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Introduction

When the seeds for this project were first planted, I ordered more books. I knew that the root of the project would be Dave Eggers’s *What Is the What*, but I also knew that I would need more—more books about the history of Sudan, more books about refugee policy, more narratives from other Lost Boys, more books about narrative theory. As the books I ordered began arriving, the doorman of my building, Joseph Okujeni, began asking questions about my studies. After I explained my idea for this project, he sat there for a moment and then said, “Yes, but what does that have to do with English?”

Joseph, many people (reviewers, critics, professors, etc.) are not sure how to label *What Is the What*. It is the life narrative (thus far) of one man, Valentino Achak Deng. Deng is from Marial Bai, a village in southern Sudan. He became one of the many Lost Boys of Sudan—meaning that during the second Sudanese civil war (1983-2005), his village was attacked by the murahaleen (Arab militiamen) and he was separated from his parents. Beginning in 1987, Deng began a trek across Sudan to Ethiopia (1987-1991) and eventually to the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, where he spent ten years (1992-2001). In 2001, he was selected to be part of the United Nations program that resettled nearly 4,000 of these Lost Boys to various cities throughout the United States. All of this is chronicled in *What Is the What*, but the book begins in 2006, in Deng’s apartment in Atlanta, Georgia. The book is told in his voice in first
person narration, but it is written by Dave Eggers, an American author. It’s been called a “fictionalized memoir” and an act of “literary ventriloquism.” The title page terminology includes both “autobiography” and “novel.” I understand the frustration, or surprise, when encountering what seems to be a literary impossibility—or at least the possible beginnings of a new genre. However, my approach is a simpler one. All I would say, Joseph, is that *What Is the What* is written in English and it is a unique piece of literature—and for those reasons, it can—and should be—studied.

Joseph, I’ve read pieces where the author of this book, Dave Eggers, acknowledges that he had trouble writing it—or at least trouble shaping Valentino Achak Deng’s testimonies and memories into a readable narrative. With over twelve hours of taped interviews and hundreds of exchanged emails, the project took over three years to complete (“Interview with Dave Eggers and Valentino Achak Deng” pars.4-6). After three years and much frustration concerning the book’s form, Eggers considered making the book a novel. He hesitated at first, but he then reflected on all the great novels—novels specifically about war—that were inspirational and educational to him. Eggers writes: “[t]he books about war and upheaval that I’d turned to again and again, and that best (in my opinion) communicated the realities of war, were in fact novels”¹ (“It was just boys walking” par.32). *What Is the What is the* literary work about the “realities” of a war that the world still knows little about. It restores the pre-war vibrancy of Marial Bai, Deng’s village in southern Sudan, complete with a family and a young boy’s life with his best friends. It shows how all of
this, the image of life being lived, was taken away abruptly by war. The novel teaches; it answers questions; it interacts with the reader; it tackles supposed American ideals; it’s a call-to-arms. Perhaps it’s too early to call it a “great” novel—to put it beside *War and Peace*, or to make it part of the canon. But I ask, is it too early to examine Eggers’s careful and purposeful narrative construction? Moreover, if *What Is the What* suggests a new trend in “memoirs”—meaning books where readers can become *involved* outside of the book, like with the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation—shouldn’t we start exploring, now, *how* a book can accomplish this kind of response and proactive attitude from the reader?

Joseph, I believe that books have the power to invoke change. Literary critics Sidonie Smith and Kay Schaffer agree. In their study *Human Rights and Narrated Lives* they discuss how a memoir, *A Memoir of Solferino* (1859), ignited the adoption of the Geneva Convention of 1864 (Smith and Schaffer 29). They detail how authors used their words and books not only to bring light to human rights violations but to summon action. They offer five case studies from South Africa, Australia, Korea, United States prisons, and China. They show how books materialized as forms of underground resistance in apartheid South Africa in the 1980s and how narratives from and about the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 continue to emerge both inside and outside of China’s borders. While Smith and Schaffer’s examples certainly are encouraging and they support ideas about the power of narrative, southern Sudan, up to and during the second civil war (and before), was very different from South Africa and
China (from Smith and Schaffer’s examples). Valentino, as narrator, describes southern Sudan when he left it in 2001 in What Is the What:

In southern Sudan, we are by any estimation at least a few hundred years behind the industrialized world. Some sociologists, liberal ones, might take issue with the notion that one society is behind another, that there is a first world, a third. But southern Sudan is not of any of these worlds. Sudan is something else, and I cannot find apt comparison. There are few cars in southern Sudan. You can travel hundreds of miles without seeing a vehicle of any kind. There are only a handful of paved roads; I saw none while I lived there. One could fly a straight east-west line across the country and never pass over a home built of anything but grass and dirt. It is a primitive land, and I say that without any sense of shame. (Eggers 49)

While the second Sudanese civil war was happening, there were no southern Sudanese authors to write “resistance literature.” As young children, these men did not enjoy the luxuries of “paved roads,” much less a national, or even tribal, schooling system that was dedicated to their education and writing capabilities. Thus while What Is the What is written by an American author (all Lost Boy narratives and memoirs that have been published in the United States have an accompanying American author), the stories remain theirs—theirs to tell, theirs to share, and theirs to, hopefully, educate and inspire.
While this project’s focus is primarily Dave Egger’s *What Is the What*, in no way do I mean to suggest that Valentino Achak Deng’s story deserves privileging over any other Lost Boy’s story—published or not. However, I do think the relationship Deng built with Dave Eggers, along with Eggers’s meticulous shaping and construction of the narrative, deserves analysis and theorization. If anything, part of this project comes down to two seemingly simple questions: First, why did *What Is the What* sell exponentially more copies than any other Lost Boy memoir? Combining hardcover and trade paperback editions, the most recent figures for the number of copies sold for *What Is the What* are 355,635 copies. *They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky* (2005), a memoir by three Lost Boys and their American mentor, sold 57,699 copies (combined hardcover and paperback), and *God Grew Tired of Us* (2007), a memoir by John Bul Dau, a Lost Boy who was featured in the documentary with the same name, sold 16,807.² *What Is the What*’s higher sales numbers are due not only to Dave Eggers’s popularity (his first book, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, sold nearly one million copies), but the way in which he constructs the narrative, particularly his ability to bring the reader into the narrative. My second question, then, would be: what is the effect of *What Is the What*’s higher sales? These sales questions might seem superficial, but this is a statistical way to determine how many people have read a book. Or, to put it another way, how many people are more aware of both Sudan’s history and of the narratives behind the second Sudanese civil war because of this book?
This project investigates how the introduction of two individuals, one American author and one southern Sudanese refugee, led to a friendship, a book, and a non-profit foundation. The creation and final product of *What Is the What* is a learning experience—first between Deng and Eggers, and then, through the book, a learning experience between Deng, Eggers, and the reader. After examining the genre of memoir in a cultural context in Chapter One, the final two chapters explore how Eggers’s narrative construction pulls readers in (Chapter Two) only to force them out, into action, after the book ends (Chapter Three).

Joseph, when you asked to see my copy of *What Is the What*, you flipped through its tattered pages, careful not to disturb the hundreds of post-it notes that stick out haphazardly, and it seemed like you were trying to understand how exactly the book worked between this Sudanese man and this American author. After a long day at the library, trying to answer that question myself, I don’t recall being very articulate that afternoon. But now I would say this: Joseph, ultimately *What Is the What* is a work of literature that is about reclamation. The reclamation of one man’s story. The reclamation of place and space. The reclamation of the collaborative—of a community. As far as its relevance in my area of study, *What Is the What* is prime, evocative material for any student interested in the expanding genre of memoirs, for any student willing to examine a meticulously constructed narrative, for any student who wants to investigate the steps an author takes to bring a person into the text and transform them from a reader into an activist.
Chapter 1: A Narrative’s Narrative

For this project, it is necessary to trace both the development of Valentino Achak Deng and Dave Eggers’s friendship, and how that affected the shape of the narrative, as well as the recent history and boom of the memoir in the publishing industry. Exploring the story behind the journey to create What Is the What, meaning both Dave Eggers’s rise in the literary world and the relationship between two men, illuminates the intricate narrative construction and its ultimate power.

The Memoir and Dave Eggers

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, first time author Dave Eggers published his memoir, A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius (2000). Eggers’s memoir shows that over the past twenty years or so, the concept of “memoir” has undergone a significant transformation. As A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius is his first book, Eggers’s work follows a current trend where first time writers, young writers, write their “life” story, assuming believing that they have a worthwhile narrative to share. In fact, not too long ago, seeing “first time author” and “memoir” in the same sentence—and referring to the same book—was unlikely. Memoirs were reserved for end-of-life reflections, not for thirty year olds (Eggers’s age at the time of publication). In their work Reading Autobiography (2001), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson trace published life narratives through a historical perspective
beginning with St. Augustine’s *Confessions* (397 AD). Smith and Watson then chronicle the development and proliferation of life narratives, culminating in an exploration of the eighteenth century as “an explosion in both the kinds and the sheer numbers of life narratives” (97). The authors further elaborate on the development of life narratives (and narrators and authors) with analysis of “the romantic subject of lost illusions” (99), “the Bildungsroman and the bourgeois subject” (101), and “American subjects in the nineteenth century” (103), all of which are written towards the end of each author’s life. This is not the case in today’s memoir-obsessed publishing industry. In a recent edition of the *New York Times* bestseller list, eleven of the top twenty trade paperback nonfiction books were memoirs, none of which qualify as “end-of-life” reflections.³

The positive critical and popular reception of Eggers’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, therefore, not only speaks to readers’ acceptance of a transformed genre, but also their approval of a new author. Combining hardcover and paperback sales, *A Heartbreaking Work* sold 841,480 copies.⁴ As the *New York Review of Books* states, “*A Heartbreaking Work* turned up on best-seller lists the week it appeared and remained on them for months thereafter, winning rank as a cultural event (paperback rights brought a reported $1,400,000)” (DeMott par.3). The success of *A Heartbreaking Work* allowed Eggers creative—and financial—breathing room as an author. While *A Heartbreaking Work* was published by Simon & Schuster in hardcover and Random House in trade paperback, his next three works of fiction (*You Shall*
Know Our Velocity, How We Are Hungry, and What Is the What) were all published, in hardcover, by McSweeney’s, the independent publishing company he founded. Moreover, What Is the What was published six years after the breakout success of A Heartbreaking Work, giving Eggers ample time not only to establish himself as an author and found his own independent publishing company, but also to garner a large following of loyal readers and fans.

While this project is not an attempt to delve into a psychological exploration of a memoir’s appeal for today’s reader, this memoir boom must be acknowledged at least in a cultural context. Social historian Paula Fass tackles the enigma of memoirs in her recent essay, “The Memoir Problem.” She claims that “the ‘memoir problem’ is…widely and significantly inscribed in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century culture, in its literature, its social developments, and in how we seek to express and define the self in the contemporary world” (108). As a social historian, Fass outlines her interest in “transnational identities and global issues” (108). Her interests are reflected in the memoirs she chooses to discuss in her article, all of which are concerned with space, place, liminality, a desired sense of belonging, etc. While Eggers’s own memoir (A Heartbreaking Work) does not necessarily fit into those categories, What Is the What certainly does. Perhaps A Heartbreaking Work and What Is the What, the two works that currently bookend his book-length literary career, offer appropriate material to examine the continued transformation of the memoir as a genre. Moreover, What Is the What is an excellent example to use in order explore the
memoir’s position today, particularly in any ability it has to garner cultural power or influence on its readers.

In 2001, the resettlement of nearly 4,000 of the so-called Lost Boys of Sudan began in the United States. Once these southern Sudanese young men were resettled (I do not believe any would qualify as “boys”), Americans, with the help of a 60 Minutes II segment and human-interest stories in newspapers and magazines, began to take an avid interest in their harrowing stories. It wasn’t long before someone realized that the young men could capitalize on both the memoir boom and the resurgence of interest in documentaries—a resurgence due to the growing popularity in independent films as well as film festivals, particularly Sundance. In 2003, the first documentary about the Lost Boys, aptly titled The Lost Boys of Sudan, was released by American filmmakers Megan Mylan and Jon Shenk. In 2005, three resettled young men, with the help of their American mentor, wrote and published their memoir, They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky. In 2006, American documentarist Christopher Quinn released God Grew Tired of Us, a documentary chronicling the resettlement of three young men from the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya to Pittsburgh and Syracuse. In fact, God Grew Tired of Us premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and won both the Grand Jury Prize and the Audience Award in the documentary category.

Recognized as a powerful public speaker both in Africa and in Atlanta, Valentino Achak Deng was another resettled Lost Boy who desired to write a book in hopes to share his story more widely. In January 2003, with the help of Atlanta’s Lost
Boys Foundation founder Mary Williams, Valentino was introduced to Dave Eggers. Utilizing his talent as an author, his popularity amongst critics and readers, the continuing memoir boom, the pull-at-your-heartstrings Lost Boys media frenzy, and the testimony from Valentino Achak Deng, Dave Eggers began work on a three-year project for what would eventually become *What Is the What*.

