealogical approach from Wai Chee Dimock's concept of "deep time," which she sets out in her alternate history of American literature in *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (2006).¹ She introduces "deep time" as a means of pushing literary history beyond the confines of the nation state, thereby opening up the possibility for a genre-based history of world literature which includes, but is not restricted to, cultural output in the United States context.² This affects her definition of "American Literature" quite drastically:

¹ By genre, I do not mean a rigid definition of textual characteristics that leaves no room for the type of textual and paratextual maneuvering that I show is key to the rights-work performed by personal narratives. Instead, I follow Dimock's assertion that genre is not the just an act of classification, but a probabilistic and distributional gauging of the interconnectedness and affinities of related texts along temporal and spatial axes (74).

² The guiding question or line of enquiry, she notes at the beginning of a chapter titled "Genre as a World System," is: "What would literary history look like if the field were divided, not into discrete periods, and not into discrete bodies of national literatures? What other organizing principles might come into play?" (73). It is my assertion in this chapter that an understanding of the personal narrative as a rights-space creating tool

“Rather than being a discrete entity, it is better seen as a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures” (3). As such, it is a useful means of gauging the evolution of the personal narrative as a rights-space creating tool against the backdrop of rights discourses that have oscillated between the national and the global, and between the Global South and the West and back again. The geographical fluidity of Dimock’s conception of American literature serves a significant purpose. In terms of rights, there is a sense in which Eggers’s collaborative testimonies constitute a writing back by forcing Western readers to look at abuses in the Global South, whereas slave narratives focus attention on the effects of the transatlantic slave trade on the United States. Even though both Eggers’s works and the slave narratives were published in North America with an American audience in mind, a discussion of their rights-space creating efforts would be hampered by a strictly national demarcation and consideration. As an alternative, a generic-genealogical reading of the personal narrative provides a means of tracing the tension between the local and the global, the universal and the particular, that marks the cultural history of rights.³

Furthermore, my analytical and methodological approach is a formal one, because it focuses attention on the mechanics of the way in which a text performs its socio-political function. As Franco Moretti asserts in the preface to his study of the *Bildungsroman* in European culture, *The Way of the World* (2000), the analysis of formal patterns and genres, as a conveyor of ideological charge, is key to understanding the way in which narratives perform their political work (xiii).⁴ In reflecting on the

could be one such organizing principle, one that would, furthermore, greatly contribute to the conceptualization of the development of human rights culture.

³ Dimock stipulates that “deep time” allows her analysis to be attentive to how the “subnational and the transnational” thus become “intertwined in a way that speaks as much to local circumstances as it does to global circuits” (23).

⁴ In her recent survey study of twenty-first century fiction, including Eggers, *Toward the Geopolitical Novel*, Caren Irr also specifically insists upon genre analysis as a necessary complement to the individualizing and particularizing tendencies of close reading to uncover what she sees as the resurgence of the American political novel in the twenty-first century (14).

coalescence of studies of literature and human rights, Slaughter and McClennen point out that the imaginative and social work of literary texts is “done through the *forms* of stories that enable forms of thought, forms of commitment, forms of being, and forms of justice” (11). This point is especially important here, given the broader socio-political impact these personal narratives aspire to and which my analysis seeks to uncover. Dimock’s approach is thus further valuable in the context of this chapter because it opens up the possibility of considering rights-space creating efforts through the uses of personal narratives across distinctive historical periods, while at the same time allowing for those efforts to be inflected by the particular contexts within which they circulated.⁵ A comparison between the two iterations of the personal narrative in this chapter reveals a continuity of practice when it comes to the performative tie between form and rights-work. In other words, the ways in which a personal narrative is told by a disempowered narrator, through the act of narrating their suffering, sets out to influence the perceptions and positions that govern the socio-political negotiation of rights. Subsequently however, the chapter demonstrates how the use of personal narratives has been adapted to the historical specificity of the rights contexts in which they function.

By reading the political through the formal, I am able to pinpoint how personal narratives are used to open up cross-cultural and cross-racial spaces within which rights can be imagined, claimed, and granted. This effort goes some way to acknowledging the “special traditions of artistic expression that emerge from slave culture” that can deepen what Gilroy terms the existing “primal history of ‘modernity’” (56). In order to do so, one must focus on the form through which rights have historically been claimed (personal narratives) rather than scrutinizing the places where they have been proclaimed (declarations). This is not to suggest that rights cannot be “claimed” politically. Historically, political rights-claiming movements have

⁵ Dimock herself summarizes and draws on Moretti’s concept of “distant reading” to undergird her genre-based approach to world literature in deep time: “He [Moretti] calls for a ‘comparative morphology,’ one that takes as its starting point a distributive map, reflecting the circulation and evolution of literary forms, and operating on the same scale as the planet. Only such a map can capture the full range of environmental input, the difference that each locale makes” (79).

been a successful means of securing rights. Even as far back as Ancient Rome, the plebeian class claimed social and political rights by withdrawing from the city during the so-called *secessio plebis*, which led to plebiscite access to the political decision-making process in the form of tribunes. Nevertheless, the politics of form as it is produced by my analyses marries this political sphere to its cultural context. In the context of slave narratives, for instance, my analysis of Douglass and Jacobs shows that there is a fascinating interplay between the abolitionist movement and the use of personal narratives as part of a broad push for (former) slaves to be granted rights. Furthermore, it introduces a level of agency to the position of the disempowered otherwise lost in historical representations of oppression in which the agency is solely conferred upon the oppressor or the saviour, rarely upon the oppressed. Close readings of the narrative performance and political role of rights-claiming personal narratives are thereby able to shed new light on the developmental history of human rights. As far as agency is concerned, Dimock's "deep time" literary history is once again a useful point of reference. She notes that even though postcolonial theorists such as Said have been successful in unpacking the history of Orientalism, they have done so in a way that places the West at its centre and thereby reproduces the very dynamic they aim to scrutinize (29). The issue of challenging the distribution of agency plays a central role in both slave narratives and Eggers's collaborative works, thereby underscoring once more the value of considering their interconnection as rights-space creating tools in "deep time."

In terms of human rights, diachronic considerations have recently become a bone of contention for scholars, who broadly fall into opposing historicist and presentist camps. In *Human Rights and the Uses of History* (2014), legal-historian Samuel Moyn forcibly argues that human rights scholars should avoid projecting contemporary conceptions and uses of human rights discourse onto the past in order to provide it with a legitimizing history: "human rights history should turn away from ransacking the past as if it provided good support for the astonishingly specific international movement of the last few decades" (xiii). Much like the central argument in *The Last Utopia* (2010), Moyn's point is not so much that human rights were invented recently, but that their current conception is specific to the contemporary moment and not part of a cascading logic of progress that can be traced back to the eighteenth century. His plea for

historical specificity partly runs counter to Lynn Hunt's landmark study *Inventing Human Rights* (2007), which argues for essential historical continuity running from the United States Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789) to the United Nations's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). This history, she writes, provides the means of understanding "what human rights mean to us today" (19).⁶ These opposing views on the history of rights have proven difficult to reconcile: one is seemingly either forced to ignore the history of human rights in order to deal with the specificity of the present, or allowed to include the evolution of human rights at the expense of glossing over glaring legal-historical differences.

However, this critical impasse need not be crippling. In fact, this opposition can be put to productive use by studying the literary history of human rights-work in deep time alongside its legal-historical development. The key role of literature in the development of human rights has become increasingly clear as interdisciplinary research has uncovered historical coalescences between the two. As Slaughter makes clear in his seminal work in this area, *Human Rights Inc.*, cultural forms like the novel have helped to shape and entrench the idea of human rights (25). The central place of personal narratives in the contemporary iteration of human rights now seems equally certain. In their study of contemporary uses of personal narratives in the context of human rights, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives* (2004), Schaffer and Smith start from the observation that they "have become one of the most potent vehicles for advancing human rights claims" (1). As a result, the goal of their study is to show the extent to which this narrative form is tied up with human rights discourses (2-8) and how they ultimately "trouble established interpretations of rights violations, shift definitions and

⁶ Acknowledging his debt to the work of Hunt, Marcello Flores similarly argues in *The Story of Human Rights* that the "history of human rights is the itinerary through which moral principles and values have transformed into political objectives and into laws and juridical institutions, as well as into common sense and shared opinions" (11). His perspective affirms Hunt's premise that the historical trend towards human rights is indicative of how "complex, articulated, yet fundamentally unitary history's progress is" (45).

framings of human rights, and test modes of advocacy” (229).⁷ The role of personal narratives now, it is suggested, is to engage with human rights discourses by pointing to those areas where it fails to live up to its universal promise.

While illuminating the dynamic between the two, this chapter also questions the stability of the relationship between personal narratives and rights activism by focusing on its volatile history. The similarities and differences between the circulation of personal narratives in distinctive legal-historical and literary contexts can reveal how the texts where rights are claimed consistently imagine a space both within and beyond the social contract and rights framework of a society. These narratives thereby seek redress within that framework for their disempowered subjects and advocate fundamental reform of it. In order to achieve this, narratives often make use of established cultural forms in order to articulate rights claims. As such, this chapter’s generic-genealogical study of personal narratives sets out to uncover how different cultural forms were adapted in the struggle for rights in different contexts. Eggers’s collaborative testimonies, for instance, make use of an established human rights form, the personal narrative, to convince the reader to expand the epistemological frames of human rights to create a space for those currently excluded from them. This drive to engage but also reform the framework of human rights through the circulation of personal narratives is summed up more broadly in *Frames of War* when Butler writes: “When those frames that govern the relative and differential recognisability of lives come apart – as part of the very mechanism of their circulation – it becomes possible to apprehend something about what or who is living but has not been generally

⁷ Their study seeks to address the following questions, all of which pertain to contemporary circulations of personal narratives within the established and dominant framework of human rights:

All stories emerge in the midst of complex and uneven relationships of power, prompting certain questions about production: Who tells the stories and who doesn’t? Why, when, how, and where do narratives become intelligible as stories of human rights? What historical, cultural, and institutional conditions affect the shapes stories take? What are the personal, social, political, and ethical effects of stories and their venues of production for both tellers and listeners? (5)

‘recognized’ as a life (12).” Even though they share this ultimate goal of rewriting the definition of who has the right to rights, nineteenth-century slave narratives function differently in that they operate within an entirely different legal and literary context. The personal narrative, as adopted by black authors, was at this time still defining itself as a rights-claiming genre in the midst of a revolutionary legal-historical moment.

Furthermore, it is important that the literary historical contribution to the history of rights should trace the adaptation of the personal narrative form without entering it into the same type of cascading narrative of progress for which Moyn seeks to provide an antidote. Even though my analysis centres on Eggers, it thus also points towards a diverse and diffuse literary tradition in which form is used to contest or disrupt colonial modes of thinking as a means of claiming recognition and rights. This further suggests that there is a postcolonial history of literary form in deep time that can inform the history of human rights culture. In this dissertation, the discussion of slave narratives in this chapter as well as the in-depth discussion of neo-colonialism in relation to contemporary human rights culture in chapter four gestures towards two moments in such a history. Even a brief overview of these two moments, focused through Eggers, reveals an intriguing dynamic in world literature whereby personal narratives are used first to claim rights in the Western world and then evolve towards forcing the purview of rights to extend beyond the West in the contemporary context. It is particularly noteworthy too, for instance, how many of the tensions between the textual, paratextual, and extra-textual struggle for rights echo through the ages.

Much as Eggers’s works and slave narratives share these features, however, their different literary and legal circumstances separate them. The protagonists of Eggers’s collaborative testimonies, Valentino Achak Deng and Abdulrahman Zeitoun, are embedded within an existing human rights framework. *What Is the What* focuses on getting the reader to inhabit a transnational space of human rights that transcends the restrictive national contexts within which Deng is denied a place throughout the narrative. *Zeitoun*’s narrative plot focuses precisely on the split between human being and United States citizenship as the protagonist is forcibly redefined as belonging to an

extra-legal space “exempt” from civil and human rights.⁸ By stressing the distinctive nature of both the slave narratives’ and Eggers’s context, I am able to pinpoint the exact nature of the rights-work these respective narratives perform. As I go on to show, however, many of the distinctive aims of Eggers’s personal narratives in the contemporary context conceal a marked similarity in terms of form and genre. By uncovering these similarities, one begins to understand just how personal narratives negotiate the relationship between text, paratext, and extra-textual circulation so as to engage in rights-space creation for disempowered subjects. In other words, while the context within which Eggers’s narratives are embedded may differ distinctly from that of the slave narratives, the continuity of such formal concerns provides a useful inroad into mapping out the rights-work Eggers and his collaborators are engaged in.

This is not to suggest that the historical context within which personal narratives are produced has no impact on form. There is a definite distinctiveness to legal and literary adaptations of the genre across time that is worth bearing in mind: contemporary personal narratives have taken on increasingly standardized forms in narrating the difficulties faced by disenfranchised subjects in signing up to the existing global human rights regime. Moreover, human rights is now so dominant as a legal-political narrative that it is shaping the way in which rights claims are narrated.⁹ Slave narrators and black activists made use of other established literary forms (rather than legal-political ones) to articulate rights claims which, if granted, would contest the recently “declared” terms of the nineteenth-century social contract in order to include the possibility for black citizenship and rights. This point underscores Moyn’s doubts about seeing the

⁸ This split between subject and citizenship, as Slaughter notes in *Human Rights Inc.*, is emblematic of non-Western applications of the integrational *Bildungs*-plot that has been normalized as the central means of narrating the individual’s integration into the rights-bearing hegemony (123-124).

⁹ This point has been reiterated time and again in studies of modern testimonial narratives. In *That the World May Know*, Dawes, discerns an emerging global subgenre of human rights narratives with distinctive formal characteristics (190). These formal characteristics are so culturally embedded, argues Anthony Rowland in *The Future of Memory*, that they can now be mimicked by other victim narrators (114). Schaffer and Smith put this down to “the pressure to conform the ‘messiness’ of personal testimony to the protocols for codification of a human rights abuse” as derived from the UNDHR or the UN (36-37).

abolitionist movement as the precursor to contemporary struggles for human rights (*Human Rights and the Uses of History* 58). Given the clearly distinctive legal, historical, and literary context, it becomes difficult to acquiesce to Hunt's call to see a continuous line from the declarations of the eighteenth century emerging from societies that were "built on slavery, subordination, and seemingly natural subservience" (19) to the present day. Peter de Bolla pinpoints the problem with a history of inspirational and seemingly definitive declarations when he concludes his conceptual history of human rights, *The Architecture of Concepts*, with the point that declarations ought to be understood as "ongoing, even continuous action, endlessly recaptured and reformulated in each successive performance" (287). The development of personal narratives as an effective means of claiming rights – even when they are denied in the most extreme sense – marks an underlying continuity of practice that runs through these disparate historical rights movements, declarations, and developments. Conceiving of that development in deep time allows for the type of flexibility and dynamism suggested by de Bolla, which finds common ground between Moyn's and Hunt's theorizations. As Spivak notes in her *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, personal narratives are able to establish a "line of communication" between the subaltern and "the circuits of citizenship or institutionality" that insert their disempowered narrators "into the long road to hegemony" (310). The comparative analysis in this chapter goes one step further by also demonstrating how personal narratives engage with their respective legal-historical and literary context in order to contribute to the negotiation and formation of successive rights frameworks, rather than simply gaining access to them.

First, I flesh out the idea of how personal narratives can forge discursive spaces that establish disempowered narrators as ethical subjects and leave room for the further development or adjustment of rights discourses. The case of abolitionist texts, slave narratives, and post-emancipation black activism is key to developing this point. Subsequently, I discuss a number of key nineteenth-century personal narratives that can be seen as emblematic in terms of their formal structure and narrative features, and which illustrate this exchange between politics and culture. Frederick Douglass's autobiographies, particularly his first autobiography *Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), and Harriet Ann Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) will be used to describe the "typical" form of the pre-emancipation slave narrative. The

relationship with white mediators as well as the standardization of the slave narrative form lays the groundwork for my analysis of the collaborative dimension of Eggers's work with disempowered subjects as well as how he thwarts or flaunts the conventions of human rights culture. Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* and the writings of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois's provide contrasting outlooks on the type of discursive space pursued following Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. The formal-political analysis of the place of personal narratives in the context of rights for slaves and former slaves will subsequently serve as a point of comparison to how Eggers's collaborative testimonies, *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun*, seek to engage with the now dominant discourse of human rights. Much like Du Bois and Washington, Eggers's works betray a concern for the extent to which rights are recognized and seek to move beyond a simple recognition of the protagonist's humanity. Finally, the nature of the relationship between privileged authors and disenfranchised subjects will be considered by juxtaposing Eggers's role in amplifying the voices of Deng and Zeitoun with the role of prominent abolitionists in engaging slave narrators to promote the abolitionist cause. This last point is paramount, I will show, as it is critical to mapping the dynamic between authorship, publication, and readership through which the necessary cultural capital to effect political change is earned and distributed.

2.1 Human Rights Culture in History: Slavery and Abolitionism

There is a restrictive tendency to portray the history of abolitionism and the acquisition of rights by former slaves according to the proclamations produced by the dominant social group.¹⁰ Hunt's *Inventing Human Rights* serves as a useful case in point here, in that

¹⁰ Edward A. Pearson makes a similar observation in *A Countryside Full of Flames*, his study of a slave uprising in 1739 in South Carolina called the "Stone Rebellion:" "Problems clearly abound when using materials written by dominant groups to explain the world view of the dominated. The authorities do not view events from the

it makes copious use of the abolitionist movement as part of its survey of the history of human rights, yet makes no mention of prominent black writers such as Harriet Ann Jacobs, W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington or even Frederick Douglass. Symptomatic is the section on “Free Blacks, Slavery, and Race,” which references a plethora of acts and declarations ranging from the acts of 1792 and 1794 in France granting black people freedom and abolishing slavery, the British Parliament’s act of 1807 ending participation in the slave trade and its eventual abolition of slavery in 1833, to the gradual constitutional process by which the United States eventually recognized black citizenship in the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 (160-161). One could also consider in this respect Michael Barnett’s recent *Empire of Humanity* (2013), which summarizes the period with a focus on a series of drastic developments that propelled the development of rights: “For many students of humanitarianism and human rights, it all began with the antislavery movement. . . . There was no single cause of this moral awakening. Instead, various world-turning developments combined to produce an outcome that only a few decades before few had reason to believe would ever exist” (57). The widespread use of personal narratives (published slave narratives, speeches by former slaves, or their contributions to the publication of abolitionist texts by people of colour), so crucial to laying the grounds for these developments, is frequently only considered as an aside to certain critical moments.

This is curious given that these black voices have been and still are the object of continued study by humanities scholars analysing how former slaves and black activists’ writings construct black humanity and subjectivity, though many do so without reference to the specific legal-historical context set out by scholars like Hunt. It would seem, therefore, that the history of rights and the literary study of black subjects claiming rights have to a certain extent eluded one another.¹¹ This chapter aims to open

perspective of the rebels; they impose their own narrative structure on events and infuse the text with their own ideological inclinations, ‘authorizing’ it for their own ends” (571).

¹¹ The point is not so much that there has been no analysis of minority literature that deals with rights issues, but that these analyses rarely insert their findings into the history of human rights that is being constructed by scholars in the field of human rights and literature. Doris Sommer’s *Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas* is a foundational study of the history of minority literature as a bridge between

a dialogue between these two approaches. This section provides a concise account of historical events as constructed through proclamations alone, as it provides a useful point of departure for considering how traditional histories of rights can be complicated by including the personal narratives of those seeking to claim them. This is significant, because tracking slave narratives' relationship to this context lays the groundwork for doing the same for Eggers's texts with regard to the contemporary context set out in the previous chapter.

The transatlantic slave trade saw a total of twelve million human beings from Africa forced into slavery, ten and a half of which eventually survived the journey to the New World (Heuman and Walvin 4). Several of the authors of the United States Declaration of Independence, most notably Thomas Jefferson, were slave owners themselves. Nevertheless, Hunt defends the view in her history that the document deserves praise for declaring at least the imagined equality of all human beings and thus formed a starting point for further refinement (18-19). This process of refinement, the gradual decline of the institution of slavery, and its eventual abolition in the United States is well-known. As Andrew Porter concisely writes in the *Oxford History of the British Empire*, the intellectual argument against slavery had been won by the late eighteenth century (201). An increasingly vocal abolitionist movement at home and abroad, led at its height by famous white activists such as William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, began pushing for this intellectual victory to effect real social and political change. Nevertheless, chattel slavery endured in the New World until Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 declared that "all persons held as slaves . . . shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free" (Lincoln 424). Citizenship for people of colour became available following the addition of the Fourteenth Amendment to the constitution in 1868.

The problem with this approach is that it ignores the process by which social attitudes towards slaves and former slaves evolved in order for the ideas in these acts

the privileged and the disempowered. I will take up the central issue she raises in her survey, of how minority literature carefully negotiates its engagement with privileged readers, in the next chapter as a means of studying the identificatory paradigm that governs human rights culture.

and declarations to gain political currency.¹² These documents themselves, moreover, only offer one window onto the past, given that they tend to reflect society in a theoretical sense rather than showing the ways in which rights and norms were debated, challenged, and transgressed. Without taking the latter into consideration, one glosses over how attitudes evolved, how ideas were negotiated, and how both were reflected in the specific cultural sphere of the time. As such, it risks skewing our interpretation of this historical moment by focusing on the interplay between the strongly principled abolitionist movement and visionary legislators. One is left to wonder about where it is this sudden conviction sprang from and how it gained traction in a society built on slavery.

What is missing, in other words, is an account of how slaves came to be understood as human beings whose rights were worth contemplating. There was indeed an intellectual movement which condemned slavery that held sway in the United States in this period which emphasized the inalienability of rights that would be foregrounded in the declaration of independence. de Bolla confirms as much in *The Architecture of Concepts* when he writes that even though American interpretations of liberal thought differed from British ones, what he calls “Whig ideology” came to dominate “interpretations of the nature of government and society” (134). This ideology was largely underpinned by the influential British liberal philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries established by the likes of John Locke, David Hume, and Adam Smith, all of whom condemned slavery in some form or other.¹³ The congruity between their condemnation

¹² In *The Last Utopia*, Moyn formulates a related critique of Hunt’s idea that contemporary notions of universal rights grew out of secular humanitarianism when he points out that, for one, humanitarianism was initially largely grounded in religion, did not point in the direction of individual rights, and was entirely compatible with the imperialist projects that operated on the assumption of racial inequality (243-244). It is not, Moyn goes on to argue in *Human Rights and the Uses of History*, till the 1960s and 70s, long after the UDHR was adopted, that the universal project of human rights was deployed in support of decolonization (93).

¹³ In the second of his *Two Treatises of Government*, which first appeared in 1689, Locke discusses the issue in a section titled “On Slavery” and argues against it on the grounds that human beings cannot become the property of other human beings (125-127). A century later, the liberal thinker and economist Adam Smith published his *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776, denouncing slavery as economically unsound: “It appears, accordingly, from the experience of all ages and nations, I believe, that the work done by freemen comes

of human bondage, on the one hand, and the fundamental equality of all human beings and the specific prohibition of slavery in the fourth article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that underlies our contemporary rights discourse in this area on the other is, however, less obvious. This becomes apparent when one considers the complex and precarious position of black subjectivity within the liberal philosophical discourse that dominated this particular rights moment instead of listing the rigid and explicit political and legal documents that are indebted to these philosophical advancements and which seems to echo straightforwardly modern rights discourses in their proclamation of equality. Take, for instance, the influential writings of Hume, who broadly condemned slavery as a practice in his *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary* published in 1741, but also defended fundamental racial inequality in an infamous footnote that reads:

I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. (Hume, “Of National Characters” 252)¹⁴

cheaper in the end than that performed by slaves. It is found to do so even at Boston, New-York, and Philadelphia, where the wages of common labour are so very high” (184). Hume, in turn, specifically denounces domestic slavery in the United States in his essay “Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations”:

The remains which are found of domestic slavery, in the AMERICAN colonies, and among some EUROPEAN nations, would never surely create a desire of rendering it more universal. The little humanity, commonly observed in persons, accustomed, from their infancy, to exercise so great authority over their fellow-creatures, and to trample upon human nature, were sufficient alone to disgust us with that unbounded dominion. (Hume 386)

¹⁴ In *David Hume and Eighteenth-Century American*, Mark G. Spencer seeks to redress the notion that Hume was somehow ignored by the North-American readership throughout this period. In fact, he argues, there is a vast array of evidence that shows that his works were widely read, and influenced American socio-political attitudes and thought accordingly. He traces the broad availability of Hume’s works before the revolution and subsequently argues that, in the years leading up to and following independence, Americans “increasingly read and defined Hume’s works in their own terms” (52). Regardless of the extent to which Hume’s ideas in

Even though some scholars have argued that this footnote should be read as an almost throwaway remark that was not an integral part of Hume's philosophical writings, John Immerwahr makes a case in his article "Hume's Revised Racism" that, based on Hume's further editing of the footnote for later editions, one could read the note as responding to the considerable criticism of his idea by contemporaries such as James Beattie (481-485). This, Immerwahr argues, "proves that Hume's racism was deliberate rather than casual" (486). Regardless of this debate, the remark shows that it was perfectly reasonable at the time to make a progressive argument in favour of the abolition of slavery and still defend the notion of racial inequality.

Thus, while the intellectual argument against slavery may have already been won, the intellectual argument for racial equality was quite clearly still raging. There is good reason for distinguishing these two issues in order to understand the development of black rights throughout this period. As Winthrop D. Jordan explains in "Modern Tensions and the Origins of American Slavery," slavery and prejudice were mutually enabling when it came to degrading and subsequently fixing the position of black people (118). Even if the former were to lose its discursive force, however, the persistence of the latter – which went far less challenged – was clearly enough to maintain a hierarchical relationship between white citizens and former slaves aspiring to citizenship. A strictly legal history of rights focusing on abolition can be considered similarly misleading or restrictive. As David Brion Davis argues in *Slavery and Human Progress* (1984), legislative changes were often more of a "cosmetic change in legal status that failed to improve the blacks' basic conditions and quality of life" (108). Freedom cannot, therefore, be equated with equality, and there is little evidence to suggest that

particular impacted upon American political thought, it is important to note how it contributes in a broader sense to the point that the dominant intellectual tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment, with its conflicting attitude towards slavery and race questions, permeated the socio-political debate of the newly founded nation. In *The Enlightenment and the Book: Scottish Authors and Their Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Ireland, and America*, Richard B. Sher provides further material evidence of this by tracing the culture of reprinting that made the ideas of thinkers like Hume freely available in North America by the end of the eighteenth century (503-540). Importantly, Sher notes how the proliferation of reprints in the American context should be regarded as "acts of appropriation, with enormous significance for understanding American culture" (506).

the former led to the latter in any direct way. This matters because it calls into question the theory of cascading progress that pervades conceptions of human rights in the contemporary context and thereby forestall an in-depth analysis of the rights-work in which Eggers's works engage. If their goal is defined as simply claiming Deng's or Zeitoun's human rights, which are fixed and agreed upon, then that goal elides the multi-layered work being done by the text and paratext, as well as the complex extra-textual reality within which they circulate.

All of this is not to say that legal-philosophical advancements are irrelevant or unimportant. As Maurice S. Lee explains in *Slavery, Philosophy, and American Literature*, the liberal philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment permeated American political thought throughout the century.¹⁵ As such, the influence and popularity of certain philosophical ideas were instrumental in educating and generalizing anti-slavery sentiments (Blackburn 47). Similarly, the generalized and vivid understanding of one's own rights as non-black citizens is a prerequisite to allowing one to "empathize with the deprivation of the rights of others" (Brown and Wilson 12). The above qualifications matter, however, because they show that defining this as a seminal and seemingly definitive legal-philosophical "moment" in the history of human rights covers over the tensions that reveal which rights were (not) up for debate, how they were contested and negotiated, and to what extent they were compatible with or contradictory to contemporary conceptions of human rights.

An analysis of personal narratives that appeared during this time can go some way towards answering these questions and offers a glimpse into how socio-cultural rights-spaces were contested and negotiated over a period of time. First, it is important to establish broadly how personal narratives were involved in the campaign for slave

¹⁵ In his study, Lee homes in on the works of Poe, Melville, Emerson, Stowe, and Douglass against the backdrop of the philosophical debates of the day and the anti-slavery struggle. He notes of the latter, for instance, that by performing the act of self-reflection, a hotly debated issue at the time, throughout his autobiographies, Douglass was able to refute those who claimed Africans were incapable of higher forms of thought (109-114). In doing so, his autobiographies brought theoretical issues of perception and self-perception into contact with the very real experience of slavery. This leads Lee to conclude that the slavery controversy helped to challenge and shape American thinking throughout the century (210-216).

rights throughout eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Michael Bennett observes in *Democratic Discourses* (2005) that slave narrators were instrumental in creating the socio-cultural platform from which influential abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison spoke: “Not only were African Americans responsible for building the discursive foundations of the so-called Garrisonian abolitionist movement . . ., they also authored one of the chief vehicles for promoting abolitionist sentiment and one of the most popular and distinctive U.S. genres – the slave narrative” (10). The genre of the slave narrative took up and adapted the conventions of a number of existing literary genres such as the picaresque, the sentimental novel, and the *Bildungsroman*. The key difference being that slave narratives inflected these “high art” forms with a political charge usually shunned by the European *belles lettres* (Bennett 13). In turn, the abolitionist movement that these narratives helped to support, which consisted of both sympathetic white activists and former slaves, succeeded in constructing a national lexicon for radical change that could be taken up by anyone wishing to end human bondage (Bennett 22). The abolitionist movement and the genre of the slave narrative should thus be considered as being mutually enabling, with the former providing the – initially highly important – framing for the latter.

This reveals a first way in which slave narratives made use of existing literary conventions to open up socio-cultural rights-spaces. In her critical edition of Douglass’s *Narrative*, Deborah E. McDowell notes that the abolitionist cause allowed slave narratives to be read as rights claims rather than another incarnation of the ever popular first-person adventure stories that dominated the antebellum American book market (xi). The fact that the reading public may initially not have been receptive to the radical message the first slave narrators told – and would probably even have rejected them if it were more explicit – is cleverly bypassed by this adherence to accepted literary forms. They were thus initially accepted into the public sphere only as adventure narratives, only to be reframed as subversive narratives once they were entered into the abolitionist discourse they helped to create. This role played by slave narratives gains further importance as a significant qualification of the now common view that testimonies fail if the discursive threshold for the rights issue to which they testify has

not yet been reached.¹⁶ It shows that there are intricate means by which they broke into the hegemony which governs whose lives are recognized and whose voice is admitted into the public sphere. Similarly, I show, Eggers makes use of the marketability of sentimental stories as a means of coaxing readers into engaging with the stories of Deng and Zeitoun.

A key reason slave narratives made use of popular literary forms is that they seek to cultivate an emotional connection with the reader. This belief in the affective power of literature is the main contribution of culture to the history of rights, according to Hunt. Referring to popular eighteenth-century novels such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa* or Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie*, she makes the point that reading literature taught the reading public how to identify and empathize with human beings across existing social boundaries (38-50). As Thomas W. Laqueur observes in "Mourning, Pity, and the Work of Narrative in the Making of 'Humanity,'" this interpretation of the so-called "sentimental thesis" is highly contested, but the core fact remains that during this period "the ethical subject was democratized" and readers "came to believe it was their obligation to ameliorate and prevent wrongdoing to others" (37-38). The concepts of identification and empathy will be complicated accordingly in the next chapter. For now, it is important to note that personal narratives could tap into the possibility opened up by literary texts for engaging readers on affective as well as intellectual terms.

The critical point is that personal narratives were both reflective of and instrumental in effecting the socio-cultural shift required for various black rights to develop throughout the course of this historical period. Slave narratives simultaneously helped to create, shape, and challenge the dominant rights discourse of their time. As I will discuss later in this chapter, this multi-layered relationship between personal narratives and historical rights discourses can be shown to persist to the present day, even if

¹⁶ See, for example, Dawes's discussion of why representations of suffering can "misfire" in *That the World May Know* (2007), in which he includes the idea that "they can fail because they are too unfamiliar, because their content has not yet reached the necessary 'discursive threshold' required to make it through the filters of information-overloaded news consumers" (65).

historical and contemporary rights discourses themselves are no longer wholly reconcilable. My discussion of these earlier uses of personal narratives will be particularly relevant for my reading of Eggers's collaborative testimonies in that the more subversive engagement between personal narratives and rights frameworks is today often downplayed in favour of more synergetic readings in which they amend rather than rewrite the terms of the existing legal-political system of rights. This more radical politics of rights conducted by Eggers's use of personal narratives can be uncovered by scrutinizing their formal features, much as the formal features of the slave narrative betray the most subversive rights-work they engaged in.

2.2 “Black” Narratives: Form and Genre

Many of the formal and generic characteristics of the slave narratives lie at the heart of the further development of the personal narrative genre adopted by Eggers in the contemporary context. The genre and form of the slave narrative go back to the earliest published autobiographies of freed slaves in the second half of the eighteenth century, two prominent examples of which are *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (1772) and *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1789). By the end of the American Civil War in 1865, sixty-five slave narratives pertaining to the American institution of slavery had been published in autobiography or pamphlet form (Andrews, “The Representation of Slavery” 63). The genre was initially successful in that it managed to combine the thrill of a good story with autobiographical realism. The rousing titles of these narratives, such as the ones by James Albert and Olaudah Equiano, hint at the “adventurous” aspect of these stories that was their major selling point. The addition of a by-line stressing the autobiographical nature of the text is also typical and feeds the timeless voyeuristic pleasure a reading public derives from reading “a true story.” As Paul John Eakin explains in *Fictions in Autobiography* (1985), the dominant symbolic systems in a culture, such as its narrative forms, are often instrumental in shaping personal narratives (132).

However, as Shari Goldberg remarks in *Quiet Testimony*, it is precisely when personal narratives start displaying similarities with literary genres that they are able to move beyond simple first-person accounts of the past and seek to drive its audience into accepted wider truths (11). In effect, my analyses show that literary genre conventions were progressively and shrewdly manipulated by black narrators in order to further their social and political aims. It is worth considering these genre links more explicitly and describing some typical formal features of slave narratives in general. The ties to the genres of autobiography, the *Bildungsroman*, and the sentimental novel are important in the further analysis of Douglass, Jacob, Washington, and Du Bois's personal narratives. Furthermore, *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun* are genealogically tied to these genres both through some of their key formal characteristics and the political aims that underlie the slave narratives' adaptations of the personal narrative form.

First, slave narratives are explicitly linked to the genre of autobiography in that they are true stories told by slaves who have suffered under the yoke of slavery. Autobiography itself rose to prominence as a genre around this time as an outlet for Romantic authors who rejected the radical severance of fact from feeling promulgated by the Enlightenment and who wished to write about their personal experiences and vivid sentiments ("Autobiography" 53).¹⁷ The genre then quickly caught on because of its ability to allow readers to understand the lives of individuals through a narrative account that mixes factual details and psychological reflections. As Eakin explains, autobiography is not a passive and transparent recording of an individual's life, but a decisive act of self-definition on the part of the author (*Fictions in Autobiography* 226). In the United States in particular, the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin – first published in England in 1793 and later in the United States in 1818 – was much admired.¹⁸ The fact

¹⁷ Typical in this respect is the Romantic poet William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, which was first published in 1805 and then heavily revised until its final posthumous publication in 1850. In this autobiographical poem in blank verse, the poet reflects on himself "as a chosen being, with an overriding duty to his poetic vocation" and offers an affective overview of his life from his infancy to adulthood ("Prelude" 812-3). As such, it is a clear act of self-definition in writing.

¹⁸ An illustration of the extent to which Franklin's autobiography came to define the genre in the United States would be William Dean Howell's comment on it in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in April 1888: "One

then that slave narrators' self-reflexive and self-constituting texts were tied in terms of genre to these highly "civilized" authors and thinkers was in and of itself an argument against Hume's claim that civilization and culture belonged purely to those with white skin. This also underscores once again the extent to which the performative aspect of literary form, in the case of these personal narratives, becomes intricately bound up with the political claiming of recognition and rights. As Andrews suggests, literacy came to be considered as a tremendously powerful tool by slave narrators because it forcefully asserted their humanity and authority in the face of an omnipresent white bigotry that refused to see slaves as anything other than property (Andrews, "The Representation of Slavery" 65). Moreover, the way in which they used that literacy to engage with established genres goes to the very heart of what it meant to be a slave. Orlando Paterson explains in *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) that slaves are constituted by the enslaving culture as socially dead and, therefore, alienated from the symbolic instruments from which the dominant culture derives its authority (5).¹⁹ By making clear the subject's personal involvement in its writing and subsequently deftly playing with established literary genres, slave narrators were able to gain access to the literary and cultural life of the nation from which they were explicitly excluded.

Slave narratives also echoed the then immensely popular genre of the *Bildungsroman* in that both tended to be exciting, bittersweet accounts of hardships suffered and overcome. There are clear similarities between the titles, narrative structures, themes, and narration of slave narratives and this novelistic form. Take, for example, Daniel Defoe's canonical *The Life and Strange and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719), a typical story of development in which a young inexperienced man is shipwrecked and overcomes hardships on an exotic island where he encounters and slaughters

cannot very well mention autobiography without mentioning Franklin, whose fragment in that sort remains the chief literary work of his life, and the perpetual pleasure of whoever likes to meet a man face to face in literature" (804).

¹⁹ This point is made differently by Eduardo Cadava in "The Monstrosity of Human Rights," where he sums up the position of slaves in the United States in relation to that nation having proclaimed all men to be equal: "Refused their minimal human right—the right to life—slaves become subject to a state-organized violence that operates, and monstrously so, under the sanction of human rights themselves" (1559).

indigenous natives before being rescued by a passing English ship once he has matured and become self-sufficient. Apart from the similar title structure, the transition from prelapsarian innocence through hardship to salvation and social integration is partially mirrored by the typical slave narrative's description of a state of freedom followed by a period of brutality under the institution of slavery and an eventual escape to freedom in the more progressive North. As I will show, Douglass's *Narrative* provides a strong example of this plot structure. The key difference, however, is that the social integration that usually comes at the end of the typical *Bildungsroman* is forestalled in the slave narrative because escaped slaves were not granted citizenship and were always at risk of being sent back to their owners in accordance with the Fugitive Slave Act.²⁰ The systematic denial of American rights and identity to former slaves above the Mason-Dixon line made it increasingly difficult for black autobiographers to close their narratives with hopeful endings of imagined demarginalization in the North (Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story* 176).

Slaughter's *Human Rights Inc.* is highly relevant in this respect, because it throws the central incorporative capacity of the *Bildungsroman* into sharp relief. In his study, he convincingly shows that the genre lies at the heart of the development of a human rights discourse. If the slave narrative were to perform this incorporative premise, it would thereby render illegible the claim to rights within by making it seem superfluous. As Slaughter indicates, the capacity for discourse creation through the narrative form of the *Bildungsroman* therefore also comes with a risk: "If the *Bildungsroman* has the historical capacity to render legible a human rights vision of the world, it also has the capacity to falsify that vision and to obscure actually existing uneven social relations" (267). This is because, even though the *Bildungsroman* offered opportunities for slaves to construct individual autonomy for themselves as human beings entitled to rights, the

²⁰ Even though the Fugitive Slave Act is now associated with its reaffirmation in 1850 as part of a compromise between the North and the South, the act itself dates back to a 1793 act that enforced article IV of the U.S. constitution, which reads: "No person held to service or labor in one state, under the laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in consequence of any law or regulation therein, be discharged from such service or labor, but shall be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labor may be due" (qtd. in Finseth 42). The acts were repealed in 1864.

genre itself, as Slaughter notes, is “only superficially” interested in its protagonist and actually more interested in legitimizing existing social institutions (116). The slave narratives of Douglass and Jacobs show a continued awareness of this risk and one can detect in their resistance of narrative closure a marked effort to prevent the potential obfuscation of racial inequality even as they make use of the conventional plot structure of this popular genre. Furthermore, the refusal to perform the incorporative ending of the *Bildungsroman* by adapting its form is a political act on the part of the (former) slave-narrator. The fact that this pattern for slave narratives became commonplace gains further significance in light of the fact that Eggers’s collaborative testimonies thwart or subvert the expectations they create as part of their rights-space creating efforts, just like the slave narratives do for the literary genres they adapt and echo.

Slave narratives also show strong affinity with the sentimental novel, a genre that illustrates the preservation of virtue and honour in the face of moral corruption through characters marked by copious feeling and a sympathetic heart (“Sentiment” 916). A canonical example is Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady* (1749), in which the eponymous protagonist attempts to retain her virtue as she is harassed, misled, and ultimately raped by a rake named Lovelace. The genre is known for the cultivation of affective ties between its fictitious protagonists and its readership, which, Hunt argues, allowed readers to expand their ethical awareness to include others whom they had never met (35-69). The best-known example of a sentimental novel that focuses its affective energy on the abolitionist cause is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), which took the book market by storm with its melodramatic descriptions of the horrors of slavery.²¹ Though the political potential of this affect-

²¹ Despite its status as a canonical abolitionist text, the title character has since become a byword for racial stereotyping and passivity in the face of abuse. In “Uncle Tom and the Anglo-Saxons: Romantic Racialism in the North,” George M. Fredrickson argues that it is likely that Stowe’s title character was inspired by the romantic race theory of Alexander Kinmont, who believed black people were naturally servile and kind-hearted (435-438). Some contemporary readers believed Stowe’s portrayal of black people was so sympathetic that it risked alienating people from the abolitionist cause. The British novelist Charles Dickens wrote a letter to this effect on 17 July 1852, in which he expressed his doubts about “there being any warrant for making out the African race to be a great race” (33). This supposedly kind portrayal of black people has been reframed by

based genre to slave narrators is quite clear, the convention of virtue preserved and rewarded was strained to its limits through descriptions of the moral void within which life under slavery was lived. As the next chapter shows, Eggers's understanding of the sentimental charge of literature marks a similar complication of the reader's affective engagement with his disempowered collaborators. In the case of slave narratives, one sees this most strongly in the double bind central to Jacobs's *Incidents*, in which narrating the sexual exploitation of slaves clashes with the need to preserve her virtue as the protagonist of her narrative.

What this general comparison of genres shows is that the slave narrative is embedded within popular contemporary literary genres, but problematizes their more uplifting aspects and thereby shifts attention to the (former) slave's socio-political struggle. Generally speaking, slave narrators thus sought to claim humanity and subjectivity through their narratives and did so by deploying literary forms that were deeply ingrained in the culture that dehumanized them in the first place.²² They did so in a way that echoed another symbolic instrument – political this time – of the dominant culture's authority, the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution. In his preface to Douglass's *Narrative*, the prominent lawyer turned abolitionist Wendell Phillips explicitly compares the two:

contemporary critics such as Arthur Riss to conclude that Stowe's portrayal of Uncle Tom is fed by racial essentialism to the extent that her support for the abolitionist cause itself, by stressing the inherent goodness and peacefulness of black people, is grounded in biological racialism ("Racial Essentialism and Family Values in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" 63-65). It is noteworthy that the protagonists in the slave narratives discussed later on in this chapter seek to avoid precisely the type of erasure of their agency that was promoted by nineteenth-century race theory.

²² In his preface to Frantz Fanon's forceful denunciation of the effects of colonialism, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Jean-Paul Sartre comments that when the disenfranchised speak back to those who repressed them, they are able to deploy the colonizers' own weighty humanist vocabulary to denounce them: "[t]here was no doubt in our minds they accepted our ideal, since they were accusing us of not respecting it" (xliv). Given the instrumental role played by literary genres such as the *Bildungsroman* in helping societies figure the human as rights bearing citizens, as determined by Slaughter, one could expand Sartre's remark to say that, in the case of former slaves, the disenfranchised made copious use of Western literary culture to denounce the failure of Western philosophical humanism.

They say the fathers, in 1776, signed the Declaration of Independence with the halter about their necks. You, too, publish your declaration of freedom with danger compassing you around. In all the broad lands which the Constitution of the United States overshadows, there is no single spot, -- however narrow or desolate, -- where a fugitive slave can plant himself and say, "I am safe." (13)²³

Thus, as slave narrators made use of genre conventions to make sure the reader would recognize their authority, autonomy, and humanity, abolitionists were quick to relate the struggle for slaves' freedom to the fervour in the fight for national independence that had such strong social and political capital. Even if, as Douglass's *Narrative* will show, the relationship between slave narrator, abolitionist, and rights declarations was complicated, this shows once again that the history of these personal narratives and their uses is deeply implicated in the legal-political development of rights during this period.

A last characteristic of slave narratives is the addition of one or more prefaces by sympathetic white editors testifying to the credibility of the black narrator and denouncing the institution of slavery. White involvement in soliciting, editing, and publishing the personal narratives of black authors was instrumental in facilitating the dissemination of slave narratives amongst a broad readership.²⁴ The fact that these types of prefaces were necessary in the first place, however, also highlights the extent to which these collaborative texts were always a partnership of unequals. The white voices that enveloped the personal narratives of freed slaves were there because, as opposed to the autobiographical subject, they were recognized in the nineteenth-

²³ Literary critics have since fleshed out in more detail the congruity of these legal-political documents and the personal narratives of slaves in the context of the United States. See, for example, "The Founding Fathers: Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington," in which James Olney supports an analogous reading of the Declaration of Independence and slave narratives as similarly self-assertive documents that establish freedom and independence (4).

