

“You Are There”: Blurred Boundaries, Touristic Reading, and the Human Rights Novel

By

Amy G. Segelbaum

A master’s essay submitted to the faculty of the  
Graduate Program in English in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree

Master of Arts in English

University of St. Thomas  
St Paul, Minnesota

December 2017

## ABSTRACT

The “Human Rights Novel” is a popular genre with great possibilities for exposing readers to issues in the lives of post-colonial subjects around the globe. However, Human Rights fiction often relies on rhetorical strategies to *suggest* truth which blurs the lines between fictional and non-fictional genres. The implied truth of the narrative makes readers feel that they are transported across the globe and participating in a form of “touristic reading” that satisfies their interests in human rights issues. This is a problematic schema that fails to challenge beliefs, and instead produces readers who choose literature that is familiar, predictable, and often written by the Western authors who usually lack first-hand knowledge. These issues will be explored through the human rights novels *What is the What* by Dave Eggers, and *Animals People*, by Indra Sinha. Both texts suggest credibility and legitimacy through four literary features: an imitative form of ethnography, appropriation of a human rights victims’ voice, a reliance on familiar colonial scripts, and the creation of an icon to represent an entire class of people. This blurring of genres and fictionalizing of human rights issues becomes problematic when it confuses readers into believing that “touristic reading” accurately represents the lives of people around the world and might prevent them from making a difference.

Novels that describe and highlight human rights issues in their pages have collectively grown into a popular literary category as the world has become more accessible and Western citizens have developed an interest in the lives of post-colonial subjects around the globe. This literary sub-genre of human rights literature has produced many best sellers such as *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini and *Beasts of No Nation* by Uzodinma Iweala. This boost in interest parallels the rise in the conversation about human rights throughout popular culture. The human rights movement's origin is often traced to the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 following World War II. Later in 1977, when Amnesty International won the Nobel Prize, new interest was sparked in human rights, and this added to the "popularity of its new mode of advocacy" (Moyn 4). This publicity and promotion of an organization advocating for positive treatment of human beings around the world helped spur awareness and social activism. The interest in the treatment of people across the globe continues today, and human rights critic Mitchum Huehls sees 2004 as a turning point where the arts and media reflected a cultural interest and foreign politics and policy which made them more relevant and important to Western citizens. This period also produced music, books, and movies such as *Hotel Rwanda*, which prompted many celebrities to publicly discuss humanitarian crises around the world. Huehls explained that other popular books such as Ismael Beah's memoir *A Long Way Gone* were frequently promoted on *The Daily Show* and sold in Starbucks stores. Later, Oprah selected Uwem Akpan's *Say You're One of Them* which chronicles the struggles of various African children for her book club. This infusion of human rights themed literature and movies brought the human rights conversation into the popular arena.

Although for readers the exposure and awareness that comes from reading these novels would seem to be contributing in a positive way, many of the works are so convincing and realistic that readers are left with the impression that they are reading factual accounts to represent entire groups of people. Rosemary Hathaway explores the ways readers tend to accept the representations they have been exposed to through literature. She calls one effect “touristic reading,” and defines it as “the fallacious practice whereby a reader assumes, when presented with a text where the writer and the group represented in the text are ethnically different from herself, that the text is necessarily an accurate, authentic, and authorized representation of that Other cultural group” (Hathaway 169). The effect of the belief in the authenticity of the text to represent the Other is what makes Hathaway’s theory relevant here. The use of a novel or text as a standard for judgement of a group different from oneself leads to misconceptions and false beliefs. Although the human rights writers do not often have first-hand information about the situations they are writing about, they often write with authority through their Western privilege. By accepting the text as authoritative, a reader is more likely to stereotype and feel distant from “the Other.” Another risk is that these human rights novels which connect to universally interesting themes, often appeal to the exotic, sensational, and stereotypical. Some examples of the common themes authors use in the human rights novel are: the innocent child, the vulnerable woman, the exotic foreigner, and the homeless orphan. This reliance on recognized stereotypes and familiar colonialist themes is used to create interest and simulate a way for readers to “feel” the struggles of actual citizens around the globe. This comfort created by familiarity can lead readers to repeatedly choose literature that is predictable, and interestingly, written by Western authors who usually lack any first-hand experience of the human rights tragedy. This is

problematic and potentially damaging if readers believe they understand a global issue but are receiving this knowledge from a fictionalized account.

