

CHAPTER TWO

ON NOT CLOSING THE LOOP

Empathy, ethics, and transcultural witnessing



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In a 2012 essay in the online magazine *Guernica* titled “The Storytellers of Empire,” adapted from a speech delivered at Yale University in September 2011, the Pakistani novelist Kamila Shamsie deplors the inward-looking nature of much American fiction published during the first decade of the twenty-first century. She sees it as symptomatic of a closed empathy loop. “Your soldiers will come to our lands,” Shamsie tells her American audience, “but your novelists won’t.”¹ She quotes from an interview with John Freeman, the editor of *Granta*, about the magazine’s “Ten Years Later” issue, which explores how we look back at 9/11:

We read less about the world and more about ourselves – instead of reading about the places we are invading, we read about our invaders. . . . It’s a natural instinct, I suppose, but in terms of empathy it feels like a closed loop.²

She holds up John Hersey, an American writer from an earlier generation best known for his account of the aftermath of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, as a shining example of a writer who “never closed the loop” and who, moreover, “wanted to be part of a project which helped Americans imagine and aspire for an America which never closed the loop.”³

Shamsie can readily name a number of American nonfiction writers from the last decade who have followed in Hersey’s footsteps in terms of outward-lookingness, including Jon Lee Anderson, Sarah Chayes, Ann Jones, David Finkel, and Steve Coll. “In nonfiction,” Shamsie writes,

the 9/11 genre takes in Iraq and Afghanistan and Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, it discusses Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, it reaches back to the 1980s and the U.S. involvement in the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, it looks at the Patriot Act and drone attacks.⁴

However, she does not see any successors to Hersey in the realm of American *fiction*:

In fiction, with pitifully few exceptions, the 9/11 novel looks at 9/11 the day itself, in New York – think of the most acclaimed novels in that genre: Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, Claire Messud’s *The Emperor’s Children* or Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*.⁵

She complains that, rather than entwining the story of the day itself with other stories, American novelists tend to treat 9/11 as if it were a natural disaster that came out of nowhere without warning: “in American fiction, 9/11 is a traumatic event as ahistorical as an earthquake.”⁶ There are no intimations of America’s dominant role in the world, its twentieth-century “empire,” or of the long sweep of colonial and postcolonial history that has shaped the Middle East, the region from where the attacks emanated.

Shamsie attributes the lack of concern with the role of America in the world that she sees among the American fiction writers of her generation partly to fear of appropriation of other people’s stories. This is something that, she suspects, weighs down those writers more than writers of earlier generations. She recognizes that “writers implicated in certain power structures have been guilty of writing fiction which supports, justifies and props up those power structures.”⁷ She is also sympathetic to “the concerns of people who feel that for too long stories have been told about them rather than by them.”⁸ However, fear of appropriation is not a sufficient excuse, in Shamsie’s view, for abstaining from engagement with the wider world altogether. The proper response, she feels, is for writers “to write differently, to write better, to critique the power structures rather than propping them up, to move beyond stereotype . . .”⁹ She ends her essay by voicing her suspicion that the more fundamental problem is a lack of empathy with the rest of the world: “you just don’t care very much about us.”¹⁰

I began this chapter with a brief summary of Shamsie’s essay because her identification of an empathy deficit at the heart of contemporary American literature and the possible explanations and solutions she offers are directly relevant to the topic I want to address here, namely the challenges that witnessing distant suffering poses for empathic understanding and ethical thinking. To underline the depth and tenacity of the problem, I will first show that an increased awareness of the perils of representing distant suffering has not prevented even the scholarly field that has arguably done most to highlight these perils – trauma theory – from falling victim to them. Next, I will analyze the work of a prominent contemporary American writer whom Shamsie fails to mention yet who, to my mind, successfully navigates the challenges she identifies and who can with some justification be considered the successor to John Hersey that Shamsie is looking for but fails to discover: a John Hersey for our age, as it were. Widely recognized as one of the finest authors writing in America today, Dave Eggers shot to fame in 2000 with his best-selling memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*.¹¹ In this chapter, though, I am going to focus on his novel *What Is the What*, the fictionalized autobiography of a Sudanese “Lost Boy” that he published in 2006.¹² Reading this collaborative testimony as an inspiring example of genuine and effective cross-cultural ethical engagement, I suggest that contemporary

American literature is more outward-looking than Shamsie gives it credit for and holds out hope that our “colonial present” – to use Derek Gregory’s phrase¹³ – can and will be transformed into a decolonial future.