²⁴ It was also necessary in the sense that the book market remained, to a large extent, closed to people of colour long after it began publishing books written by black authors. Lydia Maria Child's letters to Jacobs provide a good illustration of this. On 13 August 1860 she writes to Jacobs to tell her that she has "signed and sealed the contract with Thayer & Eldridge [a Boston-based publishing firm], in my name and told them to take out the copyright in my name. Under the circumstances *your* name could not be used, you know" (194).

century public sphere, had the resources to publish periodicals and books, and had access to the book market. Their privileged position allowed them to build a powerful abolitionist movement, partially thanks to the work performed by the slave narratives they edited and published.²⁵ The reality of slavery was thus forced to undergo additional mediation within the accepted racial hierarchy through this unequal partnership, which was reproduced in the textual structure of validating preface and narrative proper.

However, as Gilroy notes, the personal tone and genre characteristics of slaves' personal narratives became inextricably linked to the freed slave's insistence on authority and autonomy, and thereby contributed to the formation of a discursive space that refused to "subordinate the particularity of the slave experience to the totalising power of universal reason held exclusively by white hands, pens, or publishing houses" (69). My analysis of Douglass's autobiographies in particular shows how slave narrators struggled to resist this reaffirmation of their inferior social and political position by deploying certain narrative devices, such as genre conventions, that challenged their largely illustrative function within the broader intellectual debate on the institution of slavery from which they were excluded. This makes the overall effect of the text even more ambivalent and complex. Just as literary genres are both evoked and challenged on the level of the narrative, the narrative itself is both authorised and undercut by the preface, on the level of the paratext. Both were conducive to helping former slaves gain access to a public discourse on rights that excluded people of colour. They also made a broad readership amenable to their personal narratives of suffering under the institution of slavery. Yet simultaneously, they were also part of a complex mediating process that risked obscuring wider problems of racial inequality, such as the question of black rights and citizenship. It is crucial to understand the various complexities of this process because it is precisely where the rights-spaces these narratives seek to create are contested and defined. Furthermore, the discussion of this mediatory

²⁵ The narrativized autobiographies of slaves were seen as an innovative means of addressing the problem of slavery and racism outside of the established non-fictional grounds occupied by pro- and antislavery polemics (Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story* 5).

relationship provides valuable tools that allow Eggers's collaborations with Deng or Zeitoun for *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun* to be suitably scrutinized.

2.3 Imagining Rights-Spaces Before Emancipation: Frederick Douglass and Harriet Ann Jacobs

2.3.1 Frederick Douglass

Douglass is arguably the most canonical of the slave narrators in the antebellum period. Douglass, an escaped slave who became the most powerful black voice in the abolitionist movement, wrote three personal narratives over the course of his lifetime. All three provide an account moving from his escape from a plantation in Maryland to his progressively more active role as an abolitionist. Two were published before the Emancipation Proclamation, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845)²⁶ and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855); a third, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, appeared in 1893. For the publication of his first autobiography, Douglass worked with two white abolitionists. The first was William Lloyd Garrison, the prominent anti-slavery activist and editor of the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* that ran the *Narrative*, and the second was Wendell Phillips, the previously quoted lawyer turned abolitionist. Prior to its publication, Douglass had participated in the anti-slavery cause as a particularly gifted orator testifying to the horrors of chattel slave life at public rallies. This oral experience honed his natural eloquence and made him acutely aware of the need to tailor his message to an audience that was not necessarily overly sympathetic to his plea (Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story* 100). It also, at least in part, prompted his writing of an autobiography. Audiences became suspicious of a freed slave who could match the rhetorical force of highly educated white abolitionists. My analysis focuses on this first autobiography in particular, given that it is most typical of pre-

²⁶ Henceforth referred to as *Narrative*.

emancipation slave narratives but also contests the position delegated to its contents by the white abolitionists who framed it.²⁷

Typically, former slaves were meant to function as support for the abolitionist cause by illustrating in an experiential sense what was being condemned on social, religious, and philosophical grounds by white abolitionists. In this sense, they are not so different from the Amnesty Endorsed Fiction project, which aims to make real and tangible the rights for which the organization fights, or Eggers's faith in testimonies as powerful rights-space creating tools. The reason slave narratives were necessary, as Phillips writes in his preface to the *Narrative*, was because the public had "been left long enough to gather the character of slavery from the involuntary evidence of the masters" (12). Accordingly, Douglass was brought along to rallies and meetings strictly as a witness revealing the truth about slavery to a white readership ill-informed about the realities of life under slavery. This reduced the individuality of slaves' experiences to generalizable examples of lives and bodies brutally violated. This restrictive role given to slaves was common. As J. Ring explains in "Painting by Numbers," slave narratives were simply meant to narrate wrongs, not denounce them (125). Indeed, to some extent, Douglass's *Narrative* was published to perpetuate this mechanism. After all, his first autobiography was meant to strengthen the veracity of his story against those who doubted that a former slave could possess such eloquence and who thus undermined his position as a primary witness to the institution of slavery. This aim fit the abolitionist cause's use for Douglass's testimony, as the prefaces show. Garrison assures readers from the start that Douglass's story is "sustained by a cloud of witnesses, whose veracity is unimpeachable" (10) and Phillips confirms that the hardships described are "the essential ingredients, not the occasional results, of the system" (13).

It is important to note, however, that the autobiography is underpinned by a second agenda that diverges from those set out in the prefaces. Douglass was clearly unhappy about being excluded from the public debate in an intellectual sense. He greatly

²⁷ Robert S. Levine explains in "Identity in the Autobiographies" that the *Narrative* draws the most consistently on the conventions of the slave narrative (31). Andrews goes so far as to describe it as "the great enabling text of the first century of Afro-American autobiography" (Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story* 138).

objected to serving merely as a prop to be wheeled out to illustrate the horrors of slavery. He later sarcastically writes in *My Bondage and My Freedom*: “I was generally introduced as a ‘chattel’ – a ‘thing’ – a piece of southern ‘property’ – the chairman assuring the audience that *it* could speak” (366). As his sarcastic remark indicates, however, Douglass was unwilling to accept this unequal partnership and reappropriated the role of narrator in his autobiographies to exploit its potential to reimagine the specific position of black people in the United States in his own voice.²⁸ This struggle on the part of the disempowered subject to serve as more than an illustration and to combat the inequalities that seek to remarginalize their voices are key to understanding these slave narratives as rights-space creating tools. They also constitute the two critical links across “deep time” to collaborative testimonies in a contemporary context, as my discussion of *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun* goes on to show.

Douglass’s *Narrative* consistently resists categorization as a simple testimony to his past life as a slave by exploring the full narrative potential of his text. He defies the restrictive role dealt to him by the abolitionists, Delombard argues, by splitting the narrating subject into a witnessing body during his time as a slave in the South and a powerful voice denouncing slavery once he reaches the North (245-275). Similarly, Levine notes that the *Narrative* is marked precisely by the narrator’s ability to provide an astute analysis of the events he describes with regard to the institution of slavery more generally (32). I argue that Douglass utilizes the narrative account of his real-life experiences as a basis for unmasking slavery as a repressive socio-cultural force that dehumanizes slaves and denies them rights. Concertedly, he deploys and manipulates the genre conventions of the *Bildungsroman* and sentimental novel to guide the reader – sometimes rather forcefully – into imagining precisely the humanity and rights he was denied as a slave in the South and is still partially denied as a former slave in the North. Douglass asserts his humanity in a complex narrative, a high cultural mode of speech

²⁸ As a result of this, Golberg argues that “the four iterations of his autobiography may be read . . . as signalling an unwillingness to stop testifying, to stop imagining that a better way to say the self might still arrive” (85). Similarly, Ring explains that Douglass never saw his text as a simple closed record of past events, but as part of a project that reached far beyond the text and ultimately sought to write his name into history (119).

that was meant to be impossible for him to master, that shows how slavery is incongruous with the civilized society the United States claims to be.

Central to Douglass's assertive move is his mastery of language as a tool of resistance. Mullen argues that the text figures his literacy as a "radical discontinuity" with his slave past that stresses Douglass's "emerging subjectivity" (261). The *Narrative* quotes his owner, Mr Auld, as warning against his education as "unlawful" and "unsafe" before reflecting at length on the empowering sensation of literacy as a means of penetrating the society from which Douglass is excluded (38-44). However, slavery not only deprives slaves from participating in society by denying them, amongst other things, literacy, it also dulls the "masters" by forcing them to resort to primitive violence so as to enforce racial inequality.²⁹ At one stage, Douglass portrays Mrs Auld as a benighted fool who requires "training in the exercise of irresponsible power, to make her equal to the task of treating me as though I were a brute" (42). Douglass suggests that slavery denies slaves the opportunity to develop their individuality in society, but also diminishes the dominant culture by forcing it to participate in the primitive institution of slavery. This powerfully blurs the radical severance of black people from Enlightened and civilized society, aligning Douglass with civilization and slave masters with primitive brutality. By showing that he can master the language of the dominant discourse that marginalizes him, he shows that slaves can participate in U.S. culture when given the opportunity and thus makes a powerful case for being the social and cultural equal of the citizens he is addressing.

As Pearson observes, the anti-slavery movement's drive to humanize slaves on the basis of a shared humanity sparked the rise of ideas concerning race and colour that served as an argument for maintaining racial inequality (640). Hume's aforementioned footnote shows how this might be maintained by supposedly progressive thinkers even in a post-slavery society, in that he recognizes black humanity yet insists on radical

²⁹ See also Kelly Oliver's analysis of slave-society in *Witnessing*: "The world of slavery is not a world of humanity or of subjective articulation, but a world beyond description. It is a world where both slaves and masters are inhumane; masters because of their cruelty and inhumanity, slaves because they have been rendered less than human objects" (103).

difference in terms of civilization and culture. Hunt makes a similar point when she explains that Jefferson recognized the “rights of slaves as human beings,” but “did not envision a polity in which they or women of any color took an active part” (69). Goldberg confirms this when she observes that abolition, once achieved, simply “initiated a social and cultural climate of segregation that aimed to preserve the white polity” through scientific racism (81). However, she goes on to argue that Douglass’s “mistake” was to focus solely on abolitionism and believe that this would allow him to articulate a “positive and perfect, and entirely accurate and legitimate, identity for himself” (80-81). This ignores Douglass’s attempts at reframing his personal narrative to include a push for national rights and citizenship in addition to its function as a tool in the international abolitionist movement.

This gains further importance because it complicates his relationship to the abolitionist movement, which is traditionally seen as the first transnational humanitarian movement and which denounced slavery on the universalist grounds of a shared humanity. A representative illustration of the movement’s universalist rhetoric are the popular jasperware medallions made by Josiah Wedgwood in the late eighteenth century that depict a kneeling black man and read “Am I not a Man and a Brother.” Douglass’s narrative, in contrast, addresses a primarily American readership and his accusation towards them centres on the United States not living up to its liberal and Christian principles as a nation rather than on plainly denouncing the nation’s foundational texts from a universalist perspective. John Stauffer explains in “Douglass’s Self-Making and Abolitionism” that while Garrisonian abolitionists believed, for example, that the Constitution was inherently proslavery and corrupt, Douglass later openly changed his mind and saw the potential for its language to be read anarchically as being anti-slavery (Stauffer 22-23). This has led critics such as Paul Giles to consider his later work as seeking “to rotate the axis of its [the United States] master narratives so as to bring patriotic narratives into alignment with African American interests”

(139).³⁰ Douglass's *Narrative*, I argue, constitutes a first attempt at aligning his own interests with those of the nation that enslaved him precisely because he understood the need for abolition to be followed by a push for black citizenship.

The tension between the transnational focus of the abolitionist movement and the national focus of Douglass's narrative with regard to the creation of rights-spaces is born out in the *Narrative*'s appeal to socio-cultural values and discourses that were closely tied to an emerging U.S. national identity. The ability for Douglass to appeal to a well-known, in this case national, framework as a means of resistance is intriguing, especially given that the legally weak but culturally deeply entrenched discourse of human rights will form a similar frame of resistance for Deng's appeal in *What Is the What*. In terms of the slave narrative's appeal, Levine makes the further point that Douglass's autobiography mimics Benjamin Franklin's in his stressing of the hard work, energy, and creativity required to overcome hardship, in his case from slavery to freedom (32). It also employs the language of the declaration Franklin signed asserting the United States' independence when it juxtaposes the image of a free and rational man with the dehumanizing life of a slave. Douglass's past of being considered subhuman – property in fact – and present as a relatively “free” man writing and testifying are yoked together with extraordinary force in the following image:

I was kept almost naked - no shoes, no stockings, no jacket, no trousers, nothing on but a coarse tow linen shirt, reaching only to my knees. I had no bed. I used to steal a bag which was used for carrying corn to the mill. I would crawl into this bag, and there sleep on the cold, damp, clay floor, with my head in and feet out. My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes. (34)

The shocking brutality of slavery in North America is brought together with the image of a free rational man and former slave writing for an American audience. The cognitive dissonance of a rational man being forced into slavery is crucial to Douglass' rhetorical

³⁰ See also Crane, who argues that “Douglass powerfully recasts the national narrative as a continuing confrontation of the challenge to read justice into the terms of the national charter despite our history of injustice” (100)

strategy and is reinforced by the subtitle, "*An American Slave*," which uncomfortably forces the two words together.

Echoing the language of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, Douglass insists on the fundamental freedom of man set out therein to show the irrationality of men being coerced into slavery. His narrative, as he himself says, shows both how "a man was made slave" and "a slave was made man" (63). Douglass explains what is required to deny someone's humanity in order to make them a slave. In order to do so, he says, one must "annihilate the power of reason" until the slaves "detect no inconsistencies in slavery" (87). A point that is only reached once that person "ceases to be a man" (87). Two seemingly contradictory conclusions can be drawn from his use of language here. The first is that Douglass presents his story not as one from slave to man, but as one from man to slave to man. It is the United States that made him a slave and his escape would suggest that he is now free in spite of his being in the United States. He writes of how he came to detest his "enslavers" as "successful robbers" who had "stolen" him away and made him a slave in a "strange land" (44). The target of Douglass's text is, as he writes in the preface, "the American slave system" in particular and he attacks the Christian foundations of the country precisely by denouncing the "corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land" (101). The second point, however, is that his outrage and plea are heavily couched in the language and spirit of the newly independent nation that he is addressing. The claiming of humanity, reason, and freedom in an act of writing using that specific language both grounds this testimony in and addresses it to the American nation.

This ambiguous relationship with the nation that he is addressing – as both villain and potential saviour – is illuminated by the general principle that governs the *Bildungsroman*. That is, a narrative in which personal development allows the protagonist to overcome hardship, mature, and – most importantly – claim citizenship within society. Douglass takes up this literary master narrative, but twists its incorporative ending. As Andrews points out, the ending of the *Narrative* is atypical in that it refuses the "stock-in-trade" climax where the slave finds freedom in the North (Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story* 128). There is no safe haven at the end of Douglass's story, but a sense of continued struggle. Those things which are emphasized in Douglass's

Narrative, the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness granted to U.S. citizens, are precisely those things which are denied to black people under slavery, but also remain unavailable to them as long as they are denied the rights of citizenship. His narrative is thus not one of an arduous road towards testifying to the past and present brutality in the South, as the abolitionists would frame it, but a continuing story, that is necessarily open-ended, of racial discrimination and hardship across an entire nation corrupted by slavery. This manipulation of the closure afforded by a typical *Bildungsroman* upsets the uplifting ending expected by readers and allows it to achieve more than a simple plea for the abolition of slavery. Douglass's analysis of his experiences as a slave and continued struggle as a free man unable to become part of society is mirrored by an incomplete plot structure that invites readers to imagine a society in which the incorporative narrative ending now refused could be fulfilled. As such, the rights-space opened up by this personal narrative comprises both the recognition of slaves' humanity and, more ambitiously, a rewriting of the national narrative to consider extending the citizenship rights set out in the Declaration of Independence to former slaves. This rhetorical-formal strategy of the open-ended narrative, which deliberately leaves spaces for the reader to contemplate, is critical to understanding how Eggers's *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun* function in the contemporary rights context. The key difference thus becomes a political one. The dissonance and open-endedness in Eggers's texts is not focused on exposing the incongruity of the nation state's principles and practices, but on laying bare the tensions between universally acknowledge and unequally distributed rights in global society.

2.3.2 Harriet Ann Jacobs

Jacobs, the most prominent female American slave narrator, is the author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written By Herself* (1861)³¹, which details her life as a slave in North Carolina and her subsequent years as a fugitive in the North. The narrative ends with her freedom being purchased by a friend in the North, Cornelia Willis. *Incidents* is

³¹ Henceforth referred to as *Incidents*.

simultaneously typical and atypical of the slave narrative genre. The publication of Jacobs's *Incidents* was facilitated by Lydia Maria Child, an abolitionist and women's rights activist who also edited her narrative. As is typical, Child frames the narrative with a preface in which she assures the reader of its veracity: "The author of the following autobiography is personally known to me, and her conversation and manners inspire me with confidence" (5). Interestingly though, Jacobs also writes a preface for her narrative, in which she grants authority to her own narrative: "Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true" (5). The overall tone is less assertive and more self-deprecating than Child's preface, particularly when she writes: "I wish I were more competent to the task I have undertaken. But I trust my readers will excuse deficiencies in consideration of circumstances" (5). Much like Douglass's *Narrative*, Jacobs's autobiographical account displays the author's deft employment of rhetorical modes that were thought to be exclusive to white culture (Ring 124). The self-deprecatory tone, while usually a sign of authorial modesty in nineteenth-century writing, thus serves as a self-assertive move for Jacobs, who is able to underscore her subjectivity in a conventional manner.

Incidents is also unique, however, because it offered the first full-length American narrative detailing the experiences of a woman living under slavery. The uniqueness of this perspective was not without risk. Even at the time of its publication almost a century after the first slave narratives were published and read, its narrative of sexual exploitation was likely to be seen, as Child writes in her preface, as dealing with "indelicate" subjects (6). She goes on to say that Northern readers had thus far remained "veiled" from this "monstrous" aspect of slavery (6). The fact that this type of subject, usually suppressed or deemed improper in the patriarchal society of the nineteenth century, was able to be treated in a slave narrative demonstrates once again the subversive ability of the genre to assert that which was usually repressed. What warranted broaching this subject in such an explicit sense, according to Child, is precisely the overriding importance of the anti-slavery crusade (6). For Jacobs, however, the ability to broach sexual exploitation within the context of a hierarchical master-slave relationship afforded her the opportunity of manipulating the genre conventions

of the sentimental novel to put her narrative to work in creating a space for black rights.

Like Douglass's *Narrative*, Jacobs's complex narrative refuses to function simply as an illustrative example of slavery's ills and once again the resistance to this can be found at the formal level of the text and paratext. The narrative proper may be illustrative, but a number of narrative strategies ensure that the narrator is not reduced to the illustrative function of her narrative. Overtly, the goal of Jacobs's *Incidents* is precisely to move her readers to take up the American anti-slavery cause by narrating the ills that befell her as a slave living in the South. As opposed to Douglass, who resented his personal experiences being used as a representative piece of evidence to be wheeled out by abolitionists, Jacobs thus seemingly embraces in full her role as an exemplar for life under slavery. Her preface even goes so far as to state that she does not aim to "excite sympathy for my own sufferings," but wishes to "arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse" (5). This stands in stark contrast to the self-assertiveness in Douglass's *Narrative* that, according to Andrews, characterizes North-American slave narrators writing in the mid-nineteenth century (Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story* 100). In the narrative proper, she bemoans the weakness of her own authorship as a slave narrator when she exclaims: "But my heart is so full, and my pen is so weak" (28). Her sole aim, Jacobs concludes, is to add her testimony "to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is" (5). Authorial recognition and individuality seem not to matter to Jacobs, especially given that *Incidents* was published under the pseudonym "Linda Brent."

This extensive self-effacement and self-deprecation is so complete, however, that the modest rhetoric of such weak authorship, typical at the time, belies a more powerful assertion on the part of Jacobs. In *Witnessing*, Kelly Oliver argues that Jacobs's use of the pseudonym "Linda Brent" should be read as a "refusal to be defined by her experience of slavery" (103). If this is taken to be accurate, then the weakness of the slave's position and testimony as it is admitted into a social and cultural sphere guarded by white citizens is delegated to the authorial function of the pseudonym "Linda Brent," leaving Jacobs to pursue an identity beyond slavery now that she is free. This is crucial, because it allows Jacobs to launch a two-pronged attack on the position of black people in

society that, just like Douglass's, both incorporates and transcends the slavery question. First, and in accordance with the typical reading of slave narratives, Elizabeth Spelman points out in "The Heady Political Life of Compassion" that Jacobs uses her personal narrative to disrupt the legal and cultural discourses that render slaves speechless by asserting her voice from a slave's position (365-371). As opposed to Douglass's *Narrative*, Brent's story has the clear narrative closure so appreciated by readers. As *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*, an abolitionist newspaper, noted on 9 February 1861: "It is a veritable history of the trials and suffering to which a slave girl was subjected, but who finally triumphed over all discouragements, and obtained freedom for herself and her two children" (162). This is the merit of the self-contained narrative cordoned off under the authorship of Linda Brent. Second, as a result, the figure of Jacobs is left open as a newly independent woman in the North able to explore different terms for recognition and identification.

This drive to escape reductive categorization as a former slave is also what characterizes Jacobs's use of the sentimental tradition. As is the case for her authorial presence, the deployment of genre conventions both serves and transcends the abolitionist discourse within which it circulated. In a straightforward sense, the literary genre of the sentimental novel is taken up here as an ideal means of "moving" readers, both emotionally and politically, in service of the anti-slavery movement. As Michelle Burnham maintains in "Loopholes of Resistance," Jacobs's use of the sentimental novel's ability to affect readers emotionally is part of a strategy by which she means to "translate that emotional response into moral behavior" (290). The narrative is filled with pathos in its descriptions of what it feels like to be a slave. For instance, when she is "inherited" upon the death of her first master, her new master tells her that she is "his property" and that she is now "subject to his will" (26). At this point, she exclaims: "My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection" (26). Shortly afterwards, she almost pleadingly informs the reader that this was the time when most she "longed for some one to confide in" (27). In *Self-discovery and Authority in Afro-American Literature*, Valerie Smith notes of the further plot how "Jacobs's resistance of the male aggressor echoes Richardson's *Pamela*" (41). Jacob's struggle to maintain virtue in the face of sexual harassment by "Dr. Flint" (a pseudonym for her master, Dr. James Norcom) would thus resonate with readers used to consuming popular

sentimental fiction with similar plot lines (Smith 37). The heart-wrenching narrative of a woman's virtue threatened by a vile master, brought with sufficient pathos to move even the most hard-boiled reader is thus effectively keyed towards rousing the reader, as Child puts it, to "the exertion of moral influence on the question of Slavery" (6).³²

This affective strategy, however, was predicated on the fact that readers would understand that, in the case of a slave, maintaining moral virtue within a social structure that made slaves bend to the will of their masters faced Jacobs with impossible choices. This is reflected in her agonizing over the decision to take a white lover in order to shield herself from Flint's aggression and her realization that white readers may refuse to sympathize with a protagonist who voluntarily gives up the female purity that characterizes women in sentimental fiction (Riss, "Sentimental Douglass" 107).³³ In being recognized as property rather than human by her masters, the agency of women in sentimental novels to resist moral corruption – already rather limited within the patriarchal societies in which they are set – is unavailable to Jacobs. As a result, she must ask readers not to judge her "by the same standards as one would a free woman" (Oliver 101). As an illustration of this, take Jacobs's direct address of the reader in the final chapter: "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage" (156). The protagonist, having been established as worthy of the typically incorporative ending, merely claims freedom from cruelty at the end instead of completing the typical sentimental plot reconciling the protagonist with society through the institution of marriage. This provides closure for the reader as a story of adventures had and hardships overcome, while simultaneously leaving the "usual" ending of the sentimental story unfulfilled. Once again, testifying to life under slavery only comprises part of this narrative's rights-work. Additional room is left at the end of

³² Child's revisions of the narrative, though she writes that they are "trifling exceptions" (6), did contribute in one explicit sense to this affective aim. In a letter to Jacobs on 13 August 1860, she writes that she has brought the story "into continuous order" so as to render it "much more clear and entertaining" (193). Her concern with order and entertainment value no doubt aimed at improving the immersive experience for the readers.

³³ See also Oliver, who remarks that *Incidents* "often reads as juridical testimony" in which Jacobs puts up a defence of her actions "as if she were literally on trial and being judged by her reader" (103).

the narrative for the reader to imagine a recognized rights-space in society that Jacobs could inhabit now that she is no longer a slave.

Incidents also deploys the sentimental genre in a broader sense to restructure the master-slave hierarchy by redistributing moral currency within the story world. Typically, a sentimental novel details the protagonist's struggle to maintain their virtue in the face of a villainous antagonist whose rapacious conduct transgresses society's moral boundaries. The virtuous protagonist in the narrative subsequently comes to be seen as the moral centre and, therefore, the "superior" character more aligned with the ideals of a moral society. The quintessential example of this would be Richardson's *Pamela*, whose extreme piety reflects the Christian virtue to which the nation aspires. In *Incidents*, the institution of slavery – as an accepted part of the nation – counteracts the protagonist's virtue being recognized and rewarded, precisely because her status as a slave condones the immoral conduct of those threatening her "female purity." This impossible position is articulated by Jacobs when she notes that resistance was futile in the face of an attacker who was free to do with her as he pleased: "That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave" (26). This phrase is doubly significant, because it appeals to the ideal conduct that white readers found admirable and exemplary before pointing out that such conduct on the part of slaves hastens the decline rather than the preservation of virtue.

The shocking unavailability of virtue rewarded to Jacobs is subsequently brought home in the text through the familiarly self-deprecating rhetoric of the author. The narrative turns away from describing the brutality of Flint to a pathos-laden exploration of the humiliation she feels as a result of his aggression. Oliver reads passages such as these as part of Jacobs's effort to "reinscribe dignity and self-respect into the experience of slavery" (100). This, I would argue, fails to take into account the extent to which Jacobs separates herself from her slave experiences, making such a recovery unnecessary. Indeed, Jacobs says as much herself when she redirects the affective reader response away from herself in the present and towards her representative slave-past, which is cordoned off within the narrative of Linda Brent:

O, what days and nights of fear and sorrow that man caused me. Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered in

slavery. I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage, suffering as I once suffered (27).

Even though there is a strong emphasis on the immorality of slavery that is part of the sentimental appeal for its abolition and black freedom, Jacobs herself is thus presented as already having exchanged the moral void of slavery for freedom in the North.

The narrative suggests that the type of virtue she could not protect in the South should now be available to her. After all, she is now living in a social and cultural environment that is comprised of precisely those readers who consume sentimental fiction and whom she aims to shock by describing the iniquity of the South. However, the latter half of the narrative, dealing with Jacobs's constant fear of being sent back as a result of the Fugitive Slave Act, points to the precarious position of former slaves living in the North. As she writes, the danger was that slaves would be "given up by the bloodhounds of the north to the bloodhounds of the south" (147). Even freedom within a society that accepts the institution of slavery does little more than reaffirm her precarious position as property. She wryly describes the moment she finds out that she has been sold to a sympathetic white woman, Mrs Bruce (a pseudonym for Cornelia Willis):

So I was *sold* at last! A human being *sold* in the free city of New York! The bill of sale is on record, and future generations will learn from it that women were articles of traffic in New York, late nineteenth century of the Christian religion. I well know the value of that bit of paper; but much as I love freedom, I do not like to look upon it. (155)

Having denounced both the moral state of society in the North and the South, the space within which the virtue of a black character such as Jacobs's would be available in the novel is shifted from the Free States in the North to an imagined space that can, as of yet, only exist in the minds of the readers. Jon Hauss makes the related point in "Perilous Passages in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" that *Incidents* conjures up a dream of "a finally unbounded circle of human community free of exploitation" that contrasts with the "profound systemic dangers of American racial, economic, and sexual hierarchies" (162). This imaginative process is fed by the open-ended plot, which leaves precisely this type of fictional space and encourages readers to

connect with Jacobs as an equal instead of acknowledging her humanity but maintaining socio-cultural structures that reinforce racial inequality.³⁴ The goal of this personal narrative thus comes to exceed mere freedom from slavery and begins to imagine a societal structure in which exploitative racial hierarchies would be effaced as a result of former slaves being recognized not simply as human beings, but as citizens in an egalitarian nation. Like Douglass's *Narrative*, it can thus be said to stake Jacob's claim to citizenship in a reformed post-slavery nation as much as it denounces the nation's current immorality as a result of its maintaining of this morally void institution and racialized mode of thinking. The significant link in "deep time" to Eggers's contemporary work comes in the form of this resistance to remarginalization through stereotypes and hierarchies, a perpetual concern for the disempowered collaborators in *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun*.

2.4 Imagining Rights-Spaces After Emancipation: Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois

2.4.1 Booker T. Washington

With Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, the stakes shifted for former slaves and black people born in the Free States alike. Across the United States, slaves became – at least by law – free, and escaped slaves who made it to the North were legally safe from being returned to their masters, even if the Civil War was still to rage for a further two years and the freedom of slaves was still hotly contested. With the primary goal for abolitionists thus achieved, subsequent personal narratives by black authors debated the future of African-Americans in American society as well as how best to pursue the acquisition of rights in a post-slavery society. Two towering figures in this debate were

³⁴ See also Sandra Gunning in "Reading and Redemption in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," where she argues that this narrative pursues an affective response that stimulates activism which connects black and white readers rather than stimulating top-down charity (352).

Booker T. Washington and William Edward Burghardt Du Bois. Both published influential narratives around the same time that took up the slave narrative genre and adapted it to the issues facing African-Americans in the U.S. following Emancipation. Washington's *Up From Slavery, An Autobiography* (1901) presents him as a self-reliant American hero as it briefly touches on his early life as a slave on a plantation in Virginia before going on to detail his success in founding and running the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, a school in Alabama dedicated to teaching practical skills to young African-Americans.

Du Bois was a prolific author. He began his writing career as a researcher at Harvard University, where he wrote a doctoral dissertation titled *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America* (1896). He is also known for his autobiography titled *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940). His seminal work, however, is *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), in which Du Bois explored the concept of race in American society through the now well-known concepts of “double consciousness” and “the veil,” to which I will return later. Du Bois and – especially – Washington's engagement with the slave narrative genre reflect a shift in the use of personal narratives that took place in the post-Emancipation period. These narratives moved away from the paratextually framed texts working in conjunction with, or resisting, the abolitionist movement towards an even clearer adoption of the *Bildungsroman*. This was particularly the case now that the latter's incorporative premise coalesced with the central issue of how black rights should develop in a post-slavery society. This is a final, significant evolution in the personal narrative genre that is worth exploring in relation to Eggers, given that his collaborative testimonial work negotiates the treacherous balance between recognizing disempowered subjects as the “human” in human rights and pushing beyond that to have those subjects be granted full rights within global society.

Up From Slavery and *The Souls of Black Folk* typify the polemical relationship between their respective authors on how black rights should be developed further following Emancipation. The disagreement between both authors was played out in the public sphere, as their books were widely disseminated and published by mainstream presses. *Up From Slavery* was first published in 1901 by Doubleday, Page, and Co. in New York, one of the largest publishing houses in the United States, following serialization in the

periodical *The Outlook* between November 1900 and February 1901. As opposed to the radical abolitionist presses and newspapers that published Douglass's and Jacobs's narratives, *The Outlook* was a popular periodical with a mainstream readership. Theodore Peterson explains in *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* that the period when Washington's *Up from Slavery* was serialized coincided with a golden age for the magazine as a mainstream "journal of opinion" with a circulation of between 100,000 and 125,000 copies that attracted important editors and contributors, including Theodore Roosevelt (144-146). By way of comparison, Douglass's *Narrative* ran in *The Liberator*, which only had 3,000 paying subscribers, many of whom were African-American.³⁵ Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* was partly serialized in *The Atlantic Monthly*, a similarly mainstream cultural and literary magazine, and published as a whole by A. C. McClurg, the same publisher who revived the magazine *The Dial* that would later become a major outlet for influential modernist authors such as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Marianne Moore. These publishing outlets provide some indication that black authorship and subjectivity itself had gained mainstream social and cultural capital in the decades following Emancipation.

Washington's autobiography is characterized by its stressing of economic rights over social and political ones, a focus that formed the basis for Du Bois's profound disagreement with him. *Up From Slavery* largely provides an almost benign account of slavery and goes on to extoll the virtues of his life as a self-made man as an example for his race, emphasizing all the way that economic rights are now both available to and to be preferred by former slaves.³⁶ In order for this narrative to make sense, Washington disentangles the ills of slavery from the nation state and appeals to the latter's foundational meritocratic principles of self-reliance to offer hope to African-

³⁵ As Ellery Sedgwick notes though, the abolitionist newspaper's influence cannot be measured by its subscriptions alone, as it was "disproportionate to its circulation" (27). This is largely a result of the extent to which single copies were copiously shared amongst a wide audience.

³⁶ This benign description of slavery and its impact upon the black community contrasts heavily with the brutality so central to many preceding slave narratives. At one point, he writes that former slaves and their descendants "are in a stronger and more hopeful condition, materially, intellectually, morally, and religiously, than is true of an equal number of black people in any other portion of the globe" (16).

Americans.³⁷ His intended audience is thus clearly both white and black. To white citizens of post-Emancipation society he offers reassurance that he bears them no ill will for the brutality of slavery with which they had become acquainted through previous slave narratives. To recently freed black men and women, he shows a path of hard work and economic progress that will secure them a place in the American nation. His initial description of slavery is a suitable illustration of his reconciliatory gesture to the American nation, especially the South:

I pity from the bottom of my heart any nation or body of people that is so unfortunate as to get entangled in the net of slavery. I have long since ceased to cherish any spirit of bitterness against the Southern white people on account of the enslavement of my race. . . . Having once got its tentacles fastened on to the economic and social life of the Republic, it was no easy matter for the country to relieve itself of the institution. (16)

In this passage, slavery is externalized as an evil that befell the American nation rather than an integral part of it. As such, Washington suggests, white citizens – even former

³⁷ Self-reliance was also central to the thinking of the influential transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson. In an essay titled “Self-Reliance,” Emerson bestows upon the individual in a democratic society of free and equal men the great agency to shape the world around him and to resist the temptation to always conform to existing customs and traditions. As James H. Read explains in “The Limits of Self-Reliance,” Emerson soon realized the incompatibility of slavery and self-reliance, and subsequently found in the resistance to the Fugitive Slave Act a prime example of the type of individual non-conformist thinking that any self-reliant individual should undertake (152-155). Superficially, Emerson’s intellectualist concept of self-reliance seems opposed to the anti-intellectualist self-reliance of which Washington was a proponent. However, Emerson interestingly reframes his notion of self-reliance when confronted with his opposition to slavery. In denouncing slavery in a speech in 1856, Emerson aligned the same virtues of education and hard work stressed by Washington with the democratic values of the free states in the North that were a prerequisite for the type of self-reliance he advocated: “I do not see how a barbarous community and a civilized community can constitute one State. I think we must get rid of slavery, or we must get rid of freedom. Life has not parity of value in the free state and in the slave state. In one, it is adorned with education, with skilful labor, In the other, life is a fever; man is an animal, given to pleasure, frivolous, irritable . . .” (“The Assault upon Mr. Sumner”).

slave owners – cannot be blamed for its cruelty, as they are as much victims of it as the slaves themselves.

This most forgiving attitude to the U.S.'s slaving past may seem odd to readers now, but it did serve an important purpose in Washington's attempt at securing a place for black people in American society. Slaves may have been considered socially and culturally dead for centuries as a result of their enslaved status, but they had not been economically dead. Consider the way in which freedom in the present day is suggestively juxtaposed with past slave labour in Washington's summary of black people's place in the history of the United States: "The central government gave them freedom, and the whole Nation had been enriched for more than two centuries by the labour of the Negro" (83). On the one hand, slavery provides African-Americans with economic roots in the nation that just granted them freedom and, on the other hand, so he points out, had contributed to the nation's economy. Even as the ills of slavery as an institution are thus disentangled from the nation, the slaves themselves are shown to be an integral part of it. The establishment of roots, Gilroy clarifies, became increasingly important in this period as African-Americans sought to articulate claims to citizenship as a means of constructing a cultural sense of belonging that made sense of disparate histories of diaspora, exile, and dispersal (112). Nevertheless, Washington is also at pains to make sure his readers understand that he does not wish the nation to return to slavery: "I have never met one [African-American] who did not want to be free, or on who would return to slavery" (15). As Washington repeats throughout the book, the benefit of the former slave's present freedom is that, through hard work and merit, they are able to make something of themselves in a society that no longer fixes black people in inferior positions. All that is required, he argues, is for others to follow his example of self-reliance and industriousness, which will eventually and inevitably be "recognized and rewarded" (40-41). By proving their economic worth and relying on this law of meritocracy, he says elsewhere, black people can also serve the larger purpose of "softening prejudices" (154). Constructing his narrative in this way allows Washington to denounce slavery as a past evil and look towards a more inclusive future society in which both former slaves and slave-owners have a place, even if it is not yet an equal one.

This opposition between past ills and present opportunities, which is so critical to the rights-space Washington imagines, can be foregrounded even further by looking at how he engages with the genre conventions of the slave narrative, *Bildungsroman*, and the tremendously popular nineteenth-century travel narrative. *Up From Slavery* has the typical self-deprecating preface written by Washington in which he regrets that what he has tried to narrate was “done so imperfectly,” and in which he takes the opportunity to thank Max Bennett Thrasher, a white publicist, for his “painstaking and generous assistance” in helping him tell his story (“Preface”). In “Slavery and the Literary Imagination,” Arnold Rampersad aptly summarizes his further use of the slave narrative genre. He points out that it uses “the skeleton of the slave narrative form” in order to urge self-reliance, reconciliation with the white South, and a relinquishing of social and political rights in favour of economic rights (105). The reconciliatory aspect of his narrative, grounded in its willingness to accept only a partial granting of rights, did not go unnoticed by reviewers at the time such as William Dean Howells, who reviewed *Up From Slavery* for *The North American Review*: “Social equality he does not ask for or apparently care for; but industrial and economic equality his energies are bent upon achieving, in the common interest of both races” (283).³⁸ Indeed, Washington’s narrative stresses this fact repeatedly, making it central to the rights-work it sets out to do. In the penultimate chapter of *Up From Slavery*, he forcibly asserts how economic rights granted by whites and hard work on the part of blacks can cement the latter’s freedom and place in the United States. African-Americans must seek to make themselves “of such indispensable value that the people in the town and the state where we reside will feel that our presence is necessary to the happiness and well-being of the community” (281). What is noteworthy here is that even as Du Bois would condemn Washington later on for selling out on racial equality, the latter leapt on the opportunity of making real the incorporative promise and premise of the *Bildungs*-plot that was unavailable to previous

³⁸ Howells goes so far as to praise Washington in his conclusion by comparing his reconciliatory attitude to the fighting spirit of Douglass, suggesting that the latter would not have been so constructive following Emancipation: “Without affirming his intellectual equality with Douglass, we may doubt whether Douglass would have been able to cope so successfully with the actual conditions, and we may safely recognize in Booker T. Washington an Afro-American of unsurpassed usefulness, and an exemplary citizen” (288).

slave narrators such as Douglass or Jacobs and that now emerged in the wake of Emancipation. He is at pains to perform the incorporative ending of the plot, particularly in the pathos-laden closing scenes in which he receives a letter inviting him to attend a ceremony at Harvard University where he will be awarded an honorary degree. This scene explicitly summarizes the *Bildungs*-plot as part of the narrative's conclusion in which he is accepted into society by one of its foremost institutions:

[I]t was hard for me to realize that I was to be honoured by a degree from the oldest and most renowned university in America. As I sat upon my veranda, with this letter in my hand, tears came into my eyes. My whole former life – my life as a slave on the plantation, my work in the coal-mine, . . . my struggles for an education, the trying days I had had at Tuskegee . . . – all this passed before me and nearly overcame me. (296)

Up From Slavery is eager to narrate the case for economic rights in the aftermath of Emancipation before renewed racial segregation has the chance to close down whatever rights-space he realized was available to him and is now available to other African-Americans. Crucial to this is Washington's stressing of the real and immediate benefits for the United States's economic future from allowing black people to claim these rights as well as his deferral of claims for social and political rights as a means of placating the white section of his audience.

Despite his acceptance of inequality, Washington managed to gain recognition for U.S. citizenship as a result of his autobiography, something Douglass and Jacobs were only able to conjure up through rhetorical twists and narrative devices. Howells's review, for instance, was tellingly titled "An Exemplary Citizen" and claims that "the story of Booker T. Washington does not differ so very widely from that of many another eminent American" (281). *Up From Slavery* is not devoid of narrative devices, however, when it comes to reinforcing the claim to and recognition of its author's citizenship, which often extends beyond the purely economic level that he purports to claim. A particularly poignant example of this is how he makes use of the conventions of the popular travel narrative genre that boomed throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century when he describes his visit to Britain in 1899. The genre had the ability to captivate American audiences, even if typical examples such as Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832) and Charles Dickens's *American Notes*

(1842), infamous for its negative portrayal of Americans, were not always well received. As the nineteenth century went on, American authors gained in confidence and decided to “write back” by visiting Britain and commenting on what they found. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Our Old Home* (1863) can serve as an example here, with its rather scathing comment that “an English lady of fifty is apt to become a creature less refined and delicate, so far as her physique goes, than anything that we Western people class under the name of woman” (48). This aside may seem trivial, were it not that Washington also takes the same perspective of the observing, witty American abroad, and thus strongly aligns himself with his readership at home and includes himself in a shared perception of being American. Washington implicitly also rejects the voyeuristic gaze of eighteenth-century travel books that were strongly focused on exotic explorations of what were seen as “primitives” in the ancestral homelands of slaves, Africa, by aligning himself with the “civilized” observer instead of the observed.³⁹ Consider, for example, this comment on the English stiff upper lip: “The average Englishman is so serious, and is so tremendously in earnest about everything, that when I told a story that would have made an American audience roar with laughter, the Englishmen simply looked me straight in the face without even cracking a smile” (287). By way of humour, these types of witty observations spoon-feed his claiming of American citizenship to his reader and transform him from an African body of exotic interest into an autonomous and observant African-American subject. In spite of these narrative moves, critics have largely concluded from Washington’s emphasis on economic self-assertiveness over rhetorical moralizing that he disavows the performative power of personal narratives. Andrews asserts that, as opposed to earlier slave narrators, Washington claims “a radical distinction between action and speech” to the extent that he “denies the performative dimension of representation” (Andrews, “The Representation of Slavery”

³⁹ Frank J. Klingberg notes the following in *The Anti-Slavery Movement in England*: “During the middle years of the eighteenth century interest in primitive man was revived largely by a great increase of travel and the publication of travel books” (29). One can read into this sort of cultural interest in Africans a form of Orientalism that reinforced the image of black peoples as brutish, uncivilized and uncultured. As Said notes in *Orientalism* of similar textual constructions of the “Orient,” such an existing body of texts has the ability to create a discourse that rationalizes racial and cultural inequality and hierarchy (39).

72-73). However, his deft rewriting of the slave narrative genre, explicit performance of the incorporative aspect of the *Bildungs*-plot, and adroit adopting of the travel narrative genre show that the narrative devices at work in *Up From Slavery* were key to its mapping out of a rights-space for the recently freed African-American community.

Even Washington, therefore, who downplayed the ills of slavery and who saw the moment of Emancipation as a golden opportunity for his race, narrates a story of the gradual negotiation of rights in the wake of newly declared freedom. In *Up From Slavery*, Washington blazes a trail for his African-American brethren in terms of claiming economic rights in order to grind down prejudice, while simultaneously reassuring white readers that he is not advocating for a social or political awakening that would upset the existing racial segregation. This is not because African-Americans are incapable of participating in political life, as he makes clear in his description of the run-up to Emancipation in *Up From Slavery*. There, he writes that while Lincoln was running for the presidency, the slaves were keenly aware of “the issues involved” (8). As my analysis showed though, Washington’s focus was on displaying the worth of African-Americans as self-reliant human beings now that they were no longer mere property as a means of grinding down prejudice and laying claim to the citizenship the nation accorded to men who displayed precisely those virtues. Racial prejudice could not keep down the African-American who shows his merit in a country that Washington believed had always been fundamentally meritocratic and that had now finally been freed of slavery.

2.4.2 W. E. B. Du Bois

Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, published two years after *Up From Slavery*, constitutes a concerted rebuttal of Washington’s proposal for the incremental acquisition of rights by African-Americans in the post-Emancipation United States. It does not subscribe to the slave narrative genre, which Du Bois saw as an obsolete means of describing African-American experience in a post-slavery nation. Instead, Du Bois’s narrative is the beginning of what Rampersad calls a “reflexive paradigm” that is “allied to the slave narrative” but more aptly suited to the modern world (106). The subsequent influence exerted by *The Souls of Black Folk* suggests the success of this new paradigm. Seemingly

keenly aware of his breaking with tradition, Du Bois provides a nod to the conventionally self-deprecating style of slave narrative prefaces when he addresses the “Gentle Reader” in his own: “I pray you, then, receive my little book in all charity, studying my words with me, forgiving mistake and foible for sake of the faith and passion that is in me, and seeking the grain of truth hidden there” (359). This humble tone disguises, however, the serious intellectual work already being done by this opening section that undergirds his further analysis of the race issue in the United States.