Readers are often not aware of the various rhetorical techniques used through the texts to convince them of the validity of the narrative. Four features often found are: familiar colonial scripts which reveal patterns of racial bias and prejudice, a suggestion of ethnographic methodology to create credibility and legitimacy, a first-person voice which can spur intimacy with vulnerable victims, and icons who represent entire classes of people. Two popular human rights novels that use these four rhetorical strategies are *What is the What*, by Dave Eggers, about the Lost Boys of Sudan, and the novel *Animals People* by Indra Sinha which is based on the events of the Bhopal Dow Chemical gas explosion. Readers are often unaware of the use of these rhetorical strategies, and readers use judgement and previous assumptions to navigate the literature. Judith Butler describes the hazards of judgement and how it can keep readers from truly “knowing” the Other. In her book *Frames of War*, she writes, “We judge a world we refuse to know, and our judgement becomes one means of refusing to know that world” (Butler 156). The universalizing and distancing citizens perform toward marginalized people through the use of judgement keeps people of developing nations at a “safe” distance. This prevents readers from experiencing discomfort as they contemplate the lives of others. As Hathaway explains, “such reading is one-dimensional; touristic readers consume such texts as interesting sorts of fictionalized travelogues and then return to the safety of their own culture(s) without really having disrupted their notions of their own culture in any more than a superficial way” (Hathaway 170). Personal stories of actual human rights victims serve as the source material for these novels written by Western privileged writers, but reading the personal stories often result in a shallow understanding of victims from different cultures. Instead, the personal stories are

simply used in the commodification of stories of the Other through the sales of books, music, and movies.

Frequently, features of the text such as colonial scripts and an ethnographic framing not only fail to challenge readers, but they also blur genre lines used in determining how to engage with the texts. A work that mimics the structural conventions of typical ethnography, including first-hand accounts and interview transcripts, can serve to disorient the reader regarding the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. When readers believe they are reading literature based on qualitative research, it tends to seem so realistic that it can even feel participatory. A harmful effect of simulated “participation” is that readers consider exposure to the issues equivalent to actual humanitarian effort. Feeling accomplished after the completion of a human rights novel does little to help the people experiencing the actual struggle. As Fredric Jameson describes: “the ‘ideal reader’...would have to give up a great deal that is individually precious...and acknowledge an existence and a situation unfamiliar and therefore frightening—one that we do not know and prefer not to know” (Jameson 66). In other words, this literature is only capable of making a difference if the readers are willing to face the (sometimes grim) realities which are not always comfortable to experience. The masquerade of feeling involved yet not in any way implicated in the lives of people in other countries keeps readers safely at a distance. This is harmful if readers favor literature that feels safe and predictable instead of challenging the notions of responsibility Western citizens share in the lives of others across the world. Huehls explains that another reason many readers are drawn to this literature is that the purpose of their creation is to “capitalize on suffering to assuage guilt” (4). This allows readers to believe that the act of reading alleviates their implication in another person’s suffering or need for action. Through the satisfying purchase of these stories of suffering, readers feel supportive

toward the people experiencing unpleasant realities around the world. This also can serve as a comfort to Western readers who experience relief through the comparison of their own lives with those of people from developing nations. Despite an honorable purpose, human rights literature often creates an alternative imagined reality that is expected by the reader. This also promotes a more universal story that fails to challenge previously held ideas. In the end, this literature which has great potential for motivating Western readers toward activism needs to be read with a critical lens in order to discern the truth and reliability of their narratives.

A rise in the popularity of ethnographic research in contemporary literature most likely influenced both Eggers and Sinha to utilize the form of research in their work. Many human rights novels suggest that actual ethnographic research informs the narrative, yet ironically, the origins of ethnography are rooted in colonialist history. Both authors use an ethnographic framework to create authenticity while these frameworks inadvertently evoke colonialist histories and racist language scripts. At the beginning of the twentieth century when ethnography was gaining popularity, most ethnographic researchers were white Western men who traveled to “exotic” locales to report back to the “civilized world” about native cultures. Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the most well-known ethnographers, famously visited the Trobriand Islands from 1914-1917 near New Guinea as part of his research. His book titles from the 1920’s reveal his colonialist attitude toward his research subjects which are shocking by today’s standards. They include: *Crime and Custom in Savage Society*, *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, and *The Sexual Life of Savages*. Although he is considered an innovator and one of the first successful ethnographers, his prose reveals his attitude toward his subjects: “But the Ethnographer has not only to spread his nets in the right place, and wait for what will fall into them. He must be an active huntsman, and drive his quarry into them and follow it up to its most

inaccessible lairs” (Malinowski 8). This metaphor of the hunter and the prey establishes Malinowski’s perceptions of himself as human while his subjects are nothing more than beasts. Malinowski’s work represents a colonialist approach toward people of developing nations, but modern ethnographers continue to use many of the same techniques in their research. Interviews, note-taking, tape recordings and field observations are utilized to understand different cultures.

Ethnography has continued to evolve as a respected discipline due to the emerging ideological shifts surrounding research methodology and new theorizing of the ethnographic text, according to anthropologists James Clifford and George Marcus. They have chronicled the evolution of anthropological methods which also apply to ethnographic fieldwork: “Historical pressures have begun to reposition anthropology with respect to its ‘objects’ of study.

