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Author(s): Yogita Goyal

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African Atrocity, American Humanity: Slavery and Its Transnational Afterlives

YOGITA GOYAL
University of California, Los Angeles
ygoyal@humnet.ucla.edu

ABSTRACT

This essay argues that contemporary American conceptions of African atrocity are haunted by the specter of slavery, which structures the ways in which a relation between the United States and Africa is imagined. Francis Bok's memoir, *Escape from Slavery* (2003), and Dave Eggers's novel *What Is the What* (2006) reveal the stakes of this literary haunting, where the canonical Atlantic genre of the antebellum slave narrative is called into play to narrate contemporary Sudanese stories, thus refashioning the politics of race and diaspora for a neoliberal age. Reading for the formal and ideological exchanges between subject, author, and amanuensis, the essay shows how the discourse of modern slavery relies on sentimental humanism to generate a seemingly new way for Americans to imagine themselves as global citizens, constituting themselves as global via their humanitarian empathy for the African victim of atrocity.

Binyavanga Wainaina's brilliant satire "How to Write About Africa" has rightly become an important benchmark for understanding contemporary representations of Africa in colonial and racist idioms. But though the familiar tropes he mocks have deep roots in Western accounts—stock characters like The Loyal Servant, The Starving African, and The Ancient Wise Man, along with ample portraits of rotting dead bodies, big and red sunsets, naked breasts, and mutilated genitals—they seem to be circulating in the twenty-first century with particular intensity. Africa has become increasingly visible as a site of atrocity in the US imagination, as part of a wider public debate about human rights, globalization, and foreign policy. Comprised of films like *Hotel Rwanda*, *The Constant Gardener*, *Blood Diamond*, *The Last King of Scotland*, and *Captain Phillips*, movements like the Save Darfur campaign, and viral videos like the spectacular *Kony 2012* phenomenon, such a discourse of atrocity pivots on the notion of Africa as an

object of humanitarian intervention, zeroing in on the horrific violence of a particular conflict without always acknowledging the wider historical and political context that produced it. This interest in African atrocity has generated a seemingly new way for Americans to imagine themselves as global citizens, constituting themselves as global via their humanitarian empathy for the African victim.¹ For instance, in the 2005 indie film *I Heart Huckabees* (directed by David O. Russell), Jason Schwartzman's existential quandaries as a white American hipster are oddly interrupted at regular moments by the spectral figure of a young African man working as a hotel doorman. He is the real-life Sudanese "Lost Boy" Ger Duany, and plays Stephen Nimieri (also dubbed "that African guy"), and fulfills a strange and, in some ways, an unexplained function in the film, raising the question of whether his presence echoes the mysterious African other of colonial texts, or offers something new, at once familiar and distant.²

This essay explores the literary counterparts of this phenomenon, which have now produced new genres in African literature (such as the modern slave narrative and the child soldier novel) that are widely read and promoted by mainstream cultural institutions, from Oprah Winfrey to Jon Stewart, George Clooney to Angelina Jolie, Nicholas Kristof to Samantha Power. As Dave Eggers notes, Ishmael Beah, author of *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007), is "arguably the most read African writer in contemporary literature" (179). And yet, scholars of African literature have been slow to analyze this body of work, perhaps because it is ubiquitous and seemingly transparent, but also because it seems far removed from so many of the concerns that have occupied us—reconstructing the precolonial past, understanding the colonial encounter, decolonization and nation-building, and the dystopias of the postcolonial moment as well as its possibilities. Moreover, the shift from the colonial center to the US also precludes a neat fit with the African canon. But as this discourse gains greater visibility, it is necessary to situate it in the realm of narrative, history, and postcolonial critique. The ubiquity of African atrocity, variably presented as remote or nearby, an atavistic throwback or a phenomena squarely of the contemporary era, peculiar to Africa or a sign of transnational connectedness, is further symptomatic of larger questions of how ideas of the global and the human are being imagined in the twenty-first century. Posing a challenge not just to canonical African literary criticism, this new discourse also entails new understandings of race, diaspora, and transnationalism, illuminating the intersection of ideas of the human with those of the global. Part of my goal in this essay is to see how this particular nexus around human rights creates a relation between the US and Africa as far removed from older imperial ones as from newer transnational ones like Pan-Africanism and the black Atlantic.

It is perhaps all too easy to criticize such fetishizations of suffering without regard for context and to view the prominence of the visual as yet another instance of the need for the spectacle of black bodies in pain. After all, even *The Onion* was able to eviscerate the celebrity humanitarian complex that surrounded *Hotel Rwanda* with its satirical headline, "Don Cheadle Planned Darfur Genocide to Create Film Role." Along similar lines, Teju Cole posted a pitch-perfect seven-part Twitter response to *Kony 2012*, aptly labeling it the new "White-Savior Industrial Complex." Not reiterating these necessary critiques, my essay turns instead to one particular genre of this new discourse—the modern slave narrative—to highlight the ways in which contemporary ideas of atrocity are imbricated in the history

of Atlantic slavery. That is to say, contemporary American conceptions of African atrocity are haunted by the specter of slavery, which structures the ways in which a relation between the US and Africa is imagined. To explore how slavery circulates in contemporary human rights narratives about Africa further requires an analysis of the politics of race and colorblindness, as well as migration and statelessness. Two prominent texts that helped shape this new understanding—Francis Bok’s memoir about his captivity and escape in Sudan during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005), *Escape from Slavery* (2003), and Dave Eggers’s novel *What Is the What* (2006), based on the experiences of a so-called Lost Boy from Sudan, Valentino Achak Deng—anchor my analysis, as each dissolves the binary between the US and Africa formally by taking on the literary form of the other.

Bok narrates his story in the form of an antebellum slave narrative, which then turns into an American immigrant story, while Eggers assumes the autobiographical persona of Deng. Both, I argue, shape their narratives as replicas of well-known slave narratives from the nineteenth century—a choice that goes to the heart of the ways in which these new discourses about Africa are reshaping existing politics of race, nation, and diaspora. Form becomes the key to the historical imagination at work in these texts—one that cannot be understood without a closer look at the ways in which the specter of slavery underwrites contemporary imaginings of relations between the US and Africa. Reading formally, not to escape history, but to reckon with it more fully, I attempt to outline the stakes of this literary haunting, where a canonical genre—the antebellum slave narrative—is called into play to narrate contemporary atrocity. Returning to abolitionist uses of the sentimental mode, these texts narrate numerous scenes of reading and writing that seem to repeat liberal constructions of the self but end up undercutting the singularity of testimony, as well as disavowing the historical and cultural specificity of the atrocities they purport to document. In doing so, they reveal the refashioning of the politics of race and diaspora for a neoliberal age, where seemingly universal notions of the human once again underwrite a Western/neo-imperial hegemonic agenda. To read these texts, then, is to enter into an ongoing though often unacknowledged debate about history: the status of historicism as a critical method for literary critics as well as an exploration of philosophies of history that underwrite contemporary notions of the human.