In the preface, Du Bois introduces the concept of the “colour line.” This concept is central to Du Bois’s thinking that slavery was not, as Washington would have it, a thing of the past, but the expression of the deep-seated problem of persistent racial inequality and prejudice in the United States. The colour line is precisely what the book seeks to traverse as it aims to reveal to its readers “the meaning of being black here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century” (359). Before Du Bois’s use of it, the term “colour line” was most prominently used by Frederick Douglass in an article for *The North American Review* in 1881 with the same title. In the article, Douglass similarly uses it as a means of exposing racial inequality and hierarchy as a result of prejudice. He writes that prejudice “is a moral disorder, which creates the conditions necessary to its own existence, and fortifies itself by refusing all contradiction” (567). In describing the deeply ingrained prejudice that reinforces racial equality in such hefty terms, the concept of the colour line stands in stark contrast to Washington’s assertion that hard work and the universal law of merit would eventually grind down any remaining prejudice following Emancipation. Douglass’s description of the colour line runs even further contrary to Washington’s later faith in economic rights, when he shows how prejudice affects “every department of American life,” meeting black people even “at the work shop and factory, when they apply for work” (568). Prejudice conspires to perpetuate slavery, he concludes, in that the black person “has ceased to be the slave of an individual, but has in some sense become the slave of society” (568). Du Bois’s appropriation of the concept of the colour line reflects this less optimistic view of post-Emancipation African-American life and explains why the thrust of his argument lies in combatting racial inequality and prejudice as a precursor to the acquisition of social, cultural, political, and economic rights.

Even if *The Souls of Black Folk* does not engage with existing literary genres as extensively as the slave narratives, its discussion of racial inequality does centre on the conceptual metaphor of the “colour line.” It is therefore a markedly different text to Washington’s *Up From Slavery*, which, despite its copious use of narrative strategies to push its message, explicitly prides itself on being a “simple, straightforward story, with no attempt at embellishment” (n.p.). Du Bois has no such scruples about employing language in his thinking to its full colourful, imaginative, and complex effect. As the notion of the colour line suggests, Du Bois is not afraid of using metaphors. Another important metaphor is the “veil.” He introduces the metaphor of a veil to explain his influential idea of double consciousness:

. . . the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels this two-ness, – an American, a Negro. (364)

The metaphorical veil symbolizes that which continues to separate the white from the black in post-slavery America, clouding their mutual perception of one another. As Gilroy explains, the complex term “double consciousness” pertains to African-Americans being determined first by their race, their fluid intermediate status of former slave but not-yet-citizen, and their perceived rootlessness (127). The problem of the colour line thus lies in the fact that African-Americans are shrouded within a discourse that sees the first half of that collocation, that is the “African” in “African-American,” as a restrictive qualification of the second. As Du Bois notes, he noticed at an early age how he was “shut out from their [white] world by a vast veil” which meant that opportunity in life was “theirs, not mine” (364). As a result, the ambition for his race should be to “make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (365). Du Bois understood that the colour line, the various incarnations of hierarchical racial thinking symbolized by the veil, lay at the heart of the rights issue facing African-Americans. Therefore, he had no interest in seeking out a space within a

discourse that had already designated him an inferior position. Washington's answer had been to start from that unequal basis, to insist on establishing the inherent worth of black people through economic achievement as a means of gradually wearing down the effects of prejudice and inequality. Du Bois's was to suggest something altogether more radical.

The Souls of Black Folk seeks to disrupt the discourse of racial inequality by arguing for the simultaneous recognition of social, cultural, political, and economic parity between black and white as a means of fulfilling the promise of the American nation. This is spelled out in the very first chapter of the book, when he writes: "Work, culture, liberty, – all these we need, not singly but together, not successively but together . . ." (370). This striving is then forcefully rearticulated in the terms of American nationhood, when he says later on:

By every civilized and peaceful method we must strive for the rights which the world accords to men, clinging unwaveringly to those great words which the sons of the Fathers would fain forget: We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. (404)

To demand anything less than total equality and equal rights, as Washington suggested, would be to accept an unacceptable lesser human status deprived of those rights granted to all Americans. In case anyone should doubt the implied addressee of this poignant rallying cry, the title of this chapter, "Of Booker T. Washington and Others," makes it abundantly clear to the reader. Du Bois thus insists on equality where Washington was willing to accept marginally less inequality as a stepping stone to improving the position of African-Americans in the long term.

This is echoed in the performative dimension of both narrators in their respective narratives. In *Up From Slavery*, Washington assumes the position of the slave narrator and uses the potential of the *Bildungs*-plot contained within the slave narrative genre to show how his hard work in educational and economic terms culminates in his being recognized in socio-cultural terms by Harvard University's awarding him an honorary degree. Du Bois, in contrast, no longer wishes to perform this – erstwhile unavailable – incorporative aspect of the slave narrative's *Bildungs*-plot if it means accepting life

under the veil as Washington proposes. He published *The Souls of Black Folk* after having completed his doctoral dissertation at the same university and adopts a different, less narrative, and more argumentative textual genre.⁴⁰ It is rational argument in favour of racial equality, as his after-thought to the reader suggests, that will eventually erase the colour line: “Thus in Thy good time may infinite reason turn the tangle straight, and these crooked marks on a fragile leaf be not indeed THE END” (547). Similarly, even his autobiography *Dusk of Dawn* subordinates his own personal experiences as a black man to the broader intellectual consideration of the colour line in the nation at large: “My life had its significance and its only deep significance because it was part of a Problem . . . I seem to see a way of elucidating the inner meaning and significance of that race problem by explaining it in terms of the one human life that I know best” (551). His performance as a narrator is thus less that of an amenable former slave seeking reconciliation, as was Washington’s, and more that of a radical thinker addressing intellectual equals and thereby confirming his claim to socio-cultural equality.

However, regardless of the fundamental intellectual disagreement between Washington and Du Bois over the development of black rights, they both provide a further illustration of how the now commonplace steady and progressive history of declarations belies the complex contestation of rights between and amongst the various races yoked together in the United States as a result of the slave trade. In his doctoral dissertation, Du Bois lays bare the tension between sweeping proclamations, on the one hand, and the slow-paced change in reality, on the other, when he wryly notes of the foundational moment of independence that “[i]t was the plain duty of a Revolution based upon ‘Liberty’ to take steps toward the abolition of slavery: it preferred promises to straightforward action” (196).⁴¹ Dealing with the history of slavery and the slave trade

⁴⁰ See, for example, the structure of his preface, which sets out the different steps of his argument chapter by chapter: “First, in two chapters . . . Then, in two other chapters . . . Venturing now into deeper detail, I have in two chapters studied . . .” (359).

⁴¹ He also damningly writes that “It was the plain duty of the colonies to crush the trade and the system in its infancy: they preferred to enrich themselves on its profits” (196). Elsewhere in his dissertation, Du Bois shows himself to be particularly suspicious of the bias that a history of the abolition of slavery and the slave trade based on successive legal changes would inevitably incur. While he admits that a study of progressive laws

was important to Du Bois's thinking in *The Souls of Black Folk*, as Rampersad explains, because understanding its history and its temporality would lead to a greater understanding of Afro-American culture and allow that culture to transcend the legacy of slavery (123). In this respect, it is no coincidence that Du Bois's doctoral dissertation dealt precisely with the suppression of slavery and the slave trade. His analysis of the decline of the slave trade and slavery qualifies the moral energy of the nation's foundational moments. In the concluding paragraphs of his text, for instance, he notes that slavery was a system that never "had a slighter economic, political, and moral justification than in 1787" (197). His study also lays the groundwork for his later study of the continued problem of the colour line in *The Souls of Black Folk*. He tellingly expresses his hope in the preface to his dissertation that his study of the trade that landed millions of Africans in the United States should contribute to the "scientific study of slavery and the American Negro" (3). The inclusion of the latter in particular, the study of the African-cum-American, suggests that in studying the history of the slave trade, he hopes to address in some part the roots and identity of a people uprooted from their homes, shipped half way across the world as slaves, and denied their full identity as human beings in the process of being turned into commodities.⁴² Bridging towards his later ideas in *The Souls of Black Folk*, he goes on to describe the complex economic and political shifts that led to the abolition of the slave trade and slavery itself, thus undermining the idea that moral suasion by abolitionists alone had restored humanity to slaves and allowed them to be set free. As he poignantly writes:

There is always a certain glamour about the idea of a nation rising up to crush an evil simply because it is wrong. Unfortunately, this can seldom be realized in real

could be interpreted as a "moral awakening," he suggests instead that they "showed a fear of servile insurrection" and reflected a desire to be seen by the rest of the world to be addressing the paradox of slavery in the land of the free (194).

⁴² His own roots, as he describes them in his autobiography *Dusk of Dawn*, were distinctly bound up with his country of birth: "In the folds of this European civilization I was born and shall die, imprisoned, conditioned, depressed, exalted and inspired. Integrally a part of it and yet, much more significant, one of its rejected parts" (555).

life; for the very existence of the evil usually argues a moral weakness in the very place where extraordinary moral strength is called for. (194)

Instead of a history of moral enlightenment, Du Bois stresses the absence of sufficient moral growth and strength to overcome the racial thinking that sustained the commodification of human beings before Emancipation and allowed the veil to descend over black people after it. His attempt at creating a rights-space for black people could be considered one in which he fights against the racial prejudice that had been preserved despite the pithy declarations that are now so eagerly taken up by human rights histories as foundational moments.

Both Washington's and Du Bois's narratives fundamentally centre on the issue of racial inequality, even if their approaches differ extensively. In narrating a gradual expansion of rights to challenge the prejudice that had justified the oppression of his race, starting with economic rights and fundamental freedom from slavery, *Up From Slavery* is as much engaged with the continuing problem of racial inequality and prejudice as Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*. They both seek to create a space for black rights beyond the boundaries placed upon them by a society that had paradoxically established itself through various enlightened declarations affirming the fundamental freedom and equality of man. Their narratives do so by pushing this paradox to its limits, each in their own way, and making a case for allowing the existing discourse of rights to be extended and thereby overcome the discourse of racial inequality with which it had coexisted for so long.

2.5 Imagining Rights-Spaces in the Era of Human Rights: Eggers's Collaborative Testimonies

2.5.1 Valentino Achak Deng and *What Is the What*

Slave narratives, as my analysis shows, mostly resulted from collaborations with white abolitionists and sought to claim rights by disrupting the status quo of a culture in which proclaimed human equality and racial inequality coexisted. Today, personal

narratives are still solicited and sanctioned by actors operating within a largely Western rights framework. The distinct difference lies in that framework's now more universal and global reach, as well as its explicit affirmation of racial equality and fundamental basic rights. How do these slave narratives relate to contemporary uses of the personal narrative as a means of narrating wrongs in the modern era of human rights? Moyn suggests that studies of rights should refrain from dealing with such questions in a linear way that seeks to establish overly optimistic ties with the past. Instead, one should stress the particularity of the rights-context of nineteenth-century North America, how it differs dramatically from the current globalized rights discourse, and how the imagined "equality" proclaimed at the level of the nation state should not be entered into a cascading logical of improvement that culminates in a transnational rights order that is meant to supersede the nation state as the arbiter of rights. Yet the temptation to see continuity is not wholly unjustified and a narrative of difference belies the gradual transition from one rights-context to the next. I believe that this knotty issue can, at least in part, be disentangled by means of a comparison of the manifold ways in which personal narratives help to produce and are produced by the rights-contexts in which they operate. The black authors of the previous section provide part of the illustration for this hypothesis. They show rights "in action" in that they reflect on both the theory and practice of declarative practices and lived violations respectively. In addition to this illustrative dimension, they also show how rights are contested and imagined. Even though Douglass, Jacobs, Washington, and Du Bois may have shifted their rights-space creating efforts to respond to constant social, cultural, political, and legal changes, their narratives are all equally marked by a shared goal of imagining black rights in a way that far transcended the established rights-discourse of their time.

The narrative means may thus be a product of a historical rights context and, therefore, variable, even if the end to which that narrative is put to use invariably seeks to reshape that discourse so as to achieve the same goal. The proposed means of conceptualizing this relates to Dimock's concept of "deep time." It is a generic-genealogical map across which the mutual production of personal narratives and rights discourses can be studied at a narrative level by attending to two aspects of their development. On the one hand, it is important to ascertain how personal narratives

have been adapted in the modern age in order to engage with the entirely different contemporary rights culture. On the other hand, it is equally important to determine how the genre has built on and echoed previous uses of the personal narrative form as a means of preserving their rights-space creating characteristics. In other words, these echoes would constitute a continuity of practice with those black authors writing in the age when contemporary human rights culture is said to have emerged. As such, the category of personal narratives is a dynamic and fluid one that is united across different rights contexts and literary periods by its deployment of formal features to claim rights, but distinctive for each of those contexts and periods. Even if this dissertation cannot conclusively or exhaustively prove this point, it can offer a comparative case study with contemporary collaborative testimonies to support it. Indeed, Eggers's *What Is the What* provides a first fruitful testing ground for this hypothesis, especially given its intertextual affiliation with the slave narrative genre.

There is a clear similarity between the way the early slave narrative genre was framed and authorized and *What Is the What*, which sees an established Western author, Eggers, compose the story of a disempowered African, Valentino Achak Deng, one of the so-called "Lost Boys of Sudan" who survived the Second Sudanese Civil War and was relocated to the United States.⁴³ Following his relocation to Atlanta, Deng's apartment was robbed by two African-Americans, a further tragedy that Eggers used as part of a frame narrative for his retelling of this story. Deng himself was originally part of

⁴³ See also *Travel and Dislocation in Contemporary American Fiction*, in which Alikei Varvogli comes to the same conclusion that "By telling a black African's story of suffering and eventual triumph against the odds, Eggers is reviving the old slave narrative mode" (xxiii). As Yost notes in "The Voices of Others: Dave Eggers and New Directions for Testimony Narrative and Cosmopolitan Literary Collaboration," the collaboration between Eggers and Deng also suggests a link between *What Is the What* and the tradition of the *testimonio* genre (149). *Testimonio* narratives, as written in the tradition of texts testifying to humanitarian issues in Central America, are the product of a collaborative process in which a privileged outsider helps to write the account of a victim's life in order to make it accessible to a wider audience. The humanitarian potential of *testimonio* literature forms the central hypothesis of Kimberley Nance's *Can Literature Promote Justice?*, which explores the interconnectedness of the form, humanitarian intent, and ideological background of collaborative testimonial narratives. Important to note here is how in the *testimonio* genre the victim's narrative is facilitated and implicitly corroborated by the Western author.

fundraisers organized by an organization called “The Lost Boy Foundation” during which he would testify to his experiences of the Second Sudanese Civil War in order to inform U.S. audiences of its horrors and spur them to act. Like Douglass and Washington, therefore, Deng’s narrative address to a privileged Western audience is thus a companion to his extensive work as a public speaker and activist in the United States. In terms of the paratext, a preface was added for the 2006 edition that echoes those found in many slave narratives in which the veracity, didactic mission, and humanitarian aims of the text are explicitly set out. The need to provide justification for *What Is the What*’s narrative and charitable projects in such a preface is more than a little reminiscent of Garrison and Douglass’s struggle to convince white readers that the latter’s experiences were real, that his narrative was true, and that their cause was worthwhile. A further similarity in terms of collaboration is Eggers’s explicit role in ordering and shaping the narrative, much like Child restructured Jacobs’s text to make it flow better and to make it more entertaining.⁴⁴

What Is the What deviates from the slave narrative genre in important ways too, however. For instance, in this narrative Deng testifies to the competence and trustworthiness of Eggers rather than vice-versa. The preface sees Deng initially granting *What Is the What* his blessing by stating that it is “the soulful account of [his] life” (xiii), before drawing the reader’s attention to the pedagogical purpose of the text: “As you read this book, you will learn about me and my beloved people of Sudan” (xiii). The preface also further explicates that Eggers and Deng always agreed that all proceeds from the publication would go to Deng (xiv). In this way, the preface addresses those

⁴⁴ As Varvogli notes, Eggers’s reordering and reframing of events in *What Is the What* revolves around employing “strategies” that “are best suited to the telling of a traumatic and dramatic narrative” (11). Eggers himself noted how he felt the need to “balance” Deng’s calamitous journey with “other aspects of life” so as to establish the protagonist as representing “a full human life” (qtd. in Dawes 209). This provides further evidence of the way in which an appropriate and standard format for appeals through incorporative personal narratives has developed, as uncovered by Slaughter, in an age of rights to which testimony has become central. In *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*, Alan Gibbs makes a similar point concerning the incestuous relationship between trauma theory and trauma narratives, in which the former – once established – became a blueprint for the production of the latter.

critics who accused Eggers of appropriating Deng's voice and story in order to turn a profit. Like a slave narrative in service of the abolitionist cause, this testimonial account also serves the dual purpose of disseminating the victim's testimony and gathering funds for a humanitarian effort, in this case to support educational projects in what is now South Sudan.⁴⁵

What Is the What not only invokes but also inverts the hierarchical conventions of the slave narrative, however, by having Deng write the preface and thereby testify to the veracity of Eggers's narrativization of his story in the preface. Importantly, therefore, this is a testimonial narrative where the privileged author has ceded control to the disenfranchised, both financially – as noted before – and narratologically.⁴⁶ As such, it seeks to forestall the type of relationship generated by slave narrators and white abolitionists in which the former's agency is reduced to being an illustrative assistant in the latter's campaign. The role reversal in *What Is the What's* preface is a testament to the extent to which Eggers and Deng are aware of recreating this type of hierarchical and neo-colonial relationship, in which a white middle-class American author commits to serving a higher humanitarian purpose by helping a disempowered Sudanese man articulate his particular traumatic experiences.

A second important aspect of the text to note in this respect is the narrative voice with which the reader engages in *What Is the What*. Eggers and Deng's self-proclaimed novel and autobiography is the former's narrativization of the latter's life story, with the preface being the only section of the text written solely by Deng. Elizabeth Twitchell points out that the narrative proper is narrated in the first person by a fictional "third voice" which coincides neither with Deng's nor with Eggers's voice, and which she calls "Valentino." This third voice resembles the actual "Deng's speaking voice but does not reproduce or transcribe it" (Twitchell 638). I will maintain this valuable distinction

⁴⁵ In 2006, Deng decided to set up the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, a non-profit organization which, according to its website, seeks to "increase access to education in post-conflict South Sudan by building schools, libraries, teacher-training institutes, and community centers" ("Home").

⁴⁶ See also Michelle Peek's "Humanitarian Narrative and Posthumanist Critique: Dave Eggers's *What Is the What*," in which she notes that this inversion solidifies the collaborative text's claims to autobiographical truth (119).

between “Valentino” and “Deng” in my further analysis. Smith and Watson note how this ambiguous narrator helps to avoid the fixation on veracity that haunts many personal narrative. They point out that the “negotiable ‘I’ of *What Is the What* disrupts reading habits by requiring us to rethink the formation and location of a narrating ‘I’” in a way that leaves the novel less open to “charges of fabrication than first person testimony because it turns on a paradox of fictive truth that unsettles the metrics of authenticity” (619). Even as it undertakes similar work to the slave narrative genre in establishing the humanity of its protagonist, therefore, the narrative also actively seeks to address and remedy the problem of the disenfranchised subject’s ambiguous relationship with a privileged collaborator hindering their rights-claiming efforts as much as it helps them.

What Is the What differs most distinctly from the slave narrative genre in terms of where it seeks to create rights-space, moving its focus away from – indeed explicitly rejecting – the nation state level in favour of the transnational level at which human rights now operate. The novel undermines any reading that would allow – as the slave narratives did – rights-space to be simply created at the level of national citizenship. This is most clearly reflected in the narrative’s anti-teleological structure. The story is structured around a frame narrative spanning two consecutive days in which the protagonist becomes the victim of a violent robbery by two African-Americans in his apartment in Atlanta. Afterwards, he fruitlessly seeks assistance from the police and medical attention from a local hospital. Throughout this account of present-day suffering, however, the reader is informed of Valentino’s childhood experiences of the Second Sudanese Civil War, which began after racial and religious tensions between the oil-rich non-Islamic south of the country and the Arab-dominated north reached breaking point.⁴⁷ This circular narrative structure strongly denies the possibility of narrative redemption at the level of the nation state. Deng’s experience of rejection and

⁴⁷ The Khartoum government’s imposition of Shari’a law on the country’s entire population triggered a conflict between the government and a rebel movement in the south of the country, the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM), and its military arm, the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA). This conflict, which lasted until 2005, claimed two and a half million lives and displaced another four million people.

abuse in U.S. society from the very start of the text shatters any notions of the West as an uncomplicated safe haven into which the protagonist can integrate at the end of his story.⁴⁸ As a result, the West – and the United States in particular – is also disqualified from reforming to become the rights society into which the protagonist would integrate, given that it is inextricably bound up with his suffering. This differs greatly from the slave narrative's imagined incorporation into a reformed nation state in two ways. First, the proclaimed basis for rights is located at a different, transnational level in this contemporary novel. Second, the incurred suffering can no longer be comfortably displaced, as it could be for slaves suffering in the South and finding freedom in the North.

Yet there is also a strong similarity in the way the postponed narrative closure of *What Is the What* echoes Douglass's *Narrative*, which forestalled the incorporative ending of the typical *Bildungsroman* as a means of pushing the reader to imagine a more radical type of rights-space for the narrator to inhabit. As Dawes notes in *That the World May Know*, Deng's story is characterized by a lack of satisfactory closure in which the protagonist finds happiness and safety even as it consistently "lures the reader into a feeling of hope that has already been crushed" (202). In this sense, it is typical of what Slaughter calls "postcolonial *Bildungsromane*" in which the concluding incorporative ending is "perpetually postponed" and the protagonist never fully becomes the "sovereign, undivided human personality" imagined by contemporary understandings of human rights (215). The unavailability of full human personhood lies, once again, in the juxtaposed frame narrative that influences the story of rights abuse in Sudan so greatly. In being robbed by African-Americans, Martyn Bone notes in "Narrative of African Immigration to the U.S. South," the narrative foregrounds the extent to which Deng is doubly dislocated, being neither African nor American (68-70). The dream of equal African-American citizenship put forward by Du Bois, Douglass, or Jacobs does not cover the new generations of Africans moving to the United States. As a result,

⁴⁸ See also Peek, who writes that *What Is the What*'s narrator "questions the universal humanist assumptions upon which a rhetoric of rescue is based, and particularly its positioning of the US as benevolent and hospitable" (115).

Valentino's incomplete narrative strives for a different ideal. As Peter Boxall writes in *Twenty-First Century Fiction, What Is the What* examines the "capacity of global culture to provide new forms in which to express postnational identity, after African decolonisation" (174). One could add to this that it thereby also seeks to move beyond the strictly North-American context in which the slave narratives' rights-space creating efforts were engaged. In terms of rights, it explores a global society across which human beings migrate for various reasons, but across which human rights only exist in rudimentary transnational form. It thus similarly plays with the concept of an open ending in order to push the reader to engage with its attempts at rights-space creation to recognize Valentino as a fully-fledged human being unable to find that recognition within the confines of the nation state and not yet able to receive them from a relatively weak global human rights framework.

A further parallel with the slave narrative is the way in which the narrative sets Valentino up as a strong and fully-developed human being to whom rights should be extended. In *Travel and Dislocation in Contemporary American Fiction*, Varvogli argues that one finds in *What Is the What* the same kind of self-assertion and self-reliance that typifies the United States' national mythology that one finds in the works of, for instance, Douglass (21-25). Contradictorily, Varvogli concludes from this that *What Is the What* is fundamentally about "becoming an American" (11), even as she admits that the novel's juxtaposed stories of American and Sudanese suffering "serve to unsettle the categories of home, safety, and adventure" (22). The anti-teleological thrust of the narrative's structure cannot so easily be reconciled with the nation state, especially given the rights-space creating work it seeks to perform. Valentino's narrative asserts the testimonial subject's humanity and autonomy in a way that immediately undermines the uncomplicated world view in which the United States functions as an unblemished beacon for human rights where anyone can find safety and security. *What Is the What* instead explores ways of promoting international justice by appealing to a more egalitarian transnational empathy between the reader, the author, and the testimonial subject. It uses this to push the existing social, cultural, and political boundaries restricting the distribution of rights into the more universal transnational sphere where universal human rights have been proclaimed. The nature of this empathic connection will be explored in the next chapter in greater detail. However,

suffice to say for now that, with deprivation hitting in Sudan as well as the United States, and the traditional remedy of a saviour Western state guaranteeing rights to victims at home and abroad being undermined, the rights-space opened up by Valentino's testimony is firmly grounded in a transnational sphere that is more aligned with a global approach to guaranteeing rights. This matches a broader trend, as noted by Slaughter, in which contemporary human rights law is also seeking to transcend the nation state by internationalizing "the human person by literalizing it, making it real" (*Human Rights Inc.* 22). Both this broader trend and Deng's personal narrative thus seek to strengthen what is now a human rights regime that is "notoriously feeble" and is largely still subordinated to nation states (*Human Rights Inc.* 24). Critical in this respect is how Eggers and Deng's collaboration, which is overall more careful and productive, is able to foreground much of the rights-work of establishing Deng's humanity and pushing the boundaries of existing social, cultural, legal, and political boundaries that was implicit in the work of black authors during the long nineteenth century.

However, despite their truly collaborative narrative effort in establishing Deng as a rights-bearing subject within a transnational human rights culture, there is still an extent to which the relationship between Deng and Eggers disproportionately and problematically favours the latter. *What Is the What* cannot escape the fact that it is, first and foremost, "fashioned for the white market" (Varvogli 26). Like Child and Garrison before him, it is the white mediator – in this case Eggers – who knows how to make the disempowered subject's story amenable to a white readership. Worryingly, the issue runs even deeper than this. With Eggers's name appearing as the sole author on the cover, the various narrative strategies deployed by *What Is the What* inevitably become selling points that make the novel easily marketable to consumers already familiar with the author. The novel is, as Boxall notes, clearly "preoccupied" with this authorial mediation of the disenfranchised subject and the "circumstances of its own production" (175). For instance, the narrative strategy of a collaborative authorial voice so crucial to the rights-work performed by the novel in deconstructing the West-Rest binary is, simultaneously, part of a typical self-reflective and entertaining style reminiscent of Eggers's popular debut memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. The two aspects of this narrative strategy in some ways even come to contradict one another in the novel as it becomes fascinated by "its own narrative mechanisms, and with the nature of

the hybrid voice that it creates” to such an extent that it “continually thwarts any efforts at producing a fully embodied autobiographical voice” (Boxall 181). This points towards the fact that Deng’s self-assertion and autonomy through *What Is the What* may not be able to survive its entrance into the commercial world of the literary marketplace.

This sheds new light on Smith and Watson’s assertion that Deng and Eggers carefully “come together across asymmetries of location and access to power” to the extent that neither can claim “exclusive ownership of the story” (613). Even if ownership is deferred indefinitely in a narrative sense through the fictionalized voice of “Valentino” and financial gain is explicitly granted to Deng through a charitable foundation, cultural ownership is claimed on the title page by Eggers and Eggers alone. This contradicts the primary aim of *What Is the What* which is, as Boxall contends and as my earlier analysis shows, to think beyond “communal modes of being” that are not available to Deng in “the current global networks for the distribution of wealth and cultural power” (178). The troubling result is that in order for Deng’s personal narrative to contest and negotiate rights-space, it relies to a large extent on the cultural capital for which he is forced to compete with the author whose name alone is mentioned on the cover. The odds are thus stacked heavily in the privileged white author’s favour as being the likely long-term beneficiary in terms of cultural capital and reputation, with the success of *What Is the What* fuelling future philanthropy. Deng’s personal narrative, in turn, risks being demoted to an illustrative function not unlike the one from which Douglass’s and Jacobs’s slave narratives sought to escape. Taking a longer view, one can therefore note that personal narratives across differing rights-contexts are caught, first and foremost, in a struggle to become sufficiently salient for them to engage in their rights-space creating endeavours. Salience, in this respect, is governed by the privileged group that is intimately bound up with repressing the disenfranchised voice in the first place. Access to the public forum in which that status quo can be contested is equally restricted, moreover, through mediation by sympathetic members of the dominant group. It is perhaps to *What Is the What*’s credit, however, that it so clearly foregrounds this fundamental problem through Eggers’s typically self-reflexive style and Deng’s

reappropriation of the hierarchical slave narrative genre in the preface so as to confront the reader with the level of mediation required for them to gain access to this story.⁴⁹ In this way, the open scramble for salience is incorporated into its broader rights-space creating efforts and questions the restricted access to what is meant to be a universally accessible and established global rights discourse.

2.5.2 Abdulrahman Zeitoun and *Zeitoun*

Zeitoun provides a second interesting case study for the way in which personal narratives address specific contemporary rights discourses, are produced by them, and seek to reconceive them. This collaborative non-fiction project between Eggers and Zeitoun revolves around the latter's survival of Hurricane Katrina and subsequent brutal detention for unfounded suspicions of terrorism under powers granted to authorities under the PATRIOT Act.⁵⁰ Despite its non-fiction label, the text itself once again constitutes a rewriting and reimagining of the disempowered subject's experiences by a privileged author who moulded those experiences into a provocative and compelling story of rights abuse in the United States. *Zeitoun* was well-received at first by critics, winning the Dayton Literary Peace Prize in 2010 and being praised overall for its ability to broach so many aspects of a complex issue such as Katrina and its aftermath through the approachable lens of a single man's experiences. Since its initial reception, however, the novel has been embroiled in controversy following revelations that its protagonist is, in fact, not the idealized man the narrative makes him out to be. Following his release for suspected terrorist activities, Zeitoun was

⁴⁹ See also Boxall's point that the relationship between Eggers and Deng itself is the at the heart of the novel's "critique of the political forces that govern Deng's access to a public voice" (183).

⁵⁰ The PATRIOT Act was introduced in 2001, in the aftermath of 9/11, by George W. Bush as a means of bolstering the U.S.'s ability to deal with terror threats. It was later extended by Barack Obama in 2011. Critics of the act have accused it of providing law enforcement agencies such as the National Security Agency (NSA) and Federal Bureau of Inspection (FBI) with a *carte blanche* to pursue their enquiries, even if that means violating an individual's rights. Particularly contentious – and relevant to Zeitoun's story – is the provision that immigrants can be detained indefinitely.

convicted for domestic violence and his wife, Kathy, took out a restraining order against him. The impact of these revelations on the reception of this personal narrative is strongly connected to the rights-space creating efforts of the text and the ideal of the unimpeachable witness testimony central to contemporary rights discourses.

To understand these extra-textual implications fully, however, it is crucial to examine just how *Zeitoun* seeks to push for rights at a textual level. One crucial textual aspect of the text is its invocation through intertextual references of the longer history of the oppression of minorities in the United States, particularly the history of slavery. The development of the protagonist from ideal citizen to subhuman ‘terrorist’ – the guards alternately refer to him as “al Qaeda” (212) or “Taliban” (213) – is stressed in the narrative through its invocation of racial segregation and tensions in the deep South, where the events of the text take place. Chris Lloyd argues in “Dave Eggers’ *Zeitoun* and Katrina’s Southern Biopolitics” that the history of black oppression is regularly invoked in the second half of the story in connection with Zeitoun’s incarceration, forcing the reader to consider contemporary violations in relation to those that preceded them (163-164). For example, the temporary holding area where Zeitoun is held, a Greyhound bus stop, was built by inmates of the Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola prison), which was itself built on a former slave plantation: “Angola, the country’s largest prison, was built on an eighteen-thousand-acre former plantation once used for the breeding of slaves” (310). Upon his incarceration, Zeitoun also notices a large 120 feet long mural depicting the history of Louisiana:

The colors were nightmarish, the lines jagged, the images disturbing. He saw Ku Klux Klan hoods, skeletons, harlequins in garish colours, painted faces. Just above him there was a lion being attacked by a giant eagle made of gold. . . . There were many depictions of the suppression or elimination of peoples – Native Americans, slaves, immigrants – and always, nearby, was the artist’s idea of the instigators: wealthy aristocrats, . . . generals, . . . businessmen. (214)

The powerful setting of this detention area thus yokes together images of minority rights being violated throughout United States history. In doing so, it creates a parallel between its protagonist and (former) slaves for readers to consider. The marked difference one notices is the reversal of the slave narrative’s pattern of slavery towards freedom. In a sense, the resonance and thwarted expectations created by the echoes of

slavery may signal a different politics of rights being pursued by Eggers, in which the push for civil rights in accordance with the precepts of the nation state are substituted for a push for human rights to protect against the nation state. At the same time, this resonance also embeds Zeitoun's incarceration into a more fundamental problem faced by a nation continually failing to live up in reality to its theoretically proclaimed tolerance and equality.

In this specific historical moment, Zeitoun's fate in the text is typical of what Stephen Morton describes in *States of Emergency* as the general attitude towards Muslims in the post-9/11 context that allows their rights to be suspended on vague grounds relating to terrorism as a result of the creation of extra-legal categories such as that of the 'enemy combatant' (212). Zeitoun's incarceration without proper procedures in a makeshift prison clearly exists outside of the regular legal system. Nevertheless, this contemporary categorization of Muslims as not-quite-human and therefore existing outside the remit of otherwise universal human rights strongly echoes the radical segregations of slaves as "property" whose lives were governed by rules pertaining to property rather than humanity. Morton further notes how there is a "mutually reinforcing relationship between cultural representations of Muslims" and the systemic violation of their rights (216). This type of neo-colonial cultural reinforcement of those whose rights are being denied or violated resonates strongly with the type of cultural justification of colonialism described by Said in *Orientalism* or indeed in the nineteenth-century race theories and prejudices for which black authors such as Douglass, Jacobs or Du Bois sought to provide an antidote.⁵¹

However, like *What Is the What* and unlike Douglass's and Jacobs's slave narratives, *Zeitoun* follows a transnational line when it comes to creating rights-space. It explicitly

⁵¹ By this, I mean theories of scientific racism such as those put forward in a North-American context by Samuel A. Cartwright, George Gliddon, Samuel George Morton, or Josiah C. Nott. Cartwright came up with the supposed mental illness of "drapetomania," an illness that causes slaves to disobey their masters and run away. Gliddon and Morton variously defended theories that claimed to prove that white and black human beings were part of distinctive races, with the latter being inferior because, for instance, they had smaller skulls and were thus said to be intellectually weaker. Nott, another physical anthropologist, used these craniological theories to defend the black man's status as a slave.

rejects the view that nation states can reliably function as the guarantors of rights. In this testimony, it is not so much that the nation state fails to grant rights as much as it is the nation state that violates them or fails to protect them. This is given particular rhetorical force in the narrative through its representation of Zeitoun as having already fulfilled all the criteria for U.S. citizenship. Before the storm, the narrative describes the protagonist and his wife, Kathy, as quintessential business-owning, self-reliant, family-oriented, religious Americans. The narrator, focalising through Kathy, sums this up while contemplating the success of their construction company and family life:

Kathy was one of nine children, and had grown up with very little . . . To see the two of them now, to stand back and assess what they'd built – a sprawling family, a business of distinct success, and to be woven so thoroughly into the fabric of their adopted city . . . – these were all blessings from God. (14)

However, the narrative subsequently incorporates references to Zeitoun's Islamic faith and his environment's tendency to see his faith as disqualifying him from full acceptance into U.S. society. An early scene before the storm brings together the complex relationship between his faith, his place in U.S. society, and the post-9/11 context that resonates throughout the book. Referring to clients who had refused their services in the past because they were Muslims, the narrator expresses Zeitoun's thoughts as follows: "His frustration with some Americans was like that of a disappointed parent. He was so content in this country, so impressed with and loving of its opportunities, but then why, sometimes, did Americans fall short of their best selves" (37). The problem, as the narrator goes on to explain, lies in the fact that following the terrorist attacks on 9/11, Muslims became a persecuted minority in the United States (37). Zeitoun finds peace once he recites a passage from the Qur'an that praises the virtue of "equity" between all people (38). As A. G. Keeble writes in "Katrina Time: An Aggregation of Political Rhetoric in *Zeitoun*," the narrative's intertextual references to unobjectionable and peaceful sections of the Qur'an are central to Zeitoun's heroic response to Hurricane Katrina. As a result, his arrest becomes part of a political critique of the society that arrests him and is presented as "emblematic" of the country's "failure to live up to its melting pot national identity" (177-178). Like the slave narratives critiquing the United States for not living up to their promise of human

equality, *Zeitoun* similarly points to the nation's failings in relation to its own mythology of multicultural tolerance.

While the disempowered black authors of the nineteenth century still endorsed a readjustment at the national level, however, *Zeitoun* no longer places any faith in the nation state. In this narrative, the state participates in a systemic way in the violation of the protagonist's rights following his arrest. This abandonment of the national rights-context is possible as a result of there being, in this particular contemporary moment, a transnational rights framework with legal, political, and socio-cultural currency that, however weak, can be implicitly invoked to condemn his suffering at the hands of the state in the eyes of the reader. This rejection of the national level in favour of an engagement with the transnational discourse of human rights can be found, firstly, on a textual level. The way in which this personal narrative seeks to negotiate and contest rights-space for its protagonist can be derived from the use of various narrative strategies, the most important amongst which are its engaging with the genre of the *Bildungsroman* and its manipulation of narratological "time." Both of these narrative strategies hinge on the interplay between the two different sections of the narrative in *Zeitoun* and have their greatest impact through their interference with the reader's ability to identify with the protagonist.

The link to the ever popular *Bildungs*-plot is acknowledged, for instance, in one of the more ecstatic literary critics quoted in the extensive paratext of reviews in the 2010 Vintage edition, which originally appeared in the *Chicago Sun-Times*: "*Zeitoun* offers a transformative experience to anyone open to it . . . it is not heavy-handed propaganda, . . . but an adventure story, a tale of suffering and redemption" (n.p.). Incidentally, the ten pages of rave reviews in the paratext offer a contemporary example of the extent to which a disempowered other's suffering needs to be primed for privileged readers, much like the prefaces that accompanied so many slave narratives. The enticingly adventurous part of the plot that echoes the traditional *Bildungs*-plot and that is referred to in this particular review lies primarily in the first half of the narrative. Here, the story elaborates quite extensively on Zeitoun's experiences before and during the storm (before his arrest). In this pre-arrest section of the narrative, he is portrayed as a typically active hero within a quest-narrative that grants him immense agency. It is typical of the picaresque aspect of the *Bildungs*-genre in that it sets up a hero-

protagonist, Zeitoun, who valiantly battles against Hurricane Katrina, rescues many people, and survives with his humanity intact. As the protagonist in this hero-section of the narrative, Zeitoun becomes a witness to the suffering of others. For example, before helping an old lady who is struggling in the aftermath of the storm, he muses: "It was not right to watch a woman of her age suffer like this. The situation had stolen her dignity, and it pained him to bear witness" (103). Drawing in the 9/11-context quite explicitly, Keeble goes so far as to note the similarity between the emergency services universally praised for their heroic response to the attacks on New York and Zeitoun's makeshift efforts to rescue as many people from the greatest natural disaster to hit a major American city in recent memory (183). As such, the protagonist becomes aligned with exemplary citizenship.

The second half radically breaks with the first and sees the previously heroic protagonist being robbed of his agency and human rights by U.S. officials acting under powers granted by the PATRIOT Act. What could not be denied to him by a natural disaster in the first half (he finds ways to eat, find safety, contact his family, move around freely), is thus cruelly taken from him by U.S. officials in the second. This break in narrative flow is marked by a radical shift from the heroic narrative to a Kafkaesque story in which the protagonist's rights are systematically violated. His agency in the first part contrasts sharply with his being at the mercy of state-actors in the second. When he is arrested, he observes:

He had not been processed in a traditional way . . . Therefore he was not technically a Hunt prisoner, and so was not bound by the institution's standard operating procedure. . . . The . . . Center was renting space to warehouse these men, but otherwise made no claims to their welfare or rights. (234)

The narrative transition is thus characterized by an extreme shift in agency, in which Zeitoun's agency is entirely transferred to the bureaucratic machine which traps him after his ethnically motivated arrest and detention without charge. The inhuman conditions of the maximum security prison where he is kept lead him to compare himself to a caged animal: "He felt like an exotic beast, a hunter's prize" (213) being "fed like animals, with balls of bread being thrown in for the strongest to grab" (251). The experience, he concludes, "diminished the humanity of them all" (236). As this

transition takes place, the reader's identificatory relationship with the hero-protagonist is converted into shock and, because the U.S. government is the culprit, the reader is led to bemoan the violation of human rights differently. The interplay between the two halves of the narrative breaks the identificatory trend of the narrative in order to stress the discrepancy between incorporated citizens and disempowered subjects. In this personal narrative, the question is no longer one of the nation state needing to live up to its promise of protecting citizens such as Zeitoun, especially given that the United States in *Zeitoun* is presented as having systematically violated minority rights throughout its history. Instead, an open space is left for a more universal and transnational discourse of rights to be recognized that can guarantee universal rights in the face of discrimination and inequality.

This guidance of the reader towards a transnational level is reinforced at the level of narrative time in the text. The first half ends with soldiers appearing at Zeitoun's fall-out base in New Orleans, leaving the reader with a cliff-hanger. The narrative then continues chronologically from the perspective of Zeitoun's wife Kathy who desperately – but to no avail – tries to find out what happened to her husband. The narrative thus temporarily and noticeably silences the title character, keeping the reader in the dark. Finally, on 19 September (twelve days after Zeitoun's narrative is left hanging), Kathy hears that he has been arrested and is being detained at a maximum security prison. At this stage, the narrative jumps back to 6 September and continues the story of Zeitoun. This temporal strategy has three major effects. First, it creates dramatic tension, because the reader already knows what is about to happen to the protagonist. Second, it focuses our attention on the “why” and “how” of the events rather than immersing the reader in the “what” of the protagonist's life story. Third, and perhaps most importantly, this narrative strategy has an impact on the level of the (implied) reader's identification with the protagonist. The first part of the narrative encourages the reader to think of Zeitoun as a “model citizen,” and creates certain expectations about his future life; the second part encourages readers to take the perspective of his loving wife, Kathy, both inviting them to specify their expectations about Zeitoun's fate and to deepen their emotional investment in his character; the final part then creates a jarring effect, where the expectations that were created by the previous parts are radically contradicted. This narrative strategy is critical to pushing the reader beyond the

national level in terms of rights-space creation. In other words, the first half sets Zeitoun up to become a hero of the nation such as the emergency servicemen and women who dealt with the aftermath of 9/11. The second half, by providing radical discontinuity in a narrative sense, shatters both the hero and the nation state he would serve. Instead, his story champions the values of universal human rights, recognized and set out at a transnational level, in the face of their violation by the nation state.

The extra-textual fact that the protagonist was later revealed to be far less of the “perfect victim” that the book made him out to be speaks against this powerful condemnation of injustice and racial profiling at a textual level. An analysis of the rights-work performed by *Zeitoun* must take into account these damning revelations concerning its protagonist that shook the initial universal praise for the book. When Zeitoun was convicted for domestic violence, various media reflected the general shock felt by an audience that both trusted and admired Dave Eggers as an author and felt misled by his portrayal of Zeitoun in the narrative. On 9 December 2012, *Salon.com* published an article by Victoria Patterson titled “Did Eggers get ‘Zeitoun’ wrong?” which detailed the various domestic violence charges for which the protagonist had been convicted since *Zeitoun* was released and reflected on the impact this had on the reception of this personal narrative. It concludes by charging the narrative with oversimplifying its protagonist to serve the author’s activist purposes:

Eggers’s *Zeitoun* serves Eggers’s story . . . Eggers’s *Zeitoun* is a heroic and selfless creation, kind and gentle, and his detainment by the authorities makes for a beautiful tale of injustice. But now a far more complex *Zeitoun* has walked off the page, without a political and moral agenda, borderless and uncontainable (Patterson).

In the eyes of this commentator and the many readers whose outrage she is voicing, Zeitoun’s personal narrative of the gross injustice inflicted upon him in the wake of Katrina is disqualified from performing any substantial rights-work. This is largely because readers require a victim to display an unimpeachable innocence, to live up to the idea of the ideal citizen portrayed in the first half of the book. Anything more complicated challenges what Schaffer and Smith see as one of the mantras of the contemporary human rights discourse, that “storytellers in the context of rights

campaigns are expected to take up the subject position of ‘innocent’ victims; they are expected to be able to occupy that position unambiguously” (163). Slaughter makes a related point in this respect with regard to the relationship between the reader, the ideal reader, and the disempowered subject of what he calls “postcolonial *Bildungsromane*.” He writes that they make demands on the reader to recognize themselves in the implicated reader of these novels, “whose intentions may be humanitarian but whose reading practices make certain consumerist demands for generic conformity that influence the terms and conventions in which the world can be imagined and the observation and enjoyment of human rights realized” (*Human Rights Inc.* 326). The fate of *Zeitoun* following the real life downfall of its protagonist illustrates this problem quite clearly. Even if personal narratives have become a central tool of contemporary rights-work, the global rights discourse within which they circulate now places demands on them that restricts their complexity.