Anthropology no longer speaks with automatic authority for others defined as unable to speak for themselves” (Clifford and Marcus 9-10). This evolution of the methods of representation situate ethnography as a credible form of research and writing that is used to bring an unfamiliar world in focus. Hathaway believes that readers “often consume such materials as mimetically ‘authentic’” (171). This situates ethnography as an accepted method that is unlikely to be doubted or questioned by readers. The use of an ethnographic style to emulate actual fieldwork in both novels blurs the boundaries for readers between “research” and fictional constructions.

One way *What is the What*, and *Animal’s People* convince readers that the work is based on ethnographic research is by suggesting that transcripts, tape recordings, and interviews have informed the narrative. The use of the ethnographic eyewitness testimony as a feature of the human rights novel encourages the reader to accept the narrative as fact in order to cultivate a sympathetic response to the material. Ethnography is used to suggest authenticity, research-based information, an intimate connection between narrator and reader, and truth in reporting. These



qualities are the kind that make ethnography seem like an effective vehicle for transporting readers to the scene. Researchers Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe several ways literary witness accounts, like ethnography, engage readers: there is a “‘you-are-there’ sense of immediacy,” and a use of “the narrating ‘I’...[who serves as an] advocate on the narrator’s behalf, [and] makes explicit reference to a recognized, violated identity that is compelling and shocking, such as ‘child soldier’” (Smith and Watson 593). Through first-person language, the narrating observer speaks for the victims by naming and identifying the human rights violators in a way readers can understand. These techniques seemingly told directly from the victim also appeal to a reader’s interest in sensational topics, as familiar scripts help to “transport” the reader into the novel.

Another incentive for the use of ethnographic research techniques, or suggestion of their use, is to prevent readers from questioning the validity of the text. Michelle Peek in her critique of Egger’s work explores how he blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction allowing “Eggers to implicate the reader in Valentino’s story by drawing attention to the work of witnessing, of giving testimony to history and trauma, and enjoining the reader to take on the role of imaginative, retrospective witness” (Peek 120). This suggestion of the use of anthropologically-focused methods to describe the human rights tragedy confirms the validity of the story, which the reader then has no reason to question. The reader is placed in a position as witness, and he or she accepts responsibility by allowing the author to transport them to a front row seat. Smith and Watson also indicate how ethnography (or similar “I-Formations”) convince readers of the narrative’s credibility:

The narrator speaks as a first-hand actor in and observer of disastrous, violent, and degrading conditions of existence...In other words, the narrator adopts the

subject position of both the victim of human rights violations and the survivor. As readers imaginatively share the vulnerable protagonist's struggle to survive, their empathetic identification is awakened. They are transported "there" by a narrator's rhetorical shifts into the simple present tense. (Smith and Watson 593)

This appropriation of both positions of survivor and victim to create a modicum of truth and realism despite a lack of personal experience ultimately serves to compromise the integrity of the narrative. The text convinces readers of the narrator's position as a first-hand witness, which could be considered misleading if not read critically as a work of fiction.

The appropriation of voice and a suggestion of the use of ethnography is also suggested in *Animal's People*. Sinha's text itself suggests ethnographic research is the basis of the work by using "tape" numbers in exchange for chapter headings. This structural element positions the reader as an eyewitness and a first-hand observer which also creates a feeling of authenticity. Sinha also includes an explanation in a fictional editor's note posed as a primer providing factual background:

This story was recorded in Hindi on a series of tapes by a nineteen-year-old boy in the Indian city of Khaufpur. True to the agreement between the boy and journalist who befriended him, the story is told entirely in the boy's words as recorded on the tapes...The recordings are of various lengths, and the tapes are presented in the order of numbering...A glossary has been provided. Information about the city of Khaufpur can be found at [www.khaufpur.com](http://www.khaufpur.com). (Sinha "Preface").

This detailed note suggests that the novel is informed by actual audiotape transcriptions. In addition, the use of the phrase "entirely in the boy's words" suggests that the author has not manipulated the text in any way which leads readers to conclude that this is an actual transcript.

The added inclusion of a website link directs readers to an elaborate web of travel guides, photographs, and detailed topics related to the *fictional* city of Khaufpur which is based on Sinha's imagined locations. This combination of fictional ethnographic "tapes" as the basis for the novel and a multipage website leave the reader feeling as if "they are there" in a convincingly realistic world. In addition, Sinha authoritatively uses the editor's note to suggest that he is giving the reader source material as the factual basis for his novel. Readers without knowledge of Indian geography might find it confusing as Khaufpur is referred to as an actual city and the website reinforces the possibility of its legitimacy.