THE PERILS OF REPRESENTING DISTANT SUFFERING

Over the last few decades, creative artists as well as humanities scholars – producers and students of cultural artifacts – have become increasingly aware of the perils and pitfalls involved in the representation of “the other,” whether understood in cultural, racial, ethnic, gender, or class terms. This development can be accounted for at least in part by the rise of various social movements and their academic counterparts, especially postcolonial studies and gender studies. Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Mary Ellmann, and Kate Millet – to give just a few examples – have famously criticized stereotypical representations of the respective constituencies whose cause they champion (non-Westerners and women) and exposed the appropriative impulses that may inform even seemingly benign attempts to represent or speak for disempowered or subaltern groups.¹⁴ However, the specific question of empathy with distant others, which Shamsie’s essay is centrally concerned with, has arguably been debated most intensely by scholars active in another area of cultural investigation, one I will discuss at greater length.

A desire to promote cross-cultural empathy and ethical engagement underlies much cultural research on trauma, testimony, and witnessing that has been done since the early 1990s under the rubric of trauma theory. A product of the so-called ethical turn affecting the humanities, trauma theory promised to infuse the study of literary and cultural texts with new relevance. Amid accusations that literary scholarship, particularly in its deconstructive, poststructuralist, or textualist guise, had become indifferent or oblivious to “what goes on in the real world” (the world outside the text: history, politics, ethics), trauma theory confidently announced itself as an essential apparatus for understanding “the real world” and even as a potential means for changing it for the better.

This epistemological and ethical programme is clearly laid out in the highly influential work of Cathy Caruth, one of the founding figures of trauma theory (along with Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra). In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, she argues that a textualist approach – one which insists that all reference is indirect – need not lead us away from history and into “political and ethical paralysis.”¹⁵ Quite the contrary, in fact: conjoining a psychoanalytic view of trauma with a deconstructive vigilance regarding the indeterminacies of representation in the analysis of texts that bear witness to traumatic histories can grant us a paradoxical mode of access to extreme events and experiences that defy understanding and representation.

Moreover, this critical practice comes invested with ethical significance. Caruth claims that the “new mode of reading and of listening”¹⁶ that trauma demands can help break the isolation imposed on both individuals and cultures by traumatic experience: “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, . . . history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas.”¹⁷ In a catastrophic age such as ours,

she writes elsewhere, “trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures.”¹⁸ With trauma forming a bridge between disparate historical experiences, so the argument goes, listening to the trauma of another can foster empathy and thereby contribute to cross-cultural solidarity and to the creation of new forms of community.

It should be noted that the kind of empathic response favored by Caruth and other trauma scholars is to be distinguished from common understandings of empathy as a straightforward form of identification, such as can be found in the work of Martha Nussbaum, Wayne Booth, Richard Rorty, and other exponents of the neo-humanist school of literary-ethical inquiry.¹⁹ As a sub-strand of what one might see as the competing deconstructive school represented by Jacques Derrida, J. Hillis Miller, Derek Attridge, and others,²⁰ trauma theory indicts neo-humanist complacency. It rejects what Caruth calls “facile empathy” and the “rush to comprehension”²¹ associated with the neo-humanist call for imaginative participation in the lives of others. Rather than assimilate the other to the same, trauma theory emphasizes the need to respect the otherness of the other, which eludes every attempt to understand, grasp, or possess it. Instead of naively believing in the power of the sympathetic imagination to understand what the other has suffered, it puts into question the imperialism of the same (to use another Levinasian term) which insists on reducing the other to the self’s horizons of significance. According to trauma theory, then, the expansion of the circle of moral inclusion, the circle of the “we,” can actually end up doing violence to the distant others whose inclusion is sought.