The Creation of *What Is the What*

The book’s full title reads: *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng: A Novel*. Before reading the first line of the first chapter, readers immediately are confronted with somewhat of a conundrum, or at least an unusual title page. How is an autobiography also a novel? The story behind the writing of the book has been the topic of numerous interviews and articles. Dave Eggers, not surprisingly, offers the clearest reason for choosing fiction over nonfiction. In a published transcript of an interview with Melissa Block for National Public Radio, Eggers explains:

We set out to write a purely nonfictional book, but it was really restricting. For one thing Valentino was very young when all this began, six or seven years old, and there were big gaps of what he could remember of a given day, or a given period. So, to fill in some of these things, and some of the days or periods—a time like that, that’s based on my imagining, and other reports, and maybe a human-rights report or another Lost Boy’s account. A mixture of things. Then I would call...
Valentino and say, “Well, does this sound about right?” The freedom to do that enabled the book to get finished. (par. 8)

In a piece written for *The Guardian* (UK), Eggers re-emphasizes his respect for what qualifies as “nonfiction” and the boundaries he would not attempt to cross as an author, particularly concerning dialogue. He states: “my standards for what would qualify as non-fiction were strict; as a journalist, I was trained not to put any dialogue between quotation marks unless it was on tape. We had no such thing, and Valentino couldn’t remember who said what…and thus the book would be without any dialogue at all” (par. 29).

Eggers’s adherence to the rules of nonfiction writing and his choice to take the interviews and correspondence he had with Deng and transform them into a novel follow what was the great scandal of the publishing industry in 2006. In January 2006, eleven months before *What Is the What*’s publication in hardcover, James Frey’s “memoir” *A Million Little Pieces* was exposed for its fabrications and exaggerations. Moreover, Oprah Winfrey, one of the most powerful women in business and probably *the* most influential public figure for the publishing industry, dedicated an entire show to the scandal surrounding Frey’s book, a book she once championed and lent her name to as it was part of her wildly successful book club. In the course of the show’s hour, Ms. Winfrey grilled and interrogated Frey as if he were on trial, not on a talk show. A year and a half after this taping, Frey’s editor, Nan Talese, was at a literary event and still could not contain her emotions surrounding the taping of that show. A
writer from *Time* magazine reported from the literary convention in Texas stating:

“Talese took the opportunity to go after the queen of television [Oprah]. In an earlier discussion at the convention, Talese had already called Oprah’s slap-down of Frey on television ‘mean and self-serving’ and described it as an ambush” (Hylton par.2).

More than three years have passed since Frey’s appearance on *The Oprah Show*, and since that time, interesting details have emerged concerning how Frey first positioned his book to both his literary agent and his editor at Random House. In a June 2008 piece from *Vanity Fair*, the reporter writes: “[a]s he tells it today, Frey…sought to publish [the book] as fiction. ‘I sent the book to Kassie [his literary agent] as a novel….I was pretty clear. It’s a novel. I didn’t tell her it was a memoir. I told her it was a novel. I’m not sure what else I needed to say’” (Peretz par.23). However, after his agent sent the manuscript to eighteen editors, labeled as “fiction,” she got no offers. “But when told it was a true story, the industry said, ‘Well, let’s talk’” (par.24). Frey’s author questionnaire (a Q&A authors fill out a few months before publication for marketing purposes) even negates the label of “memoir.” *Vanity Fair* quotes the questionnaire where Frey wrote: “I think of this book more a work of art or literature than I do a work of memoir or autobiography” (par.26). After the discrepancies and exaggerations began to emerge, and especially after Oprah’s renunciation of him, Random House stopped any payments to Frey. *Vanity Fair* quotes a source that states that Frey’s lawyers:
threatened to go to the media with the material they now had, including Frey’s author questionnaire…and McDonald’s editorial memos. The complaint alleged that the memos demonstrated that McDonald had directed significant embellishment. According to the source Random House quickly resumed paying him. (Peretz par.48)

The *Vanity Fair* piece ends with the reporter questioning the integrity of the publishing industry. Peretz writes:

> It now turns out that it was something of an open secret in the publishing world that the industry had been complicit in the scandal, and that Frey, though he was not an innocent, had become a whipping boy. HarperCollins publisher Jonathan Burnham, who ultimately bought *Bright Shiny Morning* [Frey’s recent novel], for an estimated $1.5 million, says today, ‘There was a gap between what people were saying in public and in print, and what they were saying to each other privately.’ (par.61)

The reporter questions “where were such voices at the time, when so many articles were being written about Frey?” Judith Clain, a memoir editor at Little, Brown responds, saying “editors, as a general rule, keep their heads down.” Clain ends the interview, however, admitting, “it’s probably true that no one wants to alienate Oprah” (par.61).
My point here, in referencing what the literary world calls “Freygate,” is that, along with his journalistic background, Dave Eggers would never want What Is the What, or more importantly Valentino Achak Deng, to be subjected to what Frey endured. It not only would be emotionally draining and devastating for Deng, but it would steal the focus and attention of the all-important story they were both trying to tell. While Frey’s story was purportedly about one man’s drug addiction, Deng’s story involved nearly 4,000 other resettled Lost Boys and the millions of Sudanese that remained in refugee camps in Africa. Moreover, as founder of McSweeney’s, the independent house that published What Is the What, Eggers not only was the book’s author, he was the book’s editor as well. Unlike Frey, Eggers did not have to suffer through an editor’s comments, unwanted changes, or a forceful “suggestion” to label the book a memoir. Fresh off “Freygate,” Eggers and Deng could not risk calling the book a “memoir” when everyone (reporters, the publishing industry, and readers) was obsessed with what qualified as truth, rather than how one remembered an event.7

The Reception of What Is the What

The reviews for What Is the What were, by and large, extremely positive. The critics, of course, had to respond to Eggers’s unique decision to blend fact and fiction. Michiko Kakutani of The New York Times calls the book “a startling act of literary ventriloquism.” She continues, “the book is flawed by an odd decision on Mr. Eggers’s part to fictionalize Mr. Deng’s story—a curious choice, especially in the wake of the
uproar over James Frey’s fictionalized memoir.” Ultimately, however, she claims that “while we start out wondering what is real and what is not, it is a testament to the power of Mr. Deng’s experiences and Mr. Eggers’s ability to convey their essence in visceral terms that we gradually forget these schematics of composition” (Kakutani par.4). In a clever use of Eggers’s first book’s title, Ashley Makar of The American Book Review states: “[f]or a writer known for his metafictional ironies, Eggers exercises his signature style with restraint, accomplishing a heartbreaking feat of subjective witness” (30). The Journal of the American Academy on Child and Adolescent Psychiatry has a particularly interesting stance on the book. The reviewer begins by asking, “[s]hould fiction be reviewed in a scholarly publication such as ours?” He continues to explore the concept of fiction, stating that while reading the book he tried
to make sense of the distinctions between novel and autobiography, between memory and nonfiction….When either psychotherapy or a novel succeeds in patching together the fragmented narrative of someone’s life, the boundaries between therapist and patient or between author and character imperceptibly blend. (Martin 354-55)
Perhaps the most concise, yet most fitting, particularly for the focus of this chapter, comes from Francine Prose for The New York Times Book Review: “[i]ntense, straightforward, lit by lightning flashes of humor, wisdom and charm, Valentino’s
story — novel, autobiography, whatever — is an account of what it was like to be one of the Lost Boys of Sudan” (Prose par.4, emphasis mine).  

One reviewer took issue with What Is the What, particularly with Dave Eggers’s involvement. In a review for The New Republic, critic Lee Siegel writes: 

How strange for one man to think that he could write the story of another man, a real living man who is perfectly capable of telling his story himself—and then call it an autobiography. It is just one more instance of the accelerating mash-up of truth and falsehood in the culture, which mirrors and—who knows?—maybe even enables the manipulation of truth in politics. (par.38)

The problem with Siegel’s review is that he seems to have missed the “Preface” of What Is the What when Deng writes, “[t]his book began as part of my struggle to reach out to others through public speaking…but I wanted the world to know the truth of my whole existence…I wanted to reach out to a wider audience by telling the story of my life in book form” (xiii emphasis mine). Yes, Deng is “capable of telling his story himself” but in his “Preface” he admits he “was not a writer” making him incapable of writing his story himself. Siegel’s ignorant insistence that Deng should just “tell” his own story diminishes the hardships Deng continues to face, concerning obtaining an education in the United States. Moreover, Siegel diminishes Deng’s desire to reach as many people as possible. Clearly a collaboration with an established author will reach more people than a
speech at a community center. Finally, if there is a “manipulation of truth in politics” it comes from the manipulation of information, or the extreme lack of awareness, by American readers, viewers, and citizens concerning the on-goings of the rest of the world. As a “cultural critic,” perhaps Siegel is embarrassed that it took a novel by Dave Eggers to illuminate (broadly) the history and personal stories behind the second Sudanese civil war and the refugee experience in the United States rather than any of the news outlets for which he has written (The New Yorker, The New York Times, The Atlantic Monthly to name a few).

A Testimony and Its Witness

The relationship that Eggers and Deng built reaches far beyond author and subject or interviewer and interviewee. Both men were fully invested in the amplification of Deng’s story. In their book Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History (1991), literary theorist and critic Shoshana Felman and psychiatrist Dr. Dori Laub work with Holocaust survivors to examine the roles of testifier and a person who bears witness to a testimony. In his chapter titled “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” Dr. Dori Laub discusses how trauma survivors must exist with “an event that…has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore…continues into the present and is current in every respect.” In order to “undo this entrapment” Laub claims one must create a narrative out of the trauma. He writes:
a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially, of re-externalizing the event—has to be set in motion. This re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and transmit the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside. (Laub 69)

The relationship that Dave Eggers and Valentino Achak Deng fostered in order to write What Is the What mirrors the analysis behind Felman and Laub’s concept of testimony. If we accept Valentino as a man who chose to testify to his experience, Dave Eggers is the individual who accepted the responsibility not only to bear witness to Valentino’s testimony but to construct the “narrative” that Laub argues is essential for trauma survivors.

Deng states in the “Preface” to What Is the What: “[t]his book began as part of my struggle to reach out to others through public speaking. I told my story to many audiences, but I wanted the world to know the whole truth of my existence” (xiii). However, I would argue that through their time together, the relationship and friendship they built convinces Deng that they not only can “reach out to a wider audience” (Deng xiii), but that his story (both his past and his present) calls for a response from the reader—for action. Deng’s “Preface” changes slightly in the hardcover (December 2006) and trade paperback (October 2007) editions of the novel. The “Preface” in the trade paperback is essentially the same, but it has one critical addition. In the paperback, Deng adds the following sentence: “Since you and I exist,
together we can make a difference!” (xv emphasis mine). Both Deng’s relationship with Dave Eggers, along with the outstanding critical and popular reception (and sales numbers) from the hardcover edition, may have led Deng to add this emphatic sentence that both acknowledges the listening, or reading, “you” and calls upon him/her to work with him.

Eggers and Deng’s relationship, along with Deng’s call to the reader (the “you and I” in his “Preface”), mirror what Shoshana Felman calls “the creation of a ‘we’” (257). Felman concludes Testimony with a chapter examining Claude Lanzmann’s documentary Shoah (1985). In the film, Lanzmann sought a specific Holocaust survivor, Simon Srebnik, found him in Israel, brought him back to Chelmno, the concentration camp in Poland he had survived, and filmed this man’s return to the site of his traumatic past (Felman 250-83). While Srebnik’s narrative is the text of the documentary, Lanzmann’s directorial role is the subtext and cannot be ignored.