Although slavery is often discussed only in relation to American literature, recent studies have brought home its continuing transnational afterlives. Just over a decade ago, in a 2001 essay, cultural critic Achille Mbembe argued that slavery remains “the great unspoken subject” haunting African consciousness and lamented that no African writers have offered meditations on slavery in the vein of writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker from the other side of the Atlantic. There is, he concludes, “no African memory of slavery” (25). In recent years, however, precisely such an African memory is emerging—in dialogue with colonialism, for instance, heritage tourism, or as part of a discussion of global notions of race and race formation.³ As a site for the reinvention of form, the slave past and its representation have been at the heart of contemporary literary production across the black diaspora.⁴ The global circulation of slavery in literary fiction ranges across post-apartheid South African explorations of history and memory, Caribbean and South Asian interrogations of indentured labor and the coolie trade, the rising prominence of the Indian Ocean as a critical nexus, feminist

discussions of concubinage, local or regional practices such as the institution of the *restavec* in Haiti, and more recently, in dialogue with depictions of genocide and civil war in Sudan, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.⁵ Such a miscellany not only testifies to the malleability of the slave narrative as archive, but also reveals the ways in which slavery, often claimed as an American story, necessarily exceeds a national identity. To understand the explosion of interest in slavery across the globe, it is further useful to reckon with the contemporary politics of the US as a global super-power, albeit in decline, and how the very idea of human rights (developed in the eighteenth century) is manufactured in the present via an encounter with the slave past.⁶ At stake in the discussion is the basic question of how we see the relation between past and present, particularly between historical violence and contemporary forms of inequality. As Atlantic historian Vincent Brown argues, nested within debates about theories of slavery as social death or the absences of the archive is the deeper question of how we theorize resistance and agency and indeed our very definition of politics itself.

Modern slave narratives form a peculiar genre of contemporary literature. Accounts of atrocities like human trafficking, capture in war, debt bondage, forced marriage, the use of the child soldier, and sex-trafficking, such narratives are explicitly modeled on Atlantic slave narratives like Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1794). Rachel Lloyd's *Girls Like Us*, for instance, links pimps to slave owners and argues that "our equivalent of slaves on the auction block is the ads on Craigslist, Backpage, and numerous other online sites, the street corners in certain neighborhoods, the stages of strip clubs" (97). Lloyd also recalls what she dubs Equiano's Stockholm syndrome toward his master to explain why the women subject to sex trafficking form attachments to their abusers. Zana Muhsen's *Sold: A Story of Modern-Day Slavery* creates a similar connection between her own bondage and the African American slave experience by drawing on her reading of Alex Haley's *Roots* and recalling Kunta Kinte's flight as she runs away from captivity (50).

Replaying familiar narrative tropes like exile and natal alienation, the idea of social death, the quest for literacy, sentimental appeals to readers, the journey north to freedom, and dreams of the Jubilee, modern slave narrators seek to arouse readers to action against modern slavery. Narrators emphasize an idyllic childhood, cruelly ended with their abduction and removal from a loving family, and chronicle a journey of servitude and exploitation as they forge a sense of self based on individual autonomy, the acquisition of literacy, and a life devoted to service.⁷ Both the primary literature of modern slavery and the scholarship that promotes it makes explicit reference to US slavery to establish an equivalence with contemporary abuse and bondage, thus concluding that present-day slavery should be seen as a shameful anachronism. For example, *To Plead Our Own Cause: Personal Stories by Today's Slaves* (2008), edited by Kevin Bales and Zoe Trodd, takes its title from *The Freedman's Journal*—the first newspaper set up by freed slaves in 1827—which declared that "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us." Such edited collections of first-person narratives are circulated by such neo-abolitionist organizations as Free the Slaves, Anti-Slavery International, and Christian Solidarity International and often written with an amanuensis, thus echoing not only the form, but also the conditions of production of antebellum

slave narratives, leading to lingering questions of whose voice we hear behind the words.⁸ Scenes of reading, instruction, and writing are common, echoing the antebellum slave narrative's emphasis on literacy and trope of the "talking book" and many of these narratives end with rescue in the US through the aid of a humanitarian worker, who appears as the modern-day abolitionist of the Underground Railroad in the Global North. Rather than the hell on earth of antebellum slave narratives, the US appears as the savior for fugitive slaves, an example of a nation that has transcended its own horrific past, while Africa is narrated as a site of no political or human possibility or agency. Both the norm and normative, the US experience of slavery accrues hegemonic power, as it functions as the locus of a universal experience of suffering and struggle.

Neo-abolitionists estimate that modern slaves number thirty million, across 160 countries, and though these numbers are disputed, and many would quarrel even with the seeming oxymoron of modern slavery, neo-abolitionism is rapidly gaining increasing acceptance as the frame through which to view contemporary human rights violations.⁹ Anybody who is forced to work, controlled by an employer with the threat of abuse or actual abuse, dehumanized, bought or sold as property, and physically restrained is said to be in slavery. Calling on the legal precedents of *The Slavery Convention* (1926) and *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), the *Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, The Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery* (1956) notes that "Debt bondage, serfdom, forced marriage and the delivery of a child for the exploitation of that child are all slavery like practices and require criminalization and abolishment."¹⁰ Kevin Bales, the foremost theorist of modern slavery, notes that "most Americans' idea of slavery comes right out of *Roots*—the chains, the whip in the overseer's hand, the crack of the auctioneer's gavel. That was one form of bondage. The slavery plaguing America today takes a different form, but make no mistake, it is real slavery" (6–7). Not just drawing on the rhetorical or affective power of slavery to raise awareness for the cause, the links drawn to the past are literal and emphatically refuse metaphor. Anti-Slavery International, for instance, declares that "When we think about slavery what comes to mind is the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, captured Africans, transported to the West Indies and America. . . . Although that slavery was abolished in the 19th century, slavery still exists today . . . when we talk about slavery we do not use a metaphor."

In explaining their agenda, many of these books call into play the language of visibility and exposure. Their first task is to make their readers accept the designation of slavery. To do so, they insist on both transparency and tautology. Gloria Steinem, in a foreword to *Enslaved: True Stories of Modern Day Slavery* (2009), hopes that "just as nineteenth-century slave narratives forced readers to recognize the humanity of slaves, these twenty-first-century slave narratives force us to recognize the reality of slavery" (x). If a figure like Douglass asserted over and again that he was a "man" and not a "slave," these texts emphasize the opposite, insisting that—to use the title of a film based on the Sudanese national Mende Nazar's experiences of captivity and abuse—*I Am Slave*. For the readers, victims like Nazar are "our contemporary Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Lavinia Bell."¹¹ Using the language of an exposé or scandal to bring to light the hidden existence of slavery, documenting and rendering visible become key abolitionist strategies, and anybody who attempts to parse the meaning of the terms used is

suspect. Bales expresses this idea in *Disposable People* with some irritation: "When the public stops asking, 'What do you mean by slavery?' and 'You mean slavery still exists?,' then slaves will be on their way to freedom" (260). Continuing this sense, Anti-Slavery International positions Darfur in Sudan as a global neighborhood watch program that can be policed by vigilant netizens, who can intervene in the violence via satellite imagery without ever leaving their home, suggesting a neoliberal logic of surveillance.