Trauma and memory scholars such as Caruth, LaCapra, Jill Bennett, E. Ann Kaplan, and Alison Landsberg are careful to distinguish empathy from forms of affective involvement that do not recognize and respect alterity, and which are variously referred to as sympathy (Landsberg); projective or incorporative identification (LaCapra); surrogate victimage (LaCapra); and facile, empty, or crude empathy (Caruth; Kaplan; Bennett). Desirable empathy, by contrast, is called, simply, empathy (LaCapra; Landsberg), empathic unsettlement (LaCapra), critical empathy (Bennett), or ethical witnessing (Kaplan).²² This caveat against imperialism and appropriation is meant to prevent empathy from turning into a closed-loop process.

From its inception, though, trauma theory itself has been plagued by Eurocentric and monocultural tendencies, which sit uneasily with and, ironically, even counteract the field’s commitment to cross-cultural ethical engagement.²³ In an article on the exclusions and limitations of trauma theory, Susannah Radstone notes that there are limits to the empathy advocated by trauma theory:

it is the sufferings of those, categorized in the West as “other”, that tend *not* to be addressed via trauma theory – which becomes in this regard, a theory that supports politicized constructions of those with whom identifications via traumatic sufferings can be forged and those from whom such identifications are withheld.²⁴

Judith Butler spells out the far-reaching consequences of such constructions in *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, where she argues that the differential distribution of precarity across populations is “at once a material and a perceptual issue”: “those whose lives are not ‘regarded’ as potentially grievable, and hence valuable, are made

to bear the burden of starvation, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement, and differential exposure to violence and death.”²⁵ A one-sided focus on traumas suffered by members of Western cultural traditions – such as the Holocaust and 9/11 – could thus have pernicious effects at odds with trauma theory’s self-proclaimed ethical mission. If trauma theory is to adhere to its ethical aspirations, it must keep the empathy loop open: the empathy it promotes must extend to the sufferings of those belonging to non-Western or minority groups.

However, in those relatively rare cases when canonical trauma theory does move beyond its traditional Euro-American focus and attempts to reach out to non-Western others, it often exhibits the very imperialistic and exploitative behavior it condemns. Take, for example, the few descriptions of cross-cultural encounters that we are offered in Caruth’s pioneering study *Unclaimed Experience*. I am thinking of her reading of the story of Tancred and Clorinda, her analysis of Sigmund Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, and her interpretation of the film *Hiroshima mon amour*, all of which are central to her formulation of trauma theory, yet which strike me as highly problematic instances of witnessing across cultural boundaries. What tends to happen there is that empathy is surreptitiously redirected toward the European character, and the non-European other ends up being silenced, excluded from the empathy loop, his or her suffering ignored or relegated to the margins of a Western trauma drama. Rather than being evidence of a postcolonial sensibility, then, Caruth’s descriptions of cross-cultural encounters actually reinforce Eurocentrism.²⁶

As such, they seem to bear out the suspicion voiced by Radstone, in her article “Theory and Affect: Undivided Worlds,” that trauma theory, despite its stated concern with the empathic witnessing of the pain of others and its explicit aim of redeeming their suffering, “is driven, at an unconscious level, by a certain aggressivity”:²⁷ “Trauma theory is a consequence both of acts of violence and aggression that it seeks to redeem, and of unconscious aggressivity that it unconsciously vents.”²⁸ In fact, Radstone believes that the popularity of trauma theory “cannot be understood without reference to both these aspects of the theory.”²⁹ Her suggestion that the appeal of trauma theory derives in part from its simultaneous disavowal of and address to the aggressive drives of readers and practitioners aligns her with Mark Seltzer’s analysis of what he calls our contemporary “wound culture,” by which he means “the public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound.”³⁰ Seltzer characterizes the public sphere that is defined by this wound culture as a “pathological public sphere,” that is, one in which “the very notion of sociality is bound to the excitations of the torn and opened body, the torn and exposed individual, as public spectacle.”³¹ According to him, this pathological public sphere is inhabited by voyeurs and fetishists. Witnessing the suffering of others has little to do with compassion, in his view – quite the contrary, even: the cultural fixation on spectacles of suffering and trauma (such as car crashes or serial killings) is all about individuals indulging in erotic pleasure, enjoying a sadistic identification with violence and a masochistic identification with exposed pain. Radstone’s and Seltzer’s accounts of the darker aspects of “empathy” and the selfish fascinations that partly shape the impetus to engage with trauma seem highly pertinent in the context of transcultural witnessing.