Considering Eggers’s role as architect behind the form and construction of What Is the What, he can be seen in a very similar light to Claude Lanzmann. Felman states that “Lanzmann hopes…to have an impact on the outside from the inside, to literally move the viewers and to actually reach the addressees: to make—historically and ethically—a difference” (239). Like Felman’s analysis of Lanzmann’s goals for Shoah, Deng and Eggers also had goals for What Is the What. In The Guardian article, Eggers discusses how he and Deng “felt strongly that there was no time to waste” (par.6) concerning their “intent—to bring Valentino’s story to the general reader” (par.30). After
struggling over how to structure the material, and finally deciding on a novel, Deng’s response was to “do it the way you think it will best reach people” (par.33). When Deng and Eggers were on the publicity tour for the book, Eggers writes that “at the end of each talk we gave, Valentino and I implored the audience to do what they could to help Sudan generally and Darfur in particular” (par.51). Eggers not only wanted to “move” and “reach” viewers into an ethical re-action, but the difference he wanted to make was also of a historical nature. Through his meticulous research with Valentino, Eggers recreated a place and time in history that many knew little about, which, in effect, changes how we, as readers, view and understand history as a whole.9

In a final thought of the creation of a “we”: in the “Commentary” section of the “Special Features” in the documentary God Grew Tired of Us, John Bul Dau, one of the resettled Lost Boys featured in the film, discusses the “I community” of America and the “we community” in Africa (0:05:50 mark). The individualistic, pull-yourself-up-from-your-bootstraps mentality, which many would agree is the foundation for the so-called American Dream, was a foreign concept for these young men, making their adjustment to American life, after resettlement, much more difficult. Instead of that individualism, the concept of a “we community” can be seen in any narrative about or by a Lost Boy. Separated from their parents and family on month-long treks that eventually led to Ethiopia and Kenya, these young men understood that their only chance for survival meant a reliance and dependence on one another. This dependence, and interdependence, can be seen in the young men that were resettled in the United
States through their lending of money, constant communication via cell phone, and the unbroken desire to stay connected to those left in Africa. Ultimately, Dau’s concept of the “we community” of Africa is an enlarged version of Felman’s ideas for the “creation of a ‘we’” between two people. What Is the What has many examples of Felman’s “creation of a ‘we’” specifically between Valentino and his American mentors. Mary Williams, the woman who first contacted Dave Eggers about the book project, was the founder of the Lost Boys Foundation in Atlanta. As Eggers writes in The Guardian article, Mary Williams’s first letter to him told him that “she had got to know one young man, Valentino Deng, better than any other” (par.4). In the book, Eggers has Valentino, as narrator, detail his relationship with the Newtons, a family in Atlanta. After Valentino spoke at an Episcopalian church, Anne Newton, a member of the church, reached out to him, and Valentino became close with the entire family, especially their twelve-year-old daughter, Allison (Eggers 114-15). Phil Mays was Deng’s sponsor, who, upon their first meeting told Valentino that he was “‘going to get [him] working, and get [him] a car and an apartment. Then we’ll see about getting [him] into college’” (Eggers 173). All of the examples, and there are of course others, demonstrate not only Felman’s “creation of a ‘we’” put the power of a “we”—the power of a united effort. However, a broader “we community” can only be created after Deng and Eggers’s relationship is extended to include the book’s readers.
Collaborative Relationship, Collaborative Narrative

The effect of Eggers and Deng’s collaborative relationship also serves as an integral component to the foundation of the narrative structure. We learn from Eggers’s article in The Guardian that he did not settle on a structure for the book until he received an email from Deng informing him that he had been robbed in his apartment in Atlanta. Eggers writes:

One night…I got an email from Valentino, who was still living in Atlanta. The subject heading was “A BAD DAY.” He explained that he had been mugged in his home, by people he didn’t know who had knocked on his door asking to use his cell phone. When I called him, and when we saw each other soon after in San Francisco, he was more distraught than I had ever seen him…. It was at this time that I knew the book needed to be not only about Valentino’s experiences in Sudan and the camps, but also about the many unforeseen struggles of his life in the US. The attack became the framing device for the book, and connected to something he had told me during our first weekend together. We had been talking about the small indignities he’d experienced taking the bus around Atlanta, trying to get to work. He had been pushed, ignored, disrespected. And each time he would think, silently, “If only that person knew what I’d already been through…” He would direct his thoughts to whoever had treated him less than
humanely, and hope for a day when his story was known far and wide, and that perhaps then his sufferings small and great would end. (Eggers par.41-43)

I do not wish to rely too much on Eggers’s words, but this passage highlights the many sides of Eggers and Deng’s relationship. First, they clearly had become close friends if Deng included Eggers in his email about the assault and robbery. Moreover, this email, “A BAD DAY,” is referenced in the book (Eggers 505), so as much as Eggers wants to be absent from the story, he is in the book because he is a person in Deng’s present-day life. Furthermore, this email exchange brings to light Deng’s critical role in how Eggers worked through his frustrations to create the appropriate “frame” for the book.

Ultimately, what emerges is a dichotomized, yet connected, narrative. One timeline follows a twenty-four hour span after Valentino is robbed and assaulted in his apartment in present-day Atlanta. In the other narrative timeline, Eggers has Valentino serve as storyteller, delivering his life’s narrative (from around age six to his current age, around twenty-six years old), albeit silently, to nine different characters or actors within the storyline of the day of the assault. However, the beauty of the project rests in the fact that, as a book, Valentino is not silently telling his story to just TV Boy or Julian at the hospital. Through both the friendship Eggers and Deng built and the actual voice Valentino has within the text as storyteller, Eggers creates a space (the physical book) that allows Deng, the man, to tell his story to 355,635 people—at least.
While Dave Eggers name is on the spine, the front cover, and the title page, *What Is the What* serves as Valentino Achak Deng’s *reclamation* of the story of his life until 2006 (when the book was published). Throughout the novel, Valentino, as narrator and focalizor, discusses different times in his life where he was told, or instructed, on the nature in which he should share his story. For example, in his first storytelling retroversion that he thinks of after he’s been assaulted in his apartment, he tells of his friendship with Edgardo, one of his neighbors in his apartment complex in Atlanta. Edgardo asks to hear a story and Valentino tries to start from the beginning in Sudan, when his village was attacked, to which Edgardo replies: “‘No, no. No fighting. I don’t want all the fighting. I read three newspapers a day…. I get enough of that. I know about your war. Tell me some other story. Tell me how you got that name, Valentino’” (13). Valentino has had to constantly readjust his story to fit the wants and demands of his listener. Later, Valentino details the resettlement application process in the Kakuma refugee camp, including questions UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees) asked concerning the young men’s association with the SPLA (Sudanese People’s Liberation Army). Valentino states: “those of us who needed to lie, lied. The SPLA had been a part of our lives from early on, and over half of the young men who call themselves Lost Boys were child soldiers to some degree or another. *But this is a part of our history that we have been told not to talk about*” (Eggers 17, emphasis mine). Valentino also discusses the versions of their history and
stories that the newspapers and reporters want (Eggers 21) and the “abridged” version of his story that he has given in talks to churches, synagogues, etc. (Eggers 28).

*What Is the What* is not directly from Valentino’s mouth—or pen. Eggers took liberties, as a writer, to construct the narrative in a certain way. However, it has only been through *this* book that Deng has been able to share the most “complete” version of his life. For example, at one point Valentino says, “[n]o doubt if you have heard of the Lost Boys of Sudan, you have heard of the lions….The lions enhanced the newspaper articles and no doubt played a part in the U.S. being interested in us in the first place” (Eggers 30). Eggers then takes the space to allow Valentino, as storyteller, to narrate “the first incident” with a lion snatching and consuming a boy as they walked to Ethiopia. While a newspaper article may have a sentence, or at most a paragraph, referencing an event like this, Eggers gives Valentino (the narrator), four pages to describe the night, “the sounds of the forest,” how Valentino’s friend Deng held onto his shirt “from behind as he always did,” the “shuffling in the grass” and the lion with its “simple black silhouette, broad shoulders, its thick legs outstretched, its mouth open” (Eggers 30-31). Yes, this is *Eggers’s* imagining of the “sounds of a forest,” but if Valentino Achak Deng, the man not the narrator, accepts this description, than how can readers not?
Dave Eggers is the first to say that the writing process was an arduous one, but if anything, his frustrations only emphasize his dedication to both Deng and the project in its entirety. Understanding their committed, collaborative relationship (to the project and to each other) helps illuminate Eggers’s decisions concerning the construction of the narrative and, ultimately, how their relationship serves as the first building block for the creation of a “we community” with the reader outside of the text.
Chapter 2: The Narrative that Eggers Built

Beginning with the book’s title, *What Is the What*, Eggers shows that he has high expectations for his readers. He expects their questions (“what is the what?”), while he also expects them to wait patiently for his answers. Before answering their questions, however, Eggers realizes the significance of space and place in the book and the required steps he must take to bring the readers both into the narrative and to Marial Bai, Sudan, the refugee camp in Pinyudo, Ethiopia, the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, and finally, to Atlanta, Georgia in the United States. However, by bringing the reader into the spaces of these places, Eggers sets up a narrative where the importance of time, or the space between past and present, begins to disappear. By connecting the memories Valentino recalls for his storytelling narrative with the present-day plot events in Atlanta, Eggers constructs a novel where the narrator cannot keep the past in the past, and, moreover, the reader cannot help but see the past in the present.

The Importance of Space to Dave Eggers

In the previously mentioned article in *The Guardian*, Eggers states “though the form of the book was still unclear, I knew that we would have to return to southern Sudan, to Valentino’s hometown of Marial Bai, if either one of us hoped to tell the story with any degree of accuracy” (par.11). Traveling to and experiencing the space of
Marial Bai in 2003, was critical to the creative endeavor that Eggers had just agreed to undertake. Moreover, traveling to Sudan with Valentino confirms the collaborative aspect of the project. In the same article, after deciding to form the project as a novel and securing Valentino’s approval, Eggers reiterates the need to recreate a space:

The first thing I did in my new method was to reimagine Marial Bai, before the war. The book needed a sense of the town—and, by association, hundreds of similar places—before the coming of the conflict. The book needed to demonstrate, step by step, how the war unfolded, through the eyes of a tiny boy in a busy market town. (Eggers par.34)

Traveling to that space with Valentino allows Eggers to envision what Marial Bai used to look like pre-war and then gives him the tools to recreate that space within the novel. The idea that a space was fundamental to Eggers’s commencement of writing speaks to narrative theorist Franco Moretti’s work on the productive quality of space in a narrative. Moretti states: “space is not the ‘outside’ of narrative…but an internal force, that shapes it from within” (70). Because Valentino brought Eggers home to Marial Bai, Eggers then is better able to bring the reader home to that space as well. Eggers’s meticulous and vivid re-creation of Marial Bai makes its devastation by the Arab militia (the murahaleen) that much more traumatic. By the time the murahleen attacks Valentino’s village in the novel, readers are embedded—and invested—in the space of Marial Bai.
The Importance of Space to a Refugee

With nearly 4,000 Lost Boys of Sudan resettled in the United States, Dave Eggers’s *What Is the What* is not the only narrative that emerged from this humanitarian effort and cultural importation. As mentioned in Chapter One, many of the resettled young men found various outlets to share their story: memoirs with the help of their American mentors, features in documentaries, or, on a spoken level, addresses to churches, high schools, and community groups. However, despite the variation in format, a similar struggle runs through each narrative. To become a refugee as a child, as the Lost Boys were forced to do, is to be robbed of a home—a home on all levels, i.e. a physical house or family hut, a village, and ultimately, as a refugee, a home nation. The United Nations Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines refugees as: “people outside the country of their nationality and who are unable to avail themselves of the protections of that country, owing to fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or membership to a particular political group” (UNHCR “Article 1”). As refugees on the run, the young men’s concept of space was invaded and violated constantly. They had no space to call their own, and therefore they never had a stable foundation on which to build any kind of future. Ultimately, a childhood of transience and impermanence leads to great difficulty in any attempt to configure a sense of identity and an attachment to a space or place (be it a home, a village, or a nation). The Lost Boys’ only concept of “home” was made as they walked in large groups across and through Sudan in search of safety. Their idea of “home,”
then, constitutes being surrounded by others like them, making their efforts to stick together (both in the refugee camps and in their resettled cities in the United States) understandable and reasonable.

These struggles with instability and displacement can be found in the other published Lost Boy narratives. For example, in They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky, Benson Deng writes: “I didn’t want to listen to him. I wanted to stay there and stop walking farther away from my home and parents. I thought it would be better if I died” (Deng 67). Here, Benson Deng conveys his desperation when confronted with the possibility of leaving the once-safe space of his childhood home. In fact, he prefers death. In the memoir God Grew Tired of Us, John Bul Dau chronicles his resettled life in America and begins a chapter with: “I dream of Africa almost every day. Sometimes I dream at night that I am back at Kakuma…. Sometimes my mind wanders while I work at the hospital and I see things that are not really there. For some seconds, I do not remember where I am” (235). As these two excerpts demonstrate, the effects of being forced out of one’s home as a child (Deng’s quote) still resonate when one is an adult, resettled in the United States (Dau’s quote). The trauma—and the effect it continues to have in the present—are intimately and inextricably tied to a refugee’s sense of space. This also proves true in both of Valentino’s narratives in What Is the What, as his spaces—his apartment in Atlanta and his home in Marial Bai, among others—will be violated by outside, violent forces.
In her article on memoirs, Paula Fass focuses on the role of memory in memoirs, stating, “the memoir makes the invisible world of memories visible and the past important. The memoir confirms history. It is witness to a passing past. It refuses to move on unnoticed and unremarked upon” (116). What Is the What, with both Eggers’s structural use of memory and Deng’s intent for the book outlined in the “Preface,” fits nicely with Fass’s ideas in this statement. However, Fass also asserts, “the world has become very small and history very fast, but childhood still slowly replays itself in our heads. For this reason, I think the contemporary memoir is ultimately about time itself” (119 emphasis mine). In her emphasis on “childhood” and “time,” Fass seems to deemphasize her idea that “the world has become very small” (i.e. the spatial element of this world). If Fass were a narrative theorist, she might be of the camp that prioritizes narrative time over narrative space. When considering a person’s childhood, or when considering Valentino Achak Deng’s childhood specifically, space is just as important as time. Being a child in 1987 is one thing, but being a child in southern Sudan in 1987 fundamentally shapes not only his childhood but the formation of his entire identity. The importance of Sudan, of the space of that place, in Valentino’s identity—and narrative—is undeniable. To re-quote Franco Moretti: “space is not the ‘outside’ of narrative, then, but an internal force, that shapes it from within” (70). The space of southern Sudan, along with the trek to Ethiopia and Kenya, is fundamental, “an internal force” that “shapes” Valentino Achak Deng’s life
narrative, just as traveling to the space of Marial Bai shapes the literary narrative that Dave Eggers ultimately produces that allows Valentino, the character, to tell his story.