This mutually enabling and disabling dynamic between rights frameworks, sympathetic readerships, and disempowered narrators constitutes another continuity in the history of the rights-work performed by personal narratives. Eggers’s *Zeitoun* is not the only collaborative work to suffer from the demands placed upon personal narratives by contemporary rights frameworks. *What Is the What* is similarly constricted, but avoids the compromising of its protagonist by complicating other characters while preserving the one-dimensional innocence of Valentino. The clearest example of this comes when Valentino’s flight across Central Africa leads him to spend time with the Sudan People’s Liberation Army, which recruits children into its ranks. In “Human Rights, Child-Soldier Narratives, and the Problem of Form,” Maureen Moynagh makes an important point concerning the ambiguity of child soldier narratives, the protagonists of which cannot live up to the required level of innocence as a result of their being simultaneously victims and perpetrators of human rights violations. She concludes:

There is, consequently, a marked tension between the human rights discourse that both frames the reception of child-soldier memoirs and memoir-style novels

and is invoked by them, and the necessarily compromised status of the child soldier that the narratives foreground. (42)⁵²

However, even if other characters in *What Is the What* become compromised in this way, Valentino is careful never to suggest that he was one of the child soldiers who served in the SPLA: “Of those boys with whom I walked, about half became soldiers eventually. And were they all willing? Only a few. . . . We were all used, in different ways. We were used for war, we were used to garner food and the sympathy of humanitarian-aid organizations” (47). The novel makes it clear to the reader that Valentino’s narrative was used for the latter and is not an example of the former. It is thereby saved from suffering the same fate as *Zeitoun*, but only by eliding the complexity of its protagonist so as to serve the strong demand for generic conformity and unimpeachable innocence placed upon the personal narrative in the contemporary rights context.

2.6 Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, it is clear that there are numerous similarities in “deep time” between the ways in which personal narratives are used by disempowered subjects such as Douglass, Jacobs, Washington, Du Bois, Deng, and *Zeitoun* in wildly different rights-contexts. Continuities of practice include the careful use of genre conventions and narrative strategies to push the reader into imagining rights-spaces for the protagonist

⁵² Though it falls outside the scope of this dissertation, it is worth noting more broadly that the child occupies an ambiguous position with regard to human rights. As Jacqueline Bhabha notes in “*The Child – What Sort of Human?*,” children “are included in the broad scope of protection but peripheral to the framing conception of agency” (1526). She illustrates this by scrutinizing the wording of the UDHR, which, in its first article, suggests that all human beings are endowed with reason and conscience, thereby suggesting a level of maturity that cannot be expected of a child (1526). Her argument centres on the point that “[t]here is a tension between recognizing the child’s distinctiveness as an agent and according him or her the same rights as adults” (1526). It is precisely this notion of agency that is given an additional layer of complication when it comes to the issue of child soldiers.

to inhabit that push the socio-cultural, political, and legal boundaries of existing rights frameworks. In Jacobs's case, this meant pushing the limits of propriety to show the particular suffering endured by female slaves as well as pointing out the flaws of seeing the North as a safe haven for former slaves. Similarly, *What Is the What* breaks down the idea of a rights-violating global South versus a rights-protecting United States by testifying to his suffering in both places. As I argued, this pushes the novel's rights-claim into the transnational sphere of human rights, even as it simultaneously testifies to the weakness of that framework. In undertaking such meticulous narrative work, these disempowered subjects often lay bare and contest the demands placed upon them by existing rights discourses to articulate their rights-claims in a certain way. For Douglass, this manifests itself in his rejection of the illustrative role carved out for his *Narrative* by abolitionists, choosing instead to assert his humanity and authority in a way that not only made a claim for freedom, but also made a claim for U.S. citizenship. By inverting the hierarchical conventions of the slave narrative in its preface, *What Is the What* similarly tries to transfer control of the personal narrative to Deng in a narrative and financial sense. Finally, throughout this historical comparison, it is clear that the narrator's efforts are continually marred by the way in which their testimony has to be mediated through a privileged author who is able to sell their stories effectively on the white marketplace.

These personal narratives are further characterized by their engagement with the interconnection of citizenship and rights, the incorporative premise of which is illustrated by Slaughter's study of the *Bildungsroman* in relation to the rise of human rights. Washington's *Up From Slavery* places great faith in the ability of his narrative to narrate incorporation into the nation state. It is a plea to its white readership to grant black people limited economic integration and an appeal to his race to take up this diminished offer of partial citizenship. In *Zeitoun*'s case, the protagonist disentangles citizenship from rights by illustrating the way in which racial profiling and prejudice can cause even the most ideal citizen's rights to be suspended. The perpetuation of such racialized thinking was the core of Du Bois's rights-space creating efforts in that he saw the challenging of such thinking as a prerequisite to the acquisition of rights by disempowered subjects in a society that shut them out as a result of racial bias. The necessity of breaking down racial prejudice was also central to Douglass's later thinking,

who realized post-Emancipation that if his race was denied a voice in shaping the public discourse on rights, it would continue to be determined by it. Indeed, *What Is the What* shows a marked awareness of the restrictions placed on disempowered narrators in the present day in its negotiation of the child soldier issue. *Zeitoun*, on the other hand, illustrates the way in which complexity can re-silence those who narrate wrongs.

The historical specificity of the current rights-moment perhaps also provides the greatest difference between the rights-work performed by these various narratives. Douglass, Jacobs, Washington, and Du Bois exploited the narrative freedom of their personal narratives to re-write the terms of American citizenship and rights, but were also led to craft those narratives according to the demands placed upon them by the shifting legal, political, and socio-cultural status and voice available to them in nineteenth-century America. For Douglass and Jacobs, this meant dealing with an abolitionist discourse that focused on their freedom more than their achieving of racial equality. In the case Washington and Du Bois, the issue at hand was how to achieve the latter in the face of continued racial segregation. *Zeitoun* and *What Is the What* are equally bound by certain constraints as to how humanity and rights violations can be articulated and heard, perhaps even more strongly so as they circulate their stories in a global public sphere within which transnational human rights discourses have risen to prominence. As a result, the narrative strategies at work in Eggers's collaborative narratives typically work less towards fixing the national rights context. Instead, they lay bare the tension between nation states unwilling to guarantee rights or even actively participating in rights violations, on the one hand, and transnational rights frameworks unable to defend in practice the universal rights they theorize on the other.

In this sense, they too accuse the dominant rights framework of their time of not living up to its promise of fundamental equality and freedom, even if that framework is no longer – as it was in the nineteenth century – a national one. However, even as Eggers's narrative partners are freer to appeal to a more elaborate and more established transnational rights framework that transcends their suffering at the hands of the nation state, they are now even more strongly produced by certain preconceptions that govern the construction of the “human” that is entitled to human rights. Perhaps even more so than Douglass or Jacobs, Deng's and Zeitoun's position as narrator is tremendously precarious as any challenge to their status as representative

disempowered subject can disqualify their personal narratives from completing the careful rights-space creating work they perform. It is noteworthy, for example, that Jacobs was able to narrate fundamental wrongs from her position as a morally flawed narrator, whereas Zeitoun can no longer take up such a complex subject position without his rights-space creating efforts being fundamentally undermined in the eyes of his privileged audience. In conclusion, it is clear that the ongoing contestation and negotiation of rights, as revealed through the intertextual links between these personal narratives across historical periods, adds crucial complexity to progressive histories of rights centred on declarations. To this extent, it is equally important to bear the historical development of rights-claiming practices in mind if one is to understand the various ways in which Eggers's narratives are produced by existing rights discourses even as they try to redraw them so as to make space for their disempowered subjects.

3 Filling Rights-Spaces: Beyond Identification in Human Rights Culture

I have argued that Eggers's collaborative testimonial works are emblematic of the ways in which personal narratives have engaged and shaped as well as reflected and challenged the rights discourses of their particular historical context. In this respect, Eggers's narratives have the same function, if not the same objective and effect, as the texts by disempowered black authors such as Douglass, Jacobs, Washington, and Du Bois. The use of this diverse and malleable narrative form as a means of creating rights-space for disempowered subjects connects these texts across disparate moments in the history of rights, including the modern human rights moment. In this chapter, I take a closer look at those personal narratives written or published with the help of Eggers, and investigate how they seek to fill the rights-spaces they create in the contemporary rights context. Specifically, this chapter deals with two separate testimonies written by Eggers in conjunction with two disempowered subjects, *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* and *Zeitoun*, as well as two edited oral history collections published as part of the Voice of Witness series that Eggers helped to found, namely *Voices from the Storm: The People of New Orleans on Hurricane Katrina and Its Aftermath* and *Out of Exile: Narratives from the Abducted and Displaced People of Sudan*. As is the case with many human rights narratives, the explicit goal of these texts is to educate readers about human rights crises, narrate the humanity and suffering of their protagonists, and, by extension, convince readers to include them in the circle of people whose rights deserve recognition and protection. This distinguishes these texts from the donor-victim dynamic that pervades humanitarian encounters between privileged audiences and disempowered subjects. As Brown and Wilson explain in *Humanitarianism*

and *Suffering*, human rights culture relies on the assertiveness of victims of abuse to claim rights as well as the privileged's commitment to acting in support of their cause (8). As such, it differs from humanitarian assistance, where those being helped "are more likely to appear as passive recipients" disconnected from the political reasons for their victimization (8). The process in this aspect of human rights culture, in theory at least, is an active one.

In each of these personal narratives, the protagonist's humanity and suffering are shown from the perspective of a victim-protagonist, and it is this act of collaborative witnessing that offers victims the opportunity to claim rights. As Eakin writes in "Breaking Rules: The Consequences of Self-Narration," the autobiographical act in North-American culture is seen as a "natural extension of the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (113). In the case of personal narratives, this autobiographical act channels its rights claim through its efforts to educate and persuade the reader. In other words, the disempowered subject presents him- or herself as a human subject demanding recognition, and that demand is first and foremost made on the reader. Witness narratives in particular, as Smith and Watson explain in "Witness or False Witness?: Metrics of Authenticity, Collective I-Formations, and the Ethic of Verification in First-Person Testimony," "educate and bind readers" in that they convince readers that "a narrative is joined to an embodied person" and "that the reading experience constitutes a cross-cultural encounter through which readers are positioned as ethical subjects within the global imaginary of human rights advocacy" (590). Identification, I show, is one of the accepted understandings of how readers engage with protagonists in such texts as a means of achieving those goals, a practice that is further encouraged by a rights discourse that emphasizes universal human equality and, therefore, in a textual context, relatability. This chapter aims to complicate this understanding of the reader's interpretative framework as being too reliant on straightforward identificatory practices.

The first half of this chapter considers why the four texts under discussion are both typical and peculiar when it comes to personal narratives testifying to rights abuses. In doing so, it deconstructs the "progressive" genre of the personal narrative, submitting it to a trial by analysis to determine its effectiveness as well as to weigh its productive against its counterproductive features. Mark Antaki has observed that interdisciplinary

studies into law and literature such as Hunt's *Inventing Human Rights* tend to overstate the efficacy of testimony. In its adherence to "the romantic fantasy" of literature as a morally transformative force, he points out, Hunt's work tends to promote "so-called progressive genres that allow for criticism of existing social structures—but without subjecting these progressive genres themselves to critique" (976). On the one hand, Eggers's testimonial work is typical of a human rights culture that expects victims to narrate their traumatic experiences in a way that aligns their subjectivity with the "human" in human rights. They are also characterized by a tendency to solicit their readers for empathy through identification so that those readers may recognize the injustice that befell the narrator and become advocates on the testifying subject's behalf. On the other hand, they are atypical as trauma narratives because of a formal style that does not, as classical trauma theory posits, reflect the victim's crippling trauma through narrative distortion, but instead leads the reader toward comprehending the victim's experiences through a coherent narrative. They are additionally unconventional in that they only partially adhere to the dominant identificatory paradigm, offering variations on it that, I argue, address the risk of obfuscating global inequality within a universalist discourse based on fundamental sameness. This risk, which results from overidentification on the part of the reader fed by a feeling of universal sameness, is defined by Nance in *Can Literature Promote Justice?* as "fusion," a process by which the reader moves "out of the addressee role to share the subject position" and thereby sheds the ethical commitment to recognize injustice and to take action against it (53).¹ How Eggers's narratives engage with this risk, finally, will be considered critical to the way in which they seek to steer the reader's cross-cultural

¹ Fusion is part of a series of unproductive reader engagements with a text, according to Nance, all of which shut down the narrative's ability to move the reader to action. The others are the process by which the reader passes responsibility to act on to someone else ("Forwarding"), the evasion of responsibility ("Abjection"), and passive engagement with the text so as to remain beyond its "field of address" (53). Fusion is especially relevant here as it deals with the commonplace notion that readers engage with literature, particularly personal narratives, through identification. The issue at hand, as Nance points out, is that this unhelpful type of identification "is accomplished through a multiplicity of *uncritical* identifications" (54, my emphasis).

conceptualization of human rights culture as well as the reader's engagement with the victim-subject within that culture.

With this in mind, the second half of this chapter uses the chosen case studies to consider how these narratives cultivate differing forms of engagement between their disenfranchised subjects and their (mostly Western) readership. *What Is the What* carefully guides the reader into a form of guarded empathy that allows them to inhabit the trauma of its protagonist without appropriating it. Abandoning similarity altogether as it progresses, *Zeitoun* radically emphasizes disidentification between its subject and its readers, thus explicitly breaking the simplistic identification that it cultivates at the start in order to create a narrative shock effect. The Voice of Witness oral history collections, finally, find a middle ground by stimulating a diffuse identification with different victims of a single rights abuse or crisis, rendering the crisis itself accessible to readers without universalizing the multifarious experiences of it for the reader. In addition to this, these works also betray an explicit attempt to call into question the privileged position of the West as a stable and uncomplicated guardian and proponent of rights. This destabilizing move is important in so far as it breaks down existing hierarchies between privileged readers and disenfranchised others and thereby affects the reader's position within the rights conversation in which the narratives ask them to participate. Overall, the chapter shows how Eggers's testimonial work is both shaped by the narrative directives of human rights culture and reshapes its discourse of universal sameness as a means of engaging the disempowered other on fairer and more equal terms.

Finally, however, I also examine whether Eggers's role in the ventriloquism of the subaltern disconnects the testimonial subject's narrative from its socio-historical context by reframing it for a Western audience. This examination asks whether these narratives, in their specific attempts at addressing a Western audience in a more productive way, actually relocate the victim's voice and experiences within the boundaries of a Western human rights culture. Part of the reason for this lies in the fact that the narratives take the important step of carefully managing the reader's engagement with the discursive space within it, but struggle to address fundamentally the rights culture within which they circulate. Even though they ask for more than simplistic identification—and, in doing so, address and productively reshape part of the

existing rights culture in which they are embedded and which the reader brings to bear on the text—these narratives also reinforce the idea that the socio-cultural environment in which abuses occur still exists beyond the purview of the narrative’s rights culture. Optimistically speaking, they thus aspire to reform the reading culture directly in the hopes of also affecting the broader rights culture, a process to which I will return in the next chapter. The danger is, however, that for all their narrative efforts in forcing a Western audience to engage their victim-subjects on more equal terms, these texts fail to embed those subjects and the different cultures from which they emerged into an expanded rights discourse. First, however, it is crucial to unpick the first part of that process, that of structuring the reader’s engagement with the text.

3.1 Trauma Narratives as Human Rights Narratives

Before I set out a methodology for analysing the type of dynamic Eggers’s testimonial work cultivates between disempowered subject-narrators, editor-authors, and reader-activists, it is worth briefly examining how Eggers understands the function of these texts himself. This not only provides a window into the relationship between Eggers and the people whose story he wishes to present, but it also helps one understand how and why those stories were crafted so as to meet and adjust audience expectations.² Overall, the author seems acutely aware of the careful balance that he must strike between the demands of a Western literary marketplace and audience for respectively saleable and entertaining books, and the need for the text to be a faithful representation of the testifying subject’s voice, person, and experiences. In *What Is the What*, Eggers grants Deng space in the preface to explain to readers why the former’s intervention was

² By this, I do not mean to subject the four texts under discussion to an analysis that seeks to ascertain the author’s intention through textual analysis, thereby falling prey to the so-called “intentional fallacy” disavowed by literary criticism. Instead, I want to suggest that it is important to understand Eggers’s explicit role as an activist in addition to his role as an author in shaping these texts. This is additionally relevant because it impacts on the way the text is framed for the reader.

required as a means of streamlining the narrative. Deng also explains that they should not feel uncomfortable about Eggers having fictionalized part of his experiences to such an extent so as to require the entire book to be classed as fiction (*What Is the What* 2008 xiv). This intervention by Deng before the narrative proper even begins assuages fears on the part of the reader that the novel's entertaining pace and plot, hallmarks of fictional narratives, take away from its capacity to provide an accurate window into the real lived experiences of its disempowered subject. By putting his heart-wrenching story in the hands of a skilful storyteller with considerable clout in the Western book market, the disempowered subject is thus able to go about deploying their personal experience as a rights-claiming tool.

The author is clearly aware of his role in this respect, quite happy to be a facilitator if it helps obtain recognition for those whose suffering exists beyond the purview of Western audiences. Eggers's involvement in founding the oral history project Voice of Witness provides additional illustration of this point. In an interview with Stef Craps and myself on the occasion of Eggers being awarded the 2015 Amnesty International Chair at Ghent University, the author commented on what he sees as the power of personal narratives to illuminate rights issues and violations. Speaking directly to Voice of Witness's aim of amplifying unheard voices so as to foster "empathy-based understanding of contemporary human rights crises" ("About"), he explained his belief that "you almost always have a better understanding of a situation through a first-person narrative—seeing what one person says and then seeing a broader view of it" (qtd. in Bex and Craps 562). In order for a testimony to achieve this, he goes on to say, it needs to be transformed into a legible and engaging story that maintains the illusion of direct contact between the reader and the disempowered subject by replicating as faithfully as possible the latter's speech (562). He notes that readers of the series rely on editors turning oral testimonies into "a compelling linear narrative with the narrator's original words and phrasings and idiosyncrasies of speech" because they "will not read a seventy-page transcript" unless it is edited (qtd. in Bex and Craps 563). Part of the reason for this mimicking of the victim's speech is no doubt that it stimulates the illusion of direct contact between the reader and the testimonial subject, which is of paramount importance for an author who sees identification and vicarious experience as one of the unique characteristics of a narrative text. In an unpublished section of the

interview, Eggers elaborates on this particular aspect of literature, noting that compelling and well-crafted stories “allow you to live a different life, another life, and have an immersive experience that opens up a world that otherwise we would not have access to” (“An Afternoon with Dave Eggers”). The latter part of this observation expresses Eggers’s faith in the ability for personal narratives to bridge the cross-cultural gap between privileged readers and unacknowledged or obfuscated experiences of human rights abuses across the globe.

This chapter focuses specifically on the way texts construct that cross-cultural relationship between the disempowered victim-narrator and the privileged Western reader. In doing so, it draws attention to a methodological rift between the way in which the narrativization of traumatic experiences is considered by humanities scholars working in the fields of trauma studies, postcolonial studies, and human rights. Trauma studies tends to examine the relationship between victim and reader only in so far as it is expressed in a body of trauma narratives whose style and structure are inflected by the multidimensional psychological trauma of its rights-bearing narrator. Postcolonial studies and research into human rights, in contrast, typically consider how the compelling and coherent personal narratives of disempowered subjects are codified according to the precepts of human rights discourses, and the way they are bound by the strictures of simplifying neo-colonial conceptions of the postcolonial Other’s subjectivity. Each of these modes of study offers valuable insights into the opportunities and problems posed to readers by personal narratives testifying to the mental and physical violence endured by their narrators or testimonial subjects. Trauma studies is useful in that it pays particular attention to the ways in which individual memories of past violence transition into narrative and are received by an audience. This body of research is complemented by the work of postcolonial studies and human rights scholars, who study how these articulations of past experiences relate to existing legal-political frameworks of individual rights and how the reception of these testimonies relates to global flows of power in the aftermath of decolonization. This does not mean, however, that these three fields are perfectly compatible. In order for these approaches to be brought to bear on Eggers’s collaborative works with concomitant productivity, it is important to disentangle their respective strengths from their incongruous basis.

Broadly speaking, trauma studies has sought to understand the way in which trauma is experienced and articulated by individuals as well as how it is received by others. The field's understanding of trauma was largely shaped by the work of theorists such as Cathy Caruth, whose foundational study *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) constructed the dominant conception of the trauma narrative, and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, whose *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992) provided the field's primary conceptualization of the relationship between traumatic testimony and the reader.³ In her work, Caruth saw the initial shock of traumatic events as making them almost unspeakable, except through those distorted narrative modes of fiction that allow victims in effect to mimic their psychological suffering by stylistically disfiguring the text. As a reflection of the experienced trauma, Laub and Felman sought to understand the relationship between the testimonial subject and the addressee as one in which the initial trauma is recreated second hand for the latter through narrative. The primary function of a trauma narrative, therefore, is its ability to confer the traumatic experience onto the reader. Avishai Margalit says as much in *The Ethics of Memory* (2004) when he explains that the "paradigmatic case of a moral witness is one who experiences the suffering – one who is not just an observer but also a sufferer" (150). Focusing on the implications of this necessarily transferential nature of the speaker-addressee dynamic in trauma narratives, Dominick LaCapra theorized a productive way in which this relationship

³ The main impetus for studying testimonial narratives was the Holocaust testimony movement. Felman and Laub's work takes a psychoanalytical perspective in studying the process of witnessing in reading and writing Holocaust testimony. Lawrence Langer's *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* focuses on how testimonies mediate the way in which history remembers and understands the Holocaust. LaCapra's seminal work on empathic unsettlement, upon which this analysis draws, largely grew out of this sustained attention to Holocaust testimony begun in the 1980s. Additionally, in *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, Robert Eaglestone points out that postmodern literature's tendency to stress the "limits and processes of rationality" (3) through formal and stylistic experiments interweaves with the ethical impossibility of straightforwardly representing the horror of the Holocaust and disrupts the "process of identification" (43). While the – by his own admission non-exhaustive – taxonomy of postmodern tropes he analyses convincingly makes that point, the particular narrative devices I discuss here in Eggers's oeuvre are neither specifically postmodern nor do they fall into the categories set out by Eaglestone.

should unfold. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), he defines this ideal relationship, characterized by what he calls “empathic unsettlement,” as one in which the reader is able to identify with the victim’s trauma without appropriating it (78).⁴ When testimonial narratives are read in this way, as cultivating a form of guarded empathy, they contribute to the reader’s understanding by associating the lived experience of victims with more abstracted notions of human suffering (xiv). The basic tenets of trauma theory thus emphasize the disruptive experience of trauma, its similarly distorted narrativization, and the ways one can engage with it (un)productively as a secondary witness.

Trauma scholars have since come under fire for their strong focus on literature that adheres to a more modernist, experimental, or distorted aesthetic, which forms an ideal textual playground in which the victim’s trauma and scholars’ theories could be played out in all their complexity.⁵ LaCapra writes that “many commentators would agree with Caruth in thinking that the literary (or even art in general) is a prime, if not privileged, place for giving voice to trauma as well as symbolically exploring the role of excess”

⁴ LaCapra operates under many of the same assumptions as Caruth or Laub and Felman in his study of trauma. Like the former, he believes that the unsettled experience of the victim’s testimony in a text should be reflected by “stylistic effects” that defy codification (41). In accordance with the latter, he acknowledges the “implication of the observer in the observed” (36). Indeed, this mirroring effect forms one of the starting points for his definition of a productive form of empathy that eschews “unproblematic identification” while still allowing for a deeper engagement with testimony that transcends the merely factual (38). This is not to conflate the positions of LaCapra and Caruth, the former criticizes the latter in *History and Memory after Auschwitz* for her emphasis on “acting out” rather than a productive working-through of trauma.

⁵ By this, I mean those things Anne Whitehead puts forward as the object of study in her book *Trauma Fiction*, where she explores how the rise of trauma theory has provided novelists with the incentive to turn their attention away from “what is remembered” to “how and why it is remembered” (3). Novelists, she writes, further inspired by insights from trauma theory, “have found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection” (3). In order to study this phenomenon further she looks at novels by, for instance, Toni Morrison (*Jazz*), Pat Barker (*Another World*), W. G. Sebald (*The Emigrants*), and Caryl Phillips (*The Nature of Blood*). These novels are exemplary of the typical trauma canon, being marked by one or more disorienting stylistic and thematic features such as multiple intersecting plots, muddled chronologies, or non-linear narrative progressions.

(190). This has led to a self-perpetuating dynamic between trauma scholars asserting the inability for victims to articulate trauma and authors of trauma narratives seeking to replicate this theory in their writing through the use of stylistic distortion and experimental modes of writing. Alan Gibbs puts forward this critique in *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*, adding that this prevents victims from verbalizing the details of their experiences in favour of creating texts that simply reflect the fact that they are traumatized: “A broad injunction exists in cultural trauma theory, discouraging writers from attempting to represent trauma. Instead, the approved ethical-aesthetic approach is to aim to transmit the trauma to the reader” (27). In an important diversion from the dominant approach, Roger Luckhurst’s *The Trauma Question* (2008) seeks to address this problem by broadening the scope of trauma research to incorporate examples from popular culture that are not necessarily reflective of the trauma aesthetic defined by canonical trauma theory. Another important pushback against the typical trauma aesthetic comes from Stef Craps, who argues in *Postcolonial Witnessing* (2013) that the narrow corpus of experimental texts prescribed by traditional trauma theorists risks blinding researchers to the multifarious ways in which the subaltern voices their experiences of trauma, violence, and abuse (38-41). The solution, according to Craps, is for trauma theory to “take account of the specific social and historical contexts in which trauma narratives are produced and received, and be open and attentive to the diverse strategies of representation and resistance which these contexts invite or necessitate” (43). This suggests that the issue may not be that trauma can only find an outlet in literary texts able to deploy stylistic features that reflect the experience of trauma, but simply that Caruthian trauma theory has maintained too narrow a definition and is, therefore, focusing on a restricted set of texts that confirm that definition.

Richard J. McNally suggests as much in *Remembering Trauma* (2003) when, going against Caruth’s assertion that trauma is repressed and therefore cannot be articulated coherently, he writes that “emotional stress does not prevent encoding and memory for the central, important aspects of experience” (50). In “Speak, Trauma,” Joshua Pederson takes this to mean that when a victim does not speak about their traumatic experiences, it may be because they are unwilling rather than unable to do so (338). As such, he suggests, trauma theory should study how texts “warp” trauma, rather than focus on

the lacunae in texts where a supposedly unspeakable trauma is manifest (340). This not only refutes one of the central ideas in classical trauma theory, but also contradicts the understanding, expressed by James Dawes in *The Language of War*, that extreme violence is anathema to language and “imposes silence upon groups and, through trauma and injury, disables the capacity of the individual to speak effectively” (2). If that were indeed the case, how is it that organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International manage to fill thousands of pages with disempowered people’s testimonies of their experiences of all manner of human rights violations, however gruesome and traumatic, that are perpetrated in the world today? McNally’s correction of the assumption that victims are unable to articulate their suffering thus raises an intriguing epistemological question. If (traumatized) victims of human rights violations articulate their experiences so prodigiously, why then do their voices not find their way into the works of trauma scholars? This question gains particular importance when one considers trauma theory’s contribution to understanding the myriad ways in which the testimonial subject seeks to narrate wrongs and how audiences engage with that speech. Indeed, trauma scholars such as LaCapra provide a useful theoretical basis for thinking through the ethics of the transferential relationship between victim-narrators and readers, a pre-requisite for engaging the disempowered subject on egalitarian terms that would allow them equal access to the discourse of human rights.

Not only do victims of abuse make use of various new channels that are available to them in the era of human rights, they also codify their experiences according to the human rights culture within which their testimonies will circulate and be read. Schaffer and Smith specifically argue that collections of personal narratives tend to format the particular experiences of rights violations according to “standardized structures and thematics of presentation” (47). These standardized and thematized texts are severely different from the stylistically distorted narratives solicited and studied by classical trauma theorists. They are characterized by self-assertiveness and narrative clarity on the part of the narrator as a means of claiming recognition for rights violations and articulating membership of a global rights community. The problem with narrative requests for access to such a global rights community, as Schaffer and Smith go on to explain, is that “empathetic identification” between rights-bearers and disempowered subjects may come with “the potential cost of reducing difference to sameness” (47).

The key difficulty that arises from a discourse based on universal sameness such as human rights is that it may end up covering over the glaring inequalities that derive from hierarchical power relations between the West and others instead of illuminating and eroding them. The storytelling imperative of human rights culture, as Jennifer Rickel explains, is for individuals to narrate themselves as “fully developed human persons” who can lay claim to membership of a narrative of universal humanism (160). In other words, the aim is for the testimonial subject to be constituted as a complex and particular human being, not a carbon copy of the reader’s abstract humanity. The central problem for these non-conventional trauma texts, that is straightforward linear narratives, is thus not their inability to articulate trauma, but the capacity of such narratives to capture the attention and empathy of rights-bearers as well as unsettle the dynamics of power that silence those oppressed by those dynamics.

An additional complication is that once a rights-bearing audience is found, it is often allowed to assuage its newfound cross-cultural empathy through simple charity rather than forced to question the reason abuses are perpetrated, perpetuated, and obfuscated. In *States of Denial* (2001), Stanley Cohen clearly distinguishes three forms of engagement with the subject of suffering in a text: sympathy, empathy, and identification. He explains that “*sympathy* means feeling sorry for victims; *empathy* means feeling what their suffering must be like to them; *identification* means imagining yourself in their position” (216). The danger, on the basis of these definitions, is that empathic and identificatory engagement with an individual’s particular experiences is all too easily transformed into hierarchy-reinforcing sympathy for a disempowered collective that readily confirms rather than challenges existing neo-colonial power relations. The next chapter will deal with the particular countervailing discourses that feed this unhelpful dynamic and close down the rights-spaces that personal narratives seek to create. At this point, however, it is already worth noting the potential danger involved in human-rights advocates representing others in a way that shows them as a deprived collective whose suffering and humanity is universalized so as to make them deserving of charity, but whose individual experiences are thereby rendered irrelevant. As I already noted, the resulting sympathy reinforces a charitable hierarchy between the privileged West and a reductively blurred group of impoverished others rather than promoting horizontal cross-cultural connections based on the human-rights-related idea of human

equality. It is critical to maintain an awareness of how easily these different forms of engagement, clearly distinguished by Cohen, slip into each other. As this chapter shows, there is a significant slippage between all of these terms, both textually and historically.

The complex history of terms such as empathy, sympathy, and identification goes some way to illuminating why they are so easily confused. Sympathy, as defined by Adam Smith in his eighteenth-century *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, closely resembles Cohen's contemporary understanding of empathy and takes place, Smith posits, according to a process of identification. Smith's discussion of how we engage with the pain of others at the start of his eighteenth-century text is emblematic of the extent to which the three terms defined by Cohen are conceptually more muddled than his definitions suggest. In a section titled "Of Sympathy," Smith writes that "we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others" and that, "[a]s we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation" (13). Using the example of a man being tortured on the rack, Smith admits that our empirical senses alone cannot "inform us of what he suffers" (13). However, the use of our imagination allows us to "place ourselves in his situation" (13) and thereby feel in some weaker sense "some degree of the same emotion" (14). In effect, Smith's discussion of sympathy explains that, to render it in Cohen's definitions, sympathy causes empathy through identification. To make matters worse, Smith goes on to define sympathy as denoting "our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever," a type of engagement Cohen reserves for empathy. In "Irresistible Compassion: An Aspect of Eighteenth Century Sympathy and Humanitarianism," Norman S. Fiering explains that the imaginative switching of positions in Smith's discussion of sympathy guarantees its altruism in that it leads to one understanding the pain of another rather than simply projecting that pain onto oneself (210-11). In this sense, the historical notion of sympathy and modern understandings of empathy espoused by, for instance, LaCapra, become even more blurred. This is not to suggest that these concepts are to be abandoned altogether. Instead, I propose to use Cohen's clear definitions as a starting point to examine those parts of a text's interpretation where they are problematized and blurred.

LaCapra's empathic unsettlement is meant precisely to safeguard against straightforward overidentification to the extent where one becomes a surrogate victim,

proposing instead that one should empathize in such a way that understanding takes place without a blurring of the subject positions of victim and witness. LaCapra himself becomes entangled in the conceptual chaos I propose to investigate as he insists that his notion of empathic unsettlement is to be kept separate from “unproblematic identification” and “patronizing sympathy” (38). Even though I agree with LaCapra that these are to be avoided, precisely because of the unproductive engagement with the disempowered subject they cultivate, my analysis of Eggers’s testimonial works shows that various forms of identification, empathy, and sympathy can and do coexist within the same text. I believe, therefore, that the answer to this conceptual conundrum is not to make the analytical case for an empathically unsettled reading, but to apply the type of interpersonal awareness displayed by LaCapra to the discursive space of the text as a whole in order to uncover the different dynamics of recognition that it conjures up. The answer to this conceptual confusion is thus not to stake out clear-cut definitions for each of these dynamics, but to incorporate a meticulous awareness of their slippage – and the implications of such slippages – into the analysis of how personal narratives engage the reader. The subtle empathically unsettled connection with the true victim contemplated by LaCapra provides one suggestion as to what an ethical relationship with the subaltern may entail. Even if the corpus for classical trauma theory is entirely different from the personal narratives that dominate human rights culture, the type of sustained attention trauma theory provides to the intricate textual dynamics that foster egalitarian relationships between victims and addressees can thus be crucial to disentangling the productive and counterproductive interpersonal aspects of personal narratives’ engagement with human rights discourse.

This textual awareness contributes to and should be integrated with the broader social, cultural, and political dynamic between the subaltern and the privileged as it is studied by postcolonial and human rights scholars. Even though these fields are not aligned in their interpretation of the dynamic between privileged readerships and disempowered narrators, they share a focus on narratives testifying to past and ongoing violence, using a conventional definition of narrative that is treated dismissively in classical trauma theory. The central question in these fields is not whether disempowered subjects can verbalize their trauma, but whether or not their speech can find a large enough audience to protest their exclusion from the hegemony and make a

difference.⁶ This shift in focus has a clear impact on the type of text that is studied and, indeed, emulated by activist authors. It is noteworthy, for instance, that Eggers's works become less experimental as they move into the realm of testifying to the traumas of Deng or Zeitoun, not more so. The relatively straightforward plots and confident narrative style of *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun* stand in stark contrast to the postmodern and self-deprecating style of the author's breakthrough memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, which testifies to Eggers's own traumatic childhood.⁷ This results from the basic premise upon which human rights narratives are based. Concisely, that premise is that clear and coherent testimony to human rights abuses provides salience for unacknowledged or forgotten crises as well as recognition for the injustices that befell their victims. As Brown and Wilson argue, the discourse of human rights thus demands from subjects that they display a degree of individual self-assertiveness by claiming those rights with which the framework endows them (8). However, rather than simply reflecting an existing norm, Levy and Sznajder argue in *Human Rights and Memory*, frequent attention to the violation of rights in the public sphere is part of a mutually constitutive practice that is an integral part of the proliferation of human rights as a discourse (4). Restating the identificatory practice that underlies human rights culture, they write that it utilizes our "capacity to identify with others" as derived from the "ontological equality" promoted by the discourse of human rights (31). Personal narratives thus bring into play a rights claim on the part of the narrator, who thereby implicitly agrees to claim rights according to an existing discourse and thus also helps to legitimize it as a means of doing so. In order for a personal narrative to fulfil

⁶ The impetus for this consideration in postcolonial studies is largely derived from Spivak's famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak," which asks whether there is a way for the subaltern's voice to survive mediation into the hegemony without it being purloined by Western intellectuals or activists who inadvertently appropriate that voice for their own causes.

⁷ Even *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* differs from the trauma paradigm, though, in that the memoir is not exactly a reflection of the author's unprocessed trauma, especially given that its central purpose seems to be to amuse rather than traumatize the reader. Indeed, as Timothy Dow Adams writes, it confidently and consistently attempts to "keep readers off balance" (69). As such, the book is less concerned with wallowing in the protagonist's trauma as much as it seeks to entertain the reader with regard to the presentation of traumatic events.

this function, Schaffer and Smith explain, affectively charged and sensationalized stories are typically chosen for circulation that “target privileged readers in anticipation that they will identify with, contribute to, and become advocates for the cause” (27). The audience for these narratives is mostly made up of rights-bearing individuals whose engagement with the text helps the subjects of these narratives to claim their place as similarly rights-bearing human beings in the global community. The ability of a personal narrative to cultivate cross-cultural identification thereby becomes paramount to its transformative capacity as a rights-tool in its engagement of privileged audiences.

Whereas human rights scholars such as Schaffer and Smith or Levy and Sznajder have paid attention to how the discourse of human rights is produced within rights-cultures, postcolonial critics have sought to illuminate how access to that culture can be restricted or denied to those whose rights are yet to be recognized and protected. Modes of thinking thus come into play that perpetuate inequality in a global community that purports to have accepted universal equality. These insights are important to any analysis of personal narratives in a rights context precisely because they impact upon the text’s function in global human rights culture. In *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Paul Gilroy makes the point that continued emphasis on racial difference “obstructs empathy and make[s] ethnocentrism inescapable. It becomes impossible even to imagine what it is like to be somebody else” (63). The point being not so much that race should not be a consideration in cross-cultural engagement, indeed it proved central to chapter two’s discussion of black rights, but that a radical emphasis on racial difference places interlocutors in a category of “others” for whom empathic interaction is placed beyond the remit of Western readers. This observation is particularly relevant given its impact on the identificatory practices around which human rights culture is so clearly centred. It fundamentally questions the ability of a universalist discourse based on equality such as human rights to speak in a cultural sense through empathetic identificatory practices without dealing first with the glaring inequalities that can make such practices fall on deaf ears. By this, I mean that by enforcing equality for all through a discourse of an abstract, shared human endowed with rights but stripped of those racial, social, or cultural particularities, human rights may be ill-equipped to consider why less

benevolent conceptualizations of those particularities may obstruct its egalitarian aspirations.

Anticipating this discussion, Gayatri Spivak's famous question concerning the possibility of subaltern speech demands that one take into account not only why a privileged audience may not be open to hearing disempowered subjects, but whether a privileged author such as Eggers's involvement in ventriloquizing their speech may perpetuate their silencing as subjects even in the voicing of their experiences. Commenting on her landmark essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Spivak explains that an ethical relationship with the other must involve "a transaction between the speaker and the listener" (Spivak, "Subaltern Talk: Interview with the Editors," 289), something which is potentially rendered more difficult if someone other than the subaltern has stepped in to take on the role of speaker. This transaction would challenge the audience to unlearn their privilege and reform their understanding of who qualifies as the human in human rights. Thus, it would expand the epistemological frames that govern whose life is recognizable and grievable, as discussed by Butler in *Frames of War*. Spivak notes further that one of the problems with the assumption that the subaltern will assert themselves and claim a voice on our terms is that it conveniently allows audiences to remain passive, never requiring them to question their own position in the dialogue: "The effort required for the subaltern to enter into organic intellectuality is ignored by our desire to have our cake and eat it too: that we can continue to be as we are, and yet be in touch with the speaking subaltern" (Spivak, "Subaltern Talk: Interview with the Editors," 292). For Spivak, there can be no true dialogue between the subaltern and the privileged without a more substantial process taking place in which barriers of privilege and power that prevent an ethical engagement with the other are broken down. As Butler explains, once the frames that determine whose life is recognized in full start to come apart, it becomes possible to come into contact with those lives that have hitherto been excluded (12). This movement, as Rosalind Morris notes, challenges the slippage between the normative equality upon which human rights are based and the rather reductive insistence on fundamental sameness that stands in for that universalist aspiration in human rights culture. Instead, Morris affirms Spivak's idea that an ethical dialogue with the other asks us to acknowledge their rights on the basis of a shared humanity as well as their alterity (Morris 97)—an alterity that, for Spivak, is

fundamental to the very identity of the other (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 27).⁸ In order for such a dialogue to be successful, the privileged audience must be willing to acknowledge the equality of the other precisely by understanding them as both different from Western rights-bearers yet in possession of the same common humanity in whose name human rights speaks.

This leaves us with the seemingly paradoxical impetus to overcome inequalities, such as those based on race to which Gilroy draws attention, as well as the need to respect the alterity of others as a means of establishing equality on egalitarian terms, as convincingly argued by Spivak. What is required, in other words, is for personal narratives read in the context of human rights culture to foster recognition and understanding without collapsing interpersonal or cultural differences into simplistic sameness through reductive forms of identification. The personal narrative is key to unravelling this paradox. Personal narratives have become prevalent precisely because of their ability to engage the reader imaginatively across the differences that separate them from the victim. A productive means of understanding how human rights culture ignores, sidesteps, or deals with the social, political, and cultural issues raised by postcolonial theorists is through a study of how this key cultural medium, the personal narrative, functions in this respect. My approach thus expands on the previous chapter’s point that personal narratives, both fictional and non-fictional, construct a discursive space in which the relations between rights-bearers and disempowered subjects are played out against the backdrop of the global discourse of human rights.

⁸ It is important to distinguish this alterity, the particular identity of each individual subject, from the process of othering that lies at the heart of neo-colonial modes of thinking, which erases the particularity of the subaltern in favour of what Spivak discusses as catachreses in “Practical Politics of the Open End.” There, she uses catachresis to refer to master words that transform particular subjects through sweeping definitions for which there are no literal referents, such as “true worker” or “true woman” (104). In this chapter, alterity is used as a counterweight to appropriative identification in which the particularity of the other is erased. I will, for instance, distinguish between the necessary respect for Zeitoun’s alterity and the negative implications of radical “othering” through catachresis by focusing on how the latter is bound up with Zeitoun’s mixed roots and the abuse he suffers as a result of racial profiling.

The dialogue that takes place in such texts is largely imaginative, as it is conjured up by readers as they make their way through the text. The imaginative charge of the textual experience is inevitably expended on the relationship the reader builds up with a story, its characters, and – particularly in the case of personal narratives – its protagonist. In *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge emphasizes the importance of breaking down absolute alterity as a road towards comprehension: “Absolute alterity, as long as it remains absolute, cannot be apprehended at all” (3).⁹ He goes on to stress that literature can be instrumental in breaking down such absolute alterity in a productive way that preserves the particularity of the other, whilst allowing the reader to insert them into their frame of reference. This idea centres on Attridge’s argument that the imaginative process of constructing story-worlds with fictional others is cognitively related to the alterity of the subaltern and the reader’s engagement with them (32-33). The latter is also the subject with which human rights culture seeks to facilitate engagement. Both processes, according to Attridge, present readers with an other and ask the reader to make them real and knowable, making the cultural force of literature dependent upon the efforts of “responsible readers” (131). In the former case, the other is other until they have been imaginatively created by the reader, whereas in the latter the other is recovered from their position of having been made foreign by the hegemonic discourse.

Attridge argues that the reader is able to actualize the other through an identificatory process in which “otherness” is introduced “into the field of the same” in a way that “reshapes cultural norms and habits” (136). This field of the same differs from the type of flattening sameness that obscures inequalities in that the otherness of the other is meant to be preserved by the identificatory process set out by Attridge. Sameness in his sense is only extended on the basis of a shared humanity that acknowledges the distinct particularity of the other:

⁹ This insight is echoed by Ulrich Beck and Patrick Camiller when they write in “The Truth of Others: A Cosmopolitan Approach” that the preservation of absolute alterity “amounts to irremediable mutual ignorance” as it effectively places an embargo on interpersonal understanding (431). They also warn, however, against overidentification derived from a notion of universal sameness: “universalism sacrifices the specificity of others to a global equality that denies the historical context of its own emergence and interests” (431).

To respond fully to the singular otherness of the other person (and thus render that otherness apprehensible) is creatively to refashion the existing norms whereby we understand persons as a category, and in that refashioning – necessarily inaugural and singular – to find a way of responding to his or her singularity. (33)

Even though this textual theory of identification provides an alternative to the flattening identificatory sameness that denies the alterity of the other, it has come under fire for its reductive conception of the reader. In “‘Above and Beneath Classification’: *Bartleby*, *Life and Times of Michael K*, and Syntagmatic Participation,” Gert Buelens and Dominiek Hoens aim to offer an alternative view on the singularity facing readers in a literary text that goes beyond notions of identification. While they share the view that literature is more than a simple conduit for meaning waiting to be recovered by readers, they argue that the force of a literary text lies in its ability to disrupt the reader’s interpretative frames rather than, as Attridge would have it, rendering those existing beyond those frames visible to them through a process of identification (159). This is an important qualification of Attridge’s theory, in that it opens up space for the literary text to carve out a more multidimensional reading experience in which the reader is inflected more heavily and more directly by their encounter with the other whose story they engage with. To render this insight in Spivak’s terms, one can see in Buelens and Hoens’s critique the possibility of overcoming the problem of passivity that pervades less productive engagements with the subaltern, where Western audiences are allowed to maintain their privilege.

Despite this critique of Attridge’s theory, the productive link between the imaginative process initiated by a literary text and the need to respect the alterity of the other brings the concerns of postcolonial critics down to the discursive-narratological level at which important aspects of human rights culture operate. Indeed, Buelens and Hoens’s critique of it shows how this analytical approach to texts begins to address important questions regarding the ethical dialogue that human rights narratives seek to establish. In doing so, they bring into focus the discursive processes by which human rights are negotiated and contested when disempowered subjects find ways to speak to rights-bearing audiences. In “Introduction: The Future of Testimony,” Anne Cubilie and Carl Good have more fundamental reservations about the premise that

the other encountered in literature is cognitively and productively similar to the other in postcolonial theory. They assert that, in the process of imagining the disempowered other through fiction, the reader is encouraged to recognize them in a way that actually makes them less embodied and, therefore, less likely to be seen as a viable interlocutor (590). Once again, though, and regardless of its success, the kinship between the imaginative aspect of narratives and the imaginative requirements of cross-cultural rights-work makes the study of personal narratives a particularly fruitful place to bring together various fields of study that have separately considered the articulation of trauma, global power relations and inequality, and the cultural discourse of human rights.