Serious misgivings about the political efficacy of empathy have also been voiced by Lauren Berlant and Wendy Brown, who, in separate critiques, deplore “the steady

slide of political into therapeutic discourse”³² that, in their view, the application of notions of trauma to situations of social injustice and the resulting tendency to “over-identif[y] the eradication of pain with the achievement of justice”³³ abet. In the same vein, Rosanne Kennedy and Tikka Jan Wilson argue that, insofar as it encourages readers of testimonies to identify with innocent victims, trauma theory absolves the former of the need to engage in critical self-reflection regarding their own possible complicity in oppressive practices, whether as active participants, bystanders, or beneficiaries. Kennedy and Wilson warn that, with empathy functioning as a substitute for critical thinking and effective political action, trauma theory and the testimonies it studies may end up depoliticizing the histories that have produced the wound to which they bear empathetic witness.³⁴

KEEPING THE EMPATHY LOOP OPEN

Given the myriad hurdles and obstacles involved in empathetically engaging with distant others, which even trauma theory itself cannot seem to surmount, it would come as no surprise if contemporary American literature had indeed turned inward, as Shamsie claims. After all, writers would be fools to expose themselves to the barrage of criticism and skepticism that, it appears, inevitably meets any effort to reach out to the racial, ethnic, or cultural other these days. One only has to consider the way in which the *Kony 2012* campaign, which sought to instill empathy for the victims of an African warlord in an American (and, beyond that, a global) audience, was almost universally derided by the intellectual establishment to realize the extent to which academic concerns about appropriation, exploitation, and imperialism have entered the cultural mainstream.³⁵ However, in the final part of this chapter, I will argue that contemporary American literature is not, in fact, the empathy-starved wasteland Shamsie makes it out to be.

While her negative assessment of the current state of American letters is shared by Bruce Robbins, who diagnoses twenty-first-century American fiction as suffering from a lack of “worldliness,”³⁶ others beg to differ. Meghan O’Rourke, one of the judges chosen to select the best young American novelists for *Granta* in 2007, remarked at the time:

I was struck by the degree to which American writers are looking outward . . . there’s a sense now that to be an American fiction writer is to deal with America in the world – and the world in America. If in the past American fiction dealt with the rest of the globe by trying hard to assimilate it, today it deals with it by going outward towards it.³⁷

O’Rourke’s statement, made in the same journal whose editor Shamsie quotes in support of her rather different view, is echoed by Alike Varvogli in her monograph *Travel and Dislocation in Contemporary American Fiction*, which analyzes a range of novels that “go outward,” in the sense that their protagonists either go abroad or carry within them a sense of being abroad.³⁸ Varvogli’s study gives pride of place to the work of Dave Eggers, curiously overlooked by Shamsie, which strikes me as an instructive example of how American literature can shake off its alleged insularity

and engage with the rest of the world in a responsible and productive manner. In what follows, I will focus on Eggers's novel *What Is the What*, and suggest that in this book the author manages both to stay true to the continuing cultural demand for empathy with distant others and to defuse or counter the prevailing "skepticism about the morality of empathic identification"³⁹ that tends to find such efforts hopelessly wanting.

Published by McSweeney's in 2006, *What Is the What*, subtitled *The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng*, tells the story of a refugee from the Second Sudanese Civil War. One of the thousands of "Lost Boys" who were brutally displaced during the conflict, Deng was forced to leave his village in southern Sudan at the age of six and walked hundreds of miles, pursued by militias, government bombers, and wild animals, to find safety, settling in camps in Ethiopia and later Kenya, and finally moving to Atlanta, Georgia. Wanting to reach out to a wide audience by telling the story of his life in a book, he came into contact with Eggers, with whom he collaborated over a period of several years to create *What Is the What*.

The book did not come together until Eggers, having first tried but failed to write Deng's life story as an oral history by transcribing their numerous interviews, decided to turn it into a first-person fiction. Acutely aware of the overtones of a privileged white American writing the fictionalized autobiography of a struggling black African, Eggers took great pains to be as transparent as possible about the genesis and development of the project.