What emerges in Eggers’s narrative construction is a symbiotic relationship between space and time. The inextricability of such a relationship, particularly in literature, has been articulated by theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) who coins the term “chronotope” stating:

we will give the name chronotope (literally, ‘time space’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature…. What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time…. In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. (84)

The novel Eggers writes as delivered by Valentino, as narrator, supports Bakhtin’s definition of a “literary artistic chronotope.” Valentino’s storytelling narrative often revolves around the space of a place: Marial Bai, the Pinyudo refugee camp in Ethiopia, the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. Readers are not only taken to Marial Bai, but they are taken inside the spaces of Marial Bai. We are next to Valentino as he plays with a hammer on the floor of his father’s shop (65-66); we are with him as he, Moses, and William K (his best friends) guard Jok Nyibek Arou’s new bike as it rests
next to “the trunk of a tree in the market” (37-40); we are with him as he runs through the village to retrieve water for Amath, his childhood crush (41-45). However, and just as important, all of the places in the narrative are embedded in Valentino’s memories—emphasizing that the timing of Valentino’s narrative is in the past. Moreover, he is remembering, recalling his past—all to tell a story in the present.

The Door and the Space: The Opening of the Narrative

Before readers are transported to Marial Bai, however, they are first let in through a door. The first line of What Is the What reads, “I have no reason not to answer the door so I answer the door” (Eggers 3). With no reference to time, Eggers begins the narrative at a site of entrance and exit from a space. At this point, readers are unclear what kind of space to which the door is connected. Invoking theorist Wolfgang Iser’s work (1993), I argue that Eggers’s ambiguity in the opening sentence immediately places the readers in space of indeterminacy (5-10). We, as readers, must keep reading in order to locate the narrator and characters within a space and to close the gap between the reader outside the text and the narrator inside the text (and inside the door). Therefore, from the first line of the novel, readers must cooperate as active participants with the narrator in the text.

As the architect behind this narrative’s structure, Eggers is frugal when it comes to offering orientation devices to the reader. His narrator reveals little: the narrator is not only nameless but sexless as well; we are given a door but it is uncertain
what this door is connected to (an office? an apartment?); we know that it is “nearly night” (3). While the narrator is nameless, he/she does inform us that he/she “returned from the convenience store” an hour ago and smiled at the woman that has now asked to use the phone, allowing us to figure him/her as a generally friendly person; the narrator also includes that he/she had “been studying most of the afternoon” (3) suggesting that the narrator is a student of some sort. However, when the woman at the door steps into our narrator’s space, Eggers gives readers the first piece of critical information concerning his characterization of this narrator. The narrator tells us “it does not make sense to me to leave the door open but I do so because she desires it. This is her country and not yet mine” (3). I call this narration “critical” because it is at this point that national identity—and the ability to possess it—is first introduced as a source of constant and difficult thought processes for our narrator—a difficulty that continues for the entirety of the text. Interestingly, we know that our narrator struggles with displacement and belonging, yet, at this early point in the novel, we do not know where, or what country, our narrator is in or has come from—so we must keep reading.

Eggers’s choice of when to have his narrator reveal information and when to conceal it offers more support for Iser’s argument of an author’s action and the necessary reaction from the reader: to want or need to keep reading in order to fill the gaps or blanks in the text (32-34). When the narrator states, “it is a strange thing I realize, but what I think at this moment is that I want to be back in Kakuma” (4), we, as readers, still do not know the narrator’s name, sex, or where any of the plot events
are taking place, but we *do* know that the narrator does not want to be there and for some reason he/she thinks that others might think that “strange.” The statement articulates the narrator’s complicated emotions concerning place and sense of belonging. Once again, Eggers has his narrator reveal a piece of information (a desire to be “back in Kakuma”) while concealing what, or where, Kakuma is. The reader *must* keep reading in order to understand where the narrator wants to be. Kakuma was a refugee camp with pretty dire conditions, yet conditions that this narrator prefers over his present situation (a situation that *still* has no defined location beyond the narrator’s apartment). Eggers uses the Kakuma connection to present the narrator’s first foray into his memory. At this point, within the narrator’s memory of Kakuma, we learn our narrator’s sex: “there was nothing there, only one or two meals a day, but it had its small pleasures; I was a boy then and could forget that I was a malnourished refugee a thousand miles from home” (4). Eggers embeds such vital details in the text; moreover, they’re often embedded in the narrator’s memory, forcing readers to pay close attention to those memories (and *listen* to the narrator) to decipher what’s important to the narrator—and thus what’s important for the progression of the narrative.

When we finally learn that the opening event (the robbery) is taking place in Atlanta, Georgia, it once again comes as a small aside as a precursor to another memory. The narrator states, “now I own a television, a VCR, a microwave, an alarm clock, many other conveniences, all provided by the Peachtree United Methodist Church here in Atlanta” (5). Acknowledging that the narrator’s longing for Kakuma
comes before the brief aside of his present day location in Atlanta helps illuminate Eggers construction of the narrator’s story, specifically the uses of space and place. The privileging of Kakuma over Atlanta (not only in the narrator’s inclination toward a place but physically in the placement in the text), is a way in which Eggers can convey, through his narrative construction, the narrator’s internal identity struggle with place, placement, and sense of belonging.

By beginning the novel with a repeated emphasis on the sense of space (the door, the bedroom, the apartment, Kakuma, and finally Atlanta), Eggers sets the foundation for what will be a fundamental element in both his construction of the narrative and a persistent internal struggle for the narrator. Eggers uses spatial connections to bridge the difference in narrative time (the past and the present), allowing readers to see the effects of trauma on this Sudanese refugee.

Atlanta, Georgia = The Gilo River

As discussed in Chapter One, once Eggers heard about the robbery and assault Deng endured, he knew that this event could serve as the framing device for the novel. The violence in Atlanta opens Valentino’s memory to allow for fluid travel between time and space, while it also prepares the reader for parallel spaces, or settings, for violence in the United States and Africa. Valentino may be bound and gagged on the floor in his apartment (post robbery), but his memory, and his storytelling, travel back to Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya.
Similar to the consistent sense of displacement that can be found in all Lost Boy narratives, the images from Valentino’s first traumatic flashback, of the Gilo River crossing, can be found in most Lost Boy narratives as well. In 1991, after spending three years in relatively peaceful and safe refugee camps in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian government was overthrown and all refugees were forced out. What followed was chaotic, violent, and terrifying—particularly for the “unaccompanied minors” (children without parents and what the Lost Boys were called within refugee camps). This event, being chased and shot at by Ethiopian soldiers into a crocodile infested Gilo River, is a critical moment in their lives that is referenced in narratives from those who experienced and survived the crossing. In They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky, two of the young men reference it (the third never went to Ethiopia and, hence, never had to cross the Gilo River). In the memoir, God Grew Tired of Us, John Bul Dau states that he continues to have nightmares about the Gilo River, but he does not go on to describe those dreams. The Gilo River incident not only represents another forced expulsion from what seemed to be a safe space, but it was a chaotic event where the concept of safe space was obliterated completely. Ethiopia, the place for refuge, was no longer safe, the crocodile-infested river certainly wasn’t safe, and the refugees were being forced back into their war-torn homeland.

While the Gilo River crossing certainly is narrated in other Lost Boy memoirs, it is done so chronologically. In both They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky and God Grew Tired of Us, the day is mentioned (in the past tense), reflected on (in the present
tense), and then the young men continue, chronologically, to narrate the history of their lives. In contrast, the Gilo River is mentioned six times throughout both narratives (past and present) in What Is the What. While the narrators from the other memoirs state that they continue to have nightmares about that day, Eggers makes Valentino’s first memory a flashback of the Gilo River. As Valentino stares at Powder, the name he gives the perpetrator who is robbing him in his apartment, he thinks:

I stand before Powder and my memory is searching for the time when I last felt this betrayed, when I last felt in the presence of evil so careless…. I stare up at Powder and I know who he brings to mind. The soldier, an Ethiopian and a woman, shot two of my companions and almost killed me…. We were fleeing Ethiopia, chased by hundreds of Ethiopian soldiers shooting at us, the River Gilo full of our blood.

(Eggers 6)

The betrayal Valentino feels in the present produces a flashback, allowing Eggers to insert a choppy, violent embedded narrative. Through the narrative and flashbacks, we see Valentino’s memory or consciousness travel fluidly between past and present, both temporally and spatially. This robbery, now, in Atlanta, recalls a traumatic memory then, in Ethiopia.

The Gilo River flashback represents a realistic portrayal of a trauma survivor’s life with post traumatic stress disorder (a violent episode in the present recalls violent memories from the past). It also represents the fluid nature of Valentino’s storytelling
style in general. While much of Valentino’s narrative is chronological, his narration definitely moves freely in time, at times following his stream of consciousness. For example, Valentino first mentions Tabitha, his girlfriend, in the present-day narrative (Eggers 8) long before he introduces her to readers when he meets her in Kakuma (Eggers 429). While the Gilo River flashback, along with moments of stream of consciousness, are present in Valentino’s narrative, if we look closely enough, we can also see Eggers’s careful construction of, and between, the two narratives (past and present). Specifically, if we examine the narrative breaks and subsequent turns Eggers takes between past and present, we can also see how Eggers draws parallels between the traumatic spaces of Africa (from Valentino’s past) to his current traumatic spaces in Atlanta (in the present).

The Hospital in Atlanta = Pinyudo Refugee Camp in Ethiopia

After months of walking across Sudan and hearing wonderful descriptions of the safe and prosperous life awaiting him in Ethiopia, Valentino is dumbfounded and distraught when he reaches Ethiopia. After Dut, the leader of the boys as they walk, tells him “[t]his is it. We are now in Ethiopia,” Valentino thinks Dut is “making a joke.” He recalls: “I looked at the land. It looked exactly like the other side of the river, the side that was Sudan, the side we left” (Eggers 227). Book One ends with Valentino’s disenchanted thoughts concerning Ethiopia. Book Two then begins in the present-day narrative with Achor Achor, Valentino’s best friend and roommate,
coming home to their apartment, seeing Valentino bound and gagged and insisting on taking him to the hospital. Valentino finally agrees, and Chapter XVI begins as they reach the hospital. Valentino thinks, “[i]n hospitals I feel palpable comfort. I feel the competence, the expertise, so much education and money, all the supplies sterile, everything packaged, sealed tight. My fears evaporate when the automatic doors shush open” (Eggers 240). This chapter ends as Valentino silently addresses Julian, the hospital administrator, saying, “Julian, you know nothing yet.” When Chapter XVII begins, the narrative in Ethiopia resumes, with Valentino admitting “that when we did cross into Ethiopia, there was a measure of safe, and some rest” (Eggers 256). While this refugee camp is clearly different than a hospital in Atlanta, we can see how the space of both places conjures feelings of safety and protection.

Valentino’s feelings of safety, both in Ethiopia and the hospital in Atlanta, transform into feelings of indignation and hopelessness as he is refused refuge—or treatment—in both places. Eggers, again, sets up the break in both narratives (the past and the present) to serve as a mirror between the two spaces. Chapter XX ends as Achor Achor and Valentino have reached Pochalla after the chaos of the Gilo River crossing and forced expulsion from Ethiopia. Achor Achor says, “I don’t want to wait here [in Sudan] forever. People are getting sicker here. We’re just waiting to die” to which Valentino thinks “[t]his night, I felt Achor Achor was probably correct” (345-46). Chapter XX, the storytelling narrative then ends, and Chapter XXI begins with Valentino’s present-day narrative in the hospital in Atlanta. The first sentence of the
chapter conveys his frustration with the hospital: “[i]t is time to leave this hospital. They have made a fool of me…. I approach the new nurse…. ‘I am leaving now,’ I say. ‘But you haven’t been treated,’ she says. She is genuinely surprised that I would consider leaving after only fourteen hours. ‘I have been here too long,’ I say” (Eggers 347). Through the sequential placement of the two narratives (past and present), we can see that Valentino’s fourteen-hour wait in the Atlanta hospital mirrors his fourteen-year wait for safety in Africa (1987-2001). The two narratives coincide at Valentino’s points of realization that the safe spaces (first Ethiopia and then the hospital, or even the United States in general) will not be able to help him. Therefore, Eggers uses the space of a place to connect the narratives and collapse the distance between past and present. This collapse of temporal distance not only demonstrates the effects of trauma on Valentino, but it educates the reader on how someone attempts to live with his traumatic past while still enduring present-day injustices.