Kony 2012, the viral video created by the aptly named Invisible Children Foundation, used a similar set of images to foreshorten the distance between here and there, as with the use of technology, the "dark continent" of Africa and its exploited children will be illuminated and, by simply watching the video and making the Ugandan overlord famous, the viewers are said to be launching a human rights revolution. The tagline of the campaign—"make him visible, make him famous"—encapsulates this notion perfectly as the question becomes reframed as "could an online video make an obscure war criminal famous?" Such a focus parallels and perhaps emblemizes recent critical moves away from allegorical or symptomatic readings toward an emphasis on surfaces.¹² The discourse of modern slavery claims a certain obviousness, similar to what Joseph Slaughter terms the ubiquitous and commonsense claims of human rights, and attempts to dissuade us from depth-based readings in favor of immediate affective response. Perhaps this is why it is tempting to simply repeat the titles of these books, since they give away the whole story: for instance, Jean-Robert Cadet's *Restavec: From Haitian Slave to Middle-Class American* (1998) and *My Stone of Hope: From Haitian Slave Child to Abolitionist* (2011) or Beatrice Fernando's *In Contempt of Fate: The Tale of a Sri Lankan Sold into Servitude Who Survived to Tell It: A Memoir* (2004) already divulge the journey that they will document, laying out the curiously flat temporality of the narrated lives, all of which are relentlessly moving toward rescue in the US.

To make such claims self-evident or commonsensical, such narratives rely on the power of analogy. That is to say, since readers are already expected to be familiar with the story of American slavery, modern slave narrators are not required to prove their humanity but to insert themselves within the pre-existing template. I want to acknowledge here the difficulty of analyzing these narratives—not least because they are first-person accounts of truly horrific abuse and suffering at the same time that they exist at the intersection of various geopolitical agendas, including human rights advocacy, ongoing disputes over war crimes and reparations, the war on terror, evangelism, and neo-imperialism. But they are also difficult to read in terms of concepts of race and racial formation, of diaspora and black Atlanticism, and in relation to the status of slavery as an institution in relation to other forms of labor exploitation. What are the assumptions about the power of analogy and comparison at play here, as one form of exploitation is narrated through forms developed in another time and place? How does the choice of genre circumscribe the enunciative possibilities of the narrators? What is at stake in these claims to equivalence?

As one experience of exploitation is narrated in a pre-existing template, the politics of analogy at work here raise the question of what it means to write a postcolonial experience in an American genre. The bestseller memoir of Sudanese asylum-seeker Francis Bok, *Escape From Slavery: The True Story of My Ten Years in*

Captivity—and My Journey to Freedom in America (2003), cowritten with an amanuensis, the American journalist Ed Tivnan, for instance, starts as an Atlantic slave narrative and then becomes an immigrant tale of assimilation into the American dream. Captured in an Arab militia raid on a market in South Sudan at the age of seven, Bok was abused and held in bondage for ten years, before finding asylum in Egypt and the US. At the time of publication, the 23-year-old was well on his way to being a celebrity ex-slave, testifying before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in hearings on Sudan, writing an open letter to Britney Spears asking her to reconsider the language of the song “I’m a Slave for U,” and speaking throughout the US as an associate of the American Anti-Slavery Group. The transition from the enslavement plot to the immigrant one takes place with a kind of bureaucratic baptism, as his name is misspelled on his passport and since “I was my passport . . . I was born again—as Francis Bok. It cost eighty Sudanese pounds” (123). For Bok, the US serves as a beacon of having overcome slavery in its past and a model for countries like Sudan to aspire toward. He writes, “In Sudan and Egypt, opportunities were available only to a few. In America, the opportunities seemed limitless—for everyone, including us immigrants” (177). The redemptive narrative is powered by a curious construction of race. Bok gradually realizes that “there were black people in America” (138), who were once enslaved and are now free and his diasporic “American Journey” makes use of that existing narrative—as he inserts himself within the African American trajectory. In a church, an African American preacher responds to his tale saying, “it was once this way with us” (190). With a laying-on of hands, the audiences marvel at seeing slavery come alive in a real person, as Bok becomes the past they have transcended: “Slavery had become a person they had seen, a young Sudanese whose hand they had actually shaken” (196). In a familiar denial of coevalism (to use Johannes Fabian’s term), Bok has become a living embodiment of their own past.¹³

In order to appear legible within pre-existing codes of US readers, Bok presents the roots of the conflict in Sudan in Islamic fanaticism, which he interprets specifically as a form of anti-black racism. He links his story to that of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, noting that Osama Bin Laden was in Sudan at the time of Bok’s enslavement. The conflict thus appears not as a struggle over control of resources like oil and fertile land, or as a consequence of colonial British tribalization of Darfur (as political scientist Mahmood Mamdani shows), but as a clash of civilizations between the “Arab North” and the “Negroid South,” a transposition of the black-white binary of Atlantic slavery, and an analysis particularly suited for the post-9/11 age of terror. As Jemima Pierre has recently demonstrated in relation to Ghana, it is essential to recognize that race and racialization are active processes in the postcolony and not just as an export from the West. “Africa stands in for race but yet, paradoxically, race does not exist in Africa,” she argues (xii–xiii). Reading Sudan as not another Rwanda (as the Save Darfur movement tends to do), or as part of a global struggle against a resurgent fundamentalist Islam, reduces the specificity of the political struggle in Sudan itself, a move that is not only intellectually threadbare, but also politically risky. As Mamdani argues in *Saviors and Survivors*, “Darfur” and “genocide” have become unhistorical watchwords in US foreign policy, where humanitarianism is simply indistinguishable from neo-imperialism. It is thus perhaps not surprising that narratives like Bok’s tend to assume a moralistic frame, where the innocent victim is rescued from the evil

slave-owner by the white Western humanitarian worker. Resorting to the sensational language of nineteenth-century abolitionists allows minimal discussion of processes of racialization or differentiation, local struggles, causes of corruption or poverty, or of the uneven impact of globalization. Taking the form of an Atlantic slave narrative further accumulates some ideological baggage that assigns Africa to tragedy and the US to promise, allowing US readers to read a story of tragedy that they themselves have transcended in their own history, rather than encouraging them to think more deeply about how events in the US and Sudan have common politically entangled roots.

It is thus not surprising that *Escape from Slavery* ends with a treatise offered by Charles Jacobs, the founder of the American Anti-Slavery Group and a second father to Bok, about the “human rights complex,” which is a term Jacobs coins to explain why the world neglected modern slavery in Sudan for so long. Jacobs argues that the human rights community, mostly made up of decent, compassionate, white people, feels it has a duty to attack evil done by those “like us.” Since it was Arab Muslims rather than white Christians or Jews enslaving blacks in Sudan, nobody cared. When Muslims in Bosnia were killed by white Christians, the West intervened. Jacobs claims, “We Westerners, after all, had slaves. We napalmed Vietnam. We live on Native American land. Who are we to judge others?” (274). White culpability for past sins thus creates contemporary paralysis when faced with such events as genocide in Rwanda or Sudan. For Jacobs, it is necessary to move away from such unproductive and melancholic historical guilt, as he argues for military intervention in Africa as a humanitarian choice.