The book's generic hybridity is clear from the start, as the title page, which identifies Eggers as the sole author, refers to Deng's story as both an autobiography and a novel. The book contains a preface signed by Deng, which explains the book's peculiar generic status and outlines its social agenda:

This book was born out of the desire on the part of myself and the author to reach out to others and help them understand the atrocities many successive governments of Sudan committed before and during the civil war. To that end, over the course of many years, I told my story orally to the author. He then concocted this novel, approximating my own voice and using the basic events of my life as the foundation. Because many of the passages are fictional, the result is called a novel. . . . And though it is fictionalized, it should be noted that the world I have known is not so different from the one depicted within these pages. We live in a time when even the most horrific events in this book could occur, and in most cases did occur.⁴⁰

In the revised preface to the 2007 Random House edition, Deng further explains his and Eggers's reasons for resorting to fictionalization – they had to pronounce the book a novel, he says, because of the fallibility of Deng's memory – yet assures the reader that "most of the major events in the book are true"; indeed, "[t]he book is historically accurate."⁴¹ This assertion reverses the traditional hierarchy of the nineteenth-century African American slave narrative, where, as Varvogli points out, "the stamp of authenticity was placed on the book's preface by a white person who could also vouch for the slave's honesty and integrity."⁴² Any semblance of paternalism or imbalanced power relations is further dispelled by Deng's disclosure, in the revised though not in the original preface, of the financial arrangement he had made with Eggers: they

agreed, he writes, 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.”⁴³

Moreover, *What Is the What* contests the notion that the United States is morally superior to Sudan by juxtaposing the story of Deng’s perilous African journey with an account of his ongoing persecution within the United States: indeed, Deng’s adopted country is depicted not as a haven but as another war zone, where he faces yet more violence and discrimination. This implicit critique of American exceptionalism is continued in *Zeitoun*, a more recent collaboratively produced testimonial narrative about the unjust treatment of a Syrian American Muslim in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in which Eggers describes the United States as a site of moral decay in contrast with Syria.⁴⁴ (In light of recent events, of course, Eggers’s benign portrayal of the latter country looks a little dated now.) Similarly, *Voice of Witness*, a non-profit oral history book series that was started in the wake of Eggers’s encounter with Deng under the former’s co-editorship, has published volumes on human-rights crises around the world, both outside and within the United States.⁴⁵

In a feature published in *The Guardian* around the time *What Is the What* came out, Eggers spoke of his desire to “disappear completely” behind Deng’s voice,⁴⁶ and an article in *Entertainment Weekly* quoted him as asking the friends to whom he had shown a draft of the manuscript to “edit it as brutally as possible to make sure that *nothing*, not even one adjective choice, sounded like me.”⁴⁷ However, in a rare hostile review of *What Is the What*, Lee Siegel accused Eggers of failing spectacularly in this regard. Regretting that Eggers had not refrained from fictionalizing and simply given his reader “[t]he unadorned story, the true story humbly recorded and presented,” he claims that in the book as we know it “Deng’s personhood has been displaced by someone else’s style and sensibility – by someone else’s story. Deng survived his would-be killers in the Sudan, only to have his identity erased here.”⁴⁸ According to Siegel, Deng “does not really exist”⁴⁹ in *What Is the What*, because “Eggers’s voice is all over the book . . . Eggers has totally subsumed his Sudanese hero’s voice into his own.”⁵⁰ Pointing out similarities between particular passages from *What Is the What* and Eggers’s breakthrough memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Siegel calls the former book’s “innocent expropriation of another man’s identity” “a post-colonial arrogance.”⁵¹

It seems to me, though, that Siegel misses the point of Eggers’s attempt at self-erasure. As one would expect from the hyper-self-reflexive author of *Staggering Genius*, Eggers makes visible the process and limitations of the act of authorial self-annihilation in performing it.⁵² The voice we hear in the book is “both hybrid and singular, distinctly audible and yet impossible to locate” – Elizabeth Twitchell calls it a “third voice” that is neither quite Deng’s nor quite Eggers’s;⁵³ let us call it Valentino’s. This device allows the author to retain Deng’s autonomy and to intercede in the reader’s attempts at identification, which can never be complete. According to Twitchell, “The novel thus proposes a unique relationship among author, reader, and subject, one that enables fellow feeling while disabling projection – or worse, the vampiric appropriation of the traumatized subject.”⁵⁴