Convincing readers that they are feeling the struggles along with the protagonists can be established through the introductory information such as the preface and editor's note. It is an important way that both authors create a "you are there" feeling of witnessing for the reader. Both Sinha and Eggers utilize the supplemental information outside of the heart of the novel to convince readers of the credibility of their narrative which helps to legitimize the work. *What is the What* uses the extraneous information to allow Valentino Achak Deng, a "Lost Boy" to address the reader and describe the methods of ethnography used. This Sudanese man explains how Eggers completed his research which culminated in a visit to Africa: "we even went to Sudan together in December 2003, and I was able to revisit the town I left when I was seven years old. I told Dave what I knew and what I could remember, and from that material he created this work of art" (Eggers, "Preface"). Deng's use of the word "even" as a qualifier indicates that he sees it as above and beyond what he expected from a writer. This tone of justification shows deference given to Eggers despite his ownership. The exposition which Eggers uses to establish Deng as the original storyteller has been analyzed by Peek, and she notes, "Deng's preface is pivotal here, inverting the convention of a much older tradition of humanitarian and human

rights narrative by establishing Deng, and not Eggers, as the authoritative voice verifying the book's claims to autobiographical truth" (Peek 119). The use of the preface serves to establish the novel as "Deng's story" and prevents the reader from questioning the narrative techniques. Interestingly this preface is similar to historical slave narratives which were usually written by white men to convey the legitimacy of the narrative and the integrity of the black subject. Deng's case however, is structured as the inverse of the traditional introductions, as it features a black man legitimizing and designating a white man as authorized to chronicle his experience. One of the most famous examples of slave narrative introductory pieces was written by Wendel Phillips, a white attorney writing on behalf of former slave Frederick Douglass. This preface displays white power and influence, and served as an introduction for the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*:

Again, we have known you long, and can put the most entire confidence in your truth, candor, and sincerity. Everyone who has heard you speak has felt, and, I am confident everyone who reads your book will feel, persuaded that you give them a fair specimen of the whole truth. (Douglass xvi).

This vote of confidence from a white lawyer echoes the same message Deng uses to inform the reader that Eggers has accurately presented the details of his life. Eggers, from the beginning, reminds readers of his use of legitimated research to tell the story. The narration by Deng reverses the traditional structure of the slave narrative, as this case features a black African man legitimizing a famous white author's book. A complete vote of confidence and gratitude from Deng in the preface is used to dispel any skepticism through an inverted familiar colonial script. This authentication of Eggers by Deng suggests a willing relinquishing of control, yet the latent influence and control underscored through Egger's position as a famous white author has great

significance. Perhaps Eggers uses the preface as a way to assuage *his* guilt for speaking for this man. However, in his position as author and publisher, readers should be aware that the content (including material narrated by Deng) is ultimately controlled by Eggers.

Many human rights novels written by Western authors are based on the trust of their subjects from developing nations, but it is often achieved through a self-appointed authority to impose control and use of an appropriation of the narrative voice. Eggers, a white American author, appropriates the voice of Deng, a Sudanese refugee, to describe his experiences. Eggers, although writing from an omniscient position, seemingly cannot be ignored as a central character through his first-person narrative voice. Eggers attempts to reposition himself from an acknowledged position as narrator to an absent participant. Eggers creates a complicated duality as narrator and author of the entire novel, but aside from brief mention in the preface, he does not reveal himself and his white American perspective. Another way his presence cannot be ignored is through the acceptance of full recognition as sole author and creator of the work. This is also exemplified through the cover art of many paperback editions of *What is the What* which display a large artistic representation of Deng's face without his name acknowledged, while Dave Eggers' name is prominently displayed. This cover is intended to attract readers, yet it imparts conflicting messages about the narrator through its outer display. Eggers features and highlights Deng's story, however, his large format byline indicates that credit and accolades are welcomed.

Deng places the power of his life story into the hands of Eggers who classifies the work as "a novel," yet represents it as a factual account of Deng's life. This blurring of genres creates a confusing tone for a novel that appropriates the story of a Lost Boy and converts it into popular fiction. Deng attempts to justify Eggers' fictionalizing technique in the preface:

It should be known to the readers that I was very young when some of the events in the book took place, and as a result we simply had to pronounce *What is the What* a novel. I could not, for example, recount some conversations that took place seventeen years ago. However, it should be noted that all the major events in the book are true. The book is historically accurate, and the world I have known is not different from the one depicted within these pages. (xiv)

This assertion of accuracy is included to help eliminate the possibility for questioning Eggers' intent. However, this addition by Deng further complicates the notion of voice. By acknowledging the novel as fiction, he highlights the fact that a Western writer has embellished some of the details, and that he ultimately has control over the content. This acknowledgement makes the source of the narrator's work exceedingly difficult to identify. Eggers fails to acknowledge the information which has been imagined, and he displays incredible ability in assuming another's voice through skilled storytelling. Deng attempts to remedy this by detailing the methods of research which were used in their collaboration. The ethnographic methodological detail is also included to dispel Eggers' lack of transparency: "Over the course of many years, Dave and I have collaborated to tell my story by way of tape recording, by electronic mailings, by telephone conversations and by many personal meetings and visitations" (Eggers xiv). This acknowledgement of ethnographic research methods is included to create a higher level of credibility and truth.