If one accepts that personal narratives thus emerge as a prime object of study because of their role as a key cultural tool in human rights discourses, the subsequent analytical point must be to determine how best to examine them as texts. These textual outlets for human rights, as a complex discursive space in which rights-bearers and disempowered subjects negotiate their relationship, bring the broader debate concerning the accessibility and universality of those rights into focus. They can only do so, however, if one allows the analysis to reflect the complexity of the processes at work in the text rather than forcing upon them schemata of interpretation that yield the types of uplifting but simplistic identification that readers find comforting. To pay attention to the intricacies of a personal narrative is to uncover how it presents the reader with numerous interpretative cues, not all of which are conducive to straightforward identification with the protagonist. Even the *Bildungsroman*, which, as Slaughter has argued, lies at the heart of human rights culture as a genre, extends a dubious identificatory invitation to its reader. As Franco Moretti writes in *The Way of the World*, a classical *Bildungsroman* asks readers to identify with the perspective of the protagonist only for the initial section of the narrative process (56). As the protagonist becomes more integrated into society, he goes on to argue, the reader is led to desire “the disappearance of those attributes of the protagonist that hinder a clear perception of the text” (62). In other words, the perspective of the protagonist is only a temporary guide for the reader towards allowing that reader to develop their own holistic view of the protagonist and the society with which the character interacts. This insight is valuable with regard to the identificatory process within human rights’ narrative

culture, especially given the tie between Moretti's object of study, the *Bildungsroman*, and its connection to the developmental history of human rights, as established by Slaughter. In this light, Moretti's argument can be taken more broadly as a basis for suggesting that even though the protagonist's perspective is at the heart of the story, the text drives the reader to take on their own distinctive perspective on the events in a narrative the longer it progresses. This view of the reader's engagement with the text ties in with Attridge's theory of textual identification. After all, in Attridge's view, the alterity of the other is incorporated into the reader's interpretative framework. Buelens and Hoens expand his theory to accommodate the complexity of the reading experience and, therefore, the reader as a whole. It is therefore worthwhile to study personal narratives in the context of human rights as a collection of interpretative paths that include the recognition of the other, but are not reduced to a singular identificatory relationship. Rather, identification is part of the broader interpretative work the reader undertakes in engaging with the text.

This has two implications for my analysis of Eggers's testimonial works as texts that fill the rights-spaces they open up through their engagement with the reader. Taken together, these two analytical imperatives would go some way to deepening the now commonplace view of the affective role played by personal narratives in human rights discourse. This view is perhaps most memorably expressed by Richard Rorty in his essay on "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality" as the ability of "sad and sentimental stories" to move us to recognize and defend the rights of others (185). The first analytical drive is to broaden the analysis to include more than the central relationship between the narrating or narrated subject and the reader, taking into account the full complexity of the discursive space staged by the text. This discursive space needs to be understood in relation to the socio-cultural space that these texts operate within and seek to reform, as was shown in the previous chapter. This not only makes for a more nuanced understanding of the rights-work performed by testimonial texts, but also allows the analysis to come to terms with Elaine Scarry's critique of the sentimental thesis as being overly optimistic about the imaginative engagement with a

disempowered subject contributing to the understanding and advancement of their cause.¹⁰

Second, it is important to unpack the myriad possibilities for identification and recognition between the reader and the protagonist instigated by the text. This not only prevents personal narratives from being forced into narrow and reductive forms of identificatory interpretation, but also reveals textual efforts to diversify audience engagement with the disempowered subject that actually actively seek to counteract a discourse of absolute sameness through simplistic identification. Slaughter already examines one such alternate form of identification in “Humanitarian Reading,” where he suggests that readers should seek to identify with the humanitarian agent’s perspective in narratives of human rights violations rather than with the victims’ (103). Such a perspective would avoid what he rightly sees as the hierarchy-reinforcing style of sympathy with the victim often cultivated by theories of affective engagement that reaffirm “the liberal reader as the primary and privileged subject of human rights and the benefactor of humanitarianism” (104).¹¹ But in shutting down our engagement with the subaltern altogether for the risk of cultivating such an unethical relationship, valuable opportunities are also lost to engage them on more egalitarian terms. Would it not be more valuable, in other words, if our understanding of the textual dialogue in human rights contexts were able to include both the humanitarian agent’s and the

¹⁰ In “The Difficulty of Imagining Other People,” Scarry argues that notions of empathic engagement through identification have led to “an overly optimistic account” of what imagining other people can achieve, to the extent that it is seen as a legitimate means of bypassing “legal provisions and constitutional procedures” (99). She admits that fictional texts “bring other persons to press on our minds,” but further insists that one must “recognize the severe limits of imaginative accomplishment” (104). In *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel*, Pieter Vermeulen recognizes a similarly unfounded optimism in the tenets of cultural cosmopolitanism, a mode of thinking that I will deal with more extensively in the next chapter. He goes on to conclude that “it is far from self-evident that artistic and literary engagements with human rights abuses have more purchase on international power relations than other cosmopolitan practices” (88).

¹¹ Slaughter makes a related point in *Human Rights Inc.* when he suggests that the sentimental model of reading, as defended by Rorty, instigates what he calls an “instrumental humanitarianism” in which a powerful rights-bearer, the incorporated citizen-subject of human rights, assists a disempowered subject who cannot enact their rights (325-26).

subaltern's perspective, with the text creating a discursive space in which the reader is able to engage with both perspectives? If one is to accept, as Slaughter suggests, that narratives of suffering make a "metonymical claim of belonging to a common community, of membership in the universal class of humanity from which their [the subaltern] suffering has effectively excluded them" ("Humanitarian Reading" 105), then preserving the absolute alterity of the other by disavowing the metaphorical leap of imagining them as equal interlocutors cannot be taken out of the audience's interpretative repertoire. Instead, it would be worthwhile to consider how, for example, Eggers manipulates the reader's identificatory engagement with *What Is the What* so as to counteract the hierarchy-reinforcing and reassuring types of identification condemned by Slaughter. This would also resonate with more recent reformulations of the sentimental thesis by, for instance, Thomas Laqueur, that are less optimistic about the ability of affect to move audiences to action, but still accept the affective force of literary texts as a means of expanding "the universe about whom such moving stories might be told" (54).¹² Such a study of Eggers's testimonial work would resonate with the author's own assertion that reading testimonies makes the political context within which individuals' rights are violated legible to audiences (qtd. in Bex and Craps 562). One fruitful means of understanding how narrating or narrated subjects and readers cultivate such productive relationships can be taken from models developed by trauma theory for the analysis of a narrow set of trauma narratives adhering to a modernist aesthetic. Even though the coherent and self-assertive narratives of human rights culture differ markedly from the original corpus of these theorists, their insights as to the type of relationship that is to be pursued brings certain aspects of the textual dynamics of Eggers's collaborative works to the fore.

My analysis of Eggers's testimonial works brings the disparate theoretical blind spots and contributions discussed into focus by considering how the author's narratives address many of the issues and questions outlined above. In my analysis of *What Is the What*, I will use LaCapra's theory of empathic unsettlement as a starting point to

¹² This reconceptualization of the sentimental thesis takes into account the critique, as phrased by Laqueur, that "it is, and was, far easier to be moved than to be moved to action" (33).

consider the type of guarded identification cultivated by Deng and Eggers in relation to the reader. This will then be thrown into relief by considering how those relations challenge the neo-colonial assumptions that usually dominate tales of African victims being “rescued” and brought to the United States. Critical in this respect are not only Deng’s and Egger’s perspectives, as they uncomfortably mix in the narrative voice of the story, but also the myriad of other cross-cultural voices with which the reader comes into contact as *What Is the What* progresses. As far as *Zeitoun* is concerned, my analysis will consider the first half of the story as cultivating an all-too-easy identification between the protagonist and the North-American audience, before drawing on Kelly Oliver’s critique of the identificatory paradigm in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (2001) as a means of understanding the shock effect caused by the radical break with empathetic identification in the second half. The resulting contradictory reading cues, I argue, provoke a number of incisive questions regarding the balance that needs to be struck between making the other recognizable and not reducing them to sameness. Particular attention will be paid in this respect to the dynamics of recognizability that permeate the narrative. *Zeitoun* oscillates between the well-worn role of the American hero and the radically othered other. His wife, Kathy, plays a recognizable American woman and housewife actively seeking to become part of a social category, the American Muslim, that, as she finds out, the rest of society has significantly more trouble recognizing. Finally, the Voice of Witness series’ *Out of Exile* and *Voices from the Storm* shed interesting light on the necessity for personal narratives to bring the audience into contact with more than just the protagonist. In these collected oral histories, the emphasis shifts from identifying with a single disempowered subject to identifying with a diffuse range of subjects and situations. The resulting narrative cues invite the reader to find that which connects these various voices, all of which are embedded in their own specific social, cultural, and political contexts.

3.2 Guarded Empathy in *What Is the What*

Perhaps the best starting point for the application of trauma-theoretical approaches to the ethical dialogue that personal human rights narratives seek to establish is Eggers and Deng's collaborative testimony *What Is the What*. The novel's plot is compelling and coherent, but its narrative voice and structure are significantly complex and open up the types of imaginative spaces in which readers are challenged to engage with the author and autobiographical subject's ambiguous voicing of trauma and human rights abuse in a way that resonates with the precepts of trauma studies. The story comprises an enthralling account of Deng's harrowing experiences during the Second Sudanese Civil War and his life following resettlement in the United States. Eggers's ventriloquizing of Deng's speaking voice in narrating this story opened him up to criticism for straightforward neo-colonial appropriation of the subaltern's voice. A similar argument can be made from the audience's perspective, because the novel renders the incomprehensible experiences of Deng legible and entertaining in a way that allows readers to walk vicariously in the disempowered subject's shoes as they empathize with his horrendous journey across Central Africa and his helpless wandering around Atlanta.¹³ My analysis of the novel rejects both these claims on the basis that the novel's peculiar interplay of genres and narrative voice prohibits such offhand dismissals. This is not to place the novel beyond criticism. I go on to argue that there are significant issues with Deng and Eggers's undertaking, but they are located on a different analytical level. The issue at stake is not solely one of narrative voice, but one of perspective. For all the care that is taken in crafting a non-appropriating narrative

¹³ Lee Siegel's scathing review of the novel makes both points. He argues that "Valentino Achak Deng, the man and the human argument, does not really exist in *What Is the What*" (51), before lamenting the book's neo-colonial appropriation of the victim's voice as representing a reading culture that increasingly desires to live vicariously through the protagonists of rights violations (53). In "Referring to the Human in Contemporary Human Rights Literature," Mitchum Huehls makes the point by claiming that *What Is the What* is unable to refer adequately to Deng's experiences because it embeds his story in a universalist discourse (7). In this reading, the reader can only engage with him as a vacuous representation of an abstract humanity, easily recognizable but stripped of particularity.

voice, *What Is the What*'s textual cues still lead the reader into inhabiting a specifically Western perspective from which they can comfortably look at Deng's distant African suffering. Before this issue can be dealt with, however, a close reading of the text's central narrative feature, its ambiguous narrative voice, is needed.

An analysis of *What Is the What* must deal with its complex interplay of genres, through which most of its narrative work is performed. The book hovers between the three genres of the novel, biography/autobiography, and testimony. Each of these genres must be taken into account in order to understand fully how Eggers's narrative works. In the previous chapter, I homed in on *What Is the What*'s intertextual links to the genre of *testimonio* and, even more clearly, to the nineteenth-century slave narrative. There is a clear similarity with both of these traditions of collaborative testimony, even though, as I have shown, the narrative and its paratexts work hard to invert some of the more troublesome conventions of the slave narrative in particular in order to divert control away from the privileged author towards the disempowered subject. In this chapter, I will focus on the novel's links with two other genres, biography and autobiography, because Eggers uses these particular links to create narrative effects relating to identification. This blurring of biography and autobiography is already encouraged by the title page, where the novel's full title—*What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, a Novel*—contrasts with the fact that Dave Eggers is credited as the sole author and even introduces a third ambiguity, that the book is also a novel and hence at least partly fictional. The subtitle explicitly links it to the genre of autobiography, whereas Eggers's role as the writer of Deng's life story invokes that of biography. Given that the text brands itself as an *autobiography* rather than a *biography*, the otherwise strictly divided roles of the subject (Deng) and the biographer (Eggers) are intentionally blurred. Hence, the reader is unable to pin down the authorial voice as being strictly Eggers or entirely Deng, forcing him or her to hear instead the in-between voice of Valentino.

Further deepening the generic ambiguity is the fact that *What Is the What* is also fiction, by its own admission on the title page as well as in the (revised) preface: "It should be known to the readers that I was very young when some of the events in the book took place, and as a result we simply had to pronounce *What Is the What* a novel" (*What Is the What* 2008 xiv). The admission that part of the protagonist's life is fictional

breaks what Philippe Lejeune in *On Autobiography* calls the “autobiographical pact,” the unspoken contract between an author and a reader that guarantees the actuality of an autobiography’s subject. Yet it also exemplifies an unresolvable tension between fiction and autobiography that is explored in Paul de Man’s “Autobiography as De-facement,” an essay written in response to Lejeune’s ideas. De Man posits that the pact between the reader and the text’s subject is in fact one of “mutually reflexive substitution” which serves to corroborate subjectivity without collapsing the reader into the autobiographical subject (921). In other words, de Man suggests that the autobiographical subject is neither strictly real, as Lejeune’s contract suggests, nor entirely fictional, but is instead the product of a collaborative process between the text and the reader. Accordingly, by embracing the ambiguous space between fact and fiction, Eggers encourages readers to become part of a mutually defining relationship with Deng based on their entering into a dialogue with the fictionalized voice of Valentino. As de Man writes, this conceptualization of the reader’s relationship with the text “implies differentiation as well as similarity, since both depend on a substitutive exchange that constitutes the subject” (921). This rings true with postcolonial theory’s insistence that the alterity of the other must be preserved as well as the emphasis on the privileged reader needing to be challenged to unlearn their privilege as part of their questioning of why the subaltern was excluded from the hegemony in the first place. Following de Man’s understanding of autobiography, this process is partially simulated textually by bringing Deng into the realm of the same so that he may be recognized while maintaining his difference so that he may function as a fully-fledged interlocutor for the privileged reader.

As a novel, *What Is the What* is able to appeal specifically to the reader’s imagination when engaging with the text. Indeed, Valentino, the in-between voice defined by Twitchell referred to in the previous chapter, stresses the importance of readers imaginatively engaging with his testimony in order to further the humanitarian aims of the text as a whole in a reflection on his interior monologues. These monologues are addressed to uninterested interlocutors who, as I argued in chapter one, can be considered stand-ins for the North-American audience reading the novel:

You [the uninterested interlocutor] 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 [a

friend of Valentino's], who died after eating elephant meat . . . or about Ahok and Awach Ugieth, twin sisters who were carried off by Arab horsemen. . . . *Do you have any idea? . . . Can you imagine this?* (29)

Consider also the choice of words when Valentino silently addresses Michael, the boy left to guard him as he is gagged and bound in his own apartment, telling him of Sudanese experiences: "Be grateful TV Boy. Have respect. Have you seen the beginning of a war? *Picture* your neighbourhood, and now *see* the women screaming, the babies tossed into wells. *Watch* your brothers explode. *I want you there with me*" (73, my emphasis). A further significance of the fictional aspect of *What Is the What* is that in openly and expressly drawing together all of these genres, Eggers's text foregrounds and simultaneously internalizes the constructed nature of collaborative testimony, and particularly an account that exists in the grey area between biography, autobiography, and novel. The fact, then, that these genres, most notably the novel and autobiography, can only coexist uneasily in this text and are "never comfortably integrated" (Siegel 51) stresses the unsettled relationship between genres, truth, fiction, and indeed authorial voices in the narrative itself.

The myriad of implications as well as uncertainties that derive from *What Is the What*'s unique blending of genres impacts upon the voice and, by extension, the person with whom the reader enters into dialogue. One productive way of conceptualizing the vocal dilemma posed by the fictional voice of Valentino, who is neither Eggers nor Deng, would be to hear in *What Is the What* the elusive middle voice that LaCapra puts forward in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* as an appropriate way of representing historical traumas. The discussion of the middle voice—a linguistic category between the active and passive voices that exists in some languages such as Ancient Greek—has its roots in Roland Barthes's essay "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" In that essay, Barthes discusses the middle voice of the verb *to write* as allowing the subject to both actively write and be affected by that which he or she has written (142). LaCapra's definition, however, comes out of his specific engagement with Hayden White's reconceptualization of Barthes's notion of the middle voice in "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of the Truth," which posits that the middle voice holds the means to represent the Holocaust in a way that eschews absolute certainty and ties reader and writer together in a process of understanding and meaning-making on the level of the text. In a similar vein, Rick

Crownshaw has suggested in *The Future of Memory* that memory studies, a field closely related to trauma studies, would be wise to focus on the middle voice as a means of maintaining the distinctive nature of various subject positions in relation to trauma such as primary and secondary witness, while encouraging empathy between them (12-13). LaCapra himself describes it as being an “in-between’ voice of undecidability and the unavailability or radical ambivalence of clear-cut positions” (20).

This description of the middle voice has two key implications for my analysis of Eggers and Deng’s collaborative testimony. First, while the contents of the narrative in *What Is the What* are clear, its voice remains necessarily ambivalent to the reader (“undecidability”). Second, and consequently, as the victim’s voice meshes with that of the Western activist, the reader’s imaginative efforts are directed towards inhabiting the space of the narrative’s traumatic events without their being able to overidentify with the victim (“unavailability”). In this sense, the narrative voice testifies to both Deng’s lived experience and Eggers’s careful listening (Twitchell 639) by finding the middle ground between primary and secondary witness. Returning to the question of genre, one might say that *What Is the What* invokes the type of contract Lejeune defines in order to secure the factual existence of its subject, while it also undermines that contract’s very premise by openly exploring the tension between fiction and autobiography alluded to by de Man as a means of drawing the reader into the act of recognizing and co-defining Deng.

It is precisely through this stylistic distortion that *What Is the What* creates for its readers the “empathic unsettlement” described by LaCapra, which guards against the reader’s appropriating the victim’s voice or victimhood. Empathic unsettlement, LaCapra posits, takes account of the necessarily transferential connection between the witness or victim and the reader (36), while warning against gratuitous identification (38) as well as against the integration of trauma into a “spiritually uplifting account of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance” (41–42). In other words, it entails empathy where the reader as an “attentive secondary witness [is put] in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place” (LaCapra 78). This form of empathy, which encourages identification while acknowledging distance, can be found symbolically in *What Is the What* as “the collapsible space between us” (535) to which Valentino refers in his closing address to

the imagined reader. The novel neither appropriates nor erases Deng's voice or identity precisely because of that intersubjectivity. That is, it evokes a type of readerly empathy with the victim that centres on a relationship between two independent human beings. This dialogue is established in a middle voice distinctive enough to be heard but so ambiguous that it cannot be purloined by Western readers or organizations. In this sense, the ambiguous authorial middle voice – Valentino's – with which the reader can empathize but not over-identify provides a possible answer to Gayatri Spivak's famous question: how can the subaltern speak without privileged individuals' humanitarian desire to represent the silenced subaltern effectively appropriating the subaltern's voice and thereby re-silencing them?

The answer lies, as I have shown, in how *What Is the What* preserves Valentino's alterity, even as it invites the reader to identify with his suffering. This is also partially achieved through the narrative's offering of a different perspective on the protagonist, one that does not rely on guarded empathy but on the flattening logic of sameness. As Valentino's home in Atlanta is invaded by two African-Americans, Tonya and Powder, a particularly revealing dialogue ensues that seeks to inflect the reader's interpretative framework. This inflection is twofold. First, it undermines the homogenization of the subaltern into a universal category of disempowered others. Second, it causes a rift between Valentino's relatable experiences in the familiar setting of Atlanta, on the one hand, and his radically different and thus far less relatable experiences in Sudan, on the other. In both cases, this is achieved by the narrative in its offering of a perspective, Powder's, that uncomfortably makes both these errors of homogenizing the subaltern and subsequently implying that Deng's experiences as a refugee in Atlanta can be equated to a universal understanding of what it means to be black in a society. Powder is one of the two African-Americans that robs Deng's Atlanta apartment. Consider the following scene, in which Valentino is violently restrained by Powder:

"You're from Africa, right?"

I nod.

"All right then. That means we're brothers."

I am unwilling to agree. (5)

Cynically referring to Valentino as “Africa” throughout the robbery, even as the reader is intermittently informed of his specific traumatic childhood in civil war-torn Sudan, explicitly denies the particularity of Deng’s story; his unwillingness to agree with Powder’s sarcastic suggestion that he is his brother constitutes a rejection of a simplistic pan-Africanism which denies the obvious differences between Powder’s life, however troubled, as a black United States citizen and Deng’s life as a Sudanese refugee relocated to Atlanta. The problem with Powder’s reasoning, to render it in Du Bois’s terms, is to universalize the nature of double consciousness and thereby deny the diffuse experience of it. In this scene, the reader has to recognize the alterity of the protagonist’s Sudanese trauma in order to keep identifying with the character of Valentino in the Atlanta section of the narrative. The alternative would be to equate the two social and political contexts, which would leave the reader in the uncomfortable position of aligning their perspective with that of Powder. As a result, recognizing Deng’s alterity becomes part of the identificatory process with the protagonist in the frame narrative. There are others examples of the reader’s interpretative framework being inflected by similarly troubling perspectives. One such perspective, highlighted by Varvogli, involves the scene in which Valentino fruitlessly appeals to his Christian neighbours to rescue him (22). Like the “telescopic philanthropist,” Mrs. Jellyby, in Charles Dickens’s proto-humanitarian tome *Bleak House*, the evangelical Christians next door are too fixated on gazing at abstracted and distant issues in Africa to notice problems closer to home. Once again, the alterity of Deng’s Sudanese experiences as well as the relatability of his situation in Atlanta are underscored by the novel’s offering of a perspective of characters who simplistically appropriate the former and fail to comprehend the latter.

The individual alterity of victims is further highlighted *ex negativo* when *What Is the What* once again self-consciously reflects on the problematic nature of the presumed similarity and universality of human suffering. The testimonial accounts of the so-called Lost Boys of Sudan – a unifying term imposed upon heterogeneous victims of the Second Sudanese Civil War by the West – are repeatedly shown as unnaturally uniform narratives deliberately made to suit the demands of Western readers. Children are especially vulnerable to this type of logic, as Suski explains in “Children, Suffering, and the Humanitarian Appeal.” She explains how the privileged tend to portray child-

victims in the Global South as “deprived versions of children of the North” (206). The follow example is illustrative:

Along our walk from southern Sudan to Ethiopia, there were a handful of boys who drank their own urine, a few more who ate mud to keep their throats wet, but our experiences were very different, depending on when we crossed Sudan. . . . Even so, the tales of the Lost Boys have become remarkably similar over the years. . . . But we did not all see the same things. . . . Survivors tell the stories the sympathetic want, and that means making them as shocking as possible. (21)

Deepening the tension between reality and fiction foregrounded by *What Is the What*, Valentino admits that his “own story includes enough small embellishments that [he] cannot criticize the accounts of others” (21). By exposing the pressure exerted by a Western audience on the subaltern to sensationalize and harmonize their testimonies, *What Is the What* addresses the broader Sudanese issue in a way which honours the complexity of the individual victim’s experience of that particular human rights crisis.

Given that *What Is the What*, at least in a textual and paratextual sense, so meticulously cultivates the reader’s engagement with the fictional voice of Valentino, it is worth considering the extent to which this effort reaches beyond the text to the extra-textual level. What my analysis of the range of textual contortions of the narrative reveals is how much mediation is required for even the most interested audience – that is, readers sufficiently interested in Deng’s story to buy the book – to be coaxed into engaging the disempowered subject on more equal terms. This is partly due to the discourse in which a personal narrative such as *What Is the What* is embedded, which demands from the narrator that they inform, educate, and entertain in order to solicit support from the rights-bearing public. One finds adherence to these narrative imperatives in the deployment of Eggers’s compelling sense of storytelling – such as the clever use of a frame narrative – or Deng’s sincere belief in the power of the novel to “reach out to others to help them understand Sudan’s place in our global community” (xiv). Most importantly, one finds this in the ambiguous narrative voice of Valentino, which cultivates the guarded form of empathy through which the novel performs the majority of its rights-work and which diverges from more straightforward identificatory reading practices. To the extent that these textual features are a result of the demands placed upon the likes of Deng by Western audiences’ conceptions of

human rights discourse and how they wish to consume it, the novel clearly seeks to deploy narrative devices in such a way that they also challenge readers to reform their reading habits and, by extension, the cross-cultural dialogue established with disempowered subjects. In this sense, *What Is the What* allows itself to be shaped by the tenets of human rights culture, but only in a way that puts it in a position to address certain flaws it perceives in that culture.

Nevertheless, intricate textual and paratextual negotiations do not entirely save *What Is the What* from falling prey to some of the Western bias with which human rights culture contends. Much attention is paid to complicating the reader's interpretative frameworks as a means of preserving the alterity of the other throughout the process of recognition. This is achieved, however, through the novel's strong grounding of Deng's experiences in the United States, both narratively and imaginatively. The scene with the two African-American robbers provides a useful illustration of this. Even though it is instrumental in providing the reader with the incentive to recognize the alterity of Deng's past Sudanese experiences, it only does so by having the reader identify with him in the narrative present in Atlanta. This means that Deng's otherness can be accepted, but only once the subject has been recovered as available for identification within a recognizable Western context. One could even go so far as to suggest that this implies that Deng's humanity is only acknowledged through a story played out in the U.S. context. Valentino's appeal, while poignant for the other characters' (lack of) engagement with his personal narrative and suffering, thus seems to avert attention away from the Sudanese context in the process of guiding the reader into engaging with him as he suffers in Atlanta. This is not to take away from the fact that the character-narrator Valentino ensures a productive engagement with Deng's traumatic past in Sudan that does not flatten his alterity nor allow the reader to straightforwardly identify with a victim and context whose difference is part of its identity. Instead, the issue at hand is whether or not the process of recovering, recognizing, and respecting the particularity of Deng comes at the cost of grounding the reader even more firmly in the North-American perspective, gazing at the Sudanese social and political context from the admittedly unsettling but overall reassuringly familiar position of Deng's Atlanta apartment.

3.3 Diffuse Identification in Voice of Witness: *Voices from the Storm* and *Out of Exile*

Different forms of personal narratives engage the issue of identification in varying ways, however, and with that in mind it is worth looking at some of Eggers's other testimonial work to gauge the extent to which they are as successful as *What Is the What* in negotiating the reader's engagement or indeed ultimately as vulnerable to reaffirming the Western perspective. Part of the money raised by collaborative testimonial works such as *What Is the What* or indeed *Zeitoun* goes into funding Eggers's more formalized commitment to keep printing personal narratives in a human rights context through a book series titled Voice of Witness. Voice of Witness is a non-profit organization that seeks to illuminate human rights crises across the globe through edited collections of testimonies. The stated aim of this book series, which makes it particularly relevant to this chapter, is to foster "empathy-based understanding" of those crises by "amplifying the voices of individuals most closely affected by injustice" ("About"). In many ways, the series is typical of anthologies about rights violations, by Schaffer and Smith's definition of the genre. They write that "such anthologies gain their ethical force by gathering multiple narratives of shared victimization into one volume whose purpose is to challenge and rewrite history, call the reader to recognition, and spur action" (45). There is a clear similarity between this description and the self-description in Voice of Witness's educational guide book, *The Power of the Story*, which explains that oral history is about combining facts with people's interpretations of facts in order to come to a deeper understanding of a historical moment and its memory (6). The guide book, which helps teachers use Voice of Witness books in the classroom, distinguishes itself from traditional history precisely on the basis of the identificatory practices at the heart of the human rights culture revealed by a study of personal narratives:

The creators of the Voice of Witness series, and the approaches offered in this guide, conceive of students as oral historians able to reject the dispassionate stance of traditional social science, and adopt instead a capacity for empathy and identification, for greater joy and immense indignation and, above all, a willingness to be changed in the process. (7)

This ties in with the genre characteristics set out by Schaffer and Smith, who write that these thematically structured collections of rights violations tend to make use of modes of address “that make an emotive appeal” (45). One of the interesting ways in which this identificatory logic is reinforced in the exercises suggested in *The Power of the Story* is by leaving an open space in a “critical reading log.” In this log, students are free to reflect in whatever way they choose on the extent to which they feel connected to the testifying subjects in the *Voice of Witness* books.

The texts of these books lend themselves to empathic engagement in part because they have been moulded into a narrative form that suits such an affective relationship. Eggers, co-founder of the series, explains this as being one of the hallmarks of the project:

We decided that the *Voice of Witness* books would edit everyone’s story . . . into a linear narrative, without changing words. That would be what the reader could rely on –that we would tell a compelling linear narrative with the narrator’s original words and phrasings and idiosyncrasies of speech, which takes some editing. (qtd. in Bex and Craps 563)

Writing about one of the first books in the series, *Surviving Justice: America’s Wrongfully Convicted and Exonerated*, Barbara Eckstein points out how this narrative effect is created by the volume’s complete effacement of the mediator, since the questions of the original interviews are sacrificed to create a linear narrative (109). She wonders whether this process does not “obscure the authority of the interviewing/editing/narrating voice” that necessarily shapes the reality presented by the narratives (110). As with the collaborative testimonial works in which Eggers plays a more involved part as an author, he is quick to explain his role as editor as part of the necessary mediation required for these personal narratives to be made amenable to a Western audience. He expresses his belief that editors of the series “serve the narrators well only when the book itself is compelling and can be read by a broad audience” (qtd. in Bex and Craps 563). With this narrative focus in mind, it is fruitful to determine how the textual cues of *Voice of Witness* books inspire empathic engagement and how that affective relationship relates to or differs from the one cultivated by individual personal narratives. As I will demonstrate, these cues are largely similar across both *Voices from*

the Storm and *Out of Exile*. However, the compositional structure of each volume is slightly different, and this has some effect on the terms on which the reader is engaged. To take this into account, I will provide additional discussion of the different volumes where necessary. Overall, my analysis will also take into account the collateral impact of the extensive involvement of Eggers and other editors in fashioning these stories for the Western market. *Voices from the Storm* provides an especially crucial point of contrast, in this respect, in that one of its victim-narrators' stories was turned into a stand-alone narrative by Eggers.

Voices from the Storm is an oral history collection that brings together thirteen different testimonies of people affected in some way by Hurricane Katrina, which hit New Orleans in 2005 and left a humanitarian crisis in its wake. It is organized chronologically, detailing particular days or events in the lives of victims as the storm progresses, and structured according to major moments before, during, and after the storm. Abdulrahman Zeitoun, whose story Eggers later adapted for his non-fiction narrative *Zeitoun*, is one of the thirteen narrators. Before going on to scrutinize the textual cues that invite the reader of Zeitoun's contribution to engage affectively with its contents, it is useful to consider the anthology as a whole first to see how it functions as a tool within human rights culture. There are two main structuring devices at work in this volume that have a direct impact on the rights-work it performs. The text is first divided into four sections that relate to the life-changing impact of Hurricane Katrina, entitled "Life before the Storm," "The Storm," "The Week After," and "Looking Back." Instead of providing full testimonies from start to finish, *Voices from the Storm* breaks them up in order to fit them into a chronological day-by-day narrative. In a very basic sense, this imposes a narrative structure onto the whole – the anthology becomes a story of Hurricane Katrina narrated by several survivors rather than a collection of disparate survivor testimonies that happen to deal with the same event. The focus is shifted away from individual narrators, in other words, and towards the way in which certain sections of their experiences contribute to a larger picture of key moments before, during, and after the storm. Apart from this distinctive chapter division, the first device also works through the insertion of a two-page list of "Narrators" with two-line biographies for each at the start of the anthology (40-41). Instead of focusing on each biography as narrators tell their story, all of the biographical information is thus

grouped so as to allow the individual narratives to be split up according to the anthology's overall narrative of Hurricane Katrina. As a result, the various fragments of each testimony are able to inform the stories of the other narrators as the reader makes their way through the collection's story. The focus thus lies on creating a broader picture of the crisis at each stage across the spectrum of subjects by weaving together their accounts. The volume's introduction suggests as much when it presents the book as "a rich tapestry of oral histories" (*Voices from the Storm* 1).

The second structuring device, a list of appendices at the back, works towards the same goal of focusing attention on the broader crisis and the inadequacy of the government's response, once again leading the reader away from individual narratives. In the appendices, a picture is created of the flooded city that demonstrates that disenfranchised African-Americans (lower wealth, lower educations, fewer means) were disproportionately affected by Hurricane Katrina because they were the ones left stranded in the city of New Orleans. These appendices make it clear that in having thirteen narrators from this particular background narrating their hardships, *Voices from the Storm* has not skewed its representation towards a select group of victims, but touches on the very essence of the broader issue at hand. It actively promotes, therefore, a metonymical reading of these testimonies as being representative of the broader experience of the survivor community which largely, disproportionately, and unfairly consisted of non-white disempowered Americans.

Within this collection of oral testimonies, Zeitoun narrates his story in eleven episodes. Both before and during the storm, Zeitoun's testimony feels out of place in the volume: he neither struggles to survive before or during the storm, and even has enough food to feed abandoned dogs as he roams the now post-apocalyptic landscape of New Orleans. Yet his interruptions are given ever more prominence as the volume's story of Hurricane Katrina develops, becoming the first narrative fragment on 31 August and 1 September in the build-up to his eventual arrest and detention without charge on 5 September. The volume narrates the steady progression in government mismanagement of the crisis, noting particularly the refocusing of attention on combating looters and terrorists instead of search-and-rescue by Mayor Nagin on 31 August (precisely when Zeitoun's testimonial fragments are given prominence). The image created is one of a gradual creep in government mismanagement, neglect, and

abuse in the wake of Katrina, affecting first those at the very bottom before eventually even reaching well-to-do but racially othered Syrian-American Muslim Abdulrahman Zeitoun. In other words, while the mismanagement of the natural disaster by the U.S. government caused the disenfranchised African-American community to be affected disproportionately, as shown by the appendices, the homeland security intervention that followed in its wake exacerbated this crisis by rebranding survivors from different (and not just African-American) ethnic minorities as potential terrorists based on their ethnicity and/or religion.

Zeitoun goes on to comment on the authorities' decision to arrest him, linking his arrest to the post-9/11 context of religious and racial tension in the U.S.: "First, I think he [the arresting officer] saw my name, and when he see us together, he overreact. . . . I think he thought he catch a group of terrorists" (239). This is precisely the type of interaction between fact, the appendices, and personal narratives the volume hopes readers will pick up on. Statistics tell the story of which people were most affected by the storm, but personal narratives can illustrate just how they were affected and why the government's response exacerbated an already dreadful situation. What this brief discussion shows is that *Voices from the Storm* works towards presenting its testimonies metonymically, with each fragment becoming a synecdoche that builds a larger picture of government crisis mismanagement deteriorating into rights violations in the context of post-9/11 racial and religious tensions. Both the narrative structure of a chronological story of the storm and the appendices with their focus on the demographic picture of New Orleans contribute to our understanding of Zeitoun's experiences as part of the wider racially motivated rights violations in the storm's aftermath and the socio-ethnic tensions in the country more broadly.

With this in mind, it is worth considering how this impacts upon the empathy-based identificatory relationship the Voice of Witness series seeks to cultivate, which is also central to human rights culture more broadly. It is clear from the structural analysis that the focus of *Voices from the Storm* leads towards a greater understanding of the overall picture of life in New Orleans before and after Katrina, with individual narrators serving as conduits to facilitate that process. This fits with the overall conception of the role of personal narratives in the series as noted by both Eggers himself and Mimi Lok, the series' executive director and editor. The latter conceives of the stories as pieces of a

puzzle that contribute to an overall picture created in the minds of the reader after they have read through the various perspectives: “I think you get at the universal through the particular. We make it so that each voice in a collection – there are usually around thirteen or fifteen voices per collection – highlights something different, a different side of the situation” (qtd. in Bex and Craps 562). Eggers concurs with this view, adding that “you almost always have a better understanding of a situation through a first-person narrative – seeing what one person says and then seeing a broader view of it” (qtd. in Bex and Craps 562). The stated aims and structural devices thus balance individual narrators’ experiences with the overall experience of the crisis. Whereas the structure draws attention away from the individual narrators towards the situation surrounding Katrina, the editors and founders build that picture by focusing on a set of individual narrators so as to get the readers to understand the situation in New Orleans around the time of the storm.

This balancing act contributes to the text’s nuanced approach to identification. With its tapestry of narrators and fragmented storylines, *Voices from the Storm* is actively checking the reader’s identification every few pages. These checks guide the reader into channelling their brief spats of empathic engagement into a metonymical impression of the crisis. Lok’s description of individual narrators feeds this metonymical logic, as she seems to understand their experiences as being representative of a “type” of person, which allows the volume to speak to more than just the individual stories of these particular narrators: “Some stories can be taken as emblematic for a crisis, some are surprising in that this could have happened to this kind of person” (qtd. in Bex and Craps 562). Such a metonymical interpretative framework would be detrimental to the preservation of the alterity of the victim in a singular narrative, as it amounts to equating a single victim with all victims. It would be particularly problematic in the case of *Voices from the Storm*, which takes place in the United States, in that its primary readership may feel that this vicarious victimhood covered every inhabitant of the United States, including themselves. As such, it would provide a worrying example of what LaCapra warns is the process of becoming a “surrogate victim” who feels they have a claim on the real victim’s subject position and think they are entitled to speak for them (78). One could even note that the text’s emotive appeal, its call to action, stimulates the reader to take up the cause in this way, thus speaking for the subaltern

and providing a negative answer to Spivak's question as to whether subaltern subjects can speak for themselves.

In this case, however, because the volume brings together different perspectives, all of which are representative only to a limited extent, the reader's metonymical reading experience is consistently curbed. As a result, while identification is encouraged by each personal narrative, overall equation of victims through a logic of simplistic sameness is forestalled. The particular experiences of Zeitoun, a reasonably well-to-do Syrian migrant living in Uptown, are radically, irreconcilably different from those of other narrators such as Dan Bright, a native to New Orleans who grew up in the deeply impoverished area of the Florida Housing Project. With straightforward single-perspective identification thus ruled out, the textual cue for the reader seems to be one of diffuse identification. This type of affective engagement, as encouraged by the text, allows the reader to gain greater understanding of the human rights crisis at hand as a result of their dispersed recognition of and engagement with the humanity of individual victims. The construction of that broader picture of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath is thus predicated on a process by which the alterity of each victim's experiences must be acknowledged as the volume cycles through different emblematic victim-narrators.

Out of Exile cultivates a similar form of diffuse identification through its sixteen different narrators, but it is less clearly structured around telling an overall story of the particular aspect of Sudanese history it seeks to address. The human rights crisis that prompted this collection is that of the abducted and displaced people of Sudan during the Second Sudanese Civil War. As Eggers and Deng explain in a joint preface to the volume, this project grew out of their visiting of the latter's home region, where they were confronted with numerous harrowing stories of victims from across the southern part of the country (1-2). The preface explicitly comments on the decision to present each victim-narrator's story separately from start to finish rather than integrating them into a larger story in fragmented form, as was the case in *Voices from the Storm*. The reason given is that full narratives overcome the situation where victims offer "brief sound bites" commenting on larger issues (2). Full narratives, they argue, allow "the full scope of their humanity" to be recognized, thus giving the reader "a far better chance at empathy" (2). Unlike *Voices from the Storm*, which does fragment its narratives so that they may shed light on a broader crisis introduced at a structural level, *Out of Exile*

makes a seemingly different choice. However, given the diffuse identificatory practice stimulated by the series' textual build-up, the volume's ability to speak to the broader crisis, now only implicitly available to the reader, is retained.

The different narratives maintain their metonymical ability to represent a broad category of people, as noted in the preface where Eggers and Deng explain to the reader what type of knowledge and understanding they will gain from reading the collection: "We feel that the narratives in *Out of Exile* are essential reading for anyone interested in contemporary rights issues in Sudan, and in the lives of refugees throughout Africa and indeed the world" (3). Finally, though, the preface is also quick to stress the alterity of each narrator, emphasizing in its final lines that "[t]here are as many stories, indelible and startling and tragic and inspiring, as there are Sudanese. As there are people. Let us keep our ears open to them" (3). The victim-narrators in *Voice of Witness* books are thus both the same and different, that is, they are representative of other victims and yet entirely individual and specific. Similarly, readers are meant to open themselves up to victims by empathizing with them, thus erasing their own particularity so as to relate to people living in vastly different rights-situations, yet are also asked to understand that each testifying and reading subject is unique, making their stories irreconcilably different.

What one observes here is the double-bind created by human rights culture's tendency towards empathic, identificatory practices as a means of expanding the circle of those able to have their rights universally recognized. In order for human rights to become universal, victims need to claim an abstracted humanity and rights-bearers need to recognize their doing so on the basis of their own similarly conceptual humanity. Additionally, though, this process needs to take place in a way that respects the alterity of victims and rights-bearers alike if it is not to cover over the inequalities and violence that cause and perpetuate rights abuses in the first place. This contradictory process is a result of human rights' status as a theoretical truth universally acknowledged and their reality as unequally distributed and protected. As far as the theory is concerned, identification helps confirm the basic premise of the innate equality of all human beings. In practice, however, various forms of identification risk flattening the reader's own particularity, and thus their position of privilege as

rights-bearers, to the extent that disempowered subjects are simply rendered deeply unfortunate individuals rather than the victims of systemic inequality and abuse.

The issue for the personal narratives in the Voice of Witness series as well as their audience is how they negotiate this double-bind and to what effect. The diffuse identificatory processes stimulated by *Voices from the Storm* and *Out of Exile* achieve three associated things with regard to the victims, readers, and overall crisis. First, the complexity of victims is established through the provision of multiple perspectives. All of these perspectives are grounded in the same rights crisis, but simultaneously show how a wide range of victims were affected differently. Second, the straightforward identificatory practice that sees equality as sameness is forestalled in the text by moving the reader out of the interpretative comfort zone that underpins human rights culture's emphasis on a stable sense of humanity. This is achieved by qualifying the identificatory drive with each new perspective that is introduced. Third, the testimonial narratives and extensive appendices collude to create a larger picture that transcends the victims and that highlights some of the broader social, legal, cultural, and political dynamics that lead to rights abuses. As such, the volume can claim to provoke cross-cultural understanding for rights crises in a way that avoids some of the pitfalls that plague the rights work usually performed by testimonial narratives in human rights culture.

What they do not achieve, however, is the complication of the reader that is instrumental in addressing the reason human rights crises remain beyond the purview of the global discourse that guarantees them. In other words, in "amplifying unheard voices," as its slogan would have it, Voice of Witness never gets around to dealing with why these voices fall on deaf ears until the series mediates their narratives in such a way that privileged readers are coaxed into engaging with them productively. As such, it remains couched within the biases of the culture that it seeks to redress. Similarly, even as readers are led to bemoan the rights violations, they are equally allowed to maintain their uncomplicated position as rights-bearers as they gaze at the suffering of others. Even if, for instance, *Out of Exile* can be said to provoke a more diverse view of the violence of war in South Sudan, it does not involve the reader in a similarly complicating process when it comes to their position as privileged rights-bearers in the cross-cultural dialogue fostered by the collection as *What Is the What* attempts to do.

3.4 Disidentification in *Zeitoun*

I have argued in the previous chapter that *Zeitoun*'s two-part structure has a profound impact on the audience's engagement with the protagonist. The story is made up of a section that takes place before Zeitoun's arrest in which the protagonist functions as a typical hero character, and a section following his arrest in which he is subjected to gross human rights violations. In this second half, he becomes trapped in a truly Kafkaesque situation in which he is accused of terrorist activities and simultaneously categorized as an "enemy combatant," an extra-legal category that places him beyond the proper judicial framework. As a result of the latter he is unable to challenge the accusations in question. The contrast with the active hero in part one is substantial, and this has its most significant impact on the affective level of the text. Whereas the character saving others from the storm is irresistibly likeable and recognizable as an ideal citizen and compassionate human being, the reader is forced to watch that same character become radically "othered," reduced to his essential foreignness, following his arrest. This is reinforced by the narrative when the period covering his detention is narrated more extensively from the perspective of his wife, Kathy, who, almost certainly coinciding with the reader's own perspective, struggles to come to terms with what has happened to Zeitoun.