What Is the What actively tries to forge empathetic bonds and create cosmopolitan communities through the device of imaginary conversations between the narrator and various people he meets. In the preface, Deng confidently states: “Since you [the reader] and I exist, together we can make a difference!”⁵⁵ However, this model of

collaboration remains a wish rather than a reality for much of the novel: Valentino silently tells the story of his life to a whole series of interlocutors, none of whom is prepared to listen to what he has to say. These “silent stories”⁵⁶ culminate in another direct appeal to the reader at the very end of the narrative, where Valentino, like Deng in the preface, asserts his existence. Throughout the narrative the reader has been “an undetected eavesdropper,”⁵⁷ but in the final paragraph Valentino acknowledges the presence of the reader and the author:

Whatever I do, however I find a way to live, I will tell these stories. . . . [T]o 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. . . . I am alive and you are alive so we must fill the air with our words. . . . How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist.⁵⁸

The reader is called upon to corroborate Valentino’s existence, yet he or she knows full well that Valentino is a construct, a product of literary ventriloquism. In fact, Eggers’s mediating role is underlined in this excerpt by a fairly explicit allusion to an intertext that one cannot fail to be reminded of while reading *What Is the What*: Ralph Ellison’s famous 1952 novel *Invisible Man*. Ellison’s protagonist is an unnamed African American man who has been rendered socially invisible by racism (“I am an invisible man. . . . I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me”⁵⁹), a predicament that clearly resonates with that of Valentino, who is largely ignored by the Americans around him. Thus, the very passage in which Valentino asserts his independent existence and urges the reader and the author to acknowledge this reminds us of the inevitability of mediation and the ever-present risk of discursive imperialism.

This is a risk, however, that Deng and Eggers are willing to take. Deng rejects the isolationism of Ellison’s protagonist, who locks himself up in an abandoned basement in a desperate attempt to maintain autonomy. Deng wants to make the reader aware of injustice and appeals to him or her to act in collaboration with him to “make a difference.” In marked contrast with *Kony 2012*-type humanitarian campaigns, which portray Africans as helpless victims whose only hope lies in the actions of white saviors, Eggers’s novel seeks to create bonds of solidarity and community between equally empowered distant strangers.⁶⁰ The interlocutors whom Valentino silently addresses and the readers who engage with his narrative are called upon to join him in a collective project of social justice. This communitarian vision informs a novel that does not resolve all the moral ambiguities surrounding transcultural witnessing but that is unafraid to confront them and refuses to be paralyzed by them. To quote Twitchell once more:

Rather than throw his hands up in despair, citing the hopelessness of communicating trauma or the inevitability of linguistic imperialism, Eggers writes helplessness, uncertainty, and the likelihood of empathic error into *What Is the What*. He concedes the limitations of the project, but he publishes the book.⁶¹

I want to suggest, in closing, that *What Is the What* is a good example not only of the new ways of writing that Shamsie calls on American fiction writers to develop, but perhaps also of the “middle voice” which Rick Crownshaw has argued memory studies is in dire need of. In his introduction to the essay collection *The Future of Memory*, published in 2010, Crownshaw writes: “In sum, the future of memory studies might be wise to draw on LaCapra’s concept of the middle voice, which generates a sense of ‘empathic unsettlement’ in relation to (rather than over-identification with) past victims.”⁶² The middle voice originally refers to a grammatical category found in certain languages which occupies a place in the middle between the active and passive voices, because the subject cannot be categorized as either agent or patient. However, Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra, taking their cue from an essay by Roland Barthes, use it to designate what they take to be an appropriate way to write about extreme traumatic events such as the Holocaust.⁶³ Exactly how we should picture the discursive analogue to the middle voice that they have in mind remains unclear, though. Crownshaw writes:

What then does the middle voice sound like or, when transcribed, look like, and just how is it articulated? LaCapra does not suggest that there is a stylistic formula but that an adequate voice (or form of historical representation) illuminates one’s pre-existing implication in transferential relations. It is the aporetic nature of the middle voice that opens up a space in which the addressers’ and addressees’, authors’ and recipients’, pre-existing relationship to trauma can be provoked and explored.⁶⁴

Indeed, the middle voice “allows engagement with, critical distance on and self-reflexivity towards transferential relations rather than their disavowal.”⁶⁵ The third voice we hear in *What Is the What*, which is neither Eggers’s nor Deng’s but emanates from the collapsible space between them, strikes me as a plausible incarnation of this elusive but all-important middle voice. Eggers’s novel harnesses feeling in the face of suffering while continually reminding the reader that Deng’s experiences are not his or hers to inhabit. Rather than solidifying an already existing community, it calls a community of otherwise distant and disconnected people into being for the purposes of alleviating suffering. Or, to use Shamsie’s terms, the empathy loop, perpetually at risk of being closed, is kept precariously but determinedly open.