However, even after obscuring his position and voice in the novel, Eggers does not seem to resist the acceptance of credit and praise through media interviews and publicity. He not only refers back the preface to create legitimacy, but also brings Deng further into the focus of the reader without revealing himself. David Amsden in a *New York Magazine* review noted how

Eggers conceals his position: “In short, there are exactly zero indicators alerting us that we are in the midst of an Eggers production” (Amsden 1). This observation confirms that by appropriating Deng’s voice, and capitalizing on the excitement surrounding Egger’s latest novel, his position is not transparent in the fictional memoir. This technique only serves to convince the reader of his absence. This “I-formation” used in his book, exploits the reader’s desire for an intimate connection with the subject because the reader does not consider who is actually speaking. For example, as the novel concludes, Deng addresses the closeness he feels with the reader: “How blessed are we to have each other? I am alive and you are alive so we must fill the air with our words...All the while I will know that you are there. How can I pretend that you do not exist? I would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist” (Eggers 535). This candid and personal address creates an impression that Deng is addressing the reader directly. The effect for the reader is a feeling of intimacy with Deng which creates the impression of deeper understanding. However, it remains unclear if these rhetorical questions through an emotional plea are coming directly from Eggers or Deng.

By obfuscating their voice and assuming the role of the post-colonial victim, the text in the human rights novel, (with potential to educate and enlighten) becomes so convincing that readers are not likely to recognize the technique. Similar to Egger’s use of the technique, Sinha obscures his position as narrator by speaking through the voice of the main character named Animal. Through media interviews Sinha reveals that the fictional character is based on a real person, Sunil, whose identity is rooted in a combination of real and imagined ethnography. The title page contains a minor attempt to acknowledge this appropriation, and reads simply, “For Sunil.” This seems slightly insufficient after the appropriation of much of Sunil’s account and personality traits. Although it seems that Sunil and the fictional Animal did not have completely

parallel lives, there are enough similarities that this inference cannot be ignored. For instance, in an interview with *The Guardian* newspaper, Sinha describes Sunil who sounds eerily similar to Animal: “As the years passed Sunil began having bouts of schizophrenia. He'd describe these as his mad times. He hallucinated and heard voices. He believed people were coming to kill him and once ran away into the jungle to live like an animal” (“*Only*” 1). This description parallels a passage in *Animal's People* quite closely in which Animal escapes to the wilderness: “Running I'm running, I don't know where, just to clutch onto one more hour...I'll live as an animal, alone and free as an animal should, no master I'll have, no work, no duty but survival” (Sinha 340, 342). This scene is easily recognizable as part of Sunil's story, but is also combined with other details in order to exoticize and enhance the character. Sinha, when pressed in interviews, denied the similarities between Sunil and Animal by explaining that Sunil did not walk on all fours like Animal. Sunil's story is not revealed clearly to the reader, and the sensitive nature of Sunil's eventual suicide problematizes Sinha's lack of transparency. The use of handpicked sensational details of an actual man's life to be used for fiction creates some ethical questions about Sunil's inability to grant permission and the appropriation of his personal narrative.

Sinha uses his authorial voice for a dual purpose: one aim he acknowledges is to advance his human rights agenda against those responsible for the chemical crisis in Bhopal such as Dow Chemical Company, but another unspoken motivator is likely the promotion and sale of the novel. Sinha places himself within a rather “meta” position by asking (through the voice of Animal) how this novel will be different from other human rights literature: “I said, many books have been written about this place, not one has changed anything for the better, how will yours be different? You will bleat like all the rest. You'll talk of rights, law, justice. Those words sound the same in my mouth as in yours but they don't mean the same...On that night it was



poison, now it's words that are choking us" (Sinha 3). This questioning is directed from Animal toward the reader, but it seems to be a question for Sinha himself. He is acknowledging that human rights literature often does not accomplish what it sets out to do. Sinha writes from his British home, and several visits to Bhopal are simply not representative of a life as a disfigured victim of the crisis. Animal's fictionalized voice is unable to truly speak for the subaltern and as part of a collective fight for justice. Sinha creates a conflicting duality: on one hand, he created Animal to speak for the subaltern and marginalized, and on the other, he creates a text that can be viewed as exploitative of Animal (who is based on the life of his friend) for the novel.