The repeated connections between traumatic spaces definitely work to remind the reader that Valentino’s “traumas” do not exist only in his past. He faces many hardships in America—hardships that even trigger the feelings of resignation and hopelessness he had as a child refugee in Africa. However, part of the work in having readers understand trauma is more than connecting two spaces and the temporality of two narratives. Eggers also makes sure to include numerous examples of life being lived—of joy, of humor, of friendships, and of love—in order to understand what kind of life, exactly, was being taken away—both in Africa, and, at times, in America.
Making Trauma Traumatic

We could read a statistic where X number of people were killed in a village in southern Sudan and we might define that as a trauma. However, in order to make the reader feel the trauma, to make an event traumatic, the reader needs to be invested fully in a person. By juxtaposing traumas next to unexpected moments of humor, friendship, and love, Eggers transforms a statistic into a human, a human into a life narrative, and narrative into a tool that can cull an impassioned response from the reader.

In *What Is the What*, readers become what Shoshana Felman calls a “second degree witness” (213) in her work *Testimony*. Felman applies this type of witnessing to Claude Lanzmann’s directorial ability to cross boundaries and bring viewers inside the trauma of the Holocaust. When Eggers takes the readers inside, he takes them inside the entirety of Valentino’s life, recognizing that a life, even a life lived on the run or in a refugee camp, has its joyous and even humorous moments, particularly for an adolescent boy.

As stated before, one of the most mentioned traumatic memories that is found in Lost Boy narratives is the Gilo River crossing that came after the Sudanese refugees were forced out of the Pinyudo refugee camp in Ethiopia. However, just before Valentino’s narration of the Gilo River crossing (Eggers 336-40), Valentino recounts his time with the “Royal Girls of Pinyudo”—the most sought after girls in the Pinyudo refugee camp. In the space of this narrative, readers witness a young boy’s nervousness in front of young girls, his social missteps and his subsequent embarrassment, and,
finally, his “success with ladies” (Eggers 306). His visits to the girls’ house become a routine, and, similar to the trauma of the Gilo River that produced a flashback in his present-day narrative, Valentino can recall vivid details about his time with the Royal Girls of Pinyudo. “[E]ven at this moment I can describe every object in that room, the location of every nick on their floor, every knot in the plywood of their bunks…. This was my life for many of the days that year in Ethiopia. It was not the worst of my years” (Eggers 310-11). There are numerous examples of this balancing of joys and trauma in the narratives. One of the best cases revolves around Valentino’s relationship with Tabitha Duany Aker. Tabitha appears in both narratives, as she was a Sudanese refugee in Kakuma as well as one of the few girls resettled in the United States. When Tabitha is killed in Seattle, we, as readers, understand how her murder is heartbreaking and traumatic for Valentino (356-59) because we were witnesses to the joy, and humor, during their meeting (429), during Valentino’s request of a date (442-43), and their first kiss during the drama group trip’s to Nairobi (465-66). All of the traumas in Valentino’s narratives are traumatic—*for the reader*—because we have been a witness to the joyful and humorous moments as well, and therefore, when they are taken away, be it through death or the result of living life on the run as a refugee, readers have their own traumatic reaction.

One of the ways to truly see the many examples of joy in the novel is to make a list of the joyful or humorous embedded narratives or plot events. If we then map those *and* the major traumas in text, we see a balance to the narrative and how a trauma is
traumatic because there was so much joy taken away. In one of the examples in his book *Atlas of a European Novel*, narrative theorist Franco Moretti maps out the plot events in Jane Austen’s novels in order to demonstrate that *where* things happen are all part of an author’s narrative construction. When referencing “maps,” Moretti states:

> Of maps, I mean, not as metaphors, and even less as ornaments of discourse, but as analytical tools: that dissect the text in an unusual way, bringing to light relations that would otherwise remain hidden. A good map is worth a thousand words, cartographers say, and they are right: because it produces a thousand words: it raises doubts, ideas. It poses new questions, and forces you to look for new answers. (3–4)

If we map the “traumas” and the “joys” in Valentino’s narrative from *What Is the What*, we can determine that there are just as many traumas in America as there were in Africa; and there were just as many joys in Africa as there are in America. Mapping becomes the “analytical tool” that helps illuminate Eggers’s careful construction of the narratives and the balance he achieves by including so many joyful and humorous events next to the more well-known traumas that have emerged from Lost Boy narratives. (For more examples of the novel’s traumas and joys, see my mappings of the two narratives in Appendix A).

Similar to the joys we find in *What Is the What*, we also find many cases of humor throughout the text, particularly in the friendships Valentino relies upon. During the part of Valentino’s narrative that takes place in Marial Bai—and even while they
are walking to Ethiopia—William K, his best friend and a storyteller who enjoys embellishments, provides numerous outlets for humor, even as they are surrounded by danger and destruction. For example, when the boys are still safe in Marial Bai, William K tells a story where a woman’s “eyes popped out of her head.” Valentino then tells the reader: “I knew William K well enough to know that this last part was fabrication. Whenever possible in William K’s stories, someone’s eyes popped out of their heads” (Eggers 55). Later, as Valentino, William K, and the hundreds of other boys walk toward Ethiopia, Valentino tells us how William K “filled the air between [them] with the beautiful lacework of his lies” (195). When he predicts how strong he will be once he reaches Ethiopia, William K says, “I’ll be a very big man…I’ll be a great warrior, and I’ll hold many guns at once, and I’ll also drive a tank. People’s eyes will pop out of their heads when they see me” (209). Because they have become familiarized with the intimacy of their childhood friendship, and they recall Valentino’s instructions on how to judge William K’s stories, readers now feel “in” on the joke. Eggers not only incorporates humorous moments, but he also includes the reader in these moments. This inclusion makes any forthcoming trauma between the friends traumatic for the reader as well.

Eggers also gives Valentino an acute focalization technique to help readers understand the level(s) of trauma. On their trek to Ethiopia, the young Valentino mentions that, with the lack of mirrors, he would gauge his own health, and likelihood for survival, by examining the bodies and eyes of his friends (Deng, William K) and
the other boys with whom he was walking. Valentino thinks: “In the mirror of William K, I did not look well that day. My cheeks were sunken, my eyes ringed in blue. My tongue was white, my hipbones were visible through my shorts. My throat felt lined with wood and grass” (Eggers 215). In this short passage, Eggers’s uses Valentino’s focalization of William K as a “mirror” to his Valentino’s body, eventually transforming into a conflation of the two bodies. The “cheeks” that were “sunken” were actually Valentino’s view of William K’s cheeks, yet the “throat [that] felt lined with wood and grass” is his description of his own throat. In the span of four short sentences, Eggers is able to merge two bodies, two friends, so that when William K dies one page later, we (as readers) understand how the death of a friend, the death of one’s “mirror” to himself, equates a partial death for Valentino.

In the only critical article that examines this novel, Robert Eaglestone calls *What Is the What* a work of “‘engaged literature’ in a renewed Sartrean sense; that is, [it is] not simply [an] affective work: [it is] also aimed explicitly at pricking Western consciences” (82). Eaglestone also describes Eggers’s narrative frame as “demanding” and “unsettling” (80). Linking the two separate narratives through spatial similarities in traumas, Eggers forces readers to collapse the space between the timing of Valentino’s story—making readers see—and feel—the trauma of the *now* just as much as the trauma of the *then*. This visceral connection to the trauma, in the readers, is Eggers’s first step in the journey to cultivate a reaction from the readers *outside* the text. Eggers
also employs pedagogical tools along with more narrative devices to bring the reader into a collaborative relationship with text as well as into a relationship with himself and Valentino Achak Deng.
Chapter 3: For the Reader, With the Reader: Eggers’s Role for The Reader, Inside and Outside the Narrative

Every published Lost Boy narrative includes a map of Sudan and its surrounding countries. What Is the What, They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky, and God Grew Tired of Us (both the documentary and the memoir) have a map at the beginning of the text (or film). As I demonstrate with examples in the next section, it’s easy to understand why a map was necessary considering the extreme lack of information or knowledge known about Sudan (both its geographical location and its history). However, while all the narratives include a map, the way in which Eggers chooses to include—and embed—Sudan’s history within Valentino’s narrative not only educates his readers, but also puts them in the same referential field as a young Valentino. Eggers’s efforts result in not only a better informed reader, but an individual who is fully invested and ready to participate outside of the narrative.

“What?” Eggers’s Pedagogical Narrative for the Reader

In the robbery scene that opens What Is the What, the male perpetrator (who Valentino refers to as “Powder” because of the hat he is wearing), calls Valentino “Africa” (Eggers 4) and “Fucking Nigerian motherfucker!” (9). Valentino responds thinking: “In America I have been called Nigerian before—it must be the most familiar of African countries” (9). Later, in an embedded narrative about harassment from
teenagers in Atlanta, Valentino recalls telling them that he’s Sudanese after they ask where he is from. He thinks: “[t]his gave them pause. Sudan is not well known, or was not well known until the war the Islamists brought to us twenty years ago, with its proxy armies, its untethered militias, was brought, in 2003, to Darfur” (Eggers 18).

In Deng’s “Preface” he writes: “[a]s you read this book, you will learn about me and my beloved people of Sudan” (xiii). Eggers makes this process of learning possible by embedding Sudanese history and Dinka cultural stories within Valentino’s narrative. While other memoirs, such as Dau’s God Grew Tired of Us, have chronologies at the beginning of the text, Eggers implants that information within Valentino’s narrative. When walking to Ethiopia, Valentino sits on the riverbank and listens to Dut Majok, the teacher from Valentino’s village and also the leader as the boys walk, as he offers a history lesson. In his lesson, Dut outlines how the war came about and the never-ending repercussions from the time Sudan was a British colony. Dut asks: “[h]ave you heard of the people of England, boys?” We shook our heads. Ethiopia was the only other country we were aware of” (191). While contemporary English-speaking readers will have “heard of the people of England,” they may not understand England’s role in the late 1980s conflict that Dut is explaining. At this point, many readers are in the same referential field as Valentino and William K. Literary theorist Wolfgang Iser claims that “a referential field is always formed when there are at least two positions related to and influencing one another; it is the minimal organizational unit in all processes of comprehension” (36). Therefore, as both the
reader and Valentino are enduring a “process of comprehension” while absorbing Dut’s explanation, they are in the same referential field. Making readers learn Sudan’s complex history, along with Valentino (the character), Eggers, ultimately, is able to build a relationship between Valentino and the reader. The reader is beside Valentino, as a fellow student, as Dut, the teacher, explains Ethiopia (Eggers 130-35), and, as mentioned before, when Dut explains England’s role and the “Southern Sudan Question” from 1953 (193-95). As much as Valentino doesn’t know about Ethiopia, England, or the American way of life, Eggers’s use of this teaching device points out that it’s likely that readers might be ill-informed as well.

What occurs throughout What Is the What is a consistent sharing of information. This sharing takes place between Valentino and other characters and also between the reader and the text. Through Valentino’s narration, readers learn about a young southern Sudanese boy’s trek through Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya. We learn that the environment of southern Sudan “is not limitless desert. [It] is a land of forest and jungles, of rivers and swamps, of hundreds of tribes, thousands of clans, millions of people” (Eggers 47). We learn about the government in Khartoum and the racial and religious divides (140-42). We learn how a refugee camp is organized and how a “city of refugees rose up within weeks” in Pinyudo, Ethiopia (257). All of this information helps increase what theorist Lev Vygotsky calls a person’s (or reader’s) “zo-ped” or zone of proximal development.” Vygotsky uses the phrase in reference to children, specifically, but it can certainly be applied to naïve readers. In Alex Kozulin’s
“Introduction” to Vygotsky’s work, *Thought and Language*, Kozulin defines Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development” as such:

The zone of proximal development [is] the place at which a child’s empirically rich but disorganized spontaneous concepts ‘meet’ the systematicity and logic of adult reasoning. As a result of such a ‘meeting,’ the weaknesses of spontaneous reasoning are compensated by the strengths of scientific logic. The depth of *zo-ped* varies, reflecting children’s relative abilities to appropriate adult structures. The final product of this child-adult cooperation is a solution, which, being internalized, becomes an integral part of the child’s own reasoning. (xxxv)

To both paraphrase Vygotsky’s definition and apply it to readers in *What Is the What*, readers come to the text with a certain zone of proximal development. A “meeting” then occurs between old information (or what they knew before reading) and new information (what they know after reading). All of which results in a “cooperation” (between reader and text) where there is a “solution” that “becomes an integral part” of the reader’s new “reasoning.” Thus, after reading *What Is the What*, readers’ zones of proximal development may be expanded depending on how much, or how little, information they knew when first approaching the text. Eggers use of pedagogical tools increases his readers’ zones of proximal development so that, after the book is finished, all of this information is “internalized,” and readers will have a transformed understanding of the complex history of Sudan, the refugee experience in America, etc.
Moreover, as this information is now an “integral part of their reasoning,” readers are now able to use their new understandings in new situations they explore. For example, the next time they read about Sudan, they may come to different conclusions considering the expansion of their zone of proximal development.