Even if the protagonist is typical of the kind of self-assertive rights-claiming individual that human rights culture prefers according to Brown and Wilson, Zeitoun is something of an outsider in that the first half of the narrative only marginally affirms the protagonist's claim to victimhood. As the analysis of the *Voices from the Storm* collection already emphasized, Zeitoun is not overly affected by the storm, does not struggle to survive, and engages in numerous makeshift rescue operations. This is interesting in the light of David Kennedy's description of human rights culture in *The Dark Sides of Virtue* as a theatre of roles in which victims are passive and innocent, violators are abnormal, and human rights professionals are heroic (14). Part one of *Zeitoun* aligns the protagonist with the role of the heroic activist rather than the helpless victim. He thereby coincides with the type of person with whom the reader should identify, as Slaughter argues in "Humanitarian Reading" (103). A. G. Keeble makes the further observation that this version of the Zeitoun character resembles the

“American heroes” in the official emergency services who helped deal with the aftermath of 9/11 (183). This is particularly significant because this section of the narrative works hard to allow Zeitoun’s Syrian-Muslim identity to coincide with his role as the quintessential incorporated American citizen-hero. When the storm hits, the images used by the text are initially derived from myth and legend, before homing in on Zeitoun’s particular character and experiences. The images used to describe the protagonist’s feelings about the flooded city are not directly taken from the Qur’an, quotes from which periodically intersect the narrative, but from a cross-religious mythical hero recognizable to a Judeo-Christian audience. As the water floods the city, Zeitoun “could only think of Judgment Day, of Noah and forty days of rain” (94). In effect, the protagonist himself becomes a Noah-like figure in the following section, concerned only with salvaging people and animals from the flood in his canoe. He is an *American* Noah figure, though, because the image also echoes the American mythology of explorers and settlers conquering an exotic new land. These images are yoked together as he sets off in his canoe:

He imagined floating, alone, through the streets of his city. In a way, this was a new world, uncharted. He could be an explorer. . . . He thought of the animals. The squirrels, the mice, rats, frogs, possums, lizards. All gone. Millions of animals drowned. . . . He was conflicted about what he was seeing. . . . The novelty of the new world brought forth the adventurer in him – he wanted to see it all, the whole city, what had become of it. But the builder in him thought of the damage, how long it would take to rebuild (95-96).

The supposedly to-be-avoided subject position of the subaltern – Slaughter explains how it reinforces a “patronizing sense of moral superiority” (104) – is thus rendered in such a way that it is not only available as an identificatory perspective, but desirable in its coinciding with a subject position deeply ingrained in the privileged readers’ interpretative frameworks. By re-writing the “other” as an American hero, the narrative’s first half makes the character imminently open to almost boundary-less levels of identification. As the reader takes on the perspective of this version of the character, they are simultaneously led into understanding Zeitoun’s Syrian roots as well as his migrant experiences. Throughout the narrative, references are made to the protagonist’s home country, his past as an adventurous merchant sailor, and his

eventual settling in the United States. The flooding brings these different identities to the fore, quite literally washing up old photographs, shown in the book, of his childhood in Syria and life at sea. The American settler-explorer myth and Zeitoun's particular past as Syrian migrant and sailor thus end up coinciding in the hero-role taken up by the protagonist in the flooded city.

This co-mingling of vastly different identities would be highly problematic in its erasure of Zeitoun's distinctive cultural background, were it not for the sudden narrative break in the second half following his arrest. The fact that American heroes are meant to be representative of the nation as a whole, ideal citizens so to speak, makes it especially striking that this dramatic narrative shift is caused by a state-sanctioned intervention in New Orleans. The official rescue operation, bungled by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), is shown to fail utterly to the extent that the situation following the calamitous effect of the storm is allowed to render the city into a post-civilizational setting in which the normal social and legal order is suspended. Subsequently, the authorities' heavy-handed response to the perceived threat of terrorism in this extra-legal space marks the end of the Zeitoun character's heroic antics in the flooded city. At this point, the reality of the Syrian migrant is severed from the mythical image of the American hero. Zeitoun explains that, until he was arrested, he "had no experience with profiling," and had, therefore, been able to lead a hyphenated existence in New Orleans as a Syrian-American (213). The process of his arrest and detention radically breaks this dual identity, with the extra-legal space of the flooded city giving rise to practices associated with socio-cultural contexts existing beyond the purview of human rights discourses. As if to reinforce the similarity between the rights violations taking place in this chaotic setting on U.S. soil and the neo-colonial stereotype of pre-civilizational third world countries rife with barbaric legal systems, the protagonist perceives the former in terms of the latter:

Zeitoun was in disbelief. . . . arrested at gunpoint in a home he owned, brought to an impromptu military base built inside a bus station, accused of terrorism, and locked in an outdoor cage. It surpassed the most surreal accounts he'd heard of third-world law enforcement. (218)

Further emphasizing the exotic neo-colonial wilderness of this extra-legal landscape, the protagonist experiences his incarceration in animalistic terms, describing himself as “an exotic beast, a hunter’s prize” (213). In this way, *Zeitoun* calls into question the supposedly universal availability of rights within the United States by exposing the extent to which his hyphenated identity can be reduced to its essential “otherness.” The text does so by comparing what befalls the protagonist to the “surreal” neo-colonial imaginary of “third-world” countries, which is by definition fantastical, unreal, and disorienting in its reliance on stereotypical visions of distant, uncivilized, and dangerous lands of “others.” This renders the process of “othering” beyond the affective accessibility of the reader to the extent that while the character holds the reader’s interest, he is no longer recognizably similar enough to be easily relatable.

A brief comparison between Zeitoun’s Kafkaesque experiences and Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* can illuminate what is so particular about these shifting affective cues in *Zeitoun*, which oscillate between identification and alienation. The central difference between the way in which these two narratives drop affective cues for the reader with regard to their respective protagonists lies in the fact that Zeitoun is eminently recognizable in the first half of the narrative, while the protagonist of *The Trial* remains abstract throughout the story. Kafka’s famous novel tells the odd story of a man fighting an impossibly frustrating bureaucratic system, running from his seemingly arbitrary arrest in the novel’s opening line – “Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., he knew he had done nothing wrong but, one morning, he was arrested” (1) – to his eventual execution by two “officials.” The final pages, describing the moments before his execution, echo not only the character’s confusion but the many unanswered questions with which the novel’s seemingly definitive ending leaves the reader: “Was he alone? . . . Would anyone help? Were there objections that had been forgotten? . . . Where was the judge he’d never seen? Where was the high court he had never reached?” (164-65). *The Trial*’s obscure protagonist, simply known as “Joseph K.,” engages the reader only in an alienating way. Much as the character’s experiences are relatable on a more universal level, since he is a human being trapped in an absurd trial backed up by an impenetrable bureaucratic machine, K.’s particularity remains symbolically abstracted by the omission of that most basic of human identifiers, a complete name. This reflects the general lack of information that pervades the novel, in

which the reader's knowledge of the protagonist's person is almost entirely reduced to his struggle against an obscure law court and its executive branch. As a result, the reader's identification with the protagonist's perspective only goes so far as to provide a window into an otherwise estranging and absurd narrative universe. To this extent, *The Trial* provides a useful point of comparison for the post-arrest section of *Zeitoun*, in which the latter's protagonist is faced precisely with a Kafkaesque situation.

Zeitoun is different, however, in that it covers an extensive period before the protagonist's confrontation with bureaucratic absurdity and human rights abuse. This is what distinguishes it from *The Trial*'s narrating of an immutable setting in which a protagonist, stripped of agency, undergoes an absurd trial and punishment. Eggers's narrative portrays its protagonist and the story's setting before the storm. In this section of the story, as I showed, both New Orleans and Zeitoun are presented to the reader respectively as being identifiably a typical U.S. city and an upstanding Syrian-American citizen. Once the storm hits, the novel's setting changes and the protagonist becomes an enticing object of identification, claiming the heroic status of an adventurous character in a dangerous setting. As such, the reader does not settle into the alienating experience of the Kafkaesque post-arrest situation because *Zeitoun*'s narrative structure is fundamentally disruptive. Affect is manipulated to go from identification with Zeitoun to alienation from the hero in the second half. In the second half, and much like Joseph K., the protagonist is only recognizable as an abstract human being suffering at the hands of a simultaneously devastating and absurd anti-terror operation. As if to match the way he is reductively "othered" by the authorities, the narrative strips the character of the depth that stimulates the reader's identification with him in the first half. The post-arrest section, when told from the perspective of Zeitoun, contains no photographic material reinforcing his image as a loving father, proud brother, and adventurous traveller. As such, he becomes unavailable as a particular individual with which the reader can *continue* to identify. The text thus deals at a textual level with a crucial aspect of identification underlined by Butler, namely the need to reintroduce the alterity of the other. As she explains, identification is as much grounded in alterity as it is in sameness, given that the identificatory process "relies upon a difference that it seeks to overcome" (145). Following Zeitoun's arrest, the text maintains two versions of the protagonist that recreate this coalescence of relatability

and difference. With increasing force, the reader is continually confronted by the contrasting images of a man inhumanly detained, on the one hand, and the likeable and particular character of Zeitoun that lingers on in his wife Kathy's storyline as well as the reader's memory of the first half of the narrative, on the other.

As the reader is ejected from Zeitoun's perspective, Kathy becomes increasingly enticing as an identificatory perspective as she seeks to find out what happened to her husband after they lose contact following his arrest. Kathy is a sympathetic character, introduced to the reader before the storm hits as managing the family business and as a caring mother. She is an American who converted to Islam just before meeting her husband. As such, she too claims a precarious hyphenated identity as an American and a Muslim. As Zeitoun roams the estranging space of post-Katrina New Orleans, Kathy flees the city with their children, staying initially with her brother in Baton Rouge, eighty miles outside the flooded city, and eventually with a friend, Yuko. As her husband is "othered" in the setting of New Orleans following his arrest, Kathy experiences related forms of othering within a more ostensibly North-American setting. Once she reaches her family, the narrator explains, she could expect to be told to take off her hijab by siblings unwilling to recognize her conversion to Islam as genuine and seeing it instead as an obligation imposed on her by her husband (57). These asides, focalized through Kathy, underscore the socio-cultural attitudes underlying the extreme racial profiling experienced by Zeitoun. As Oliver explains in *Witnessing*, the way "we conceive of others" corresponds strongly with "how we treat them" (3). Kathy's perspective matters further, however, because it remains available to the reader as a point of identification within the narrative from which to perceive Zeitoun's victimization. No matter how many times Kathy recalls prejudiced behaviour towards her, she does so from an American perspective in a recognizably American setting. A scene early on in the book in which Kathy confronts an instance of islamophobia serves as a useful example. After a young girl throws insults at her and tries to remove her hijab, Kathy returns in kind: "They assumed, no doubt, that a Muslim woman, presumably submissive and shy with her English, would allow her hijab to be ripped from her head without retaliation. But Kathy let loose a fusillade of pungent suggestions, leaving them dumbfounded and momentarily speechless" (46). Despite her hyphenated identity, scenes such as these serve to distance the reader from their potential prejudices and make Kathy's

perspective more attractive. Through Kathy, the reader is led into seeing the individual prejudice she successfully confronts turned into a systemic violation of rights less easily combated at an individual level.

A final comparison with Kafka's novel, specifically the parable contained within it, can illustrate the effect these various perspectives have on the human rights-work *Zeitoun* performs with regard to the reader. In *The Trial*, as the reader becomes more familiar with K.'s particular struggle, however absurd, against his seemingly arbitrary conviction and eventual death sentence, the story begins to frame its already ethereal protagonist in more abstract terms. As K.'s situation becomes increasingly dire, the story leads him to a cathedral where he was meant to meet up with an important "Italian business contact of the bank" (143). The contact never materializes, and so K. decides to explore the cathedral alone. There he meets a priest working for the court who informs him that his case is going badly and his guilt is unquestionable. In desperation, K. makes an appeal to a common humanity to counteract his being devoured by an absurd legal system that churns out guilty verdicts without considering the person involved: "But I'm not guilty," said K., "there's been a mistake. How is it even possible for someone to be guilty. We're all human beings here, one like the other" (152). Seemingly aware that his particular story and person have not proven his innocence, K. turns to pointing out the unfairness of an inexplicably abstract system finding any human being guilty more generally. The priest's answer is intriguing: "That is true," said the priest, "but that is how the guilty speak" (152). This brief exchange, in which K. pleads from the position of an Everyman and the priest responds in kind as a representative of the system, forms the prelude to the priest's telling K. a parable called "Before the Law," in which both the characters and the law itself appear in ethereal and abstracted forms.

The famous parable inflects K.'s story by generalizing his experiences with regard to the strange world of the text, thus leading the reader away from the particularity of the protagonist's predicament just before he is executed. It tells the story of a "man from the countryside" who is stranded in front of a door to "the Law," guarded by a "doorkeeper" who refuses him entry and provides vague answers to the man's questions. Years later, when the man has grown old and senile, he asks the doorkeeper a final question: "Everyone wants access to the law," says the man, "how come, over all

these years, no-one but me has asked to be let in?" (155). The doorkeeper's response, which he shouts at the man just before he dies, is baffling: "Nobody else could have got in this way, as this entrance was meant only for you. Now I'll go and close it" (155). It would be almost impossible to argue that the reader is provided with any specific identificatory cues for the man from the countryside. It is equally clear that the parable does not make K. or his situation any more recognizable or real. Instead, the parable raises more general issues and questions. The law is presented as being universally accessible, even if, paradoxically, not accessible to the man from the countryside. In the story, this translates into the question of why he has a door to the law reserved for him if he is specifically prevented from entering through it. Much like K., the man from the countryside is made to suffer the effects of the law without ever knowing its workings or understanding his relationship to it. K. is accused, tried, and found guilty without ever reaching the high court or finding out what he is alleged to have done. This is the key similarity between K. and the man from the countryside, and the subsequent discussion between the priest and K. with regard to the parable bears this out in the way K. objects to the man's unfair treatment (155-60). In this respect, the parable presents an abstracted version of K.'s predicament, which, in turn, hands the reader much-needed interpretative tools to decode K.'s strange relationship to the absurd legal system in the novel. It allows the reader to understand K.'s invocation of the Everyman trope, in that his struggle takes on a profound universal resonance of a human being demanding equal access to a legal discourse, socially and culturally embedded and accepted, that ostracizes and ultimately condemns him without his ever having understood or engaged with it. If K. or the man from the countryside invite identification, therefore, they do so as abstract human beings confronted with an absurd reality.

The second half of *Zeitoun* gains additional meaning as a human rights text through this comparison to *The Trial*, as such a comparison throws its intrinsically Kafkaesque features into relief. Neither the setting of Zeitoun's makeshift prison nor the character of Zeitoun stimulate any form of identification informed by ideas of sameness or relatability for an audience of privileged Western readers. As much as the first half invites precisely such identification, the second half disavows it entirely. In the extra-legal space of the makeshift prison, Zeitoun is confronted with his own version of K.'s predicament, as he realizes the cells there are purpose-built for those flagged up by a

system of racial profiling from which he cannot escape and against which he cannot protest his innocence: “It was as if the entire operation, this bus-station-turned-military base, had been arranged for them” (211). In a twisted echo of the parable about the man from the countryside, Zeitoun is incarcerated in a purpose-built prison to which he is given “access” once he has been relabelled a terrorist by the guards who will not let him leave and will not reasonably answer any questions. The comfortable perspective of Kathy, into which the reader can more easily settle, further encourages the reader to recognize the irreconcilable difference of Zeitoun’s situation. Upon his release, and underscoring the extent to which her husband had been “othered” throughout his detention, she demands Zeitoun’s wallet be returned to him with his ID card, so she has “proof that her country recognized her husband as a citizen” (317). Despite this interlude in which the protagonist is stripped of his status as the incorporated citizen upon which human rights is based, to use Slaughter’s terms in *Human Rights Inc.*, the reader remains invested in the protagonist throughout the entirety of the story. This is, as I argued, a result of the pre-arrest section of the narrative and the sympathetic perspective of Kathy, which provides them with a strong cue to maintain some form of relationship to him. As is the case in *The Trial*, however, the type of relationship becomes an abstract one. Once the narrative explains how Zeitoun is dehumanized by a discourse that collectively labels people like him “terrorists” and erases the relatable person described in the first half, the text invites the reader to re-establish that humanity.¹⁴ In its emphasis on the strangeness of both the setting and the person wrongfully imprisoned, however, the only way for that re-humanizing process to take place is for the reader to identify with Zeitoun as a human being. In effect, the text asks the reader to construct the “human” in human rights in order to find a means of maintaining a connection with the now otherwise unavailable character whose rights are being violated.

¹⁴ In “On Making Dehumanization Possible,” Samera Esmeir points out that the rise of human rights as a legal framework intricately links the struggle for rights and recognition to the notion of being human and claiming humanity: “the transformation of humanity into a status conferred by the protective work of the law enables the renaming of human rights violations as practices of dehumanization” (1544). The type of cultural work being conducted by *Zeitoun* in this respect is a reflection of that legal status and issue.

In order to achieve this, *Zeitoun* first has to modify a narrative culture surrounding human rights that stimulates direct and straightforward identification with the victim rather than this mediated identification through the abstracted “human” in human rights. It does so, as I have shown, by facilitating a move towards disidentification on the part of the reader in their negotiation of the two halves of the protagonist’s story. This is important because it not only counteracts the process by which difference is allowed to elide into sameness, but it also undermines readings of *Zeitoun* in which his ethnically diverse roots are essentialized and subsequently perceived as a threat. Oliver explains the latter when she writes:

If we conceive of ourselves as self-identical, and we conceive of identity as opposed to difference, and we conceive of anything or anyone outside of the boundaries of ourselves as different, then we will conceive of anything different or outside of ourselves as a threat to our own identity. (2-3)

In *Zeitoun*, the protagonist is drawn from within recognizable and relatable circumstances into a position of being “outside” and “different,” which prevents him from being constructed as a radical “other” unrelated to the reader. Instead, the reader is confronted with various complex versions of the protagonist, which include the straightforwardly identifiable, the radically other, and, perhaps most importantly, the abstractly human. As such, the traditional pattern, in which privileged readers recognize disempowered subjects and in doing so recreate a “subject-other/object hierarchy” (Oliver 9), is broken.¹⁵ Instead, the recognizer-recognizee relationship is deferred to a higher level, in which *Zeitoun*’s particularity is respected and simultaneously seen as a specific incarnation of the “human” covered by the discourse of human rights.

¹⁵ Oliver explains that the condition of disempowered subjects in a culture centred on recognition through sameness feeds this negative hierarchy: “Dehumanization creates the desire and need for recognition from the dominant culture. By so doing, however, the desire for recognition reinforces the dominance of the oppressor and the subordination of the oppressed. For it is the dominant culture and its representatives who have the power to confer or withhold recognition” (26).

Zeitoun only partially overcomes the central identificatory issue at the heart of human rights culture, though, even if it seems to find a middle ground between the practical issue of overidentification with victims and the overly abstracted human theorized by human rights discourses. It is important to stress at this stage that the reader is only able to form a productive relationship with *Zeitoun*, one in which his rights-claim is recognized in a non-appropriative way, once he has been arrested and his rights have been violated. As such, the rights claim in the narrative is only introduced once the protocols of identification have been destabilized and the reader's affective engagement has been channelled to a subject who is American first, and only then Syrian and Muslim. While this is certainly productive as a mean of recovering *Zeitoun* as a human being worth caring about, it problematically erases his specifically Syrian-Muslim background that lies at the heart of the rights violations he endures. The "Syrian" aspect of his "Syrian-American" citizenship never appears in anything more than a reductively assimilated form in the hero-section of the narrative, where the protagonist's migrant background is incorporated into the far more amenable prototype of the American hero.

Similarly, the racial profiling that allows the protagonist's rights to be violated in the extra-legal space of post-Katrina New Orleans is only addressed when the narrative makes *Zeitoun*'s abstract humanity available as an affective perspective to the reader. Whilst this is productive, it problematically erases his specifically Syrian-Muslim background. Consequently, when the character is reintroduced into U.S. society upon his release, he emerges, in the eyes of the reader, simply as a human being able to be incorporated into American society. The latter is underscored by his wife, who forcefully asserts *Zeitoun*'s place in that society by insisting that state officials return documents proving her husband's American citizenship rights (317). His diverse cultural affiliations, central to the rights violations he endured, thus fade into the background. In the final pages, *Zeitoun* only exists as a model citizen contributing to the re-building of New Orleans. As in the mythical model of the city on the hill, he vows that New Orleans should be "better," that the storm "removed the rot," and that the foundations are being strengthened (325). As such, his incarceration has thus not only distances the protagonist from the Syrian-Muslim part of his identity, but the storm that made his detention possible is presented as having magically cleansed the country of the

prejudices that caused his rights to be violated. In this sense, the rights-claim in the narrative is never brought to bear on the particularity of Zeitoun as a character, with all its attendant hostility, and only on his abstracted humanity. This is a marked difference from the slave narratives discussed in the previous chapter, where the emphasis was on the ways in which society needed to change. In the contemporary example, the purview of Western human rights culture is thus not extended through the narrative's careful negotiation of the reader's affective engagement with it. Instead, *Zeitoun* carefully presents and guides Zeitoun's character in such a way that they can be accommodated by the existing rights culture without disturbing that culture's fundamental limitations and problems.

3.5 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have examined at a textual level how Eggers's collaborative testimonial projects, both with individuals and with collectives, cultivate affective engagement with their readership in order to perform their role within human rights culture. As a means of achieving this, I suggested an approach that brings together the psychological and textual sensitivity of trauma studies and the cross-cultural awareness of postcolonial studies. This approach is fruitful because it lays bare some of the affordances and constraints of the personal narrative, and of the ways in which this genre is used in human rights culture, that are often overlooked. This oversight occurs when personal narratives are reduced to a means of enforcing straightforward identification through a crushing notion of human sameness that denies those differences that are typically at the heart of rights crises. My analytical approach exposes these blind spots and complicates our understanding of the personal narrative. Trauma studies has developed a meticulous awareness of the dangers posed by (over)identification, and theorists such as LaCapra have provided possible answers in the form of guarded empathy. As such, expanding the scope of their corpus to examine narratives circulating within human rights culture can help to throw into relief the different affective relationships these texts cultivate. Similarly, postcolonial studies' insistence on taking into account the

hierarchical power dynamics perpetuated in global discourses of human rights sheds additional light on the connections established between privileged audiences and disempowered subjects through personal narratives. Following on from the previous chapter's investigation of how Eggers's collaborative testimonies both produce and reproduce the contemporary discourse of human rights, this chapter has thus further investigated how these narratives, embedded in human rights culture, engage a rights-bearing audience.

What Is the What provided an intriguing case study of how literary ventriloquism, through the narrative middle voice of Valentino, destabilizes the relationship between Eggers, Deng, and the reader. This particular novel's distorted narrative voice, I showed, cultivates a form of guarded empathy between the reader and the disempowered subject that closely resembles the empathically unsettled relationship thought out by LaCapra. In doing so, it is able to counteract appropriative readings of the subaltern's testimony that are grounded in neo-colonial conceptions of a rights-bearing West gazing at and aiding a wild and lawless Global South. The two volumes discussed from the Voice of Witness series, *Voices from the Storm* and *Out of Exile*, took a broader approach in their affective offer to readers, stimulating a more diffuse type of identification. This diffuseness attempts to negotiate the particularity of the victims with the metonymical expectations cultivated by oral history collections that their subjects provide a comprehensive overview of a rights crisis. Overall, the reader of these volumes is provided with a number of cues that aim to unsettle straightforward identificatory practices by embedding the particularity of victims in the broader social, legal, cultural, and political dynamics that cause large groups of people to be similarly affected and abused. Finally, *Zeitoun's* two-part structure enthusiastically adopts a straightforward identificatory paradigm in the first half, but only as a means of stressing radical difference in the second and making the protagonist's experiences of rights abuses unavailable. This has the added effect of unsettling the reader's interpretative comfort in the first section, which reimagines Zeitoun as a prototypical American hero, through a process of fundamental human sameness and reductive ethnocentricity. When the first and second half are taken together, however, the novel provides a strong cue for Zeitoun's basic humanity to be recognized while preserving the alterity of his experiences in the extra-legal space of post-Katrina New Orleans.

Fundamentally, all three forms of affective engagement cultivated by Eggers's various adaptations of the personal narrative seek to render the disempowered subject as being covered by the "human" in human rights without eliding their alterity in the process. As such, they both use and reshape the affordances attached to the personal narrative within human rights culture and seek to address the problematic discourse of sameness that accompanies its more straightforward applications. This type of sustained attention to the textual function performed by personal narratives complicates some of the commonplace assumptions held about the nature of those narratives' contributions to human understanding and empathy. For instance, Hayden White, an advocate of the so-called linguistic or narrative turn in historiography, begins *The Content of the Form* by stating that "narrative is a meta-code, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted" (1). This type of observation is welcome as an affirmation of the centrality of narrative to the way in which reality is shaped and understood, one that remains crucial to understanding a contemporary context of human rights culture that supplements facts of human rights crises with testimonies of real experience. Building on this, it has been my argument in this chapter that sustained attention to the textual negotiation of affective relationships between the subaltern and the privileged can provide additional depth to our understanding of the role played by personal narratives in human rights culture. My analyses highlight how Eggers's personal narratives manipulate the opportunities afforded by the personal narrative to conduct the human rights-work of establishing the disempowered subject as recognizable and equal in a way that does not reinforce a neo-colonial dynamic of rights-bearers patronizingly granting that recognition or equality.

Additionally, however, parts of Eggers's textual strategies and manoeuvring are, as I showed, severely undermined by the constraints of the personal narrative as a genre within human rights culture. The previous chapter already brought some of these to light, such as the mediation through white authors and the Western book market as well as the extra-textual requirements of human rights culture for disempowered subjects to occupy the position of the victim with a flattening lack of complexity. This chapter has uncovered additional contradictions and counterproductive aspects on the level of the text itself. The intricate textual and paratextual negotiation of both the disempowered

subject's voice and the reader's privileged position in *What Is the What* ultimately fails to factor Deng's original Sudanese context into the equation. Even as the novel carefully guides the reader into a guarded form of empathy with its protagonist, it only does so by meticulously navigating the existing boundaries of human rights discourse so as to include Deng. As I argued, this leads to the uncomfortable situation of Deng, now recovered for a Western discourse, providing a more ethical lens from which to peruse distant abuses in Sudan. Even though *Out of Exile*, adopting the Voice of Witness style, is better able to convey the diversity of experience of the Sudanese crisis, it too fails to complicate the essentially biased perspective of privileged readers by upholding their position as rights-bearers gazing at the suffering of others. *Zeitoun* overcomes this limitation by focusing explicitly on disrupting the reader's interpretative framework in such a way that they are forced to recognize the protagonist's humanity when he is forcefully abused as a result of racial profiling. However, the narrative struggles to bring its rights-claiming efforts to bear on the particularity of the protagonist's cultural affiliations, despite their centrality to his incarceration. *What Is the What* attempts to stress difference too through Deng's encounters with African-Americans, but only to the extent that he is a different kind of "other" to whom empathy can be extended once his narrative is grounded in an North-American context. *Zeitoun* struggles in a similar way when it fails to reintegrate the protagonist's alterity back into the North-American context, thus cordoning off his experiences of racial profiling and related rights abuses in the extra-legal setting of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Sustained attention to these affective textual negotiations thus turned up a number of significant obstacles, challenges, and outright contradictory discourses and processes that coexist with the productive aspects of Eggers's collaborative testimonial work. The next chapter will further illuminate these constraints placed on the rights-work performed by personal narratives and consider their impact on the rights-space-creating and -filling affordances of the genre examined in this and the previous chapter.

4 Closing Rights-Spaces: Eggers and Human Rights in the Global Public Sphere

Up to this point, this dissertation has focused on the ways in which personal narratives function within human rights culture. When the subaltern finds a means of speaking, it not only accepts – and thereby legitimizes – the global rights discourse, but also tries to reshape it so as to confront some of the myriad structures and processes by which they are rendered invisible by or in spite of it. In doing so, they confront the cosmopolitan faith in cross-cultural encounters with the lingering neo-colonialism that still plagues the human rights project's global ambitions. As a genre, the personal narrative thus takes up a central place within human rights culture as a rights-space creating tool able to expand the circle of people to whom that projects feels rights should extend. In doing so, disempowered victim-narrators typically push back against countervailing discourses that prevent such an expansion. In this respect, one could recall the rights-space creating efforts of black authors in the nineteenth century who sought to establish themselves as human beings to whom freedom and citizenship should extend, and who were acutely aware of the need to challenge widespread racial prejudice and inequality. Eggers's collaborative testimonial works, such as *Zeitoun* and *What Is the What*, maintain a similar awareness of the need to not only claim rights on behalf of disempowered subjects, but also to undermine readings of the narratives of those disempowered subjects that reinforce rather than break down the epistemological boundaries of who qualifies as the “human” in human rights. The close textual analysis in the previous chapter of the type of relationship these narratives cultivate with their readership brought out just how the textual cues in these texts aim to ensure non-appropriative and less hierarchical forms of engagement.

Eggers's meticulous attention to claiming rights, taking on prejudice, and guiding the reader matters because there is a perpetual risk that the subaltern's voice is drowned out or re-marginalized. At each stage of my analyses, competing discourses and practices crop up that undermine the rights-work being performed by personal narratives. In Eggers's case, for instance, the only way for his disempowered collaborators to gain recognition is through a white author who mediates access to a book market catering to the expectations of a privileged audience. These expectations, governed in part by the tenets of human rights culture, mostly centre on the desire to consume sentimental stories whose call to action can easily be answered in the form of patronizing charity and sympathy. When combined, the author and the disempowered subject's intricate textual, paratextual, and extra-textual efforts seem to accrue enough socio-cultural capital to purchase a place for the victim-narrator within the existing hegemony. As I have shown, however, Eggers's works fall short when it comes to doing more than simply recovering the single subject whose story they tell. Fundamentally, the discourses that cement the subaltern's exclusion within hierarchical global power dynamics go unchallenged at a structural level, despite the fact that the particular subjects of *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun* are victims of those dynamics. On this level, in short, the overall effort of Eggers's collaborative testimonial projects is successfully counteracted by competing discourses.

Over the course of this dissertation, at least three crucial systemic issues have surfaced that compete with and undermine the rights-work Eggers's personal narratives set out to complete. The first, borne out in the diachronic comparison to slave narratives, centres on the collaborative process itself. In the case of the abolitionist-(former) slave collaboration, the latter continually resists the former's efforts to allocate them a purely illustrative function within an intellectual debate and campaign organized, regulated, and played out amongst white folk. Contemporary collaborations, such as Eggers's collaborations with Deng or *Zeitoun*, acknowledge and seek to reverse or downplay this detrimental hierarchy, but in the end the disempowered collaborators are necessarily engaged in an unequal struggle for the required socio-cultural capital with an established authorial brand name preferred by the cultural marketplace. The second structural problem lies in human rights culture's fixed understanding of the different actors in rights crises and reparations. This understanding is enshrined in the

form of strictly defined roles from which any deviation risks disqualifying the affected victims from being heard and the issue they bring forward from being recognized. These roles, set out for example by David Kennedy in *The Dark Sides of Virtue*, comprise the passive and innocent victim, the uncomplicatedly evil villain, and the heroic human rights activist (14). In the case of the personal narrative, the audience is often cast as the latter as they are invited to take up the cause and act on behalf of the disempowered subject.

The extra-textual case of *Zeitoun* provides an important example of what happens when complexity is introduced into this performance of roles, be it through the protagonist's fall from grace or the supposed state-guarantor of rights *par excellence*, the United States, being cast as the villain rather than the hero. In the case of *What Is the What*, the tension between the recovery of particular subaltern subjects and the need to address this second structural problem is laid bare in an especially poignant way. In order for Deng to narrate his way into the circle of rights-bearers in an effective way, the novel is forced to emphasize his resolute innocence as it carefully treads around the ambiguity of the child-soldier issue. As such, Deng's recovery comes at the cost of an implicit admission that some of his fellow Lost Boys, those drafted into being child-soldiers, are beyond the narrative salvation offered to Deng by *What Is the What*.

The final obstacle comes from the widespread intrusion of neo-colonial discourses into the rights-claiming process. These countervailing discourses, practices, and mindsets are perpetuated culturally in the form of neo-colonial stereotypes that fix the subaltern as a passive and helpless collective that exists in the lawless borderlands of the global rights-community. What makes this mode of thinking so pernicious is how it effectively counteracts some of the core aims of human rights by stressing fundamental differences between human beings and entrenching hierarchical conceptions of Enlightened and primitive cultures, or indeed between the civilized West and the uncivilized rest. Ultimately, all of these three systemic issues are deeply implicated in one another. It will be the central focus of this chapter to draw out these implications by combining a textual analysis of different works in Eggers's oeuvre that can speak to one another in this respect.

Initially, I will explore the various strands of neo-colonial discourses more closely in order to uncover how they unhelpfully inflect those of human rights culture. This will

then form the basis for two separate analyses. The first will deal with the resonances of colonialism as they interfere with the cosmopolitan notion of a free and open global public sphere in which universal rights are negotiated and distributed. This first section will focus on two fictional works by Eggers, the novel *You Shall Know Our Velocity* and the short story “Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly.” My aim is to show how the discursive spaces in these works play out the tenets of neo-colonialism against the often naïve cosmopolitan faith in cross-cultural dialogue as a means of extending the discourse of human rights. By exposing the problems with an almost blind faith in cross-cultural dialogue, these fictional narratives form an effective critique of the type of projects Eggers engages in through his collaborative testimonial works and for which his careful textual work only provides a limited answer. Interestingly, then, even as interdisciplinary research on literature and human rights has begun to etch out the coalescence of the two, Eggers provides an important example of how literary texts can also critique human rights discourses and explore questions pertaining to their universalist rhetoric.

The second analytical section reprises two critical aspects of human rights discussed in the previous analyses that Eggers’s personal narratives rely on for their rights-work. The first is the perceived benefit of a rights discourse that transcends the nation state and is thereby less marred by the tension between the nation state as guarantor and violator of rights. The second is the ability for the personal narrative to provide a cultural entry point into the imagined transnational community of rights-bearers. This section will discuss Eggers’s novel *A Hologram For the King*, demonstrating that it exposes the relative lack of a strong, formalized socio-political framework beyond the existing nation state-based order. This analysis is important because it significantly qualifies the faith placed by *Zeitoun* and *What Is the What* in the availability of a viable transnational alternative to the power dynamics between states and cultures that spawn rights crises. The section goes on to consider the ways in which the existing, weak transnational framework of human rights risks re-enacting those power dynamics by rendering itself unavailable to those who most need it. Returning to several important scenes in the run-up to Valentino’s airlift to the United States, I use *What Is the What* to reflect on the legalistic focus of human rights discourse that enshrines the subaltern’s dependency on expert, privileged mediators. Ultimately, the chapter uses consecutive analyses as a

means of questioning whether Eggers's personal narratives can overcome the competing discourses that seek to undermine his efforts and that he so poignantly exposes elsewhere in his oeuvre.

4.1 Neo-Colonial Inflections

Given their patently opposing aims, it may seem strange to discuss the interconnectedness of human rights and the contemporary incarnations of colonialism. One seeks to guarantee basic needs, equality, and fairness for all, while the other harks back to a divisive discourse of racial and cultural inequality that justifies mass exploitation and suffering. One way of understanding their interaction has been to conceive of human rights as a kind of neo-colonialism in disguise. Indeed, as I explained in the first chapter, it has been suggested that human rights itself is simply the latest Western discourse that allows the old and new imperial powers to maintain their hold over the Global South or at least maintain the idea of an Enlightened West setting terms to the rest of the world.¹ A second view is that human rights was conceived by colonial powers who simply did not take subaltern suffering caused by colonial rule into consideration for fear of giving imperial subjects a means of protesting their suffering. Moyn's work brings both views together in its comprehensive attempt at explaining the fraught relationship between human rights and the history of (de)colonization. In *The Last Utopia*, he argues that when the touchstone for human rights, the UDHR, was finalized in 1948, its revolutionary humanist character meant it was so indebted to colonial discourse that it became suspect to anti-colonialists, who initially declined to use it (60-86). Discussing the central claims from *The Last Utopia* in an interview, he goes on to assert that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights itself was still fully

¹ One should recall in this respect not just those academic critiques by, for instance, Gilroy or Slaughter, but also the accusation levelled at the ICC by the African Union that human rights law is being used by the West to castigate Africa.

compatible with a colonial world (Kaul and Kim, *Imagining Human Rights* 11). In *Human Rights and the Uses of History*, Moyn makes a similar claim and explains that this compatibility only changed following a series of United Nations Resolutions in the sixties and seventies (93).² The difficulty in determining human rights' relationship to (neo-)colonialism is thus not so much historical as it is conceptual, depending largely on how one understands the human rights project and how it is conceived of by those who latch onto it.

This raises two important issues with regard to the interconnectedness of neo-colonialism and human rights. First, it points to the fact that human rights was not designed as a means of addressing the unequal power dynamics created by colonialism and which are perpetuated by neo-colonial discourses. Second, it shows that even though human rights seemingly coincides with the period of decolonization, it is not clear that the former directly contributed to the latter, at least initially. Much like the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century declarations discussed in chapter two, therefore, it had to be reappropriated by disempowered subjects and activists in order for it to serve the drive towards ending colonial rule. It is not unreasonable to suggest that in doing so, these subjects too were confronted by the restrictions and limitations placed on their use of a newly established human rights framework not originally designed to serve their needs. In other words, the fact that human rights does not directly address many of the attendant ills of colonialism inhibited its ability to facilitate the demise of colonial rule and continues to inhibit its ability to deal with the histories and remnants of the colonial project, not only geo-politically but also culturally, that prevent rights from making good on their universal promise of equality. Accordingly, my analysis of Eggers's fictional works, and particularly "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly," explores the continued struggle of asserting subaltern subjectivity through a discourse that does not explicitly speak to the neo-colonial thinking that counteracts it. This suggests that the anti-colonial legal and political action that took place in the sixties and seventies

² These are: "1514 (1960) condemning colonialism, 2131 (1965) on the Inadmissibility of Intervention in the Domestic Affairs of States and the Protection of Their Independence and Sovereignty, and finally 2625 (1970) on friendly relations" (Moyn, *Human Rights and the Uses of History* 93).

described by Moyn has not necessarily translated into the cultural sphere, where neo-colonial thinking remains pernicious and is less easily “outlawed.”

The mediation of personal narratives provides a significant case in point, as it is framed by human rights culture’s weakness in addressing, exposing, and challenging the neo-colonial power dynamics that are often the root cause of the crises being raised. Fundamentally, it relates to human rights’ otherwise laudable commitment to universal rights to which all individuals are entitled. David Rieff sees this universalism as being derived from human rights’ foundational origins as an absolutist, maximalist, and inflexible law-based movement (286). A worrying consequence of this is that the space where rights are officially debated and defined has been rendered so legalistic and abstract that it risks being too vague to deal with the deeply entrenched inequalities that govern the realities of victims. As Kennedy points out, feeding the legalistic bureaucracy of human rights has often become an end in itself for the human rights movement, which causes its institutions to “believe and insist that they have addressed the problem of violations with an elaborate, internationally respected and ‘state of the art’ response” (12). More broadly, there is also no guarantee that declarations and laws constructed on the basis of long-standing philosophical concerns for the well-being of an abstracted “mankind” brings any of the real and particular suffering of victims into focus. One need only look again at the juxtaposed struggles of the black authors discussed in chapter two and the declarations lauded by scholars such as Hunt to see this glaring issue in action. Unsurprisingly, this blindness to the suffering of black people was and is in large part due to the entrenched forms of racial inequality and cultural stereotyping of racial others as inferior that form the core tenets of colonialism. More recently, the new discourse of human rights is no better equipped to deal with neo-colonial discourses because it is both too individualist and too universal. Or, to put it differently, human rights consistently deploys its universalist values in aid of individual subjects but not explicitly *against* the forces and structures that disenfranchise them. Personal narratives in human rights culture, such as Eggers’s *What Is the What*, *Zeitoun*, or the Voice of Witness series, can carefully negotiate disempowered subjects’ acceptance into the circle of rights-bearers by conjuring up and relying on a feeling of common humanity. What they struggle to do, however, is find ways of doing

so that do not inscribe that process along the trajectories of persistent neo-colonial power dynamics.

This calls into question the required mediation by well-meaning actors such as Eggers. In the absence of a robust global human rights framework capable of guaranteeing its universal values absolutely in the face of countervailing discourses, the process of representing and righting wrongs cannot be elided and deserves additional scrutiny. Kennedy writes that the “production of authentic victims” happens through a process whereby they take up “a language of victimization” that admits their voice into the global public sphere (29). Even as they speak in that accepted victim-voice, however, the dialogue can be monitored and mediated to such an extent that the victim is patronized or re-silenced. For instance, one of the central conclusions of Guglielmo Verdirame and Barbara Harrell-Bond’s legal-political study *Rights in Exile* (2005) of refugee rights is that many were “unaware of how to present their testimonies in order to meet the burden of proof necessary to be found credible as someone fleeing from persecution” (19). The legalistic discourse of human rights thus creates the need for expert, privileged mediators to stand between the disempowered subject and their entrance into the circle of rights-bearers. Those who have not yet been authenticated in this sense, remain speechless through their exclusion from this representational framework, which similarly reinforces global divisions and inequality (Kennedy 29). Disempowered subjects awaiting this form of mediation remain stuck in the passive bystander role and are usually, as Ilan Kapoor illustrates, often unilaterally represented by celebrities speaking for the subaltern as “victims” stripped of the political contexts that caused their rights to be violated (3). The overall problem laid at the feet of human rights is that its lack of clout in dealing with neo-colonial dynamics may cause it to reflect them, even play them out anew in its cultural efforts to generalize rights.

4.2 The Cosmopolitan Project

This poses a direct challenge to those arguing in favour of art’s role in addressing the root causes of rights violations by expanding the circle of rights-bearers or of putting

the legalistic discourse of human rights back in touch with the reality of subaltern speech and suffering (Huyssen; Levy and Sznajder). Contemporary theories of cosmopolitanism that have been imbued with new life following the rise of human rights are major proponents of this idea. Indeed, it is proposed most forcefully by scholars such as Kwame Anthony Appiah, Jürgen Habermas, and Seyla Benhabib. In “Cosmopolitan Patriots,” Appiah argues that universalist claims are insufficiently attentive to cultural difference and do not guarantee the protection of those living outside of the hegemony:

Liberals take it to be self-evident that we are all “created equal” and that we each bear certain “inalienable rights,” and then seem almost immediately to become preoccupied with looking after the rights of the local branch of the species, forgetting – this is a cosmopolitan critique – that their rights matter as human rights, and thus matter only if the rights of foreign humans matter too. (93)³

In order to overcome the infamously problematic discrepancy between the belief in universal rights on the one hand and empathic parochialism on the other, Appiah posits conversations between peoples as an intuitive “engagement with the experience and the ideas of others” (*Cosmopolitanism* 85). He suggests that this would make “real and present” the otherwise imaginary stranger to whom we are meant to feel connected (*Cosmopolitanism* 99). Furthermore, he argues, this would lead to an engaged global conversation that would help create an understanding of how shared “thin” universal values (e.g. “good parenting”) can find “thick” particular but diverging cultural applications (e.g. “how to be a good parent”) (*Cosmopolitanism* 45-50). Appiah and other cosmopolitan thinkers may offer differing versions of cosmopolitanism, but they do tend to agree on the importance of relinquishing entrenched national identities in cross-cultural dialogues of mutual understanding so as to expand the global reach of human rights.

³ Huyssen similarly critiques universalism based on the observation that “[a]ll individuality is inherently social” (618). He argues that the liberal belief that understands an individual’s autonomy as being innate denies the fact that it actually emerges “in reciprocal recognition of citizens embedded in a culture and engaged in social and political relations” (618).

Instead of Appiah's intermittent cross-cultural encounters, Habermas proposes a rational-critical debate in a more structured global public sphere in which everyone ideally participates as equals. Comparing these two cosmopolitan thinkers, Michael Scrivener explains that they share a belief in the cosmopolitan urgency to combat global disenfranchisement, but differ once Habermas elaborates on the need for a rational persuasive critical debate (24).⁴ Habermas describes the terms for his public forum as fourfold: First, "nobody who could make a relevant contribution may be excluded"; Second, "all participants are granted an equal opportunity to make contributions"; Third, "participants must mean what they say"; Fourth, "communication must be freed from external and internal coercion" (Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other* 44). In *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, he explains that it is only when norms and values are debated within such a public forum that they can achieve universal validity and recognition (65-67). The emphasis is on the presumed *rapprochement* between diverging cultures that could be achieved through a cross-cultural dialogue. This distinguishes Habermas's thinking from monological conceptions of universal rights as articulated by contemporary theorists such as John Rawls or the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, to which Habermas and Rawls are both indebted.⁵ To come back to an earlier point then, Habermasian cosmopolitanism is also determined to define universal rights as debated and agreed rather than innately human, as the "natural rights" of old were seen. This is an important distinction, as Habermas himself explains in *The Postcolonial Constellation*, because clinging to "the metaphysical assumption of an individual who exists prior to all socialization" undermines the necessary communitarian effort required to recognize intersubjective

⁴ Appiah, Scrivener argues, has "a Humean distrust of reason and a Rousseauvian trust in intuition, but his narrative of social change omits rational moments" (24).

⁵ In *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Habermas criticizes Rawls's argument in *A Theory of Justice* for excluding citizens from the debate on the norms which govern their society, placing it entirely in the hands of philosophers. For Kant, one could think primarily of his essays "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective" and "Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch," which posit the general rules which would govern relationships within, between, and beyond states with a view to ensuring universal peace and prosperity.

rights (125). What makes this particularly relevant to a discussion of Eggers's narratives is that, as Levy and Sznajder point out in *Human Rights and Memory*, extending rights on the basis of the universality principle may even preclude participation in a meaningful and mutually instructive cross-cultural dialogue (6) in that it glosses over existing inequalities and therefore, one might add, never fulfils the four requirements set out by Habermas for an open and persuasive debate in a cosmopolitan public sphere.⁶ The failed cross-cultural dialogues imagined by Eggers as I read them, moreover, would seem to reflect more fundamentally on the attainability of these requirements in the first place given the entrenchment of its protagonists in various other global practices. This entrenchment is made explicit in the stories by restricting the characters' relationships with the disempowered as a result of hierarchy reinforcing humanitarian impulses and an insurmountable rootedness in colonial discourses. Indeed, colonialism and imperialism are both practices that rely on obscuring the particularity of others, making them mutually exclusive with a cosmopolitan dialogue and anathema to the generalization of rights.