ENDNOTES

1. Kamila Shamsie, “The Storytellers of Empire.” *Guernica: A Magazine of Art and Politics*, February 1, 2012, accessed August 30, 2014. http://www.guernicamag.com/features/shamsie_02_01_2012/
2. Quoted in Shamsie, “The Storytellers of Empire.”
3. Shamsie, “The Storytellers of Empire.”
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*

8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Dave Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).
12. Dave Eggers, *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng – A Novel* (2006. New York: Vintage, 2007).
13. Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). As his title suggests, Gregory argues that, far from being a matter of the past, colonialism is alive and well in the twenty-first century. Showing how the history of British and American involvement in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine casts a long shadow on the present, in which colonial policies continue to be pursued under the guise of the so-called War on Terror, his book effectively counters the premature and obfuscatory celebration of the “post” in “postcolonial.”
14. See, e.g., Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313; Mary Ellmann, *Thinking about Women* (New York: Harcourt, 1968); Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970).
15. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 10.
16. Ibid., 9.
17. Ibid., 24.
18. Cathy Caruth, “Trauma and Experience,” introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 11.
19. See, e.g., Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
20. See, e.g., Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992); J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Derek Attridge, “Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other.” *PMLA* 114.1 (1999): 20–31.
21. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 52.
22. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*; Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
23. For a more extended discussion of trauma theory’s Eurocentric biases, from which this account is drawn, see Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
24. Susannah Radstone, “Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics.” *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 30.1 (2007): 25.
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26. Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing*, 14–19.
27. Susannah Radstone, “Theory and Affect: Undivided Worlds.” In *Public Emotions*, ed. Perri 6, Susannah Radstone, Corinne Squire, and Amal Treacher (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 197.

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31. Ibid., 3–4.
32. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 75.
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38. Alike Varvogli, *Travel and Dislocation in Contemporary American Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2012), xiii.
39. Elizabeth Twitchell, "Dave Eggers's *What Is the What*: Fictionalizing Trauma in the Era of Misery Lit." *American Literature* 83.3 (2011): 624.
40. Valentino Achak Deng, Preface to *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng – A Novel*, by Dave Eggers (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2006), 5.
41. Valentino Achak Deng, Preface to *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng – A Novel*, by Dave Eggers (New York: Vintage, 2007), xiv.
42. Varvogli, *Travel and Dislocation*, 26.
43. Deng, Preface 2007, xiv.
44. Dave Eggers, *Zeitoun* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2009).
45. So far thirteen volumes have appeared in the series, which is published by McSweeney's. They cover a wide variety of social justice topics, ranging from distant crises in Sudan, Burma, Zimbabwe, Colombia, and Palestine to wrongfully convicted prisoners, undocumented migrants, victims of Hurricane Katrina, women's prisons, and post-9/11 injustice in the United States. For further information, see <http://voiceofwitness.org/books/>
46. Dave Eggers, "It Was Just Boys Walking." *Guardian*, May 26, 2007, accessed August 30, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/may/26/featuresreviews.guardianreview29>
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49. Ibid., 51.
50. Ibid., 51–52.
51. Ibid., 53.
52. Twitchell, "Dave Eggers's *What Is the What*," 637.
53. Ibid., 639.

54. Ibid.
55. Deng, Preface 2007, xv.
56. Eggers, *What Is the What*, 29.
57. Twitchell, “Dave Eggers’s *What Is the What*,” 642.
58. Eggers, *What Is the What*, 535.
59. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952. New York: Vintage, 1989), 3.
60. For a more in-depth comparative analysis of *What Is the What* and *Kony 2012*, see Sean Bex and Stef Craps, “Humanitarianism, Testimony, and the White Savior Industrial Complex: *What Is the What* versus *Kony 2012*.” *Cultural Critique* 90 (Winter 2016): 32–56.
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