Although both novels are promoted as tools for promoting humanitarian activism, the unequal dynamic that exists between the writers and the victimized subjects reveals an imbalance of power. In her book *Fictions of Dignity*, Elizabeth Anker explores the exploitative tendencies human rights fiction writers rely on, such as the familiar formula of "good versus evil" through the issues they choose to highlight. Many of the themes of the novels she explores center around subjects that re-play familiar post-colonial scripts. Both authors are guilty of this reliance of colonial script language, but Eggers position as a white American can be viewed as especially troubling. The recreation of dialogue throughout the text from Deng's point of view yet written by a white American author creates a conflict of point-of-view many readers are unlikely to consider. One example is a scene in which Eggers describes (through Deng's voice to his friend Dut) a reaction to a first encounter with a white person.

You've never seen a white man? he laughed. This interested Dut. I didn't know where I would have seen a white man. I didn't think it was funny. His face softened and he sighed...For now we'll talk about another reason they come, which is to help people when they're being attacked, oppressed. Sometimes the

white men who come to inspect things here represent the armies of the white men, which are the most powerful armies on earth (Eggers 280).

This adulation expressed by Dut for the white colonists mirrors clichéd opinions that many were convinced to be held by poor Africans. This appropriation of Deng's inner-most thoughts surrounding race create a questionable power dynamic between Eggers and Deng. Interviews and recorded conversations are simply unable to create an understanding of the breadth of an African man's experience and inner dialogue. Eggers serves a vital role in relaying his story, but a more transparent position such as narrating in a third-person's voice would allow readers to clearly identify the speaker.

The dynamic of a Western author speaking for the subaltern subject reveals repeated post-colonial themes. These familiar themes, such as the idea of the white man as all powerful, are stereotypical yet ultimately expected by readers. Anker notes that colonialist themes are often included in human rights literature, and she explains that, "Overall, the human rights bestseller recruits many well-documented codes and conventions of colonialist rhetoric. While the genre's humanitarian reformers are vested with divine license, their perpetrators are reduced to sheer barbarity and evil" (Anker 38). Anker illuminates the patterns of good versus evil that are replayed, and the reader's subconscious desire for familiar colonialist themed literature based on the writers' desire to please. In this way, Anker blames both reader and writer for sustaining the colonialist topics. The colonial themes are repeated so often, that Makau Mutua famously named a three-part construction repeatedly found in many human rights novels. He identifies this repeated metaphorical pattern as the "savages, victims, saviors" or "SVS" (Matua 10). This reliance on pre-determined roles, leaves little room for a contextual rewriting of the script. Pre-determined patterns restrict the novel from accomplishing anything other than retelling of the

same themes. Anker maintains that: “These apologies for humanitarian intervention are replete with exoticizing, infantilizing, and other demeaning stereotypes, even as they deploy the aesthetic codes of sentimental literature to cultivate sympathy for postcolonial despair” (Anker 35). She argues that writers are caught in a dilemma of finding ways to incite empathy from Western authors toward the victims of the developing world, but often this can only be accomplished by providing what readers expect and desire. This reinforces the hierarchies and a tendency toward stereotypes without challenging them. Reading about the victims creates a feeling and an impression of resistance, yet it only continues to reinforce old belief systems.

Through the repeated use of colonial scripts, the stories of the subaltern are manipulated and discarded for more universally accepted scripts which are transformed into collective versions readers recognize. For example, the conflated lives of Animal and Sunil are commodified (sold and packaged) and transformed into a novel, and the individual details of Sunil’s story are discarded in favor of a more universal story. This silences an individual story and replaces it with Sinha’s selective details of impoverished Bhopalis, leaving the narrative as a hollow fusion of random characteristics. Smith and Watson identify how collective story-telling can obscure the individual nuances of a unique story: “The narrator positions her- or himself as a representative subject, affirming the urgency of telling an experiential history that stands in for the unspoken narratives of other victims of the same rights violation” (Smith and Watson 594). In this way, *Animal’s People* is inspired by Sunil’s story, yet his identity is not revealed despite many of the details from his life that are used to interest readers.

Deng also serves as the catalyst for a “universal” story, one that fits within post-colonial sympathy and literary expectations, and one that ultimately feels safe and predictable. Interestingly, Deng is critical of the universalizing of narratives and asks rhetorically, “didn’t we

all walk across the desert? they ask. Didn't we all drink our own urine? This last part, of course, is apocryphal, absolutely not true for the vast majority of us, but it impresses people" (Eggers 21). This critique is used as a "Deng confessional" to make us aware of the exploitation of the universal details in the Lost Boys' story that are used and repeated. The technique is highlighted in an aside directed toward the reader:

The tales of the Lost Boys have become remarkably similar over the years. Everyone's account includes attacks by lions, hyenas, crocodiles. All have borne witness to attacks by the murahaleen—government-sponsored militias on horseback—to Antonov bombings, to slave-raiding. But we did not all see the same things. (Eggers 21)