This question of a limited participation in a global debate on universal human rights invites comments from a third cosmopolitan theorist. In *Another Cosmopolitanism: Hospitality, Sovereignty, and Democratic Iterations*, Seyla Benhabib posits that cosmopolitan norms could circumvent restricted access to the global public sphere by endowing "individuals rather than states and their agents with certain rights and claims" (15). Earlier, in *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents, and Citizens*, she posits that only through ongoing negotiations between individuals from different backgrounds is it possible to "render distinctions between 'citizens' and 'aliens' . . . fluid and negotiable" and allow "cosmopolitan solidarity" to take hold (21). This is not, however, a move towards

⁶ This glossing over is subtly found in the imagery of *You Shall Know Our Velocity* when Will suggests that his newfound wealth leaves him feeling uncomfortable. His statement that he prefers "living on the equator just above and below a zero balance" (15) invites comparison with people in the Global South and ignores the fundamental fact that the North/South divide is about more than discrepancies in material wealth. This misunderstanding leaves Will thinking that money would "bridge" the distance between him and those existing outside of the hegemony, whereas his agonizing over potential interactions with those people reveals to the reader the importance of overcoming what he describes as a "limitless and deadly" distance (15).

abstract universalism at a transnational level. She starts from what Habermas calls the “Janus face of the modern nation,” meaning that “modern democracies act in the name of universal principles, which are then circumscribed within a particular civic community” (*Another Cosmopolitanism* 32). In other words, universal norms and values work by negotiating legitimacy within a particular group of individuals. The cosmopolitan move is once again to imagine this group as crossing cultural boundaries – not necessarily along the lines of existing states – in its understanding of how they wish to particularize a certain universal norm.⁷ In discussing this process, she echoes Habermas’s insistence on equal access to a global debate when she insists on cosmopolitan justice as a vision which incorporates “*just membership*” rather than simply “*just distribution*” (Benhabib, *The Rights of Others* 3). This way of thinking about the universality of rights is also quite strongly reminiscent of the relationship between “thin” and “thick” rights described earlier by Appiah.

Nevertheless, even though Appiah, Habermas, or Benhabib never suggest that their envisioned cross-cultural dialogues and cosmopolitan outlook are easily achievable, they spend more time explaining what a cosmopolitan public debate might look like and how it would work than discussing the obstacles and problems cosmopolitanism faces when engaging with the practical application of universalizing rights. How do these processes play out against the backdrop of the legacy of imperialism? What impact do the remnants of colonialism and colonial ideology have on cross-cultural encounters? How do these questions affect the position of rights-bearers and disempowered others in the conversation? And how can advocates for the universalization of human rights respond adequately to those who criticize its distinctly Western origins? Answering these questions would show sensitivity to Butler’s pertinent claim in *Frames of War* that “we must be wary of invocations of ‘global responsibility’ which assume that one country has a distinctive responsibility to bring democracy to other countries” (37). It

⁷ Benhabib stresses this need to balance the universal reach of rights with the particularity of cultures: “It is important to respect the claims of diverse democratic communities, including their distinctive cultural, legal, and constitutional self-understanding, while strengthening their commitments to emerging norms of cosmopolitan justice” (*The Rights of Others* 3).

would also take into account the issues she takes up in *Precarious Lives* concerning the precariousness of those lives existing outside of the hegemony. Both of these issues come to the fore in an analysis of Eggers's narratives, who plays out relationships with the disenfranchised both inside and outside of the fictional world. Indeed, this is where literary texts can contribute to our understanding of this issue, in that they can imagine different forms of cross-cultural encounters and throw the debate on universalism, particularity, and cosmopolitan responses into sharp relief. It is in this light that the missed or failed encounters which run through Eggers's *You Shall Know Our Velocity* and "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly" become particularly illuminating.

4.3 Discursive Spaces and Competing Discourses: *You Shall Know Our Velocity* and "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly"

In "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly," a young American woman, Rita, rushes down from the top of Mount Kilimanjaro in a dismayed and shocked state after being confronted with the death of several Tanzanian porters employed by a tourist company to carry her hiking gear: "She makes it down to the high camp, where the porters made her dinner and went to sleep and did not wake up. This cannot be her fault. . . . How could she be responsible for this kind of thing?" (198-199). Rita's question about her own responsibility is both a rhetorical rejection of responsibility and an open-ended question, asking whether she *should* take responsibility for the porters' deaths. Her response is a reflection of her thoughts, rendered in free indirect speech and steeped in a newfound yet reluctant responsibility for disempowered others whom she had been unwittingly exploiting. However, it is also emblematic of the unresolved tension within human rights culture concerning the generalization of its core values. How can rights which are distributed unequally in some places or not at all in others be made to live up to their proclaimed universality? Indeed, as Moyn explains in *The Last Utopia*, rights refer to a set of "indispensable liberal freedoms" supposedly already possessed by all, as well as to "the most elevated aspirations of both social movements and political

entities” (1). In light of this, one can understand Rita’s epiphany firstly as a cosmopolitan recognition of her own status as a rights-bearer within a world of disenfranchised others and secondly as a stark realization of the consequences of rampant inequality. Her difficulty in coming to terms with the responsibility this entails – to recognize the disenfranchised and act upon their suffering – reveals the fact that, even though she hails from a North-American rights culture that proclaims those rights on the basis of a shared humanity, she was unable to confront the tension between the unequal distribution of rights and their proclaimed universality up until this point in the story.

This scene and the broader issue it raises is symptomatic of how *You Shall Know Our Velocity* and “Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly” explore issues of cross-cultural interpersonal empathy through an engagement with the particularity of the disempowered. I discuss these particular narratives in the context of universalism and cosmopolitanism because they both confront the issue of rights-bearing Americans venturing beyond their Western rights culture to encounter the disempowered who live in parts of the world rife with rights violations. The specific issue to consider in *You Shall Know Our Velocity* is the chequered experiences of its protagonists in establishing meaningful cross-cultural relationships while engaging in charitable activities. In my analysis of “Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly,” I develop these stunted relationships against the background of neo-colonial power relations and restricted empathy. Thematically, Eggers’s stories test the limits of promoting rights on the basis of an innate shared humanity by exposing how such a basis easily slides into other universalist practices such as those of neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism. At the character level, these narratives consider the possibilities for meaningful cross-cultural relationships within the context of these discourses, revealing the ease with which they in turn can slip into hierarchical relations that reaffirm existing divisions. The troubled relationships that Eggers describes tend to fail – despite the best intentions of his protagonists – because the tremendous socio-economic difference between characters is implicitly glossed over in favour of a putative bond grounded in a common humanity, and is made explicit through the theme of charity. The recurrent evocation of these faltering interpersonal connections dovetails with the conclusion drawn by

cosmopolitan scholars who believe that a shared humanity in and of itself is not an adequate basis for global solidarity.⁸

Eggers's narratives thus make use of fiction to conduct a worthwhile thought experiment. *You Shall Know Our Velocity* and "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly" put rights discourses based on an innate humanity to the test by imagining a form of cross-cultural cosmopolitanism that engages with the particularity of the disenfranchised. In terms of human rights, the texts criticize the idea of promoting human rights as an extension of Western rights discourses and as incorporating the disempowered into Western society, arguing instead for a more open cosmopolitan outlook that would accommodate their particular histories. This cosmopolitan outlook would seem akin to what Jürgen Habermas theorizes in *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* in that it acknowledges how "the equal respect for everyone else demanded by a moral universalism sensitive to difference thus takes the form of a *nonleveling* and *nonappropriating inclusion* of the other in his [sic] *otherness*" (40). Rather than simply acknowledge and reiterate the cosmopolitan need for a cross-cultural dialogue, however, Eggers's imaginative work also raises questions with regard to the feasibility of the cosmopolitan project and explores some altogether less promising engagements with others in his works. Thus, he stresses the need for generalizing rights while also interrogating those solutions that propose to sensitize universalism to cultural differences.

In *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, one of the protagonists, Will, narrates a travel-quest he undertakes together with his friend Hand in the wake of their mutual friend Jack's death. The stated aim of their trip is to dispense with a large sum of money through charitable giving in the Global South. As I show, the novel tells the story of two characters who are both unwilling and unable to confront others in a cross-cultural dialogue and are therefore incapable of answering the call of others to recognize their

⁸ See also Rorty in "Solidarity or Objectivity" regarding the inadequacy of bare humanity to generate solidarity and Cheah's argument in *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights* that "the solidarity of world citizens grounded solely in the moral universalism of human rights is too weak to generate the cohesion required for the implementation of global policies" (57).

particular suffering and pain. Even though the call of others' suffering sounds louder and louder as their travels continue, the narrative nevertheless increasingly folds in on itself to question its own fictionality and uneasily directs both the reader and the protagonists' attention away from a meaningful cross-cultural dialogue with the disenfranchised. The novel effectively invites the reader to question the validity of the central assumption of universalist rights, which acknowledges sameness and then suggests that these rights can and should be rolled out across the globe through cross-cultural encounters. Eggers's stories make this point by exploring the defects of such superficial relationships, a point made even more strongly in "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly." In this story, the suffering of others – the Tanzanian porters – is initially screened from both reader and protagonist when the protagonist's altitude sickness causes her to hallucinate and therefore remain blind to the dying porters. This allows her to continue to the top of the mountain in ignorance and abscond from any responsibility for the porters, just as the other paying hikers choose to do. The concluding epiphany at the mountaintop is the moment when she recognizes her responsibility towards the porters as individuals and breaks through the discourse of sameness to feel personally accountable for the porters' deaths. At this point, the protagonist's outlook shares one of the characteristics of the cosmopolitan perspective described by Appiah as one in which "we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance" (*Cosmopolitanism* xv). It is, however, the imagining of the journeys Eggers's characters undergo and the obstacles they face in negotiating cross-cultural encounters against the backdrop of neo-colonialism that underlines the importance of considering literary texts in critical debates on human rights and their calibration of universalism and particularity.

4.3.1 Imagined Encounters, Missed Opportunities: *You Shall Know Our Velocity*

In *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, the motif of missed encounters and failed cross-cultural dialogues hinges in part on how the novel is structured as well as how the two main characters relate to one another. The novel follows childhood friends Will and Hand in

their ambitious travels across Africa and parts of Europe in a single week with the aim of giving away \$32,000 to the disenfranchised. Along the way, the novel provides a window into the minds of its protagonists as they struggle to cope with the death of their friend Jack, who dies shortly before the novel's inception. The scene-setting cover of the first edition published by McSweeney's in 2002 (reprinted as the opening page in later editions) reads: "Everything within takes place after Jack died and before my mom and I drowned in a burning ferry in the cool tannin-tinted Guaviare river . . . It was a clear and eyeblue day, that day, as was the first day of this story" (Eggers, *You Shall Know Our Velocity* 1; all caps in the original). Because of the paradoxical nature of this initial statement, in which Will, the narrator, proclaims his own death at the end of the events he is narrating to the reader, any positive outcome for this restorative tale is preemptively quashed.⁹ The downbeat tone on the first page contrasts rather sharply with the energetic and vibrant spirit of the protagonists throughout the novel. It also sours the upbeat final scene that reintroduces the initial depressing state of affairs far more positively as Will and Hand enthusiastically leap into a pool in the Mexican city of Cuernavaca.¹⁰ In the Vintage edition of *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, Eggers inserted a chapter titled "An Interruption" (not included in the original McSweeney's edition) in which Hand bursts into the novel at the half way point as a competing intradiegetic narrator. Hand's interruptive chapter comments on their failed attempt at ameliorating in any way the poverty they encounter while still stressing the need for our empathic, economic, and political engagement to extend beyond the parochial:

[t]here's nothing to be gained from passive observance, the simple documenting of conditions, because, at its core, it sets a bad example. Every time something is observed and not fixed . . . there is a lie being told. Friends, I urge you to find us

⁹ In the added separate chapter narrated by Hand, this paradox is explained: "Though the text as printed before and after my interlude is as Will wrote it, there's no way, of course, he could have written that first page, being no longer with us, and therefore not close to a word processor. His manuscript was sent to the publisher before his second departure, for South America . . ." (136).

¹⁰ The final lines read: "I jumped with my mouth so open, taking it all in . . . and my heart froze. . . . It stopped for a minute I swear, but then the sound and pictures came back on and for two more interminable months we lived!" (350).

[Will and Hand] hopeful. I urge you to find that we tried something, knowing nothing of the results. (134)

Crucially, however, he also aims to correct what he claims are errors in Will's story. In his chapter, Hand denies the very existence of Jack – whom, he claims, Will invented as an “amalgam of a bunch of people we know” (52) – and focuses on the restorative nature of the story by explaining that the charity-travel plot is also a way for Will to come to terms with himself (67). Indeed, he adds that “Jack is there so Will could write about pain” and work through his anger at the death of his mother (131). In both versions, therefore, the journey is understood as a means for Will to work through his traumatic loss and reach emotional stability, with the humanitarian impulse made subservient to the emotional needs of the Western protagonist. Additionally, because the characters end up fighting and overcoming practical rather than emotional obstacles, the restorative nature of the quest narrative is confounded.

Their onerous travels, despite their stated intent, never truly provide any opportunity for the protagonists to reflect on their emotional turmoil or to make a lasting impact on anyone's life. The narrative initially has the characters getting caught up in overcoming practical complications such as which countries require visas or which travel path will allow them to traverse the world in one week (4-8). As such, the novel immediately disrupts the reader's expectations: whereas the cover (or first page in later editions) informs readers of Jack's tragic death and introduces Will as the narrator testifying to his processing of this event, the opening section of the novel is entirely – notably exaggeratedly – devoted to considering and reconsidering the travel route for Will and Hand's trip instead of expanding on the facts surrounding Jack's death or the protagonists' emotional state. These pages are filled with potential travel routes such as the following:

So first:

Chicago to Saskatchewan to Mongolia

Mongolia to Qatar . . .

The next one, with adjustments:

Chicago to San Francisco to Mongolia

Mongolia to Yemen

Madagascar to Greenland (5)

As characters, Will and Hand consistently avoid talking about the impact of Jack's death on their lives throughout their journey. Projecting his grief for Jack onto his advertising money, Will experiences his newfound wealth as an encumbrance and decides that his earnings "[have] to be disseminated" (2) amongst the disenfranchised in order to shed the burden. The cross-cultural move in undertaking this global quest is not motivated by a cosmopolitan desire to engage with the subaltern, but rather by the protagonist's assumption that giving away money abroad bypasses the need for precisely such an engagement. Will's explicit explanation to this effect goes as follows:

Since I got a little money, this was a constant struggle, the frustration with people and their coupons, people and their dirty clothes, families from El Salvador living in the basement of the church around the corner . . . and my urge to buy things for them, even just their food, and my inability, due to the imagined and impossible barrier between myself and these strangers with fumbling hands, to engage them and fix things. (15)

As the story progresses, the reader becomes acutely aware that Will sees his travels as a symbolic journey (Eggers's draft title for the novel was in fact *Sacrament*) both to cleanse himself of the trauma as well as the soured relationships he leaves behind in order to forge new meaningful ones outside of the U.S.

However, the internally focused symbolism of overcoming trauma is soon externalized in the form of a charity quest plot. This allows the traumatic opening of the novel to be replaced by touristic enthusiasm for the upcoming charitable stint and also embeds that charity within a self-serving logic of personal healing. As they reflect extensively on possible travel routes, Will comments on a particular route with particular relish: "That one had everything. Political intrigue, a climactical buffet" (6). As such, they divert attention away from Jack's death, but also trivialize the dire plight of those countries and people they intend to visit and help ("intrigue" and "buffet") so as not to dampen this newfound positive spirit. In other words, Will decides that he will break the negative spiral he has been in since Jack's death solely by sharing his money rather than his story, frustrating the restorative potential of the narrative by transforming a spiritual crisis into a material quest. The reader is later made to feel the futility of this faux humanitarian impulse when their charity ends up reinforcing socio-

economic privilege rather than bridging the North-South divide in terms of wealth and power felt by the protagonists.

For Will, his trauma becomes a guarded secret throughout the trip, and he avoids anyone who might have a story of their own to tell and therefore prompt him to divulge his own. The trip thus essentially becomes a series of missed and avoided encounters, as neither protagonist is either willing or able to engage in a mutually beneficial cosmopolitan cross-cultural dialogue. Imagining and stressing these failed encounters, however, necessarily forces the reader to consider their potential significance compared to the chaotic and ineffective monetary charity pursued by Will and Hand. The two protagonists consistently try to find a means of giving away money without actually having to meet the people to whom they are giving it. Perhaps the most absurd example of this is their idea of taping several thousand dollars' worth of traveller's checks to a donkey:

As we drove, hair still wet, we looked for donkeys standing alone so we could tape money to their sides for their owners to find. We wondered what the donkey-owners would think. What would they think? We had no idea. Money taped to a donkey? It was a great idea, we knew this. (*You Shall Know Our Velocity* 94)

Note how they are reduced to wondering what the finder will think, what their story might be, whether they have truly helped them or not, what an encounter with this person may be like. Imagining the encounters their donation schemes are designed to avoid becomes an increasingly important motif in the novel. As the narrative progresses, Will reveals that he conducts silent internal dialogues with people whom he feels have traumatic pasts to share.¹¹ These are notable in two respects. First, Will explains that he has imagined such dialogues since Jack's death, thus linking them to his

¹¹ Whereas these silent dialogues are eventually imbued with additional meaning by both Will's own trauma and the disempowered position of the interlocutors he encounters during his travels, the reader is explicitly made aware of the protagonist's tendency of having unproductive dialogues with strangers from the very beginning of the novel: "I argued with strangers constantly . . . The silent though decisive discussions were a hobby of my mind . . . It helped me work through problems, solving things, reaching conclusions final, edifying and even, occasionally, mutually agreeable" (26-27).

own traumatic state of mind as well as exposing an underlying need to talk about his trauma in order to work it through. The fact that these dialogues are silent once again frustrates that ambition, however, in that they become an unproductive circular repetition of his trauma. Second, during these dialogues the charitable relationship between the protagonists and the disempowered is shown to be problematic. Indeed, as the silent dialogues provide more and more information about Will's own state of mind without a similarly informative response from the disempowered, the emptiness of their monetary charity is further laid bare. Early on, Will comments on how he hopes to replace these silent interactions – already a surrogate for actual engagement – with something which would render cosmopolitan engagement less complicated: “I wanted agreement now, I wanted synthesis and the plain truth – without the formalities of debate. I wanted only *truth*, as simple as you could serve it, straight down the middle, not the product of dialectic but *sui generis*: Truth!” (27). As a result, readers are left to fill in this space themselves by imagining the potentially productive nature of these missed encounters or are forced to witness Will's reluctant imagining of such a response. Both these options merely serve to stress the ways in which the fear of engagement combined with a purely material exchange undermines the cosmopolitan project hinted at by the silent dialogues.

Particularly noteworthy in this respect is the following silent conversation between Will and Dennis, an impoverished Dakarian man who helps the protagonists find their way back to their hotel. Having seen Hand give money to his brother Pierre, Dennis expects – almost demands – a similar donation in return for his help. The following silent exchange is noteworthy in this regard:

- You throw me, Dennis's brother. You make us sad.
- My job is not to make you happy. . . . You [Will and Hand] do more harm than good by choosing recipients this way. It cannot be fair.
- How ever is it fair?
- You want the control money provides.
- We want the opposite. We are giving up our control.
- While giving it up you are exercising power. The money is not yours.
- I know this.
- You want its power. However exercised, you want its power. (117-18)

Commenting on the charitable scheme more generally, Hand notes in the added chapter “An Interruption” that they naively thought it “all would be somehow rectified” if they blindly gave away money to strangers (71). What exactly the confused protagonists are hoping to rectify – be it the resolution of their own traumas or the gaping inequality which their trip highlights – remains ambiguous because nothing is actually achieved.

As more of these types of encounters take place, the protagonists find that their charity has made it almost impossible for them to develop meaningful relationships with anyone they encounter. As such, the strictly material nature of the charity quest is emphasized and evacuated of its cosmopolitan potential to facilitate meaningful encounters with disempowered others as well as lead the protagonists to come to terms with their trauma. The following observation by Will is significant in this respect: “Every act of charity has choice at its core” (242). That choice lies with the protagonists who are in the socio-economically more powerful position of giving, thus consistently causing them both to highlight and to fix the recipients’ state of disempowerment. Both the rights-bearing protagonists and the disempowered others’ position within the cosmopolitan dialogue – made central by the motif of silent dialogues – is therefore compromised. Moreover, because Hand denies the fundamental fact of Jack’s death entirely, the spiritual crisis at the heart of the novel is passed on to the reader, as it is impossible to ascertain whose version of events is true. *You Shall Know Our Velocity* thus subverts what is initially set to be a restorative narrative (later reiterated by Hand in his chapter) by emphasizing and prolonging the spiritual crisis at its core rather than narrating Will and Hand’s resolution of it into emotional stability and forging of meaningful cross-cultural ties based on mutual recognition and understanding.

From this compromised position, the characters fall into increasingly outlandish situations and interact with a whole host of individuals – each disempowered in some particular way. The novel has at this point already exposed, however, that neither Will nor Hand is ready to engage in a productive cross-cultural dialogue in which they could share Jack’s death, partly because of their charitable mission and partly because Will especially is not yet able to talk about Jack. Instead, in a key scene in which the protagonists become involved in a seemingly innocent basketball match with a group of young Dakarian boys, a potential encounter turns into a nasty competition, a form of sports diplomacy gone wrong, because Will and Hand project their own trauma onto the

scene. Indeed, given that Jack is described as a gifted basketball player – “Jack was the best pure player our school had ever seen” (113) – and that the basketball court with its unhinged backboard and uneven rocky terrain typifies the poverty of the local village, the court becomes the stage for a competition of traumatic pasts and presents. Will explicitly comments on how the game gradually becomes an unfriendly and embarrassing contest:

I got the hang of the court, its concavities and dust, and soon it was a game, us against them. . . . Hand knocked the ball from the younger kid’s hand and scored over him without apology. It was not cool . . . The game got closer. I tried to switch teams, to relieve the nationalistic tension, but the boys refused. . . . It went dark. We called the game. (112-13)

Hand’s interruptive chapter in the later edition of the novel makes a strong correction in this respect when it emphasizes that, contrary to Will’s apprehension in the main narrative, they actually “wiped that dusty court with eight of them at a time” (78). This would only serve to heighten what Will describes as the “nationalistic” tension between the two parties as well as sour the idea of these wealthy Westerners giving away money to these token poor people.

As the narrative progresses, Will and Hand are increasingly perceived by those they encounter as abstract representatives of the powerful West, despite their own misgivings about the Western society they leave behind. Consider the following reflection on the nature of their charitable scheme, which reveals how giving money only ends up underscoring the difference between the moneyed West and the impoverished rest: “These guys [the disenfranchised] know they need it [money] and that we can afford it. They’re not taking it from a neighbor, they’re taking it from people who it means, you know, next to nothing to” (99). The underlying idea is that Will and Hand – despite the accidental and temporary nature of their wealth – still live within a different socio-economic reality to those they encounter. By insisting on giving money to anyone they problematically deem “worthy,” they undermine the potential for a positive relationship based on equal participation before it gets a chance to develop by introducing a socio-economic hierarchy. One of the more poignant examples of this comes at the start of their journey in Senegal when an old man helps Will and

Hand repair their car at the beginning of their journey: “When the job was done the old man turned and looked at my face and smiled and walked away. He still hadn’t said anything” (96). Rather than allowing this to be a case of one person selflessly helping another, the pair decide to pay the man for his services: “I ran after the man. . . . I smiled and handed him a stack of bills. . . . He waved the money off. I took his hand and put the bills in his palm and closed his fingers, dry and ringed like birch twigs, around them. He said nothing. He took the bills and walked off” (97). As such, their relationship to this man is moved closer to that of client-contractor than one of mutual acknowledgment and cosmopolitan solidarity. The lack of meaningful engagements throughout the novel causes both the protagonists and those they encounter to remain fixed in a state of sustained crisis. Neither contributes to the formation of a cosmopolitan community that could debate and secure each other’s rights. Indeed, whereas this narrative is formally a travelogue and quest narrative, it constantly problematizes the protagonists’ relationship to disempowered others as well as their subsequent inability to imagine themselves as connected to those others as part of an inclusive cosmopolitan rights community. What Will in particular imagines instead is an unsatisfactory silent dialogue that re-traumatizes him and further alienates the disempowered.

As this analysis of Eggers’s first novel shows, the lack of engagement with the particular histories of the characters prevents them from beginning the narrative arc of bare human individual turned rights-bearing citizen-subject because it reveals the potential problems inherent to the assumption that any form of dialogue with others draws individuals into a global rights society. Whether it be the repetition of his traumatic loss for Will (and Hand to a lesser extent) or the more general disconnect from Western rights discourses through lack of meaningful cross-cultural engagement for the disempowered, their particular histories remain disengaged as a result of the charitable hierarchy imposed by the quest plot. *What You Shall Know Our Velocity* thus shows is that charity, combined with an unwillingness to recognize or share one’s own story effectively, is not a sufficient basis for a meaningful encounter with the other, that it risks promoting competitive exchanges of traumatic pasts, and counteracts the benefits of cross-cultural exchanges in promoting human rights by trapping the protagonists in hierarchy-enforcing charitable relationships rather than “cosmopolitan” ones. In this sense, Will and Hand’s failure to relate to disempowered

others reveals the limitations of the cosmopolitan ideal that travel and cross-cultural encounters in and of themselves further the universal enjoyment of rights. The reason for this lies in large part in their inability to overcome the neo-colonial hierarchy that imposes itself between themselves and those they encounter.

4.3.2 Cosmopolitan Dialogues versus Neo-Colonialism: “Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly”

Whereas *You Shall Know Our Velocity* indirectly bears out the necessity to engage disenfranchised subjects on their own terms and on an equal footing, the short story “Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly” explores the barriers posed by an existing transnational practice – (neo-)colonialism – to achieving that goal. It follows the climb to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro of a group of paying American hikers and the local men hired to carry their gear. In focusing on the group dynamics both within the tourist group and between the Americans and the Tanzanians, the narrative shows the detrimental effects of adhering to a neo-colonial logic by revealing how it restricts the circle of individuals who are recognized as worthy of empathic engagement. This issue is essentially the starting point for Butler’s discussion in *Frames of War*, in which she argues that thinking in terms of race and hierarchy does not yield the “analytic vocabularies” needed to think about “global interdependency” in a way which would allow everyone to count as a grievable subject (31). These colonial resonances manifest themselves in two specific ways in the narrative, the first being in the mind of the protagonist, Rita, at the beginning of the story, the second in the interactions between the paying hikers and the Tanzanians. Both of these are underscored by the extensive use of internal focalization in the narrative, which grants the reader access to Rita’s particular impressions throughout the journey.

In one of these many passages of the narrative that are internally focalized, she reflects upon the (for her, unexpected) poverty in Tanzania upon her arrival there and compares it to her thoughts about Jamaica, another formerly colonized country she once visited:

This country is so poor. Poorer than any place she’s been. Is it poorer than Jamaica? She is not sure. Jamaica she expected to be like Florida, a healthy place

benefiting from generations of heavy tourism and the constant and irrational flow of American money. But Jamaica was desperately poor almost everywhere and she understood nothing. (Eggers, "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly" 146)

In this excerpt, one finds clear traces of the colonial civilizing mission as well as contemporary U.S. interventionist policy as Rita is shocked to find American involvement in these poor countries has not brought peace and prosperity. Moreover, in the preliminary stages of the trip, she explicitly allows her imagination to conjure up an image of Tanzania as a colony, with the porters taking on the role of colonial subjects in an exotic place of beauty: "It was midnight and she was very awake as they drove and they had driven, on the British side of the road, in silence through rural Tanzania" (141-42) and "[s]he has a sudden vision of servants carrying kings aboard gilt thrones, elephants following, trumpets announcing their progress" (152). The latter image turns into a motif throughout the initial climb: "Frank [the guide] is walking very slowly. Rita is behind him, his pace is elephantine" (157). In a similar way to Will and Hand, this initially establishes a hierarchical relationship of wealth and power versus poverty and powerlessness which prevents any meaningful engagement with the Tanzanians in the group.

As the paying hikers bond over their various aches and pains as the climb progresses – "they are all sharing food and needed articles of clothing and medical aid" (174) –, their relationship with the porters becomes one of silent charity that leaves the hikers unaware of the hardships suffered by the porters or the reason they are undertaking what is for them a dangerous climb. Indeed, the porters – who outnumber the paying hikers six to one – take precisely those risks in climbing the mountain that the guide is at pains to avoid any of the paying hikers taking. While one hiker, Grant, is scolded for bringing a simple army tent unable to keep out the cold (171-72), several porters freeze to death on the penultimate day precisely because their equipment is lacking. Similarly, unlike Rita, the porters wear simple sneakers rather than climbing boots, prompting Rita to enter into the same silent charity with the porters: "Rita decides that Kassim is her favourite porter and that she'll give him her lunch. When they reach the bottom, she'll give him her boots" (182). Nevertheless, Rita briefly manages to develop a more personal connection with Kassim in addition to the charitable one to which the other hikers restrict themselves. In this brief moment, when she thinks about giving him her

boots, they also engage in a short conversation in which she asks for his name, turning him into an individual rather than a part of the collective of servants carrying their bags (182-83). In this short passage, she moves beyond simple donations and enters into a brief dialogue while they drink from a mountain stream, which triggers an emotional response akin to Will's silent conversations in *You Shall Know Our Velocity*:

Maybe he has kids. He can give the shoes to the kids. It occurs to Rita then that he's at work. That his family is at home while he is on the mountain. This is what she misses so much, coming home to those kids. The noise! They would just start in, a million things they had to talk about. She was interrupted all night until they fell asleep. They had no respect for her privacy and she loved them for their insouciance. . . . Kassim finishes, his vessels full, and so he stands, waves goodbye, and jogs back to the camp" (182).

By at least imagining Kassim's personal story during this brief exchange of words rather than silently sympathizing with him from a distance as an impoverished human being, Rita takes the first step towards becoming aware of the reality of the porters' situation: being forced into undertaking this dangerous journey in order to ensure the survival of their families and missing their families in a way not too different from the way Rita misses hers.

Nevertheless, a clear "us" versus "them" distinction still dominates the relationship between the groups in the narrative as a whole and therefore precludes the cross-cultural dialogue and empathy that is a crucial prerequisite to the global extension of human rights. While during their first encounter Rita purports to understand that Kassim is working as a porter whereas she is climbing the mountain as a tourist, at this stage she at no point reflects on the position of the disempowered Tanzanians she meets. This manifests itself in the text through the motif of parenting. As the above quote shows, her interactions with Kassim are framed by the narrative in terms of her own desire to adopt two children to whom she had been a foster parent. This adds to the reader's pity for the Western protagonist as the story explains earlier on that this adoption was thwarted by her parents who had "beaten her to it" and adopted them instead (147). The reader's affective engagement is even more clearly misdirected when the motif is used to build up a contrast between the porters and Michael, a young American hiker who suffers from altitude sickness and is eventually forced to return

before reaching the summit.¹² Michael's slow deterioration severely impacts upon the group of paying hikers, particularly his father, and as a result he is a constant subject of monitoring, care, and empathy. His eventual decision to give up the climb affects everyone and ruins the experience for his father. By contrast, when some of the unnamed porters freeze to death during the penultimate night of the climb, the hike carries on regardless the next day, with most of the paying hikers barely noticing the missing porters. The son's ordeal manipulates the reader's expectations in that it directs their attention towards the severity of Michael's condition – and the relationship between the Western characters more broadly – and away from the precarious position of the porters. The reason for this almost dismissive attitude to the porters' deaths is that while their loss is pitiable on a general level as a loss of human life, their individuality has consistently remained obscure to the group – and to the reader – and therefore remains unavailable for empathetic engagement. As African individuals, their exclusion from the hegemony makes their lives non-grievable, to use Butler's terms.¹³ In other words, while their humanity is recognized on an abstract level, actual solidarity based on an engagement with their particular disempowered reality and suffering is forestalled at the level of narrative and in terms of the reader's expectations.

Rita only vaguely notes the death of the porters – having suffered from altitude sickness herself on the night they died – and joins the hikers in reflecting triumphantly on the achievements of the group once they reach the summit: “Now, she thinks, seeing these views in every direction, and knowing the communion with the others who have made it here, she would not have let anything stop her ascent” (197). Crucially, however, Rita breaks free from the restricted framework created by the neo-colonial relationship between the porters and the paying hikers at the very end of the narrative. When a fellow hiker, Shelley, informs Rita of the porters' deaths once they have reached

¹² This is another example of a risk taken by the porters that the guide, Frank, tries to prevent the hikers from taking. The hikers are told not to go up the mountain too quickly in order to avoid getting ill (163), whereas the porters have to rush up and down between camps in order to transport all of the hikers' equipment (173).

¹³ See Butler's explanation in *Frames of War*: “If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense” (1).

the top, Rita becomes disgusted by the idea that the hike continued regardless. When Shelley, enjoying the view, remarks "I'm glad everyone decided to push through, because this is worth it, don't you think?" (198), Rita rushes down, dismayed and angry, only to find that there is nothing left for her to do but sign the book of international tourists who made it to the top. Her panicked response to the porters' deaths gains further meaning when contrasted with the short story's title "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly." Rita's frantic sprint down the mountain stands in stark contrast to the decision of another paying hiker, Grant, to turn back after the porters' deaths, presumably to help with the slow decent back down with the bodies. While she initially condemns Grant for choosing to go down even though "he was strong enough to make it" (197), she later finds that his decision to go down accentuates her own guilt over continuing to the top (199). More broadly, therefore, this narrative shows how the neo-colonial assumptions of the paying hikers form an insurmountable barrier to a productive cross-cultural dialogue in that they make it impossible for them to empathize with or even recognize anyone outside of the Western hegemony. These assumptions prove so powerful that they effectively cancel out the relevance of Rita's epiphany at the end, which ultimately comes too late for it to make any difference to the porters. The contrast between ineffective charity and cosmopolitan engagement becomes especially salient when the protagonist ends up giving the boots she intended to give to Kassim to another young boy (199), presumably because Kassim is amongst the porters who died on the mountain.

An analysis of Rita's narrative development within this story reveals that she actually completes a journey towards an increased sensibility to the predicament of disempowered others: Rita begins the journey in a self-absorbed state of distress as part of a group of similarly self-involved American tourists, but the climb subsequently allows her to wrench herself free from her limited empathetic framework to include those excluded by the hegemony. Rita's development here thus seemingly serves to extricate the protagonist from the restrictive Western discourse that extends rights only to those who are "incorporated," as Slaughter would have it. Nevertheless, the narrative also shows that development as taking place after the fact, once the porters have already died, thus cancelling out any uplifting readings of Rita's evolving empathy. To render this in the previous chapter's terms, the reader is provided with a cue to

revise their engagement with the characters as Rita develops her own affective engagement with them. Even if that new awareness comes too late for Rita, the narrative's cycling through various identificatory cues and practices provides a possible empathic learning curve for the reader, who is able to retrospectively adjust their interpretation of the narrative's events and characters in a way that Rita cannot.

Additionally, the development of the protagonist has been adapted by Eggers in this case to criticize the universalist underpinnings of rights discourses in that it shows how simply acknowledging the porters' humanity in the way the paying hikers do in no way guarantees actual solidarity with their suffering or a deeper understanding of the inequality which denies them their human rights in the first place. As such, stressing competing and more detrimental global practices such as neo-colonialism that preclude meaningful cross-cultural encounters allows this narrative to shift the focus away from the disempowered towards studying the stance of the rights-bearing Westerner in the rights dialogue. While *You Shall Know Our Velocity* exposes the difficulty of giving the disenfranchised an equal role in the conversation, "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly" explores the formative arc Rita herself must undergo in order to even become receptive to a meaningful cross-cultural conversation. Rita's outrage at the end of the story is presented as a belated first step towards breaking through that restrictive narrative of sameness which forestalls solidarity or understanding. The recognition Rita offers the porters in this final moment is nevertheless significant in light of Judith Butler's argument in *Precarious Lives*: "To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition for what one already is. It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other" (44). In cosmopolitan terms, therefore, it is a step towards engaging the disempowered in an open dialogue of mutual recognition that can transcend entrenched and restrictive positions of cultural and national identities. Within the context of the narrative – and therefore within the reader's understanding of the suffering of the porters – the epiphany is a stark reminder of the type of suffering that goes unrecognized. It also serves to shine a light on those who remain disengaged from the global conversation about universal rights.

Even though my reading of Eggers's texts both engages with and critiques a central assumption of contemporary rights discourses, it does not do away with the normative

idea of generalizing rights. Indeed, both stories actively encourage the reader to feel that human rights should be extended to the porters in “Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly” or the disempowered characters in *You Shall Know Our Velocity*.¹⁴ They make the point that doing so on the basis of a shared humanity is problematic for those to whom we as readers feel they should be extended, while also showing that a cosmopolitan stance of openness and dialogue towards others is likely to compete with far less productive transnational practices that undermine the envisioned generalization of rights in a global public sphere. The main obstacles are relationships grounded in charity for Will and Hand, and neo-colonialism for Rita. *You Shall Know Our Velocity* touches on ways in which establishing a charitable association with the disempowered can entrench both parties in an insurmountable hierarchical relationship that undermines solidarity and engagement with one another’s particularity. What “Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly” shows is how easily the universal discourse of sameness elides into neo-colonial ideologies which not only forestall solidarity, but allow rights abuses to go unchecked and effectively counteract the extension of rights to those beyond Western society. Nevertheless, Eggers’s imagined encounters lay bare these issues while simultaneously and resolutely bringing to light the necessity of incorporating both rights-bearers and the disempowered into a more open cosmopolitan outlook and dialogue.

¹⁴ As the previous chapter showed, the principle goal of these personal narratives is thus to negotiate the reader’s affective engagement with the characters within rather than provide direct insight in and of itself through reasoned argument. This makes them particularly effective in recovering the disempowered victim-narrator of such narratives, but may also lead away from framing that recovery with broader concerns over why they were excluded in the first place.

4.4 The Transnational Insecurity of Human Rights: *A Hologram for the King*

Culture can thus play an important part in the cosmopolitan project even if, as my critical analysis of Eggers's fictional works show, it also lays it open to further scrutiny. The major criticism of the cosmopolitan faith in culture is succinctly summed up by Pieter Vermeulen, who remarks: "Conceived as goals in themselves, the intercultural encounters that literature affords can easily be dismissed as forms of intellectual tourism" (88). His work draws on that of Cheah, who notes that contemporary incarnations of cosmopolitanism risk reproducing or reaffirming existing power dynamics:

It is not enough to fold the pluralistic ethos of older cosmopolitanisms into the institutionalized tolerance of diversity in multicultural societies. . . . The inscription of new cosmopolitanisms (and theories about them) within the force field of uneven globalization must be broached at every turn. (Cheah, "Cosmopolitanism" 495)

An overly optimistic understanding of the role of culture makes cross-cultural encounters in fiction a seemingly satisfying replacement for the actual encounters made impossible by neo-colonial hierarchies and barriers. A similar problem affects the suggestion by Andreas Huyssen in "International Human Rights and the Politics of Memory: Limits and Challenges." He argues that abstract, legalistic human rights discourses can be nurtured by memories of rights violations so as to provide them with historical grounding (608). In other words, Huyssen believes that bringing narratives and histories of suffering into contact with institutionalized rights discourses may bring their theoretical concerns into contact with the lived experiences of those whose rights they seek to protect. If the personal narrative, the role of which in human rights culture was discussed in the previous chapters, provides such succour, it may only do so in a very limited way.

This scepticism over the role of culture resonates with broader developments in twenty-first century fiction and should, therefore, not be seen as a dismissal of the important role it plays in human rights culture. It does, however, point to the need of

taking into account the manifold ways in which rights-claiming efforts are inflected by competing discourses that have historically weighed heavily on the relationships between the West and the rest of the globe by disempowering those subjects now vying for inclusion in the hegemony. Once again, it is my analytical aim to bring these concerns down to the level of the discursive space created by Eggers's texts, as this is where they can be most tangibly studied and understood. Eggers's stories, in providing a means of critiquing the cosmopolitan ideal, may be seen as part of a broader trend in twenty-first century fiction identified by Boxall that displays a marked scepticism towards the "blend of postcolonial identities" easily slotting into a new cosmopolitan global order (168). Similarly, Irr notes the rise of a new kind of political novel that aims to force the United States to engage with "the pragmatics of global mobility and inequality" (194). In terms of my analysis, I take this trend in twenty-first century American fiction and bring it to bear on a different aspect of culture seemingly less encumbered by the issues raised by these new novels, such as *A Hologram for the King*.

Whereas *You Shall Know Our Velocity* and "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly" were released before the publication of Eggers's collaborative testimonial work, his novel *A Hologram for the King* appeared in 2012, respectively six and three years after the publication of *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun*. As opposed to those works, *A Hologram for the King* does not directly feature a cross-cultural encounter that directly aims to expand the hegemonic reach of human rights. Nevertheless, it can be read as an imagining of a postnational – the decline of the United States as a global power is its core theme – or transnational space stripped of its familiar hierarchies and power dynamics. As such, *A Hologram For the King* offers a somewhat different perspective, that of economic globalization and the United States' dwindling influence, and, therefore, provides a complementary context to the socio-economic superiority and neo-colonial ideologies that cause the previously discussed protagonists' failure to engage in cross-cultural human rights-work.

A close reading of the desperate struggle for salience and equality in the cross-cultural dialogues imagined in Eggers's fictional works has already shed additional light on the problems created by his well-intentioned use of the collaborative testimonial form in other places. If, as Eakin claims in *How Our Lives Become Stories*, the authorial brand name on the title page of a collaborative work "reflects the necessarily unequal

distribution of power” (176), then this inequality must have an impact on the discursive space of the text as well as its reception by a privileged audience. Much as the identificatory practices discussed in the previous chapter work hard to destabilize the interpretative frameworks of privileged readers, the dynamic of personal narratives in human rights culture inevitably runs into trouble at the narrative’s close. At this point, both the reader and the victim-narrator are cast back into their respective positions as rights-bearer and disempowered subject, without any guarantee that the productive textual engagement engendered by the text will survive.

At worst, the positive affect generated by the text is translated into the unhelpful relationship described by Slaughter in “Humanitarian Reading.” He describes this phenomenon by explaining how it reinserts the goodwill of the text into the power trajectories of global inequality:

These unequal divisions of the world into the rich and powerful, who have security and sympathetic understanding on their side, and the poor and powerless, who are in need of both security and sympathy, have a tendency to recenter the traditional subjects of history as the subjects of sentimentality and goodwill. (104-105)

In *A Hologram for the King*, these strictly divided roles, and their geographical associations, are dealt with in two important ways. First, the relative stability of the United States as a salutary actor on the global stage is shown to be waning through its insecure and tragic protagonist, Alan Clay, as he hopelessly competes for a business contract with actors that are traditionally cast in an inferior role in the neo-colonial hierarchy, such as China and the Middle East. Second, the resulting public sphere, stripped of its familiar power dynamics, more closely resembles a chaotic free-for-all than a new egalitarian world order. The novel thus imagines an alienating global public sphere in the story world in which the traditional narrative roads to salience for the disempowered and powerful alike are no longer staked out on a map drawn out along neo-colonial lines. Far from offering succour to its characters, the protagonist and those he encounters are wracked by insecurity as neo-colonial modes of thinking continue to govern their interactions but no longer have the power to regulate them.

In the novel, the protagonist is an impotent bankrupt consultant estranged from his daughter and wife who embarks upon a hopeless journey to meet the ever-absent King Abdullah of Saudia Arabia – the epigraph from Samuel Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot” is no coincidence – in order to sell him a global holographic communications device that can be used to link up “King Abdullah Economic City” (KAEC) to the rest of the world. Initially, Alan seems to take up the same privileged position, distanced from other cultures, as Rita or Will. He stays at the Hilton hotel – “built . . . to bear no evidence of its existence within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia” (21) – and keeps his distance from anyone but the members of the team of American consultants he is leading. However, as a representative of America as a declining superpower, Alan is partially “freed” from the social, political, and economic feelings of superiority that barred Will, Hand, and Rita from developing meaningful transnational exchanges. Rather than facilitate encounters with others though, this socio-economic weakness strips him of his confidence and causes him to feel consistently out of place. He openly wonders “[h]ow he could have predicted the world losing interest in people like him” (135). Indeed, he comes to reside in a type of in-between position, belonging neither with the influential and wealthy King of Saudi Arabia, the Chinese businessmen who represent the new economic hegemony, the local residents of Saudi Arabia, nor even the members of his own “Western” team, who perceive him as inadequate and past his prime. His (self-)perception is summed up in this reflection on how he must look to Brad, a team member: “a human who was more burden than boon, more harm than good, irrelevant, superfluous to the forward progress of the world” (75).