While such moments in the text reaffirm the preconceptions of Western readers, I want to read Bok’s narrative somewhat against its grain, drawing on techniques developed for the nineteenth-century slave narrative, at the same time recognizing that such a critical move can replicate US hegemony. Bok’s narrative may be seen as what is called a “black message in a white envelope” referring to the abolitionist editor and champion whose agenda often conflicts with the goal of self-representation of the former slave.¹⁴ Recent scholarship on antebellum slave narrators has shifted away from a focus on what they couldn’t say and do because of such control, to stressing their creativity in finding what Harriet Jacobs termed “loopholes of retreat” and in transforming the alienating conditions of marginalization into modes of agency, theorizing the nature of freedom rather than simply baring their scarred bodies. Scholars have also learned to read between the lines and against the grain of such narratives, which often had to draw a veil over proceedings too terrible to relate, what Toni Morrison memorably termed “unspeakable things, unspoken.”¹⁵

Along these lines, I want to uncover two instances of Bok’s narrative tussle with the neo-abolitionist agenda. The first is an example of Bok’s voice breaking through editorial control. Alongside his high-mindedness, the desire to save other Sudanese, to fulfill his father’s dream, another narrative emerges, about racial identification through consumer culture. BET is his first source of information about black American culture. Watching basketball, buying sneakers and baseball caps, big T-shirts and jeans, and dressing like hip-hop stars, Bok creates an identity for himself that is about expressing his freedom through consumption. Buying glasses “just for fun” and not for a corrective function, Bok writes that “sometimes I would buy things because it made me happy” (176), noting the surprise of people

around him at his choice of vanity frames. But the activists of the American Anti-Slavery Group who wish to enlist him as a celebrity ex-slave spokesman cannot understand those desires and have to buy him a suit and tie for public speaking. As Bok notes wryly in one of the rare moments of humor in the narrative, "I could not speak to the Baptists in Roxbury about my life in slavery looking like a refugee from a hip-hop video on MTV" (188).

The second moment is one that occurs time and again in many of these narratives—a meditation on the nature of identity and storytelling. In Cairo, Bok has to tell and retell his story as part of the application for refugee status and, rather than symbolizing a therapeutic aspect, the book seems to allegorize the process of abolitionist editorial control over the raw matter of Bok's experiences. Bok tells Franco, his English-speaking social worker, the same story he has already narrated to the reader—we're roughly halfway through the book at this point and Bok repeats in formulaic fashion everything he's already told us—starting with the day his mother sent him to the marketplace, which was the happiest day of his life that turned into the worst. The writing and reading of the book are thus both implicated in the process of deciding whether Bok is worthy of being a refugee. When Franco harangues him to get the story straight, Bok is puzzled, since he knows that "this is my life, why should I worry about getting it straight." Then follows an elaborate scene, which wouldn't be out of place in a metafictional postmodern novel, as Franco "listened and wrote down what I said. Then he read it to me, and we worked on it and got it all straight. . . . Franco looked at me, into my eyes. 'This is your true story, Francis. This was the way it all happened.' I stared back at this man I barely knew, this 'English teacher,' who was now testing me for truth, and told him that . . . it was not only all true, it was my life." Finally, Franco concludes that "mine was the worst story he had heard—and thus the best for getting chosen as a UN refugee" (134–36). Bok's life or death depend on the credibility of his storytelling—to narrate the story precisely, without error, every single time, in a mock-reversal of the dynamic of trauma and an embedded critique of the needs of the readers, who wish to check for fraud even as they insist on the sentimental frame of a universal humanity. As James Dawes notes, making sense out of incomprehensible atrocities requires storytelling because of the risks involved in representing and misreading traumatic testimony, as UN legal officers who follow the Convention on Refugees are constrained by the narrow definition of refugees and are cast in the position of the interrogator of people as they listen to stories of abuse and decide which are true and which are false, which deserve succor and which can be ignored.

In reading the schism between the needs of the neo-abolitionists and Bok's aspirations, what comes to light is the way in which Bok is being denied ownership of his own story even as ostensibly (as he notes at the end of the book) his amanuensis, Tivnan, "has transformed my thoughts onto the page and given me the words to tell my story" (282). Jesse Sage, the director of the American Anti-Slavery Group, recruits Bok precisely with the promise that "we want to help you tell your story" (182). In omitting the details of the literary collaboration, the text advances a realist claim—this is Bok's true story, told by himself. But the narrative doesn't sustain that claim elsewhere, undercutting realism and referentiality, as the scenes of telling and retelling his story, getting it "straight" with the aid of the social worker, allegorize the ways in which the author's control over his own

narrative is circumscribed. Not just a scene of a sentimental education (unlike Douglass, for example), in some profound way, modern abolitionists insist that the stories they document are authentic, but also that it doesn't matter if they are not real.¹⁶ Numerous narrators have faced accusations of fabrication, perhaps most famously, Ishmael Beah, who at once claimed the truth of his experience of war and asked for the leeway of memory.¹⁷ To advance this contradictory claim to an authentic experience at the same time that the demand for authenticity is undermined, modern slave narratives resort to a kind of formal tautology as they insist on the readability of the slave's body and story, situating the act of reading itself as a form of politics, indeed the very politics called for in the texts.¹⁸

Perhaps the best example of what I am calling the tautological quality of modern slavery is Dave Eggers's 2006 account of Valentino Achak Deng, a former "Lost Boy of Sudan," which isn't explicitly positioned as a slave narrative, but is everywhere haunted by slavery. Even the title stages the indeterminacy between fact and fiction that is central to the project. The listed author of *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, A Novel* is Dave Eggers, who also appears as sole owner of the copyright. A brief preface by Deng calls the text "the soulful account of my life" (xiii) and explains that he met Eggers through Mary Williams, the founder of the Lost Boys Foundation of Atlanta, in response to a desire to expand the audience for his storytelling by finding "an author to help me write my biography" (xiii). Author, character, subject are all roles in flux here. Deng continues, adding to the confusion of fact and fiction, claiming at once that the story should be read as fiction and that everything depicted actually happened to him: "It should be known to the readers that I was very young when some of the events in the book took place, and as a result we simply had to pronounce *What Is the What* a novel" (xiv). But, he insists, "all of the major events in the book are true" and "the book is historically accurate" (xiv). At the end of the book, a brief biographical note about Deng clarifies that all the proceeds from *What Is the What* will be directed to the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, which seeks to provide education for those affected by the conflict in Sudan. It is never explained in *What Is the What* why the various "Lost Boys" converse in English. It is also significant that the book does not feature Eggers at all and doesn't cover the encounter between the two that generates this text, even though the entire structure of the work is built on scenes of storytelling and the journey of Deng—his *Bildung*, if you will—rests primarily on wanting to tell his story to the world and his often unsuccessful search for a listener. Even successful asylum depends on "the writing of our autobiographies," as the UNHCR requires all the "Lost Boys" to write about their lives and their desire to leave Kakuma for the US. The narrator notes that "we knew our stories had to be well told . . . no deprivation was insignificant" (485). As a reviewer points out, it's further odd that for a story that is about dispossession in numerous forms, Deng doesn't legally own the story of his own life and has become a fictional character in someone else's novel.¹⁹