On the other hand, while the reader may have been ill-informed concerning Sudan’s colonial history (amongst other things), they may be able to identify with the many American characters who serve as cultural explainers for Valentino. Mary Williams, for example, answers Valentino’s questions whether the man or woman is supposed to answer the door in America (Eggers 11-12). Or, later, when Valentino works as a greeter at the health club, Matt Donnelly greets him, saying, “what’s the good word?” (Eggers 481). As Valentino relates: “[t]he first time [Matt Donnelly] said this, I thought he was actually looking for a certain word, something appropriate for that particular day. ‘Blessed,’ I said the first time he asked. He explained the expression to me, but I still don’t know how to answer” (481).

While Valentino’s settling into an American lifestyle offers some humorous moments (as does the documentary God Grew Tired of Us), Eggers makes certain that readers undergo a cultural orientation of their own, which, of course, continues to expand their zone of proximal development. As stated before, the book’s title immediately draws readers into a place of indeterminancy. The title is difficult to say, and moreover, there’s not a question mark at the end of it. While the title is confusing, readers soon learn that “the What” is a concept that is fundamental to the Dinka
creation story. To paraphrase Valentino’s father’s telling of “the What”: when God
created the earth, he first created the Dinka people. He then offered them a choice of
the cow or the What (for sustenance, health, prosperity, etc). When the Dinka man
asked “What is the What?” God would not answer. In the novel, Valentino’s father
states, “the first man and woman knew they would be fools to pass up the cattle for this
idea of the What. So the man chose the cattle….God was testing the man. He was
testing the man, to see if he could appreciate what he had been given, if he could take
pleasure in the bounty before him, rather than trade it for the unknown” (Eggers 62).
Valentino’s father tells this creation story in his store surrounded by men (i.e. an
audience). Banter takes place between Valentino’s father and Sadiq Aziz, an Arab man
who regularly trades with him:

--How about a story then, my father Arou? Sadiq said. –Tell us the one
about the beginning of time. I’m always entertained by this.

--Only because you know it to be true, Sadiq.

--Yes. Exactly. I throw out the Koran and adopt your story.

The men laughed and urged him into the story. My father stood and began,
telling the story the way he always told it. (Eggers 61, emphasis mine)

Similar to the history lesson that comes from Dut, Eggers gives readers (and the Arab
tradesmen in the scene), a cultural lesson specific to the Dinka people. Eggers places
readers alongside characters in a narrative classroom. Moreover, these lessons are often
told orally or in story form, confirming the importance of an oral tradition for the
Sudanese people. While readers, or the characters in the scene, do not expect Sadiq really to “throw out the Koran and adopt [Valentino’s father’s] story,” they see a respect for the telling of the story, a respect for the act of listening and taking in information.

This oral tradition, in Africa, then has to be compared to Valentino’s silence in Atlanta. In Chapter One I discussed how, through this novel, Valentino, the character, reclaims the story of Valentino Achak Deng, the man. In the narrative, Valentino starts where he wants to start and includes details unique to his experience. However, this storytelling also allows Valentino to reclaim the oral tradition of the Dinka people (even if he does so silently and to himself). For example, when Valentino’s father is telling the creation story, Valentino (the young boy) notices how his father “waited for the necessary response” at the key moment in the story (Eggers 62). Readers can see this trait, waiting for the “necessary response,” in Valentino’s storytelling narrative through his constant, direct addresses to his imagined listeners (TV Boy/Michael, Julian, Christian neighbors, etc.). For example, after the perpetrators return to pick up Michael, Valentino, still bound and gagged, is left alone, and he believes if he kicks the floor hard enough his “Christian neighbors” will hear him: “Christian neighbors below, where are you tonight? Are you home? Would you hear me if I called?.... Will you hear me kicking?” (Eggers 139). After kicking for a “full minute” he rests and decides to now address his narrative to his Christian neighbors: “Christian neighbors, because it interests you, I will tell you about the slave raids, the slave trades” (140). He
continues to give a detailed explanation of the differences between religions and races in Sudan with northern Muslim Arabs and southern black Christians. Valentino asks the Christian neighbors, “[h]ave you seen the president of Sudan, Omar al-Bashir? His skin is almost as dark as mine…but still, the black-skinned Arabs of northern Sudan advocated the enslaving of the Dinka of southern Sudan, and what is Khartoum’s defense, Christian neighbors?” (141). Eggers has Valentino anticipate questions from his “listeners” just like his father. This is done not only to continue the oral tradition but to allow Eggers, as author, room to explain and inform the reader on issues with which they may be unfamiliar.

Who Valentino addresses is just as important as how he silently addresses them. In the course of one day, the time of the present-day narrative in Atlanta, Valentino addresses the story of his life to all of the individuals who refuse to acknowledge, genuinely, his existence. From the lack of response to his kicks from his “Christian neighbors” to the six individuals whose membership cards he swipes at the health club, each of his addressees either refuse to see him, hear him, or engage with him. The most fitting—and most heartbreaking—example comes from the first addressee, Michael (first known as “TV Boy”). Michael goes to great lengths to both mute Valentino so he will not have to hear Valentino’s voice and to blind himself to Valentino’s physical presence. After Tonya and Powder, the perpetrators in the robbery and assault, leave Michael to guard Valentino, who is bound on the floor, Valentino thinks that he may be able to convince Michael to help him. Refusing to acknowledge Valentino’s pleas
for communication, Michael, instead, drops a phone book on Valentino’s head (Eggers 50). Valentino still refuses to give up hope. Hours pass and Valentino witnesses Michael having a nightmare, whimpering on the couch. Valentino, again, believes he can connect with Michael. But his efforts are futile. Valentino says to Michael, “Do you want me to be quiet? I will stay quiet if you’ll stop dropping things on me.”

Michael nods and then pushes the duct tape back onto Valentino’s mouth with his foot. Valentino thinks, “[t]o have this boy pushing my mouth closed with his foot—it is too much to accept” (Eggers 73).

Michael’s efforts to totally rid himself of Valentino’s presence are not yet over. Muting Valentino is not enough—he must also erase Valentino from his view. After both of these violations, Valentino is trapped under a fort that Michael has built around him with couch cushions and a bedspread. Muted and eliminated from Michael’s view, Valentino chooses to address him silently:

Michael, I have little patience left for you. I am finished with you, and wish you could have seen what I saw. Be grateful, TV Boy. Have respect. Have you seen the beginning of a war? Picture your neighborhood, and now see the women screaming, the babies tossed into wells. Watch your brothers explode. I want you there with me. (Eggers 73)

Thus, while Michael cannot physically see Valentino, and Valentino cannot physically see Michael, Valentino uses his silent storytelling as an outlet to demand the respect that he deserves but cannot articulate—for fear of his life. He also uses the act of
storytelling to bring Michael into the trauma he endured when his village was attacked: “I want you there with me.” These direct addresses occur throughout Valentino’s narrative, constantly reminding the reader that Valentino is a storyteller, and, moreover, he expects constant attention from his “listeners.” Through his silent storytelling, Valentino makes these American characters and bystanders part of his story, even if it’s unbeknownst to them.

Reclamation of the Collaborative

Just as Eggers implants Sudanese political and cultural history within the narrative, he also provides narration and focalization from different characters, allowing the reader to experience “reciprocal reflectors” (Iser 35) that, in the end, create a multi-faceted, more complete narrative of the southern Sudanese experience during the second civil war. For example, when Valentino is reunited with his childhood friends William K (Eggers 188-90) and Moses (270-79), each boy is allowed to tell his story (since his separation from Valentino) in his own words. As Moses tells Achak (Valentino), “[m]y story is so strange, Achak.” Valentino then states, “I asked Moses to tell his story and he did” (271). Eggers then gives Moses the next eight pages to tell the story of his experience since separating from Valentino in Marial Bai. Another example of a reciprocal reflector, at a critical point in the narrative, comes when the young men are at the refugee camp in Kakuma, and the SPLA commanders come to try to recruit the “unaccompanied minors” into the rebel army. While
Valentino reveals he has no intention of joining, Achor Achor, the best friend he made in the Pinyudo refugee camp, is tempted to join the rebels. Readers can see why one might be influenced to go—for Achor Achor, it’s a sense of obligation (Eggers 418-27). Later, while they’re still in Kakuma, the boys learn of the U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania (438-40). Here, readers have the opportunity to see how Sudanese refugees might see the bombings as an opportunity for the world to finally acknowledge their existence and react to the corrupt Sudanese government in Khartoum. Gop Chol, Valentino’s guardian in the camp, enthusiastically believes this will happen. He says: “This is it, Achak!.... Now the U.S. will overthrow Khartoum in no time at all, and then we will return home, and we will get money from the oil, and the border between north and south will be established, and there will be a New Sudan. I think it will all happen within the next eighteen months. You watch” (Eggers 440). Valentino disagrees with Gop Chol’s certainty, and American readers, most likely, did not think that the U.S. government was going to overthrow the Sudanese government in 1998 when these bombings happen. Yet, with a plethora of viewpoints—from both characters and readers—a dialogic and interactive relationship can be started. If many characters are given the chance to speak (or tell their stories or their opinions), then each character is imbued with a sense of value and worth. By forcing the reader to acknowledge so many viewpoints, Eggers not only gives the reader a well-rounded education, but he also reinforces the collaborative concept upon which every singular narrative (or story) relies.
The Final Addressee—and Collaborator

After addressing nine different characters in his present-day narrative (TV Boy/Michael, his Christian neighbors, Julian, Matt Donnelly, Nancy Strazzeri, Malcolm LaForte, Stewart Goodall, Dorsetta Lewis, and Sidra), the last person Valentino addresses comes on the final page:

I have spoken to every person I have encountered these last difficult days, and every person who has entered this club during these awful morning hours, because to do anything else would be something less than human. I speak to these people, and I speak to you because I cannot help it. It gives me strength, almost unbelievable strength, to know that you are there. I covet your eyes, your ears, the collapsible space between us. How blessed are we to have each other? I am alive and you are alive so we must fill the air with our words…. All the while I will know that you are there. How can I pretend that you do not exist?

It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist.

(Eggers 535, emphasis mine)

In this last paragraph, Eggers (through Valentino) crosses not only the boundaries of text and reader, but he crosses the boundaries of the narrative world inside the text with the reality outside the text as well. Having Valentino address the reader, as “you,” Eggers is taking the first step to bridge the “collapsible space” between not only reader and text, but reader and Valentino Achak Deng, the individual. This call from the
narrator to the reader, to reach across the divide and acknowledge one another, echoes Holocaust survivor and poet Paul Celan’s speech in 1958 when he accepted the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen. In his acceptance, he compared a poem to “a letter in a bottle being thrown out to sea with the...hope that it may somehow wash up somewhere, perhaps on a shoreline of the heart.” He claimed the poems could be “headed toward” something, stating, “[t]oward what? Toward something open, inhabitable, an approachable you, perhaps, an approachable reality” (Celan 34-35). After more than 500 pages, Eggers builds a narrative that culminates with a direct address from the narrator to the reader, evoking both Celan’s “approachable you” and “approachable reality.” After nine different addressees, the addressed “you” on the final page is “approachable” and a possible “reality” because no reader wants to be categorized next to TV Boy, or the Christian Neighbors, or the health club members—all of whom found a way to “pretend that [Valentino did] not exist.” While the book may be categorized as novel or fictionalized memoir, and while TV Boy and the Christian neighbors may be characters in a book, both Eggers and Valentino seek a very real relationship with the reader outside the narrative.

Collaborative Storytelling, Collaborative Activism

In Deng’s “Preface” he exclaims, “Since you and I exist, together we can make a difference!” (xv). This invocation at the beginning of the text, coupled with the character Valentino’s last words on the final page, emphasize the reader’s role, outside
of the text, to “make a difference!” Beyond the role the reader plays in the narrative, Valentino, along with Eggers, has created a space where the reader can physically, and actually, respond to the book. Deng outlines in his “Preface”: “[Dave Eggers and I] agreed that all of the author’s proceeds from the book would be mine and would be used to improve the lives of Sudanese in Sudan and elsewhere” (xiv).\textsuperscript{12} The Valentino Achak Deng Foundation was started in 2006, just before the novel was published. As detailed in the biography at the end of the novel, Deng’s foundation will raise money for the rebuilding of Marial Bai and will include “an educational complex that will encompass a twelve-classroom secondary school, a teacher-training college, a women’s educational and vocational resource center and a public library” (About Valentino Achak Deng”). At the end of this biography, Deng’s website is listed (www.valentinoachakdeng.org) where readers can find many resources about the book, the foundation, and general questions and answers about the history and current events of Sudan and southern Sudan. Through the website, we can view photographs and short videos from a November 2008 trip Deng took to Marial Bai to follow the progress of the secondary school’s construction (see Appendix B). Standing next to Valentino in front of his of emerging community center, is Dave Eggers. More than five years after their initial meeting in 2003, Dave Eggers continues not only to stand by Valentino’s side, but to be fully invested in the goals he has set for himself—and for the rebuilding of southern Sudan.
The “creation of a ‘we’” (Felman) that Valentino Achak Deng and Dave Eggers built is not necessarily unique. After mentoring Benson Deng, Alephonsion Deng, and Benjamin Ajak, San Diego native Judy A. Bernstein not only helped them write their memoir *They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky*, but, as she states in her “Epilogue,” she has become a champion of their (and every Lost Boy’s) desire for an education and lists a website where people can contribute to an educational fund—www.TheIRC.org/LostBoysEd (Bernstein 310). All three of the Lost Boys featured in Christopher Quinn’s documentary *God Grew Tired of Us* have started foundations and organizations, where information and links can be found in the “Special Features” section of the DVD. Emmanuel Jal, a southern Sudanese man who was a SPLA child soldier, is now a popular hip-hop artist. His songs chronicle both his life as a child soldier during the war and his current life as an activist for the organization he founded, the Gua Foundation. “Gua” means “peace” in his native Nuer tribal language. Part of the Gua Foundation is dedicated to building the Emma Academy in his hometown of Leer in southern Sudan. Emma McCune was a British aid worker who smuggled Jal out of Sudan (and out of the SPLA) into Kenya where he received his education and started his hip-hop career.