This passage seems to be included to disassociate from previous "Lost Boy narratives" and human rights bestsellers in order to suggest individuality. The expressed cynicism about the use of the same sordid details also reveals frustration with the repetition of the universal story. Smith and Watson call these the "templates of suffering" and believe that "readers now expect [this from]...witnesses to violence, and that advocates, the press and publishers rely on [it] for international circulation" (615). In other words, a story that is dramatic and shocking, (and therefore popular) continues to be repeated with many of the same details that attract attention and thus, readers. Deng expresses his critical opinion of this process, but also acts as a willing participant throughout his project with Eggers. Through these collective stories, the particular is lost, and the human rights novel becomes a composite of universal facts. Peek offers her critique: "Valentino reminds us that appealing to such expectations erases individuated human experience and vulnerability for the sake of a more compelling story—a story that reveals more about readerly expectations than it does about the actual experience of the vast majority of the

Sudanese” (Peek 122). Perhaps writers on some level feel forced to provide readers with a universal version of what is expected. This dynamic prevents the author from creating material that might be considered unfamiliar or feature marginalized people in a way that challenges recognized readerly expectations.

*Animal's People* and *What is the What* present stories of the particular based in truth, to impart universal lessons. Often, the result of the universalizing and collective storytelling is the development of an iconic figure. Throughout history people have sought ways to collectively and symbolically represent an issue or era through iconic figures. Symbols such as the cross to represent Christianity, or Elvis Presley to represent rock and roll allow societies to understand and categorize large issues into smaller, more consumable information. Many sociologists have researched the origins of icon creation, and Jeffrey C. Alexander and Dominik Bartmanski have studied the needs they serve. They observe that “Icons allow members of societies (1) to experience a sense of participation in something fundamental whose fuller meaning eludes their comprehension and (2) to enjoy the possibility for control despite being unable to access directly the script that lies beneath” (Alexander and Bartmanski 2). The icon is used to represent cultural ideals and values in a concise way. It also serves as a way for societies to provide the illusion of control and power over a larger issue. One such modern icon is Malala Youfouzai, who famously survived a shooting attack by the Taliban in Pakistan in 2012, and serves as an icon of the fight against terrorism. Thomas Olesen’s analysis in his article about Malala’s Western appeal, likens icons to the “carriers of and receptacles for collective values about right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust” (308). These people become symbols who are easily generalized and used to represent global issues through universalization.

Although the stories of Deng and Animal are fictionalized, they are based on real people who, like Malala, serve as appealing and representative icons for readers. Animal, a fictional character, is iconified by Sinha to embody and educate readers about the horrors of the Bhopal chemical explosion. This is achieved through the novel by couching Animal's story as fact, incorporating details of the life of a Bhopali man, and creating a realistic and detailed social media presence to give his story credibility. Additionally, one might argue that relying on Animal's constructed voice is used to advance his agenda to help the Bhopali victims, but instead the appropriation of Animal's inner intimate dialogue seems to serve as a tool in the creation of an icon out of the homeless disfigured man. The unfortunate consequence of this iconicity is that the reader is left with a hollow fictional representative figure of the chemical crisis, and through the promotion of the novel the spectacle is exploited. The website associated with the novel combines fictitious travel, restaurant, and book review pages in combination with newspaper ads in the style of those from the *Guardian* further disorient the reader. Without context or knowledge of actual existing Indian cities, a Western reader would have no reason to doubt the authority of the Indian-born author. This promotion blurs the lines between fiction and reality which create confusion for the reader if the fabrications are only revealed through outside research. As readers are convinced of the novel's foundation in truth, the protagonist becomes believable as a representative icon for a humanitarian issue.

Deng is also iconified through this most popular fictionalized account that many readers recognize as a representative of all Lost Boys. Another way this is achieved is through the creation and promotion of a foundation that Deng serves as the "face" of through social media promotion and highly publicized interviews. According to some estimates there were over 40,000 Lost Boys who were displaced, yet Deng has become an icon for the entire group. *What*

*is the What* concludes with a section of information about the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, and a web address for the highly polished “VAD” website is provided: “The Foundation’s goal is to provide educational opportunities for those affected by the conflicts in Sudan...When Deng graduates from college, he plans to continue the work of the Foundation in other villages throughout southern Sudan and to aid in the education of the Sudanese diaspora throughout the world” (Eggers 539). Interestingly, when writing about the Foundation, Eggers writes from a third-person perspective which indicates a more transparent position, making his voice and vantage point clear. The use of a more transparent “voice” allows the reader to clearly understand the source of the narrative. Although Malala, Animal, and Deng reside in different worlds of reality and fiction, they all have been transformed into icons by others to represent universal human rights concerns. This can be problematic, as it often over-simplifies and universalizes complex issues through the embodiment of one central figure. This allows readers to be engaged and interested in their iconic figure without getting too close to cause discomfort. Unfortunately, this judgement creates a distance that is likely to prevent activism and real change.