Unlike the narrative tussle between Bok and his neo-abolitionist friends, it is difficult to assess where Deng ends and Eggers takes over, or whose voice dominates the novel. Although *What Is the What* departs from Eggers's previous style (made famous by *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*) and does not have (as a review pointed out) "a single grieving white male of high education and questionable maturity," Eggers's stamp can be seen all over it.²⁰ Eggers

explains the origins of the association between author and subject in an essay posted on Deng's website. Although the two collaborated for over a year on an account written by Deng, Eggers was worried that it read too much like a Human Rights Watch report and decided to write it himself. But third-person narration seemed too remote to convey such a harrowing story and hence he concluded it would have to be fiction, with Deng as first-person narrator. But this is fiction that claims the status of truth, as Eggers's fictionality comes cloaked with the authenticity of Deng's real life. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note about witness narratives in an era when the demands for verification are rising in response to various hoaxes and scandals in the memoir industry, what such a narrative is supposed to do is to convince the reader of two things: "that the story is the 'real' story of a 'real survivor'—that a narrative is joined to an embodied person; and that the reading experience constitutes a cross-cultural encounter through which readers are positioned as ethical subjects within the global imaginary of human rights advocacy" (590). *What Is the What* offers what they call a "negotiable 'I'"—a double subject, Deng and Eggers, who together produce a sense of immediacy for the reader ("you were there") as well as a sense of parallel time (in the US and in Sudan). The resulting words cannot be verified for accuracy but have to be trusted by the reader as an act of faith.

Perhaps this is why the book was greeted with almost no critical commentary and a showering of accolades, including a selection as finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction.²¹ Many readers of the book have not objected to this confusion of fact and fiction, in large part, I think, because of the overdetermined place of Africa as a signifier in contemporary culture. Numerous reviews of *What Is the What* calmly conclude, as David Amsden does, that it shows "the primitive cruelty of African warfare." Literary critic Elizabeth Twitchell argues for the ethical and moral value of the novel, since it combats existing misrepresentations of Africa in American literary discourse and helps "bring light to the dark continent" (628). Referring to questions about Ishmael Beah's lack of detail about his experience as a child soldier, Twitchell wonders "Would the foreignness of the African voice to Western ears make any work of African auto-narration unmediated by a Western amanuensis ring false?" (634). Such a reading asks too little of the imagined American reader, not to mention bypassing the entire canon of modern African literature, which has been engaged in precisely the project of constructing the "African voice" called for by Twitchell. If the task of literature, as numerous thinkers (from Aristotle to Adam Smith, George Eliot to Martha Nussbaum) have argued, is to produce empathy and enrich readers by bringing them into contact with otherness, it is surely too soon to start measuring and quantifying an acceptable measure of difference (what David Palumbo-Liu calls the threat of too much otherness) as Twitchell suggests in her reading of Eggers. Moreover, the problems with such literary ventriloquism, or what we may call linguistic blackface, are themselves staged in the novel, both structurally and thematically.

Numerous scenes of storytelling structure *What Is the What*, which begins with Deng in his Atlanta apartment being mugged by an African American couple who leave a young boy to guard him while they make arrangements to transport his TV. Tied up and bleeding from his head, Deng narrates in first person the story of his life—his childhood in the village of Marial Bai, the attack on it by mura-haleen (paramilitaries working for the government in Khartoum to suppress the

Sudan People's Liberation Army), and his subsequent almost unbelievably traumatic journey across Southern Sudan refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya over thirteen years, until he finds asylum in the US and tries to make a life in Atlanta. The novel concludes with Deng realizing that his role in life is to "tell these stories" since "to do anything else would be something less than human" (535). He resolves to fulfill this mission: "I will tell stories to people who will listen and to people who don't want to listen, to people who seek me out and to those who run. All the while I will know 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" (535). Deng thus understands the very purpose of his life to tell his story and stripping his words of the status of testimony and turning them into fiction threatens to diminish the materiality of the experience itself. In debates about redress, reparation, or reconciliation, the physical body of the survivor and his/her words have always been sacrosanct, the only proper rebuttal to the perpetrators of genocide and torture. In fictionalizing an experience that has value as testimony, Eggers risks erasing that special status.

Although *What Is the What* is not explicitly presented as a modern slave narrative, it is remarkable how the template of the slave narrative joined to the immigrant narrative continues to structure the tale. Deng's idyllic childhood is interrupted by the arrival of the horsemen and, as he runs to escape them, throughout his journey, his search for his family, presumed to be dead, sustains him. He undergoes a process of renaming for each step of his journey. His journey from Sudan to the US echoes the flight from the US South to the North, where the North promises freedom but often turns out to be another kind of hell. Deng's prefatory note promises the reader instruction that is not just exceptional but exemplary: "As you read this book, you will learn about me and my beloved people of Sudan" (xiii). The novel also outlines Deng's spiritual awakening—his path to understanding the meaning of the "What," his belief in himself as representative man, through the power of speech and storytelling, his resolve to make the world listen so that his people don't continue to suffer. The meaning his life accrues comes from helping others who haven't even found the modicum of freedom that he has in Atlanta. But even more than these persistent textual echoes, what links the novel to the slave narrative is the sentimental frame, the focus on producing feeling, empathy, horror, compassion, even pity to rouse the audience to some non-specified action. It suggests that the sentimental mode has become the norm for processing stories such as Deng's.

However, despite the appropriation of the techniques of the slave narrative, the novel turns expected racial politics upside down. The story at the center of *What Is the What*—the traumatic wandering of the Lost Boys of Sudan—characterizes a textbook definition of diaspora. But if, according to Paul Gilroy, the black Atlantic involved escaping nationalist essences via travel and, as in Brent Edwards's account, the practice of diaspora lay in translation, Deng's experiences do not seem legible within such understandings. Racial alliances across national boundaries aren't even a possibility entertained by the novel. The novel signals a distinct shift in conceptions of race as it begins not so much with misunderstanding or misrecognition among members of the black diaspora, but active and vicious hostility. Deng's call is met with a brutal response, as his African American assailants mock him with the epithet "Africa" (5), "Fucking Nigerian

motherfucker" (9), "Nigerian prince" (15), and "pimp" (15). As he's kicked and assumes a fetal position on the floor, his attacker clarifies that the animosity is personal, racial, and has everything to do with Deng being an African: "No wonder you motherfuckers are in the Stone Age" (9). Deng recalls numerous instances of African American hostility toward the lost boys—teenagers who follow them and taunt them with accusations like "you're one of those Africans who sold us out" (18) and saying that they should "go back to Africa" (19) and accept responsibility for the enslavement of their ancestors. Denying Africans coevalness by locating them in the Stone Age, mocking putative African royalty by bringing them into a racialized American stereotype ("pimp"), and exhibiting anti-immigrant xenophobia ("go back to Africa"), as well as indicating a racial schism ("you . . . sold us out"), these taunts and threats establish hostility as the prime emotion between Africans and African Americans, in sharp contrast to the identification embraced by Bok. What we as readers are supposed to recognize, I think, is the grim irony that a figure like Deng, a Lost Boy who was a refugee, victim, and survivor of something very much like slavery, is being blamed for a historical event long past. The scene of assault the novel opens with immediately reminds Deng of one of the worst experiences of his trek, a primal moment of betrayal, where an Ethiopian soldier calls out to the lost boys—"Come to your mother"—only to shoot them down (6).