These relationships, these examples of a “creation of a ‘we,’” demonstrate the power of a we—the power, and influence, that two or more people have rather than just one. It also portrays an interesting development in the book, film, and music industries: the idea that profits can serve a purpose. These authors, directors, and mentors not only
agreed to help share the story of these Lost Boys, but either all or part of the proceeds go toward some form of rebuilding effort (be it a community center in Marial Bai or an education in San Diego). Moreover, the sales from these books, films, and music make the reader, viewer, or listener an activist—just by buying the book, film, or music. However, by the time an individual has finished reading the book, watching the film, or listening to the music, they understand that there is still much more that needs to be done.

An Unresolved Problem

Critics of these benefactors, authors, and documentarists who took interest in the Lost Boys of Sudan could ask, “what took them so long?” Why did it take a joint effort by the United Nations and the United States government to resettle them in the United States before anyone took notice, much less wrote a book about them? Civil war returned to Sudan in 1983. Many of the Lost Boys left their villages in 1987. By 1992, they were in the refugee camp in Kakuma, Kenya, where they, along with up to 86,000 other Sudanese refugees, would be for the next ten years. Christopher Quinn, the director of God Grew Tired of Us, stated, that when he first landed in Kakuma in 2001, he could tell “everyone there really wanted to tell the story because they had been sedentary for ten years in this camp with little to no interest from the outside world. I think they were very much ready to tell their story” (“Finding the Lost Boys”
02:43 mark). Where was the interest to tell their story in 1996? Where’s the interest to
tell the story of those who are still living in the Kakuma refugee camp?

While some of these questions may be unanswerable, part of Felman’s
argument in Testimony is that, with the Holocaust, there came a “crisis of witnessing”
(xvii), meaning that the world had never seen death and destruction at this magnitude
or with these intentions. Therefore, no one could truly “witness” what they had seen
(or, rather, had not seen). The interesting thing here, with the situation in Sudan, is that
the people of southern Sudan might be comparable to Felman’s “world” in the 1940s.
As Valentino points out in the telling of his story, southern Sudan was “isolated”
(Eggers 40) and “at least a few hundred years behind the industrialized world” (49).
Due to their isolation, it may be reasonable to accept that a “crisis of witnessing” was
possible for the southern Sudanese, delaying their ability to grasp what was happening
and what had happened. But we have to ask: Where were the rest of the world’s
witnesses? Where were the people who said “never again” after the Holocaust when
the northern government in Khartoum began to kill all southern Sudanese men and
boys in an effort to eliminate the chance of procreation and lineage? How does one not
call that genocide? How does one not see the need to intervene immediately?

While the world’s lack of response to southern Sudan certainly stands as a
blemish on our consciousness, we have to acknowledge what these books,
documentaries, and musicians can accomplish now. As Eggers notes in his essay in The
Guardian:
while negotiating with the south under the watchful eye of the international community [2005], the Sudanese government was allowed to revive its vicious civil war tactics for use against the civilians of Darfur…. So while I struggled to write the book of Valentino’s life, trying to uncover the truths of his early years and to untangle the story of the SPLA and its effect on the people of southern Sudan, he and I were watching what we had thought impossible: a step-by-step re-enactment of the war he had fled, only this time in another region of his country. Thus far in Darfur, the government of Sudan has been allowed to kill about 250,000 of its citizens in almost precisely the same manner in which they killed the people of southern Sudan. Year after year, since war broke out in Darfur in 2003, the government of Sudan has been allowed to pursue identical policies of mayhem. And though President Bush, among others, has called the killing in Darfur a genocide, this has not yet spurred the international community to stop the killing. (par. 37-38)

While there still may be disbelief that this type of war is happening all over again in Sudan, at least it is being recognized (by former President Bush, by the Save Darfur Coalition and other non-government organizations, by President Obama’s recent appointment of a Special Envoy to Sudan). In the documentary War Child, former UN spokesperson Ben Parker states, “if you want to fast forward Darfur and see what it’s
going to look like in the future, go to southern Sudan. You’ll see what happens when you run out of ideas, when you run out of courage, and when you let a war fester for years and years and years” (1:27:00 mark). While the people of southern Sudan and Darfur hold different beliefs (most southern Sudanese are African Christians or animists while Darfurians are mostly African Muslims), the southern Sudanese, and particularly many of the resettled Lost Boys, are committed to raising awareness about their story in hopes that readers and listeners can draw parallels to the current situation in Darfur. As Deng states in his “Preface”:

My desire to have this book written was born out of my faith and beliefs in humanity; I wanted to reach out to others to help them understand Sudan’s place in our global community. I am relieved that Dave and I have accomplished this task through illumination of my life as an example of atrocities many successive governments of Sudan committed against its own people. Although the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement gave southern Sudan the opportunity to rebuild itself—and the chance to secede in 2011 via popular referendum—gross human rights violations still continue today in the Darfur region of the country. (xiv)

In a similar vein, in his song “Forced to Sin,” hip-hop artist Emmanuel Jal sings, “I’m on a fight, day and night / Sometimes I’m doing wrong in order to make things right / It’s like I’m living a dream / First time I’m feeling like a human being / The children of
Darfur / your empty bellies on the telly, now it’s YOU that I’m fighting for.” Jal took his “collaborative” efforts even further when, in 2007, he joined efforts with an Arab Muslim musician, Abdel Gadir Salim, for collaboration on an album that would be called Ceasefire. Recognizing Jal’s past as a SPLA child soldier that fought, and possibly killed, northern Arab and Muslim soldiers, his collaboration with a northern Arab and Muslim musician demonstrates their shared desire for and commitment to sustained peace. Similarly, in the latest volume from McSweeney’s Voice of Witness series, Dave Eggers and Valentino Achak Deng, along with Craig Walzer, put together a collection titled Out of Exile: Narratives from the Abducted and Displaced People of Sudan. The book is the fourth in the Voice of Witness series, but, as Eggers and Deng write in the Foreword, “giving voice to the victims of the civil wars in Sudan [both the war with the South and the current war in Darfur] was the very reason that the Voice of Witness was conceived” (1). They outline how during their trip to Marial Bai in 2003, they sat down with women who had been abducted by the murahaleen. They write: “[a]fter we spoke to these women, we were determined that their voices should be heard” (2). While Eggers was there to conduct research for What Is the What, he was moved into action for all of the voices that might be missing from What Is the What. Out of Exile includes 17 narratives, from abducted women to child soldiers to Darfurians living in Internally Displaced Persons camps. Eggers and Deng conclude the Foreword, again addressing the “you” in the reader: “When you read these stories, you will be moved, you will be enraged, and we hope, you will never read a headline
about Darfur or South Sudan, or indeed any member of the Sudanese diaspora, the
same way again” (3).

While Southern Sudan currently enjoys a shaky peace agreement with the
northern government, these young men, along with those responsible for amplifying
their stories (authors, documentary directors, activists, etc.), refuse to stop their efforts
both to educate and raise awareness. Sudan—as well as the entire global community—
cannot bear another crisis of witnessing.

The reader is critical in the entire experience that surrounds What Is the What.
Readers are more than Iser’s responders, more than Eggers’s and Valentino’s reading
(or listening) students. The narrative that Eggers constructs, in the end, asks readers to
be more—to do more. Just as Eggers shapes Valentino, the character in the book, to be
a storyteller in order to reclaim a custom from his past, the collaborative nature of the
text—between Valentino and listener, between authors and readers—recreates the “we
community” that these Sudanese men (Valentino Achak Deng, John Bul Dau,
Emmanuel Jal, etc.), knew as boys. Their Dinka and Nuer heritage taught them the
importance of family, of community, of helping one another. The effect of this lesson
is evident when witnessing the boys’ interdependent survival tactics on their walk
through Sudan. The young men’s decision to form makeshift families in the Pinyudo
refugee camp, with Valentino and “the Eleven” boys he was in charge of (Eggers 259),
and in Kakuma with Valentino’s acceptance into Gop Chol’s family (372),
demonstrates their understanding of the undeniable need of a community in order to survive. When they were resettled in America, the “we community” amongst the refugees remained intact. As Valentino informs the reader, “if I had not set rules, the phone would ring without end. There is a circle of perhaps three hundred Sudanese in the U.S. who keep in touch…and we do so in a way that might be considered excessive” (Eggers 15-16). But a “we community”—with someone other than a fellow Sudanese—seemed harder to foster. As Valentino thinks: “[i]n many cases, the Lost Boys of Sudan have no one else…with our relocation to the United States, again it is just boys” (Eggers 16). However, all it took is one person’s interest and concern to start building a collaborative relationship. One person’s interest in their story (Dave Eggers, Christopher Quinn, Emma McCune), gave them a “creation of a we.” But it is the book, the film, and the music that can reach an audience to help rebuild their “we community,” and, just as importantly, expand their “we community” to bridge continents and cultures. It is only a “we community” that holds enough power, and a loud enough voice, to demand action.
Conclusions and Implications: The What and the What Next?

Ultimately, *What Is the What* will teach its readers about space. The space people need to tell their story. For Valentino Achak Deng, his story’s space came in the form of Dave Eggers—first with a meeting, then with taped interviews, then through emails, then through visits to each other’s homes, and finally, in the space of a 535 page book. *What Is the What* also teaches readers about the space between a village in southern Sudan and an apartment in Atlanta, Georgia, and the space between the memory of the past and the uncertainty of the future. *What Is the What* teaches how the space between the front and back cover of a book can be a very productive space, where readers are constantly learning. Finally, *What Is the What* teaches how all of these spaces are “collapsible”—how space can collapse between two men, between the spaces of places, and between the confines of a physical book.

Chronicling the creation of *What Is the What*, especially the relationship between Deng and Eggers, helped situate the book in both a cultural context concerning the transformation of memoirs as well as a foundational context that illuminated why Eggers made certain narratological choices (e.g. to make the project a novel and to use the robbery as the primary framing device for the novel). A close reading, then, of the narrative that Eggers constructed showed the meticulous lengths he went to in order to achieve a certain effect on the reader. Eggers’s placement of plot events from the two narratives conveyed his desire to make connections between
Valentino’s past and present, forcing readers to recognize all of Valentino’s existence—not just his traumatic past as a “Lost Boy of Sudan.” Finally, Deng and Eggers’s relationship, along with Eggers’s intentions for the reader as an active participant in the text, demonstrated the collaborative nature—and desire—for the entire project: the creation of a “we community” with the reader.

Near the end of his article in *The Guardian*, Dave Eggers writes: “People have asked Valentino if he knows what the What is, if now he feels any closer to an answer. He doesn’t feel any closer, no, and I don’t feel closer, but for now it’s clear we need to continue to focus on the tangible, on doing the tough but obvious work right before us” (par.54). These sentences demonstrate the essence of the close, inextricable relationship Dave Eggers and Valentino Achak Deng built together. What was once the creation story for the Dinka, a group of southern Sudanese with which many may have not been familiar, is now not only their bestselling book’s title, but “The What” is also a philosophical and ethical question that these two men share. The “he” and the “I” in the passage above have become a “we” and an “us” because of “The What.”

In the same article in *The Guardian*, Eggers suggests that perhaps “they” (the Sudanese) “weren’t even asking the right question” when it came to the “What.” He then turns to say, “[q]uestions we might ask now: can influence be exerted in Sudan? Does the US, Britain, and the rest of Europe have a responsibility to influence the Sudanese government? Absolutely” (par.47-48, emphasis mine). Again, the “they” or “them” of the Sudanese, has become a “we” question—a “we” problem to solve.
Eggers hopes that through *What Is the What* and the talks he and Deng have done about the book and about Darfur, readers will *want* to become part of that “we”—that they will *not* want to be another individual who chooses to ignore the existence of Valentino Achak Deng.