The ability to generalize and universalize either an entire classification of people or an icon based on one representative person, relies on a level of judgement that affords framing to accommodate pre-conceived ideas. Judgement often serves to create a distance between those who are different from ourselves. Judith Butler cautions that framing of the Other as living in a separate world keeps readers from participating in real change. Butler explains, “The critique of the frame is, of course beset by the problem that the presumptive viewer is ‘outside’ the frame, over ‘here’ in first world context, and those who are depicted remain nameless and unknown” (Butler 93). The human rights novel’s realistic and convincing depiction of the Other allows

readers to feel that they understand them, yet maintain a distance through the divide between “us” and “them.” Readers remain safely distant while they feel a simulated intimacy through the text. Many of these books can be used as powerful tools for exposing readers to human rights issues around the world. However, when the novels mimic non-fictional techniques despite their roots in fiction, they create a false sense of the issues and a simulated feeling of activism which alleviates guilt, but accomplishes little else.

Both Eggers and Sinha write their human rights novels from a privileged position as citizens of the Western world, but rely on rhetorical strategies to appeal to reader sympathies and an interest in humanitarian causes around the world. Despite their acknowledgements of hoping to inspire activism, they often write with a reliance on the sensational which has popular appeal with readers. These Western novels tell the stories of citizens of developing nations and use different literary techniques to convince readers of the truth of the narrative, but ultimately, reading the fiction does not make an impact on the actual victims of human rights abuse. If an author relies on a fictional representation as a means to inspire, the possibility for knowing the Other is not possible.

Both human rights novels place a story from a developing nation in the hands of a Western writer. This dynamic alone creates a reason for a reader to question the author’s position and ability to narrate. In addition, when the protagonist becomes an icon for a cause, or represents a universal theme through their story, the issues become even less particular. Both novels rely on ethnographic methods of storytelling in order to create credibility, but the fictionalizing of the stories only blur those gains. Rather than advancing a cause, this only allows readers to fall into some of the colonialist themes and methods they might believe they are advocating against. Human rights novelists create literature that seems extremely believable and



in many cases is written solely to satisfy demand. The harmful effect is that readers ultimately equate the “feelings” they experience with reading as a form of witnessing as an activist. This ultimately leads to readers who feel satisfied with simply reading which limits the genre from its potential for activism, resulting in an opposite effect of its mission. The fictionalizing of stories of human rights abuse based on real individuals might only succeed in commodification and universalizing of complicated and serious injustices. In *The Last Utopia*, Samuel Moyn discusses the complex themes in the fight for human rights. He concludes his book discussing the dangers of universal themes being applied to all human rights issues, writing, “If human rights call to mind a few core values that demand protection, they cannot be all things to all people” (Moyn 227). Without attention to the rights of the individual, and issues that connect to different regions, the universalizing of human rights concepts (based on fiction, scripts, and icons) do little to make a difference in the abuses around the world.

## Works Cited

- Amsden, David. "Truly Heartbreaking: In His New Novel About a Sudanese Refugee, Dave Eggers Delivers Nothing Short of Genius." *New York Magazine*, 20 October 2006.
- Anker, Elizabeth, S. *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2013.
- Bartmanski, Dominik, Jeffrey Alexander. *Iconic Power: Materiality and Meaning in Social Life*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2016.
- Clifford, James, George E. Marcus. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography: A School of American Research Advanced Seminar*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press. 1986.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 1995.
- Eggers, Dave. *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng: A Novel / Dave Eggers*. San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2006.
- Hathaway, R. V. "The Unbearable Weight of Authenticity: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and a Theory of "Touristic Reading"." *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 117 no. 464, 2004, pp. 168-190.
- Huehls, M. "Referring to the Human in Contemporary Human Rights Literature." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 58 no. 1, (2012): 1-21.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *Social Text*, no. 15, (1986): 65-88.

- Malinowski, Bronislaw. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press. 1984.
- Mutua, Makau. *Human Rights: A Political and Cultural Critique*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2002.
- Moyn, Samuel. *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012.
- Olesen, Thomas. "Malala and the Politics of Global Iconicity." *The British Journal of Sociology*, Volume 67, Issue 2. (2016): 307-327.
- "The Only Way to Deal with Tragedy is to Laugh at It: Indra Sinha, Shortlisted for this Year's Man Booker Prize for *Animal's People*, Explains the Story Behind his Novel." *Guardian Newspaper* 25 Sept. 2007.
- Peek, Michelle. "Humanitarian Narrative and Post-Humanist Critique: Dave Egger's 'What is the What.'" *Biography*, vol. 35, no. 1, (2012): 115–136.
- Schaffer, Kay, and Sidonie Smith. *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Sinha, Indra. *Animals People*. Simon & Schuster, 2007.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Watson, Julia. "Witness or False Witness?: Metrics of Authenticity, Collective I-Formations, and the Ethic of Verification in First-Person Testimony." *Biography*, vol. 35, no. 4, (2012): 590–626.