If Eggers undercuts the romance of diaspora, he doesn't quite replace it with a redemptive American dream that counters inevitable African tragedy. His America is made up of failing institutions, as neither hospitals nor police officers nor potential employers can ensure Deng healthcare, safety, education, or a living wage. What emerges as redemptive is privatized philanthropy—rich (white) liberals who punctuate Deng's narrative of uplift with financial and emotional interventions (making him part of their family life)—an allegory, I believe, for a neoliberal sentimental humanism whose ultimate (unstated) champion is, of course, Eggers himself. Moved by his story, these benefactors (from Jane Fonda to Phil Mays to Bobby Newmeyer to the Newtons) serve not just as heroes for the readers, but also as inheritors and saviors of the failed US state, the best kind of readers for Eggers's novel. Phil Mays, for instance, "an average white man of Atlanta," asks Deng to narrate his story time and again not to check for fraud, but because it "affected him deeply" (171). After the first narration, Phil "put his hands in his lap and he cried. I watched his shoulders shake, watched him bring his hands to his face" (173). Once Phil becomes his mentor, Deng follows the weekly dinner at Phil's house with the "ritual" of "tell[ing] him the whole story" (177) in exchange for basic instructions about life in America. The "irrational, reckless" generosity of these families stands as a contrast to the erosion of institutions (as even the Lost Boys Foundation is disbanded in 2005) and the narrative repeatedly emphasizes that they don't just support Deng, but (in a move that parallels neoliberal economic theories of privatization and the elevation of individual actions over social structures) make him part of their family—for instance, having him play with their children, including him on their Christmas card, or teaching him how to drive, cook, and do laundry.

One of the puzzling aspects of this literary collaboration is the seeming lack of fit between Deng's traumatic experiences and Eggers's signature style—half ironic, half sincere, emotionally manipulative but constantly showing the sleight

of hand involved, as self-pitying as it is self-mocking.²² But when read closely for its reading practices, what becomes clear is that the relation between author and subject involves a series of exchanges or substitutions—formal, racial, and sentimental—that render Deng’s experiences not as testimony but as fiction. The very worldliness of the text, or its global feeling, is itself part and parcel of a neoliberal humanism that continues to package African atrocity as a form of self-constitution for the American reader. While America itself might be failing, Eggers as the silent spectator, in effacing himself as author, becomes the true rescuer. In serving as the amanuensis for Deng, Eggers is able to play the metafictional postmodern games for which he is known, but also to claim the title of truth for the narrative. Such a collaboration between author and subject speaks to the strange ironies of testimonial accounts of third world subjects who serve as the raw matter of experience waiting for first world literary expertise, mapping onto the parasitical relation of the slave narrative’s “black message in a white envelope.” Deng, constantly rebuffed, taunted, and beaten by a recurring cast of African American characters, finds his savior in Eggers, who is in turn saved from irrelevance by the moral clarity of Deng’s suffering, thus becoming, as numerous reviewers point out, a kind of “Lost Boy” himself. That the entire story of Deng’s life in Sudan and his harrowing journey is recounted while lying bound and gagged on his apartment floor, guarded by another young black boy, or waiting for help in a hospital waiting room, dismissed by the African American staffer, subtly shifts the burden of complicity from the (white) imagined reader onto Arab militias and the SPLA in Sudan and onto minorities in the United States.

At the beginning of the novel, when the narrator recalls his arrival in the US and his constant thought in response to every slight or annoyance—“*You would not add to my suffering if you knew what I have seen*”—his admonition is meant to refer back to the book the reader is reading, as an attempt to make us imagine, to feel the extent of his suffering. Given the succession of unwilling audiences Deng encounters throughout his voyage, the prime sin in his current life ends up being not being heard—his ethical demand is to be heard—and it is difficult not to see Eggers implicitly, though not acknowledged—as the answer to his prayers, the savior who listens, who translates his message, who promises redemption. In fact, as Deng, the protagonist of *What Is the What*, continually outlines various reading practices—explicitly telling the fictional characters he addresses (like the burglars, cops, neighbors, and hospital workers) how to listen to his story and how to think about it—the text approaches the feel of an instruction manual in developing sympathy for the victim of atrocity. But since Eggers is the author of the text, there seems to be an exchange of identities, the suggestion of the fungibility of Deng’s autobiographical experience and Eggers’s writerly empathy.²³ In usurping the place of Deng in the sympathies of the reader, Eggers revives the questions of representation that have always haunted the genre of the slave narrative and bypasses the long history of critiques of white appropriations of faraway suffering by reanimating an uninterrogated sentimental reading practice. One could thus say that the novel, in the end, is not the allegory of the journey of a “Lost Boy” coming to America, but of Eggers’s own salvation through his ventriloquism of Deng—his production as an empathetic, global human who can be moved by the story to action. The novel is the action required—it is the very politics for which it calls. *What Is the What* not only muddles fact and fiction, subject and author, but

also only tells us, in the end, that “what” is indeed “the what.” Eggers dramatizes for the presumed American reader how to relate to Deng—to assume the story as his own to tell means that Eggers is set apart from all those who refuse to listen. Each time Deng is rebuffed in his attempt to tell the story, the reader has the proof of successful storytelling in his/her hands, taking for granted if not guaranteeing the production of empathy, and of a worldly American reader, attuned to African atrocity.

This is why the first few pages of the novel are littered with the undermining of realist truth claims or the sanctity of experience, witness, and testimony, since the emphasis is not on Deng’s experience but the reader’s. The narrator notes that “at Kakuma, many of us lied on our application forms and in our interviews with officials” especially to deny an affiliation with the SPLA. Since refuge in the US was denied to anybody who had fought as a soldier, the applications had to excise any reference to such an experience: “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” (17). He notes that stories of drinking urine, though apocryphal, impress people and that there were “castes within castes” and other hierarchies among the walking boys. And yet, “the tales of the Lost Boys have become remarkably similar over the years. Everyone’s account includes attacks by lions, hyenas, crocodiles.”

Although the stories of the twenty thousand or so Lost Boys are all different, “sponsors and newspaper reporters and the like expect the stories to have certain elements, and the Lost Boys have been consistent in their willingness to oblige. Survivors tell the stories the sympathetic want, and that means making them as shocking as possible, my own story includes enough small embellishments that I cannot critique the accounts of others” (21). Early in the novel, the narrator describes staring “into the eyes of a lion” (8) in Ethiopia, but soon thereafter addresses the reader’s expectations of stories about lions: “No doubt if you have heard of the Lost Boys of Sudan, you have heard of the lions” (30). He notes that if it were not for the stories about lions, the US would not have been interested in them at all, but then goes on to counter the cynics by asserting that these stories “were in most cases true” (30).