Perhaps more than any other character discussed above, therefore, Alan is entirely isolated, lacking the reassuring but detrimental national and neo-colonial frameworks afforded to Eggers’s other protagonists. From this weakened, insecure, and lonely position, Alan tries and fails to develop two relationship: one with Hanne, a woman working for the Danish embassy who is attracted to his status as a U.S. businessman, and another with Yousef, an insouciant local taxi driver who invites him to join him for a visit to his father’s house in the country. His encounters with Hanne fail because he lacks confidence, suffers from impotence, and does not know how to interact with others now that he no longer holds a position of power. His encounters with Yousef are ineffective because Alan accidentally shoots at a young Saudi boy when he is invited to

go hunting with Yousef, reminding his new acquaintances of America's traumatic military interventions in the Middle East. The obstacles to dialogue here are Alan's reluctance to show or inability to cope with weakness, as well as the difficulty he experiences in transcending the negative connotation of his nationality and past instances of neo-colonial actions. This indicates that a simple removal of neo-colonial thinking underpinned by the decline of imperial powers does not guarantee more productive engagements in the global public sphere.

In fact, the imagined encounters in *A Hologram for the King* play out the distinct lack of a coherent framework able to facilitate such engagements that is not worryingly indebted to detrimental discourses. Hanging over the imagined encounters like a nostalgic spectre, neo-colonial stereotypes appear throughout the novel as a comfort zone from which individual participants have emerged but for which they have no viable alternative. Praising the confidence of the Europeans who colonized the Americas, a businessman treats Alan to a lament of the "nation of doubters, worriers, overthinkers" that the United States has become (12). Alan seeks to distance himself from this newfound failure and decline, wishing instead for "the simplicity of being who he was: no one" (252). As a result of his disavowing of a strong U.S. identity, Yousef and his friends are happy to embrace Alan until the first sign of trouble, at which point his misstep is integrated into a long-held mistrust of the West and the United States in particular. Atif, one of Yousef's friends, even maintains "the possibility that Alan was CIA" (252). Despite his inability to perform the associated role, Alan is thus continually re-embedded into the dynamics of power that mark the history of the West's interventions in the rest of the world. After the shooting, Yousef distances himself from Alan and says: "Give me some time. I have to remember what I like about you" (262).

In the narrative, the protagonist's identity crisis is further exacerbated and externalized in the form of a lump in his neck that becomes intricately linked to his lack of self-confidence, weighing him down in his endeavours. Fantasizing about its removal, he imagines once more taking up the confident role of the American businessman trading in a distant land: "He was a new man, a vital man. They knew he had gotten the job done. He'd fixed what needed to be fixed, he'd paved the way for their success, he was again captain of the ship" (199). It is unclear, however, whether the ship will map out uncharted territory by allowing Alan to develop more productive relationships with

those around him, or whether it will set course along the familiar and detrimental neo-colonial flows of power. The novel's close may seem to suggest the latter, in that the protagonist decides to keep waiting in KAEC for the king to visit and provide him with the opportunity to prove himself as the influential American businessman of old, even if the original contract for communications technology goes to a Chinese IT firm: "So he would stay. He had to. Otherwise who would be here when the King came again?" (312). However, because the story's ending continues the waiting rather than concluding it, the course Alan's trajectory will take remains undecided.

The endless waiting that pervades the novel and that is perpetuated by its ending resonates strongly with the story's epigraph, taken from Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, which reads "It is not every day that we are needed" (1). This quotation sheds light on the burden placed upon Alan by his waiting to fulfil some kind of new role following the decline of the United States on the global stage. In this scene of Beckett's play, the two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, are prompted to make their time spent waiting worthwhile by responding to Pozzo's cry for help after he falls to the ground:

Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! Let us do something while we have the chance. It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears. But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us! (71-72)

This additional context throws up a less obvious interpretation of the epigraph in *A Hologram for the King*: the emphasis is not so much on Alan's being superfluous as this being a moment of opportunity waiting to be grasped. In Beckett's play, Vladimir recognizes this, at least in theory, as a moment when, after all their waiting, they have a chance to do something meaningful, to help another and, in the character's lofty terms, thereby demonstrate the bond that ties together all of mankind. In Alan's case, the opportunity afforded is one of reinventing the neo-colonial theatre of roles that governs his relationship to others. For most of the novel, much like in Beckett's play, this opportunity is squandered because the protagonist's insecurity allows him to be defined

by others, a process that relies heavily on reinstating neo-colonial dynamics even after they have been dismantled by undermining the United States' position of power.

At first sight, Alan manages to glean some hope in the final chapters when he meets Zahra Hakem, a surgeon of mixed roots working in the Kingdom, with whom he connects on a more intimate level after she has removed the symbolic lump on his neck. His relationship with Zahra is not burdened by the national or individual flaws that have made their lives difficult. They explain how they both came to be in Saudi Arabia, tell one another about their children, discuss their fears and insecurities, and share a necessarily imperfect but significant moment of intimacy (285-301). At the same time, this seemingly positive encounter is only made possible because both characters have relinquished any aspiration to being something greater than their individual flawed selves. Stripped of the bluster of neo-colonial power dynamics, the chaotic transnational space within which Alan and Zahra circulate is filled with disillusioned individuals. Their relationship brings together the protagonist's general disillusionment as well as his eventual acceptance of his physical and metaphorical impotence: "They were so in love with the world, and disappointed in every aspect of it" (303). The fact that Alan decides to keep waiting for the king, even after King Abdullah came and went once without making a deal, provides another resonance between *A Hologram for the King* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Curtis Brooks' conclusion concerning Beckett's piece is equally valid with regard to Eggers's novel: the central event that would give meaning to the narrative never occurs (297). Moreover, Alan's choice to remain in waiting is not a hopeful anticipation of opportunity, but a decision made in desperation despite the king having visited once, the protagonist not having made a deal, and the prospect of a future deal evaporating as the king strikes deals with Alan's competitors. As in his relationship with Zahra, therefore, Alan decides that he will similarly accept the failure to get anything more out of his relationship with the king other than endless waiting and disappointment. In "The Solution as Problem: Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*," Rolf Breuer explains how the waiting itself becomes an insurmountable problem in *Waiting for Godot* (230). Alan's choice to wait for the king despite the clear indication that it is in vain is no less problematic. It is a refusal to move on and an acceptance of forever being stuck in limbo, unwilling and unable to think beyond the role he is no longer able to perform.

The implications of this analysis of *A Hologram for the King* for my re-reading of Eggers's testimonial projects is twofold. First, the novel explores a type of cross-cultural encounter that is stripped of its explicit neo-colonial inflections. Its imagining of these encounters is no less pessimistic than those in *You Shall Know Our Velocity* or "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly." Their failure is different though, in that what is shown is the lack of available discursive tools to transcend those exclusionary and divisive global frameworks into which current efforts to engage across cultural boundaries so easily slot. Stripped of its familiar but detrimental neo-colonial inflections, the transnational public sphere is not so much brimming with cross-cultural possibilities as it is paralysed by disillusionment and inertia. Second, with the grand narratives thus removed from the equation, the singularly positive relationship to emerge from Alan's trip to Saudi Arabia instils disappointment rather than inspiring hope. Alan and Zahra's positive encounter is no lofty example of cosmopolitan human connection, as it is one in which they find in each other the comfort to no longer aspire to be more than their failed selves, to have to "represent" mankind, to use Beckett's words. The suggestion is thus that combatting negative discourses may not be enough in and of itself to cultivate the types of radically productive energy which human rights culture imagines as deriving from cross-cultural encounters. This resonates quite clearly with the limitations of the rights-work that can be performed by personal narratives, which have been shown to be equally ill-equipped as a means of dealing with such discourses. What if, in other words, the human rights narrative does not have the cultural clout to engender the type of generalization human rights aspires to in a global public sphere that is no longer governed by the neo-colonial dynamics that instigated it?

4.5 Re-reading *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun*

The questions raised by this analysis of Eggers's *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly" and *A Hologram for the King*, gain further resonance when confronted with the collaborative testimonial projects undertaken by the same author. To what extent do the testimonies of Deng and Zeitoun survive their mediation

into the global public sphere of human rights culture? How do they fare against the competing discourses whose pernicious impact is exposed in Eggers's fictional works? Can the individualism at the heart of human rights-work undertaken by *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun* do enough to combat the collective stereotyping that has long been the stock-in-trade of global power dynamics? How do personal narratives cope with the unstable transnational arena explored in *A Hologram for the King* once their careful textual, paratextual, and extra-textual negotiations have broken down some of the neo-colonial thinking that structures cross-cultural encounters? Finally, how do the tenets of human rights culture mesh with the legalistic nature of its legislative and institutional sides? These questions have asserted themselves in many of the preceding analyses in this dissertation, and the sustained textual attention to the cross-cultural encounters imagined in Eggers's fictional work provides the tools to throw them into sharp relief.

What Is the What offers an interesting case in point to start answering a number of these pertinent questions. In the run-up to his airlift to the United States, Valentino spends a considerable amount of time in a refugee camp called Kakuma. The refugee camp is presented as a type of transnational limbo that is no-longer-African-but-not-yet-America: "Kakuma was nowhere. *Kakuma* was, we were first told, the Kenyan word for nowhere. No matter the meaning of the word, the place was not a place. It was a kind of purgatory. . . there was nothing for miles, it seemed, so we became dependent on the UN for everything" (373-74). From this place of transition, Valentino begins the process of finding his way into the West. Part of the application process to Western aid agencies organizing the transferral of people from Kakuma to the United States involves Valentino providing a written version of his life story. It is worth quoting the protagonist's reflections on the application process in full, as it is, in a way, a meta-analysis of the role of personal narratives in human rights culture:

The first step in leaving Kakuma was the writing of our autobiographies. The UNHCR and the United States wanted to know where we had come from, what we had endured. We were to write our stories in English, or if we could not write adequately in English, we could have someone write it for us. We were asked to write about the civil war, about losing our families, about our lives in the camps. Why do you want to leave Kakuma? They asked. Are you afraid to return to Sudan,

even if there is peace? We knew that those who felt persecuted in Kakuma or Sudan would be given special consideration. . . . Whichever strategy we applied, we knew that our stories had to be well told, that we needed to remember all that we had seen and done; no deprivation was insignificant (485).

Valentino makes at least four noteworthy observations in this paragraph, all of which deserve further scrutiny. The first is that his narrative must be in English. The second is that the focus of his statement needs to be on what and how much he has suffered. The third is that it must demonstrate a continued threat of persecution or danger. The fourth and final observation is his understanding of the need to present a well-crafted and seemingly complete record of himself as a victim in order for the process to be successful.

The language requirement may seem trivial, but it goes to the heart of the issue of mediation that has plagued the rights-work undertaken by personal narratives since the slave narratives of Douglass and Jacobs analysed in the second chapter. If one accepts that South Sudan has some of the worst educational records in the world, it seems likely that many of the young refugees who would be dubbed the “Lost Boys of Sudan” required some level of help in turning their stories into a fluent and compelling English text.¹⁵ Some, like Deng, further develop their autobiographies into activism by soliciting additional mediation from author-activists such as Eggers. A double process is thereby instated whereby traumatic pasts are rendered in the correct language and format required for the disempowered subject to be recognized within the discourse of human rights and then later mediated further so as to be made amenable to a Western audience as a broader rights-space creating tool. The first gains relevance in light of the practice, illustrated by Verdirame and Harrell-Bond’s *Rights in Exile*, of victims’ personal narratives not meeting the legalistic discourse-requirements of human rights processes (19). Initial mediation is required, therefore, by aid workers and other experts able to

¹⁵ On its website, UNICEF reports on the dire educational situation in the region: “The adult literacy rate stands at a mere 27 per cent, and 70 per cent of children aged 6–17 years have never set foot in a classroom. The completion rate in primary schools is less than 10 per cent, one of the lowest in the world. Gender equality is another challenge, with only 33 per cent of girls in schools” (“South Sudan: Issue”).

translate the bare experiences of abuse suffered by victims into the sophisticated narrative that grants such experiences salience as human rights issues. The second mediation, the one for which Deng collaborated with Eggers, continues this process in a cultural sense, carefully negotiating the wider Western public's affective engagement with his story so as to render him as a human being entitled to human rights.

Part of this process involves cleansing the disempowered subject of potential complexity, even if only hypothetically, by emphasizing that the victim has unambiguously suffered. Talk of child soldiers in *What Is the What* broaches a notoriously problematic issue in this respect, but the protagonist is spared the complicated association with this problem when Valentino, entirely unprompted by his silent interlocutor, reassures readers at the start of chapter ten: "I was almost a soldier, Julian. I was saved by a massacre" (318). This passage essentially disentangles the protagonist from one of the more complicated issues *What Is the What* raises, while reaffirming the protagonist's suffering as entirely legitimate according to the precepts of human rights. The risk is that victims end up being slotted into a mould constructed according to the tenets of neo-colonial stereotypes, even if their affective engagement with the disempowered subject is subsequently mediated in an altogether different way within human rights culture. As such, readers may be cast in the type of role taken up by Rita in "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly," where their intentions are good but their modes of thinking are detrimental to their humanitarian intentions. The central difference between this short story and *What Is the What* is that the latter is told from the perspective of the disempowered subject, which does not allow for the kind of explicit exploration of the privileged's perspective taken up in "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly." On the one hand, as I have argued, the collaborative project makes use of the opportunities afforded by the novel form to break down many of the neo-colonial assumptions that frame Western engagements with the subaltern. What remains unaddressed, on the other hand, is Valentino's observation that the purpose of victim-narratives is to demonstrate and perpetuate their victimhood, as is illustrated by his reflections on the autobiography he must produce for aid agencies.

This reductive process, whereby complex lives and situations are channelled into singular narratives of victim-subjects, means disempowered subjects can never fully narrate their claims to the incorporated citizenship enjoyed by their readers. Consider

in this respect how *What Is the What* destabilizes stock images of victims in a wild and dangerous Africa finding salvation on the rights-protecting shores of Western havens. Much as this move is necessary and important in cultivating the reader's guarded empathy with Valentino, it is achieved by juxtaposing the protagonist's continued victimhood in the United States and his horrible experiences during the Second Sudanese Civil War. If Deng's rights-claim is made through the novel, therefore, it is only granted on the basis of his having properly performed the victim-role he is expected to play. In this respect, the evaluation of his performance is symbolically represented in the novel by his writing of his autobiography on "an examination booklet" (485). Valentino soon realizes that his story will be cross-examined and evaluated by UN aid workers and, following Eggers's narrativization of it, North-American readers, whose opinions will be swayed by how many traumatic memories he is able to incorporate and how convincingly he presents them. Despite this need to be exhaustive, he concludes that the focus on the violent or miserable parts of his past means it would only ever be a "sliver version of the life I'd known" (485). One could suggest, therefore, that the more the disempowered subject's story is made illustrative and compelling for privileged readers through its focus on danger and deprivation, the less it is able to address the fully-fledged personhood to which victim-narrators are universally entitled as human beings according to the discourse of human rights. This is an important parallel to the abolitionist-(former) slave dynamic discussed in the second chapter, which centred on black writers' efforts to narrate more than simple victimhood in order to push the rights-space creating efforts of their narratives beyond claims to a bare humanity and into the realm of citizenship.

This is not to suggest that Eggers's involvement in writing *What Is the What* is not concerned with fully recognizing Deng by including him in the circle of rights-bearers rather than simply having him acknowledged by it. The issue is rather that human rights may be too rigid or underdeveloped as a discourse to make this possible. By this, I mean that human rights can recover victims as rights-bearing subjects only by appealing to idealized notions of what it means to be human, and has instituted highly stylized and regulated means of achieving that goal. Kennedy illustrates this point when he writes that human rights activists working on behalf of victims speak "in the language of universal commitments and interests" in order to convince the powerful

that they “must respect human rights not to protect the interests of these victims, but to respect the universal significance of rights themselves” (xvi).¹⁶ In the case of *What Is the What*, this means that the novel carefully negotiates the reader’s acceptance of Deng as a fully-fledged human being, but neither finds nor offers any means of allowing that recognition to take place at anything other than a theoretical level. The analysis of *Hologram for the King* can illuminate this further with its pessimistic imagining of the transnational public sphere stripped of yet haunted by its familiar dynamics. Once he has been recovered from the stereotypical role of the silent African victim, Valentino starts resembling Alan in the sense that the lack of a neo-colonial determinant turns the characters into floating signifiers. Boxall suggests as much when he notes that *What Is the What* is a “testing of the capacity of global culture to provide new forms in which to express postnational identity, after African decolonisation” (174). The cultural system of meaning-creation available at this stage is that of human rights discourse, which sketches the characters along the broad lines of a universal humanity but does little to colour that sketch with anything but predictable elements. In this sense, there may be little difference between victims collectively determined by neo-colonial thinking and individual subjects recovered as idealized humans stripped of their complexity by human rights discourse.

At this point, it is worth bringing *Zeitoun* into the discussion, as its rights-work relies heavily on the framework of basic humanity drawn up by human rights in its pursuit of a different kind of affective engagement with its readers. As I have argued, this process is deeply invested in its ability to force the reader to construct the abstract “human” in human rights as a means of maintaining their relationship with the protagonist once

¹⁶ Kennedy’s further observations also resonate with my analysis of *What Is the What*:

The vocabulary and institutional practice of human rights promotion propagates an unduly abstract idea about people, politics, and society. A one-size-fits-all emancipatory practice underrecognizes particularity and reduces the possibility for variation. This claim is not that human rights are too “individualistic.” Rather, the claim is that the “person,” as well as the “group,” imagined and brought to life by human rights agitation is both abstract and general in ways which have bad consequences (13).

the narrative's events and tone radically shift in the second half. The question then becomes whether such an approach can ever fully integrate the protagonist into the hegemony, or whether the process of increasing abstraction in the narrative's affective appeal leads away from the complexity of the character's experiences. Indeed, it was precisely my point in the third chapter that the recovery of Zeitoun as a person involves a real risk of cleansing him from that which makes him a target for rights abuses in the first place. In such a case, readers only relate to and recognize the disempowered subject on an abstract level without either side coming to terms with their incommensurable alterity. As such, it becomes enough to read the narrative and conclude that what happened to Zeitoun in the extra-legal space of post-Katrina New Orleans was wrong and that human beings in general should be spared such horrendous treatment.

The protagonist is thus recovered in the eyes of the reader on universalist grounds, but their gaze is simultaneously averted from the racial profiling that led to his arrest and abuse. This process is dangerously close to the type of hierarchy-reinforcing charity in which Will and Hand engage in *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, by which disempowered subjects are stripped of their complexity in order to become abstract human receptacles for Western charity. This is not to suggest that *Zeitoun* actively promotes such a process, but rather that by pursuing rights-work along the lines set out by human rights culture it risks inscribing the recognition of the protagonist into the same type of imaginative dynamic that pervades the detrimental discourse of neo-colonialism. The point is thus not that *Zeitoun* actively pursues neo-colonial charity, but that the reliance on constructing an ideal human for the reader to engage with in the discursive space of the novel may not be altogether that much different from the catachresis deployed to "other" the subaltern. I use "catachresis" here in the sense that Spivak elaborates on in "Practical Politics of the Open End." There, she uses catachresis to refer to master words that transform particular subjects through sweeping definitions for which there are no literal referents, such as "true worker" or "true woman" (104).¹⁷ In this context, it is

¹⁷ Writing about Spivak's use of the term, Stephen Morton notes that such catachresis are abusive in that the particularity of entire groups of people is thus plastered over by a singular definition (35). In the case of

illuminating to juxtapose the idealized human that emerges from the affective process in *Zeitoun* and the deprived collective that Will and Hand fail to engage with but to which they give liberally. It suggests that simply recognizing Zeitoun as a human being to whom rights should be extended may not get him started on the long road to inclusion in the hegemony, but may constitute yet another deferral of such an entry.

In order to dig into this issue, it is worth recalling the place of the nation state in *Zeitoun* as a means of understanding just how feeble the alternative offered by human rights discourse is in its attempt at humanizing and incorporating, to use Slaughter's term, the protagonist. In the narrative, the United States' traditional hero-role is slowly deconstructed as its inept and misguided response to Hurricane Katrina gives rise to rights violations. As such, the nation state that Slaughter establishes as being at the core of granting full rights and personhood to individuals by making them incorporated citizens emerges in a crippled state from the text. This means that as Zeitoun's idealized humanity is secured through his enrolment in the transnational narrative of human rights, the avenue towards further integration and rights-bearing citizenship has been cut off. This is not so much a flaw of the collaborative testimonial work in which Eggers and Zeitoun are engaged, but a detrimental result of the tension between theory and practice that exists at the level of human rights as a discourse. Whereas the transnational narrative of human rights is still firmly anchored in the nation state when it comes to securing individual rights, personal narratives circulating within human rights culture often testify to the violation of their rights by nation states by invoking a discourse that supposedly transcends the national context within which their rights were violated. This leaves *Zeitoun* in the narratively impossible position of having to recast the United States as the villain rather than the hero at the cost of removing the protagonist's natural route towards protecting himself from villains, namely the one towards incorporated citizenship.

Like the postnational relationships imagined in *A Hologram for the King*, therefore, this shows how cross-cultural encounters facilitated by literary texts can be haunted by neo-

human rights, the question is thus whether the "human" in human rights constitutes such a singular definition and whether such a conception tolerates the complexity of victims such as Zeitoun.

colonial thinking, even after it has supposedly been dispelled. In *Zeitoun*, this manifests itself as human rights culture not having the discursive tools available to challenge and overcome the hierarchical, racialized thinking that strands its protagonist in the position of recognized-human-but-not-yet-citizen status. Consider in this respect the way in which the familiar, comforting framing of the character and his life that dominated the first half of the narrative, nationalism, reattaches itself to the character's identity following his release:

More than anything else, Zeitoun is simply happy to be free and in his city. . . . Every person is stronger now. Every person who was forgotten by God or country is now louder, more defiant, and more determined. They existed before, and they exist again, in the city of New Orleans and the United States of America. And Abdulrahman Zeitoun existed before, and exists again, in the city of New Orleans and the United States of America. He can only have faith that [sic] will never again be forgotten, denied, called by a name other than his own. He must trust, and he must have faith. (324)

This passage is problematically cyclical in its suggestion that everything is slowly returning to normal, given that the racialized modes of thinking at the heart of the abuses described, which had been normalized and internalized, are no closer to being altered. The narrative can only express hope at its close that the process of recognition, grounded in a bare and idealized humanity, that has taken place throughout its bifurcated plot holds sufficient sway with its readers to redress the detrimental divisive thinking that led to its protagonist's rights being abused. It places this hope, however, precisely in the nation state that it has shown to be at the heart of its protagonist's suffering. This is largely because it cannot help reintegrating the bare transnational imagining of Zeitoun as a human being in the second half into the discourse of the nation state, intersected by racialized thinking, that was used in the first half to ground him.

As such, *Zeitoun* echoes Eggers's fictional work in its rendering of a global public sphere unable to think beyond the nation state as a means of granting and protecting rights. However, whereas the author is able to critique this notion in the discursive spaces of *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, *A Hologram for the King*, and "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly," his collaborative testimonial work must seek to circumvent or

simply accept this restriction for the sake of the type of rights-work it performs. The obvious difference between the fictional and collaborative testimonial projects is that the latter's primary goal is to highlight the case of a particular disempowered subject, preferably in such a way that privileged readers are engaged in a non-appropriative way while they come to terms with a broader rights crisis. Even as *What Is the What* or *Zeitoun* seek to reshape the discourse of human rights in the ways outlined in chapter two, their acceptance of its established cultural channels and precepts embeds them in its strengths as well as its weaknesses. These weaknesses, as explored in Eggers's fictional work, largely revolve around the competing, neo-colonial discourses with which it struggles to cope and that consistently bind the equalizing transnational aspirations of human rights to age-old hierarchical international power relationships. The protagonists of *You Shall Know Our Velocity* and *A Hologram for the King* are noteworthy in this respect, whose cross-cultural encounters are marred because they are continuously re-shackled to the United States' neo-colonial position of power with all its attendant connotations in the global public sphere. The point here is not so much that the characters deliberately take on this role, indeed they are often unfairly forced into it, but that there is no alternative narrative available through which they can redefine their engagement with others. When it comes to the personal narratives of Zeitoun and Deng, this becomes especially acute. Human rights culture is largely pre-occupied with gaining recognition for disempowered subjects, while Eggers is focused on doing so in a way that emphasizes his collaborative partner's alterity and that challenges the reader to engage them in a less hierarchical way. These ambitions coalesce in terms of the shared humanity of the protagonist and privileged reader, around which basic rights are structured and at which level neo-colonial divisions are less prevalent. Once this shared humanity has been established through the affective relationship cultivated by the text, however, it must be integrated into the real global society, with its attendant flows of power, prejudice, and inequality, in order for textual engagement to translate into socio-political activism and change.

4.6 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have brought to the fore the obstacles and issues with which personal narratives circulating in human rights culture are faced, and which undermine the rights-work they seek to perform at various stages. The insertion of the textual process into the extra-textual matrices that govern their reception and impact can be illustrated most decisively through the collaborative dimension of *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun*. As I noted in the second chapter, the disempowered subject in whose name the personal narrative undertakes its rights-work is forced to compete for the socio-cultural capital required to effect change with the privileged author whose name alone appears on the title page. This is particularly damaging given that, as I have shown, these personal narratives so carefully negotiate and disavow the potentially hierarchical relationship between author and disempowered subject in the text and paratext. The fact that these narratives manage successfully to overcome baleful modes of thinking at a textual level, however, suggests that Eakin may be wrong to equate the nature of textual collaboration to its correlated appropriative erasure upon publication. He writes that a collaborative autobiography involves two “I” speakers whose distinctive character is absorbed by the author whose name appears on the title page, thus reflecting the unequal relationship that exists between the two (176). As I have argued, this is expressly not the case in the careful collaborative texts produced by Eggers. *What Is the What*’s unique narrative voice pre-empts such a collapse at the textual level by making itself unidentifiable as either Eggers or Deng, thus preserving the alterity of both. *Zeitoun* also preserves the alterity of its protagonist through its shifting presentation of the protagonist, emphasized through the distance engendered by the narrative’s third person narration. The Voice of Witness series similarly preserves the identity of its victim-narrators at a textual level through its use of the diffuse identificatory model.

If appropriation occurs, it does so once the collaborative texts produced by Eggers and his disempowered collaborators circulate within human rights culture. At this point, the carefully crafted discursive space of the text is intersected by the various competing discourses with which the cross-cultural encounters portrayed in Eggers’s non-testimonial fictional works are confronted. Like the fate of the ideals of an open, egalitarian public sphere imagined by cosmopolitan theorists in these narratives, the

transition from the careful and considered affective engagement cultivated by the author's collaborative testimonial work into the extra-textual instability of the global public sphere does not inspire confidence. Taken out of the safe space created by the text and paratext, Eggers's relationship with disempowered others must struggle not to be defined by a culture that is liable to treat them fundamentally differently, despite the common humanity upon which the personal narrative's endeavour is based.

The extra-textual life of *Zeitoun* makes for a good case in point. The artistic success of the text in rendering its abused protagonist as a compelling, relatable human being to whom the text seeks to extend rights earned the author plaudits, some of which spread to the charity set up in Zeitoun's name as a means of resolving the lack of intercultural understanding that lay at the heart of his ordeal. Once the protagonist was revealed to be a more complex and less likeable character, however, as I discussed in the second chapter, the rights-work being performed by the narrative's success fell down. The Zeitoun Foundation was closed down as a result of mounting criticism and the author now refuses to speak about *Zeitoun* or to answer any questions about the issues concerning its protagonist and its charity.¹⁸ John Simerman of the *Times-Picayune*, a New Orleans-based newspaper, picked up the story and wrote that the entire situation leaves Eggers in what he calls a "literary pickle" over his "tender depiction" of Zeitoun's story. The author recovered from this ordeal, however, and continues to publish successful novels and, through his popularity and success, fund further human rights-work, such as the Voice of Witness series. The energy and activism relating directly to Zeitoun's story, however, ran out of steam as a result of the scandal surrounding its protagonist, even if racial profiling is no less of an issue because of it. This shows that while the

¹⁸ The previous discussion of Victoria Patterson's article for *Salon.com* is an example of how the abuse of the victim's rights can be disqualified because they are unable to live up to the strictly defined role of absolute innocence allotted to disempowered subjects in human rights culture. Edward Champion writes about Eggers's refusal to comment on the situation in an article for *Edrants.com*, which also has a video of the author avoiding the question at a book award ceremony ("Dave Eggers, National Book Award Finalist, Refuses to Answer About Abdulrahman Zeitoun's Violent Assaults"). The website also ran an investigation by the same author into the Zeitoun Foundation's lack of transparency with regard to how it spent its donations ("The Zeitoun Foundation's Finances: An Investigation").

privileged Western author claims credit for and builds on the success of *Zeitoun*, the risk lies entirely with its disempowered protagonist. Much as the crimes Zeitoun actually committed make him less likeable as a character, that does not make the crimes for which he was wrongfully detained and for which his rights were abused any less wrong. Nevertheless, Zeitoun's rights claim and recognition, both for himself and others affected by similar racial discrimination, hinge on his ability to perform the role of absolute innocence imposed by human rights culture. At the same time, however, the author's ability to fund future rights-work or indeed advance his own literary career are seemingly bound by no such restrictions.

Finally, it is worth considering the fate of the rights-work performed by *What Is the What*, as its protagonist has not been affected by a similar scandal but has nonetheless run into the limitations of the energy and momentum generated by personal narratives within human rights culture. In this case too, the author's accumulated socio-cultural capital, facilitated by his sole authorship on the book's cover, ensures his continued support for worthy human rights causes as well as the success of his future output. The Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, however, must fight a perpetual battle for salience, made harder now that the initial burst of interest following the publication of *What Is the What* a decade ago has somewhat faded. The website for the foundation speaks of "[f]inancial strains and subsequent austerity measures" ("Foundation History"), and this at a time when South Sudan is faced with renewed political turmoil impacting on the foundation's work: "political turmoil in South Sudan directly affects market supply and demand, which raises price [sic] of local commodities. The political unrest has made it more expensive to access and transport goods during the school year" ("Foundation History"). The issue here is once again that the privileged author's work is not affected by the human rights crisis to which he helps testify, whereas the disempowered subject's ability to address that crisis is undermined by its being perpetuated. Even if Deng's position in South Sudan has markedly improved for the better, as he is now the minister for education in the Northern region of Bahr el-Ghazal, his effectiveness is still largely determined by the extent to which he can maintain his salience and success in the West. Eggers's *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun* thus are undoubtedly successful in gaining recognition for their respective protagonists' rights-claims at an inter-personal level through the deft deployment of the text's discursive space. However, once this

collaborative commitment enters the global public sphere, it becomes clear that author and subject follow markedly different trajectories and that the latter's benefit remains both temporary and marginal.

An analysis of Eggers's fictional works helped bring this into focus, as those works tend to foreground the fraught nature of cross-cultural encounters. They do so by creating discursive spaces in which those well-intentioned encounters are played out within a global public sphere intersected by unequal power dynamics and neo-colonial prejudices. In *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, the protagonist's humanitarian impulses are consistently recast as hierarchy-reinforcing charity that close down any opportunity for cross-cultural engagement. As a result, Will and Hand remain oblivious to the particularity of the disempowered subjects they encounter, who in turn cast the protagonists in the role of the typical American humanitarian and activist rather than seeing them for the troubled individuals they are. In "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly," Rita's cross-cultural dialogue with Kassim is even more explicitly inflected by neo-colonial thinking to such an extent that she is made blind for most of the story to the forces of inequality that disenfranchise him. Once she recovers some of her humanitarian intentions from these detrimental inflections, moreover, she finds herself powerless to address what she now understands as being the major challenges facing the disempowered subjects she encounters during her hike. Finally, my analysis of *A Hologram for the King* brings into focus how the global public sphere remains haunted by its neo-colonial foundations so long as it does not have a strong narrative able to challenge and supplant it. The protagonist embodies this point. Alan's weakness as a character in this respect is what causes him to be consistently recast as the powerful, interventionist, and malignant force he no longer feels he is, leaving him impotent with regard to how he should engage with others.

Chief amongst the subversive complications brought into focus by these analyses, therefore, is the persistence of neo-colonial modes of thinking that reinforce or reinstate at every turn those barriers that the rights-claiming process seeks to break down. Closely related to this are the strictly defined roles of the innocent victim, heroic activist, and evil villain that actors in human rights culture must take up unambiguously. These roles easily slot into the familiar hierarchical thinking in which the subaltern is deprived of agency and becomes a speechless vessel for the privileged's

charitable impulses. By throwing these points into relief, it became possible to trace the extent to which his collaborative testimonial work is affected by the same problems. *What Is the What*, for all its careful management of the type of empathy it engenders, channels its narrative efforts through two intersecting storylines in which Valentino takes up the role of the unheard victim. This is not to deny that Eggers's well-crafted narrative presents the victim in such a way that Valentino is made to represent more than the sum of the victimization he describes. However, as the protagonist himself explains, he understands that the function of his personal narrative is to emphasize his victimhood by phrasing his suffering in a predetermined code. The danger is, as I have argued, that once this code is taken out of its textual context, it will be deciphered differently by a global rights culture that is not designed to counteract modes of interpretation that read Deng's narrative in terms of far less fruitful discourses. Indeed, while detaching Valentino from the stock image of the African-in-need may be productive as part of the textual process to imagine a postnational and affectively valuable identity for the character, it may subsequently leave the protagonist unable to claim his full humanity outside the text given that, as Slaughter argues, nation states are still at the heart of the rights-claiming process. *Zeitoun* is particularly affected by this, as it relies heavily on human rights' conception of a shared humanity entitled to certain universal rights. As such, my discussion reveals the broader extent to which the carefully crafted textual space in which privileged readers and disempowered subjects meet clashes with the less accommodating extra-textual reality into which personal narratives inevitably must reach if they are to effect real change.

Conclusion

It has become abundantly clear that Eggers's oeuvre and activism are deeply bound up with the prominent discourse of human rights. Whether it be the Amnesty International Chair with which I began this dissertation or the explicit labelling of the Voice of Witness series as a human rights project, Eggers's (extra-)textual activism confirms the notion that human rights, as a prominent legal-political framework, shapes author-activism in the contemporary American cultural field. It is tempting to focus exclusively on the ways in which his activism is shaped by the human rights project. In this sense, recent scholarship in the field of human rights and literature provides a cue for a reconceptualization of human rights as comprising a significant cultural dimension. This culture includes the field within which personal narratives such as Eggers's circulate in service of the human rights movement, as well as the opportunities and restrictions placed upon those narratives by the tenets of that movement.

However, if recent scholarship has focused on the ways in which such activism is shaped by the culture of human rights, this study has uncovered a more multifarious and mutually inflecting relationship. It demonstrated that he also positions himself and his works within that culture in a way that allows him to serve better those disempowered others whose voices and rights he seeks to amplify. My analyses have highlighted how Eggers engineers the narrative voice, focalization, motifs, and dramatic tension in his collaborative testimonial works as a means of directing the reader's engagement with the text's affective charge. Often, these interventions are geared towards preventing appropriative or hierarchy-reinforcing readings that would reinsert the eminently inter-personal aspect of such narratives into abstracted neo-colonial stereotypes. At the same time, Eggers's efforts to preserve and facilitate the capacity of

the individual human being's story to effect real change coincides with the core principles of human rights culture. The complexity of this relationship between Eggers and human rights, the nexus of which is the connection between narrative form and the politics of rights, explains how it is that he can be said to contribute to the human rights project.

In doing so, Eggers shows a marked preference for the personal narrative form, through which he believes broader crises can be illuminated and individual rights can be (re)claimed. He contends that “[y]ou have to focus on the day-to-day work as opposed to the theoretical and more frustrating work, where you know what needs to change but cannot effect that change” (qtd. in Bex and Craps 567). The historical comparison to previous uses of the personal narrative as a rights-claiming tool in the nineteenth century by (former) slaves threw up intriguing parallels and differences in this respect. Contemporary victim-subjects are engaged in a struggle for salience and recognition both rendered possible and at times more difficult by the central tenets of human rights culture. Eggers's role in this process is critical as a means of making the narrative amenable to a Western audience, but also risks obfuscating the very reasons his intervention is necessary. Whereas Douglass's, Jacobs's, Washington's, and – perhaps most of all – Du Bois's adaptation of narrative form for political ends proved remarkably similar, it was also clear that they saw the personal narrative as a means of addressing precisely those “theoretical” and systemic concerns that Eggers claims to treat peripherally. If narrative is thus an essential part of the politics of rights, the form of that narrative betrays the treacherous road towards social, cultural, and political change treaded by individual subjects and their testimonies

The rest of the author's oeuvre, such as *You Shall Know Our Velocity* or *A Hologram for the King*, exposed the risks of operating under the radar of such theoretical or systemic concerns. This constituted a significant qualification to the positive story of the mutually beneficial engagement between human rights and Eggers. It became apparent that the flaws, problems, and obstacles of the human rights project necessarily weigh on the type of cross-cultural engagement upon which the author's activism relies. This tempers the enthusiasm expressed by Eggers about the extent to which his highly personalized activism, in the form of personal narratives, can bypass the seemingly immutable systemic problems that spawn human rights crises, by focusing attention on

individual victims and their right to rights. Fundamentally, this dissertation has focused on this discrepancy between the success Eggers can achieve at that day-to-day level by harnessing, as Voice of Witness would have it, the power of the story and the limits of that success in the face of extra-textual forces that threaten to overpower the text's role within a global public sphere of which human rights culture is only a part.

Chapter one sought carefully to embed Eggers within a broad conception of human rights that included the cultural dimension against which the author's texts are clearly positioned. If Eggers's collaborative testimonial work for *Zeitoun*, *What Is the What*, or the Voice of Witness series earned him Ghent University's Amnesty International Chair in 2015, this chapter explained why that work warranted the label of human rights activism in the first place. In order to do so, it proved useful to consider the differences between legal-political iterations of human rights and cultural engagement with the ideas of the human rights project. Despite sharing the basic premise of universal rights, it became clear that there is a distinctive human rights culture whose practices differ from more formalized legal structures that govern international human rights law. By writing the individual traumas of victims as violations of a person's basic rights, Eggers clearly subscribes to human rights culture's core practice of using the testimonies of disempowered subjects to affectively engage readers and recruit them in the push to effect change on their behalf. At the same time, Eggers's embedding in human rights culture raised questions as to what the impact is of such privileged mediation on the relationship between rights-bearers and disempowered others.

The second chapter took up these questions by considering Eggers's use of the personal narrative in a historical sense, comparing it to canonical slave narratives by Douglass and Jacobs as well as instances of black authorship and activism after Emancipation by Washington and Du Bois. On a textual and paratextual level, this chapter mapped a number of critical formal continuities in "deep time" that mark the personal narrative's use as a rights-space creating tool. As far as the personal narrative is concerned, the adaptation of these formal continuities, such as latching on to popular narrative patterns in the *Bildungsroman* or the familiar affective dimension of the sentimental novel, is intricately linked to the social and political struggle for rights. In the contemporary context, however, Eggers engages in particular with the formal affordances of human rights culture, which stipulates, validates, and seeks to guarantee

a specific narrative path to salience for testifying victims in order for them to advocate their own and similar victims' rights. On an extra-textual level, the limits of the personal narrative's narrative force came up against the silencing dynamics of the rights-bearing community whose affect and engagement it seeks to broker. In their own ways, the well-intentioned and necessary interventions by abolitionists and Eggers alike adversely impacted on the disempowered subject's ability to articulate fully their rights-claim, even as it provided them with the necessary platform and salience to be heard.

Chapter three homed in on the mechanics of affect in Eggers's personal narratives in order to see how they confronted these extra-textual concerns at a textual level. I concluded that his personal narratives cultivate forms of identification that lead away from appropriation or hierarchy-reinforcing sympathy. In *What Is the What*, the relationship between the text and paratext as well as the intriguing narrative middle voice of Valentino made up a series of compelling identificatory cues that encouraged the reader to inhabit the space of Valentino's trauma without appropriating his voice or victimhood. The Voice of Witness series, in turn, consistently checked the reader's identificatory impulses by weaving a complex tapestry of voices testifying to their lived experiences of a single human rights crisis. As a result of this, the diffuse identification stimulated by collections such as *Out of Exile* or *Voices from the Storm* invites readers to create a diverse and intricate picture of recent crises in South Sudan and New Orleans respectively. *Zeitoun* goes furthest when it comes to directing the reader's affective engagement with the testimonial subject, providing multiple narrative perspectives on his story as well as two versions of the protagonist that are difficult to reconcile affectively. In this case, the disidentification caused by the bifurcated plot navigates the reader towards identifying with Zeitoun as the "human" in human rights, whose rights deserve protecting, while emphasizing the unavailability of his victim-experiences for straightforward identification. In each of these cases, however, problems persisted with regard to allowing the reader to deny their complicity in the crises to which the narratives testify. Similarly, the extra-textual issues by which a narrative such as *Zeitoun* is beset negatively inflect the careful textual work conducted by the story. These issues expose the precariousness of relying on texts and stories as cornerstones of human rights culture. If Eggers's oeuvre shows the power of narrative form in relation to the politics of rights, it also exposes its vulnerability to countervailing extra-textual forces.

The final chapter is devoted precisely to mapping some of the countervailing discourses with which human rights culture contends in the global public sphere, and which are poignantly played out in Eggers's fictional works. These works confront the type of cross-cultural engagement imagined in Eggers's collaborative testimonial work with the impact countervailing discourses have on each party in such a cosmopolitan dialogue. *You Shall Know Our Velocity* stages cross-cultural encounters in which Western charity comes to inflect negatively the broader *rapprochement* sought after by a human rights project intent on equalising the relationship between the West and the rest. It is especially significant that the two protagonists, Will and Hand, find that they are unable to overcome the existing roles that are stock-in-trade of neo-colonialism in approaching disempowered others. Rita's experiences in "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly" are marred by these same neo-colonial resonances, even as she confronts them after the fact and thereby prompts the reader to reflect on how blind she had been to the nature of the inequality she encountered on her hike. This is all the more poignant because, throughout the story, Rita is shown to be kind-hearted and actively seeks to engage with others, much like the protagonists in *You Shall Know Our Velocity*. As such, blindness to the realities of inequality in these works stems not from a lack of individual compassion on the part of their protagonists, but from the way in which their cultural background and perceptions obfuscate inequality by supplanting egalitarian forms of engagement with self-satisfying acts of charity. Relatedly, the discursive space of *A Hologram for the King* imagines a global public sphere in which characters are seemingly unmoored from their national cultures with their attendant hierarchies. Even in this setting, however, the stock characters and roles of neo-colonialism continue to reimpose themselves. The novel exposes the lack of discursive tools available to the characters that would allow them to transcend those exclusionary and divisive global frameworks into which current efforts to engage across cultural boundaries so easily slot. The question thereby emerged as to whether or not facilitating cross-cultural encounters is sufficient as a means of moving towards a more egalitarian public sphere, which can rise above the divisions that have defined it in the past.

This contrast between the affective engagement suggested by the discursive spaces so meticulously crafted by the author and the more recalcitrant extra-textual global public sphere threw Eggers's penchant for collaborative work into sharp relief.

Throughout chapters two and three, the collaborative process emerged as providing hindrances and opportunities as a result of its complex layering of agency, authorship, and subjectivity. At the same time, a diachronic understanding of collaborative testimonial work raised questions about the extent to which the disempowered subject is also competing with the privileged author when it comes to accumulating the necessary and sustained socio-cultural capital to effect change. This is where the clash between the cosmopolitan faith in an open, egalitarian global public sphere and the failed cross-cultural encounters imagined in Eggers's fictional works come into play. Often, the favourable aspects of cross-cultural engagement in his work remain silent, as if to symbolize the extent to which verbalizing them within the global public sphere threatens their productivity and positive impact. This is the case both for Will's silent monologues in *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, Rita's revelatory insight at the end of "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly," and Valentino's silent stories throughout *What Is the What*.

As soon as these characters try to move their positive insights and intentions beyond the realms of their imaginations, they turn sour. Will's suffering becomes externalized in a hierarchy-reinforcing charity plot, Rita's understanding of Kassim's plight remains firmly grounded in a neo-colonial mode of thinking until the final scenes, and Valentino's actual, non-silent conversations with Powder and Tonya debase the transnational sentiment cultivated elsewhere in the narrative. The way in which the reader is engaged by *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun* could be seen in a similar light, whereby the affective rights-work undertaken during the reading process is painstakingly managed, but the aftermath of that reading process is less certain and more precarious. This was brought out quite specifically when it became clear that both the author and disempowered subject play for different stakes following the publication of their collaborative work. Readers are happy to accept Eggers's efforts in telling Deng's or Zeitoun's story as evidence of his literary brilliance and kind-heartedness, upon which basis his continued success and future activism is assured. The disempowered subject, however, must continue to struggle for salience against the forces that continuously seek to re-silence them.

In this respect, the privileged reader's insight and recognition of that subject may not prove to be enough to overcome the countervailing discourses that render the suffering

of others invisible or denies their importance. It remains unclear, in short, whether or not the affective momentum generated by successful cross-cultural collaborations at a textual level with privileged readers survives the transition into a book market and, more broadly, a human rights culture mediated by privileged actors. This conclusion suggests, therefore, that the relationship between human rights culture and literature that has risen to prominence deserves additional scrutiny to take into account the way in which it is inflected by other social, cultural, and political forces. As I have argued, this leads in part to considering human rights culture's lacking ability to confront and subvert the detrimental modes of thinking that undermine it at every turn. If in recent years the understanding of human rights has broadened to include the cultural dimensions of the human rights project, as Eggers's oeuvre illustrates, this dissertation shows that it is imperative for that broader conception of human rights and its attendant textual activism to be studied in conjunction with the rest of the global public sphere.

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