At the beginning of this project I suggested that perhaps *What Is the What* conveys another transformation in memoirs. While *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* is an intensely personal account of one young man’s life after he lost both of his parents to cancer, a work like *What Is the What*, as a “fictionalized memoir,” is not only a collaborative effort by Deng and Eggers, but they have collaborative plans for the reader outside the physical boundaries of the text. If we look at recent bestselling “memoirs,” we can see this as a developing trend. On the current nonfiction trade paperback bestseller list in *The New York Times*, the memoir *Three Cups of Tea* is #1 and has been on the bestseller list for 115 weeks. This book chronicles the efforts of the authors, Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin, to build schools in remote parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. At the end of their account, there is a “For Further Information” section with a website directing readers to more information and ways to help and to donate to their cause. Another book, or transformed memoir, on the *New York Times* bestseller list is *Same Kind of Different as Me* which follows the relationship between an art dealer and a homeless man in Fort Worth, Texas. On the accompanying website there is a “Frequently Asked Questions” section where the authors respond to a question like “How can we help?” They tell
their readers to look into their local homeless organizations to donate their time and/or money. Utilizing the reader, especially through the use of technology and the accessibility of the Internet, these works, along with What Is the What, demonstrate how a memoir can—and has—transformed from a literary piece into a literary, activist piece.

Lee Siegel, the critic who took issue with Eggers’s involvement in telling Deng’s story, says What Is the What may convey “the next stage of American memoir,” but he sees this in a much more negative light than I do. He closes his review, stating:

[p]erhaps, having run out of marketable stories to tell about ourselves, we will now travel the world in search of desperate people willing to rent out their lives, the way indigent people in some desolate places give up their children. Perhaps we have picked our psyches clean, and now we need other people’s stories the way we need other people’s oil. (par.39)

To use Siegel’s metaphors (unfortunate as they may be), Deng and Eggers’s relationship (or the relationships fostered in Three Cups of Tea or Same Kind of Different as Me) is not of the “rental” variety. This is extremely clear as we can read about the friendship they maintain, see photographs of their joint travels to southern Sudan and the progression of the Marial Bai Secondary School, and read more from their continued collaborative work in the Out of Exile project. Perhaps Siegel would alter his opinion considering his review is almost two years old. I can’t imagine that he
would uphold his sentiment, now in 2009, when he said in the review from 2007: “few people are going to be galvanized into political or financial action by Eggers’s telling of Deng’s story” (par.28). Considering Deng’s foundation was started as a result of his collaboration with Eggers for What Is the What, and considering that all the proceeds from the book’s sales go toward the foundation, would Siegel choose to maintain his opinion that no “political or financial action” would result from this book after seeing the current progress of the Marial Bai Secondary School?

Furthermore, we have yet to see the true “political action” this book and Deng’s foundation are capable of producing. Remembering that many, many people told the Lost Boys that they were the “future of Sudan” and that they “have become the best-educated group of southern Sudanese in history” (Eggers 506), even more substantial “political action” will happen in the future due to the rebuilding efforts from Deng’s secondary school, Emmanuel Jal’s school, and John Bul Dau’s clinic and school. With new schools and clinics, the children of southern Sudan will have access to education and health services that were nonexistent before 2005 (the end of the second Sudanese civil war). With this kind of education available, what will the children of southern Sudan be capable of if the peace agreement holds and war does not resume? It’s unfortunate that Siegel refuses to see Deng and Eggers’s relationship as anything other than Eggers’s “appropriation” of Deng, or his “rent[ing] out” of his life. Again, this review is two years old, but Siegel has made no amendments to his original review, and by not doing so, he continues to ignore all of the productive,
rebuilding efforts (financial, political, and cultural) that What Is the What has had—and will continue to have—in southern Sudan.

When I first began considering how I would conclude this thesis, I thought again about Joseph Okujeni, the doorman in my building. We’ve had more conversations about this thesis—enlightening conversations. Like when I explained the relationship between Eggers and Deng and the book’s label as “novel” and Joseph thought for a bit and said, “so…fact and fiction? So, faction?” At the end of another conversation, I told Joseph that I’d like to “sit down and hear his story some time” to which he replied with a smile and laugh, “Yes! You can write a book about it. And we can split the profits.”

After that conversation I came home and immediately started writing down ideas for a conclusion where I would insert Joseph’s “story” or narrative. From our previous conversations, all I knew was that he is originally from Nigeria, and he has been in the United States for about ten years. He has returned to Nigeria twice and most of his family remains there. I thought I could ask him if we could sit down and I would include his story in this thesis—because I’ve started to wonder if, like Valentino, Joseph sits at his desk at the front of this apartment building and silently address the tenants as they casually walk in and out, day after day? Is he trying to tell me a story? Am I not listening? This idea haunts me.

Then I realized that while my idea was sincere, it was completely wrong. Joseph’s story does not belong buried at the end of a thesis. Putting it here would make
it seem like Joseph’s story and Valentino’s story are one and the same. I would be at risk of making vast generalizations about two men from Africa where the countries—and their histories—are extremely different. Me, putting Joseph’s story here, is comparable to Powder assuming Valentino is from Nigeria (Eggers 9). Just because I’ve written a thesis on a novel that chronicles a Sudanese man’s experience, does not mean that every African man I meet is Sudanese or a refugee. Yes, Valentino’s story, through the work of Dave Eggers, has enlightened me on the refugee, or immigrant, experience in the United States. Yes, What Is the What helped me see that there is a “collapsible space” between people, and yes, I will ask Joseph if he would like to sit down and share his story. But it does not belong here. I am no Dave Eggers. This thesis will be read by, at most, a handful of people (not the 355,635 people that have bought What Is the What). Joseph deserves his space that he can call his own to share his story.

What Is the What teaches readers about discourse and the undeniable need for communication and collaboration. Sidonie Smith and Kay Schaffer close their study Human Rights and Narrated Lives with the following words: “[a]t this historical moment human rights activism, and the discourse sustaining it, remains the most viable hope for extending democracy, social justice, and freedom” (234). I believe Valentino Achak Deng, Dave Eggers, and all of the Lost Boys who continue to tell their story (be it in a memoir like They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky, or through hip-hop music like Emmanuel Jal, or in their local community centers and churches), are the critical voices that want nothing more than to “sustain” that discourse—of human rights
violations, of the refugee/immigrant experience in America, about the human condition
and the human connection. I only hope that this thesis can also be viewed as part of the
effort to sustain that discourse and that call to action as well.

Moreover, there is a correlation between sustainable discourse and sustainable
development. Many agencies, such as United States Aid for International Development
(USAID), frequently use the term “sustainable development” as part of their mission
statement and goals for their international work and efforts. Deng’s investment,
through his foundation, in the building of the Marial Bai Secondary School and
community center (along with the many rebuilding efforts from other Lost Boys), show
a desire—and commitment—to be a vital contributor to any and all “sustainable
development” for southern Sudan. Sustainable development is only possible, though,
through sustainable discourse—we must continue to discuss, to communicate, to
brainstorm, to read, to analyze—in order to make any progress for long-term,
sustainable development in the rebuilding of southern Sudan. In the most recent
“update” on the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation website, he tells us that the first
classes at the Marial Bai Secondary School are meant to commence at the end of
April—just as this thesis is completed. Perhaps the coinciding of these two events
serves as a collision of Deng’s efforts for “sustainable development” in Sudan and my
efforts to “sustain discourse.”
In the Introduction to this thesis I stated that through *What Is the What* Dave Eggers was able to “restore the pre-war vibrancy of Marial Bai, Deng’s village in southern Sudan, complete with a family and a young boy’s life with his best friends.”

While Eggers was able to “restore”—creatively through words in a book—Deng is able to *reconstruct* Marial Bai through the proceeds from the book. The productive space of a book has led to a truly productive and hopefully *safe* space—Marial Bai’s first secondary school. Eggers used Deng’s memories to restore the image, but it took—and will continue to take—Dave Eggers, Valentino Achak Deng, and *the readers* to help Deng rebuild the reality.
Notes

1 Eggers goes on to list five “war” novels that have influenced him: *The Naked and the Dead* (a World War II novel by Norman Mailer), *The Things They Carried* (Tim O’Brien’s collection of related stories about the Vietnam Conflict), *The Painted Bird* (a World War II novel by Jerzy Kosinski), *Catch-22* (a World War II novel by Joseph Heller), and *War and Peace* (Leo Tolstoy’s epic novel accounting the French invasion of Russia and the Napoleonic Era).

2 Copies sold data were available through the database Bookscan: http://nielsen.bookscan.com/.

3 See *New York Times* bestseller list for the week of January 23, 2009:
http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/01/books/bestseller/bestpaperfiction.html?sq=best%20seller%20list%202009/02/01&st=cse&scp=3&pagewanted=print

4 Copies sold data were available through the database Bookscan: http://nielsen.bookscan.com/.

5 For an enumeration of newspaper and magazine publicity and the public’s response, see Mark Bixler’s book, *The Lost Boys of Sudan*, pp.10-11 and pp.95-110.

6 See the 2006 Sundance Film Festival and Awards: http://festival.sundance.org/2009/history/

7 To give support to the idea that Eggers hesitated to call the book a memoir by Deng, one only needs to look at the fruitless attempts to scrutinize and expose Ishmael Beah’s memoir *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*. The controversy came from two Australian reporters who claimed that members of Beah’s family were still alive (and had not died in the Sierra Leone civil war as Beah writes in his memoir). They also questioned the dates that Beah uses in his memoir. See Beah’s website and his statement to the press: http://www.alongwaygone.com/Ishmael_Beah_statement.pdf

8 Prose’s frustration to label the book echoes a quote by James Frey in the *Vanity Fair* piece: “‘Frankly, I don’t even care,’” [Frey] says, exasperated, after I pushed him on the subject of the scandal for the 16th time. ‘I don’t care if somebody calls [A Million Little Pieces] a memoir, or a novel, or a fictionalized memoir, or what. I could care less what they call it. The thing on the side of the book means nothing. Who knows what it is. It’s just a book. It’s just a story. It’s just a book that was written with the intention to break a lot of rules in writing. I’ve broken a lot of rules in a lot of ways. So be it’” (Peretz par.14).

9 See Chapter 3 of this paper for the pedagogical and narrative tools that Eggers used to educate readers on Sudan’s complex history.

10 Eggers writes in *The Guardian*: “[i]n an attempt to kickstart the writing of the book, I published an account of the trip [he took with Valentino to Sudan in 2003] in journalistic form in the *Believer* magazine. The exercise made clear, though, that my telling of Valentino’s story, in my voice, would be distracting and totally incorrect...in the book, I knew I had to disappear completely” (par.29).

11 See *They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky*, Benson’s chapter (pp. 137-41) and Benjamin’s chapter (145); See also *God Grew Tired of Us* by John Bul Dau (pp. 93-102).

12 It must be acknowledged that this sentence, discussing the book’s proceeds, was not included in the “Preface” in the hardcover edition. Similar to the addition of the “since you and I exist” sentence (discussed in Chapter One), the included information about the profits of the book for the foundation suggest that the positive reception the hardcover edition received, along with his continued relationship with Dave Eggers, has reinforced Deng’s idea that “difference” is possible.

13 See *New York Times* bestseller list for the week of April 17, 2009:
Appendix A: Mapping the Trauma and Joy in *What Is the What*

Map 1: Trauma and Joy in the United States (2001-2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event/Location</th>
<th>City/Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tabitha’s death</td>
<td>Seattle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer with the Newymers</td>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost Boys reunion</td>
<td>Phoenix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bobby Newmyer’s death</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery and assault; hospital experience</td>
<td>Atlanta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendship with Mary Williams and the Newton family, mentored by Phil Mays,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>visited by Tabitha</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**KEY:**
- Joy
- Trauma

Map source: http://www.weatherusa.net/images/map_us_outline.png

Map source: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/maps/su-map.gif

- Father attacked by SPLA rebels in shop; village attacked by murahaleen; separated from family (Marial Bai)
- Ten years in Kakuma refugee camp; witnesses execution of soldiers
- Miss Gladys and the drama group, meets Tabitha, job with UNHCR, friendship with Noriyaki, Gop Chol’s family
- Nearly three years in Pinyudo refugee camp; attempted recruitment by SPLA
- Royal Girls of Pinyudo
- Reunited with William K
- Deng’s death on walk
- William K dies
- Gilo River crossing
- Drama trip to Nairobi; first kiss with Tabitha
- Nearly three years in Kakuma refugee camp; witnessed execution of soldiers
- Mother in yellow dress, Father’s store, “best day” narrative, playing with Moses and William K, watching Amath from tree (Marial Bai)
Appendix B: The Progress of the Marial Bai Secondary School
(Photographs obtained from The Valentino Achak Deng Foundation website: www.valentinoachakdeng.org).

1) The land for the Marial Bai Secondary School was donated by the regional government in the summer of 2007.


4) Photograph was uploaded to foundation website on April 9, 2009.

5) Photograph was uploaded to foundation website on April 9, 2009.
Works Cited


Reader’s Guide” by Greg Larson.


<http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1648140,00.html>.