In this way, at the outset, his veracity, the authenticity of his experience, or the testimonial value of this text has been undercut, as have the pretensions to sympathy of the readers who read for shock value. It may seem that such metafictional suspicion could signify the novel’s resistance to incorporation. But immediately following this, Eggers contrasts this sensation-seeking reader to the much more vicious assailants—Tonya and the man Deng names Powder—who don’t share this need for detail, or the sympathy that goes with it. Their indifference makes them worse than the voyeuristic reader. Deng realizes that his assailants wouldn’t care if they knew his story—“I wonder if, knowing about my journey here, they would alter the course they’ve taken against me. I do not expect they would” (21–22). So despite the fact that throughout the novel Deng names and tries to hail his various African American and other minority interlocutors only to be met with indifference or hostility, calling on them to hear his story, we already know that they are not reading this novel. Eggers’s novel isn’t addressed to them, rather Deng’s call and their refusal to respond provides the narrative with its structure.

Moreover, the narrator's voice remains ambiguous throughout. The novel's title comes from a Dinka creation myth, which punctuates the entire narrative. Deng recalls his father telling the story of God offering the Dinka a choice between a cow, which they could see and touch, and the What. The Dinka chose the cow, believing in the power of the tangible and the material over the unknown. They also believed that the Arabs chose the What and, as he flees militias and starvation, Deng wonders if the What refers to guns or horses. But at the end of the novel, as Deng makes a speech for the other Lost Boys scheduled to fly on September 11, 2011 to the United States and quarantined in Kenya, his reading of the What changes and he chooses the unknown over the known: "the mistakes of the Dinka before us were errors of timidity, of choosing what was before us over what might be. Our people, I said, had been punished for centuries for our errors. . . . We had been thrown this way and that, like rain in the wind of a hysterical storm. But we're no longer rain, I said,—we're no longer seeds. We're men. . . . This is our first chance to choose our own unknown" (531). Resolving to "keep walking" and hoping that after so much suffering "there will be grace" (532), Deng calms the fears of the other men, inspiring them to look forward to a better life.

How may we determine what's going on here? Is this Deng's realization, born of trauma, a form of what we may think of as retroactive rationalization? Or did Eggers imagine this to provide cohesion to a literary narrative, with a recognizable metaphor of the What or the void (which has a long genealogy in Orientalism and Africanism) and to provide closure to the creation myth? That we cannot choose either side points to the complications of such a literary collaboration and the strategic silences about the conditions of its production. It is difficult to detect the tone here—whether it is hollow or sincere, self-mocking or resolute. Should Deng's words strike the reader as empty, since we already know that the boys found little grace in America? Or does the emphasis on keeping on walking function as a literary trope tying the novel together, signaling their ongoing struggle? Does Deng believe this himself or does he just say it to calm the fears of his companions? Even after over five hundred pages of first-person narration, detailed, straight-forward, and introspective, the tone remains unclear and Deng emerges with no unambiguous voice of his own.

Scholars of Atlantic slavery have painstakingly and definitively shown that we cannot read slave narratives just for facts or content, we must read them for their complexity and literary artistry, since the cultivation of a writing self was part and parcel of the process of gaining a self, of not just finding but crafting freedom.²⁴ In a similar manner, we may wonder why—when Deng's literacy and liberty are also connected and he is well known as a public speaker and storyteller—his story needs an interpreter. As Didier Fassin points out, the "politics of life" of humanitarianism rests on the value of testimony and creating a distinction between those who narrate their own story and those who become biographical subjects of someone else's narration fundamentally has to do with what counts as human. Deng's humanity is diminished, to some extent, when he isn't allowed authorship of his own life story.

In reading these narratives of African atrocity, one that is explicitly presented as a modern slave narrative and one that is a novel but everywhere haunted by slavery, what becomes clear is that a long and complex history of political conflict is often sidelined in favor of the immediacy of an individual story. As David

Harvey notes, the trajectories of modern human rights and neoliberalization are exactly parallel, coming into prominence after 1980, and the concern with the individual rather than with the creation of larger democratic and socially just institutions carries more risk than reward. Advocacy groups often call into play the necessary language of universalism to advance their claims, but it is crucial to reckon with the intersection of such universalism with racial and national particularity. In neo-abolitionism, for instance, race acquires a curious status, becoming a specter of sorts, which haunts the official discourse of color-blindness. Modern abolition relies on disavowing the relevance of race, neo-imperialism, and global inequality, presenting its case as a kind of anti-politics by appeal to an obvious shared humanity.²⁵ Bales, for instance, insists that modern slavery can be differentiated from Atlantic slavery not because the former is illegal, and considered criminal activity, but because it is beyond race and, thus, somehow for him, post-politics as well. Appealing beyond partisan divides or ideological disputes, such cases are a way for readers across the political spectrum to come together. For Bales, while historical forms of slavery were based on legal ownership and characterized by ideologies of racial difference, new slavery does not rely on race, but is the result of government corruption, poverty, and population growth. Effective counter-measures, therefore, lie in liberal legal remedies like law enforcement and individual vigilance by good Samaritans.

In the logic of neo-abolitionism, accordingly, to end slavery we would need not more or better political solutions, but better human beings, who would be vigilant good Samaritans and ethical consumers, eager to report any perceived abuse in their neighborhood to the law. They wouldn't have to think about broader issues of work and labor practices, debates about immigration, sex work, the weapons trade, or the politics of oil and resource extraction, or other gender, ethnic, and class inequalities. They would just have to be morally outraged, sentimentally aroused by the stories of suffering they read, and ready to sign off on a petition, thus choosing to stop "eating, wearing, walking, and talking slavery" (Bales and Soodalter 137). They would not seek an explanation of why and how child soldiers in the Philippines, debt bondage in Indian brick quarries, prostitution in Cambodia or the former Soviet bloc should all be seen as slavery, rather than as forms of labor exploitation, or how local and global processes of racialization or differentiation, corruption or poverty, matter in each instance. Rather, working with the easy dyad of evil slaveholder and powerless and innocent slave, readers are invited to imagine themselves as the humanitarian rescuer. Just as nineteenth-century slave narrators were constrained by the limits of the white, northern US audience, modern slave discourse, easily transposing an Atlantic genre to narrate stories from the Global South, dehistoricizes contemporary conflicts and offers a homogenizing story of African atrocity that affirms the primitivist and imperialist tropes that depict Africa and the post-colony more broadly.

While new abolitionism may be criticized along the lines suggested above—as inadequate sociology, history, or economics—it is worth emphasizing in conclusion that what makes modern slave narratives work is the power we usually ascribe to imaginative literature: the capacity to generate empathy, sentiment, and an appeal to a shared conception of human rights. In such a scenario, literature can help develop ethical norms, plotting coordinates of hope, but refusing tidy cathartic conclusions. In recent years, many literary critics have shown how the work of

human rights is remarkably akin to the work of narrative, as language, rhetoric, and textual representation matter equally urgently for both. Joseph Slaughter persuasively argues in *Human Rights, Inc.* that the constitutive intimacy between the notion of human rights and the rise of the novel, particularly the bildungsroman, reveals how human rights are “as much matters of literature as of law,” as both share a “conceptual vocabulary, deep narrative grammar, and humanist social vision” (3–4). Given this convergence, greater attention to the ideologies of form called into play to narrate such stories is needed, since using a pre-existing form of the US slave narrative necessarily limits the kinds of questions that can be raised. To understand fully how texts of modern slavery circulate and are read, we need to reckon with the different forces of genre and geopolitics, race and neocolonialism, humanitarianism and the war on terror. Moreover, the exclusion of numerous African literary texts that represent slavery, civil war, and genocide is also problematic, especially since historians argue that the civil war in Sudan has little in common with slavery (unlike Mauritania) and should be studied alongside Uganda, Sierra Leone, or Liberia. Tracking the circulation of the form of the slave narrative across widely divergent texts entails a deeper consideration of the transformation of race and form, opening up thorny questions of new paradigms of diasporic connection and fracture across the Global South.

Turning to these texts is also a way to reposition this critical conversation within a larger malaise that attends contemporary academic discourse. Nothing has been more prolific in the twenty-first-century academy than proclamations of the end of things. If the last few decades of the twentieth century represented the heyday of such fields as postcolonial and ethnic studies, recent years have witnessed an undermining of their standing on a number of fronts. Postcolonial and world literature have been seen as having their radical critique incorporated by neoliberalism and global capitalism and pronounced “lite” or represented in the language of ruins and remnants, failure and melancholy.²⁶ Such declarations dovetail with a widespread exhaustion with ideology critique or the hermeneutics of suspicion, in large part because such approaches are seen to have failed in diagnosing contemporary ills. And yet, one area where the concerns that prompt this shift seem to not have registered much is human rights discourse. Here, we find little to no anxiety about representing the other, or the stakes of comparison in a transnational setting, or even of the possibility of resistance. Books that promote a human rights agenda offer a direct call to action, suggesting (as a good old-fashioned liberal humanist would) that reading them will make the world a better place and the reader a more ethical human. They often end with directing readers to a website or other such resources, expressing the faith that reading the book will have led to a desire to act. In other words, in an era of neoliberal globalization, a time when micro-differentiation and niche markets proliferate, human rights discourse imagines itself as a bulwark against dehumanizing forces like patriarchy, tribalism, ethnic cleansing, civil war, and genocide by remaining invested in the notion of universal personhood. As Pheng Cheah notes, the idea of human rights is one of the “primary ways of figuring the global as human” (3). In an era suffused with calls for post-racialism, stories of African tragedy and American triumph say more about how race and diaspora work in the age of neoliberalism, as the end of politics declared in these universalizing narratives can only proceed by way of a disavowal of antiracist and anticolonial critique, as a resurrection of sentimental humanism that purports to be universal.

Such works are thus an exemplary test case for the debates that have been plaguing postcolonial literary studies from its very inception—who writes for whom, why do people in the first world react to or fetishize tales of suffering from far away, how can literature make us ethical in a global era, and how do conceptions of race developed in the US fare in an increasingly transnational context? Reading modern slave narratives not only stages a useful and necessary encounter between African American and postcolonial studies, it also underscores the need for new models of global raciality and diaspora that can reckon with the messy entanglement of humanitarianism, militarism, philanthropy, and the security state in geopolitics today. Further, the circulation of the Atlantic slave narrative in what Pascale Casanova has termed the contemporary “World Republic of Letters” requires a dialogue with the literature of the Global South that also seeks to understand these atrocities, but does so in ways that cannot be seen as simply indebted to or following the lead of writers from the Western world. Modern slave narratives also challenge existing discourses of race and diaspora, offering new forms of relation between and across Africa and the US. One of the most powerful provocations of Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* was to insist that we place the slave at the center of modernity and produce our histories and philosophies from that vantage point, relocating the figure of the slave from silent victim to eloquent critic. Recently, Robert Reid Pharr invites scholars to do the same with the figure of the sex worker and Ian Baucom rethinks Atlantic history by placing the Zong massacre as the founding moment of an ongoing catastrophe. Along similar lines, what requires further thought is how the vantage point of a Sudanese refugee like Bok or Deng may serve to interrogate the very foundations of a neoliberal philosophy of history and help generate more politically complex notions of human rights.

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NOTES

1. While such discussions were not limited to Africa, and the revelations of human rights violations and abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison and the Guantanamo Bay detention camp were the catalysts for much of the debate about torture and rights, the idea of African atrocity was the locus of particularly intense scrutiny.

2. The Lost Boys of Sudan refers to the groups of over 20,000 displaced children (mainly boys between seven and seventeen) orphaned or separated from their families during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005). The etymology is often traced to the children’s story “Peter Pan.”

3. See Pierre; Gqola; Adeeko, Zeleza, and Barnes.

4. See Gilroy.

5. See Patterson; Chatterjee and Eaton; Cadet.

6. See Hunt; Moyn.

7. Examples include Mam; Muhsen; Akallo; McDonnell.
8. See Cadet, *My Stone of Hope, Restavec*; Fernando; Mam; Muhsen; Akallo and McDonnell; Bok; Nazar.
9. See the Global Slavery Index, and President Barack Obama's speech to the Clinton Global Initiative, arguing that domestic abuse, the use of the child soldier, forced prostitution, and abuse in sweatshops should be known by their "true name" as modern slavery. Also see Steve McQueen, director of the academy award-winning film, *12 Years a Slave*, who dedicated his Oscar to the 21 million people who still suffer slavery today. I'm suggesting in this essay that we have been conditioned to think this way by the efforts of the modern abolitionists through the narratives of modern slavery. The move has been produced textually, through the spectral uses of form, and isn't an unconscious movement but one generated through narrative.
10. Quotations from *antislavery.org*.
11. See Stevenson.
12. See Love; Best and Marcus.
13. Even the term "modern slavery" signals a deceptive temporality, since the modernity of slavery is displaced onto the past, while the declared fact of contemporary slavery is understood as a shameful anachronism.
14. See Sekora.
15. See Andrews; Foster; McDowell and Rampersad; Smith.
16. On Douglass and sentimentalism, see Riss.
17. See Sherman.
18. We may recall here Bales's irritation at questions about the meaning of slavery, since the reader is supposed to accept that a slave is a slave is a slave.
19. See Jones.
20. Amsden goes on to say, like many other reviewers, that Eggers "is, famously, a lost boy himself" as his memoir showed both innocence and wit, "the bipolar urge to create community (*Please understand me!*) only to reject it (*You'll never understand!*)."
21. I have only found one negative review to date: Lee Siegel objects to Eggers's takeover of Deng's life, seeing Eggers as "the sincere young father of post-postmodern half-irony" or "sincerony."
22. Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, an account of the author's mother and father's death and his surrogate parenting of his eight-year-old brother, perfected his solipsistic style, where he constantly tells the audience how to read the book, at the same time acknowledging that this instruction is intensely annoying. The book is prefaced with "Rules and Suggestions for Enjoyment of this Book," an extended discussion of "the major themes," metaphors, and symbols, and a flow chart of emotional consequences of death. It also is punctuated by coy asides about the way in which Eggers is milking the misery of his own family for personal fame.
23. As Bruce Robbins has argued, what is remarkable about post-9/11 US fiction is not its worldliness, but how it turns inward.
24. See Ernest and Reid-Pharr.
25. Remarkably, there is little engagement with another body of work in the US that also claims the moniker of modern abolition and likens incarceration—as a profoundly racialized practice—to slavery and segregation. See Alexander and Blackmon.
26. See Young, n+1 magazine's essay "World Lite" and Mishra's response.

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