The Complexity of *What is the What, the Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng (2006)* by Dave Eggers: A Narrative Consisting of a Peculiar Form, a Traumatic Content and a Critical Commentary on Western Civilization and Culture

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Foreword

I would like to thank Professor Stef Craps, for offering his guidance and help along the way, Mathias Naudts, for giving all his support and lending his ear, Pieter Colpaert, for listening to all of my complaints and last but not least, my grandmother, at whose house I was able to write this dissertation, in all peace and quiet and the rest of my family.
“What Is the What is the soulful account of my life: from the time I was separated from my family in Marial Bai to the thirteen years I spent in Ethiopian and Kenyan refugee camps, to my encounter with vibrant Western cultures beginning in Atlanta, to the generosity and the challenges I encountered elsewhere” (xiii). These are the first words of What Is the What, the Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, written in 2006 by the American novelist Dave Eggers. It is based on the real life experiences of the young Southern Sudanese man called Valentino Achak Deng, who, in the late 1980s, at the age of six, loses track of his family and flees his village due to the violent onset of the second Sudanese Civil War. Together with thousands of other unaccompanied children, he roams through Sudan and Ethiopia, escaping all kinds of violence and atrocity, before ending up in the Kenyan refugee camp of Kakuma. At the age of twenty, after a ten year stay in the refugee camp, Valentino will be resettled and moves to the United States. The many things Valentino has experienced in Africa and still experiences in the U.S., the awful, the happy as well as the ordinary, make up his life story, and What Is the What is its fictional expression.

The Second Sudanese Civil War\(^1\), which lasted from 1983 to 2005, was a result of the ongoing conflict between the Islamic north and Animistic-Christian south. The north, represented by the central government and the president, declares Sudan an Islamic state and violently tries to impose the Sharia or Islamic law on the south. They start to take over the land and exploit its resourceful soil while murdering and chosing away masses of people. The south is defended by the rebellious SLA or Sudanese Liberation Army, who extends the battle to the fight for an independent Southern Sudan. During this bloody war, which lasts for more than twenty years, an estimated two million people are killed and nearly four million inhabitants of southern Sudan, among which are Valentino and so many other children, are forced to leave their homes and flee their country. Their flight away from their villages, into unknown territory of Sudan and Ethiopia, makes them fall victim to innumerable hardships. For one thing, the boys feel the constant threat of the war, through the northern government army as well as the southern Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA). The government army, assisted by the so-called “murahaleen” or muslim cowherds take over the land of southern Sudan.

\(^1\) The First Sudanese Civil War lasted from 1955 to 1972, which was also the result of conflicts between the (mainly Islamic) North and the (mainly Animistic/Christian) South who demanded more autonomy. The Second Civil War can be seen as a continuation of the First, with a temporal peace agreement of eleven years in between.
Sudan, killing people on their way. If they come across roaming children, they often captivate them and bring them to slave markets for sale. The SLA is “on the boys side” but when they encounter these fleeing children, they try to persuade them to enrol as new members of their army or just catch them straight away. At the same time, the children suffer from famine and thirst, illnesses, draught, the dangers of the wilderness and often witness the atrocious death and murder of peers.

Having walked for hundreds of miles, Valentino ends up in Ethiopia, where he finds shelter for a while in the refugee camp of Pinyudo. The children feel relatively safe and despite the often harsh circumstances, they even have a prospect of getting an education. However, due to Ethiopia’s own conflicts, things end badly and abruptly. The refugees are violently chased away, back to Sudan and they are forced to move up to Kenya. It is in this country that, together with countless others, Valentino will end up in the safety of the refugee camp of Kakuma, which will become his home for the next ten years. In Kakuma, aid workers start to call the parentless roaming children such as Valentino “The Lost Boys” after the companions of Peter Pan in J.M. Barrie’s famous story. When Valentino and the other boys have finally arrived in the refugee camp of Kakuma, after having lived in and being chased away from Ethiopia back to Sudan, the hardships cease for a large part. Kakuma is set in the heat of the desert and there is not much basic comfort, but at least the refugees are fed, have a roof atop of their heads and are protected from the cruelty of the wars.

Valentino tries to keep himself busy and content in his new home, focusing on the education he can get there and working as a youth coordinator. He does not really expect things to change. However, for the unaccompanied minors of the camp there is hope. The international community is making plans for the resettlement of the parentless children and youngsters. Supported by newly found organisations such as The Lost Boys Foundation, countries such as the United States and Australia are willing to take in a couple of thousand of them. Gradually, their resettlement in these new homelands is being prepared and eventually taken care of. This is the way it will go for many boys and also for Valentino, who eventually gets selected as well. After ten year stay in Kakuma, he is chosen for resettlement in Atlanta, United States. On a September day in 2001, he and 45 other Lost Boys migrate to the United States and many more will follow.
Upon his arrival and stay in the safety and wealth of the United States, Valentino’s awareness of the tragic situation in Sudan becomes much stronger in contrast, and it is in his new country that he will start to tell his story. Valentino, who is “thrown” from the traumatic circumstances of Sudan and the primitive life in Kakuma into American western society, notices that for many people in the United States the tragic circumstances of the Sudanese civil war and the Lost Boys remain largely unnoticed. A victim of the war himself, Valentino gradually feels the need to step forward with the account of his life, as an example of how the situation was and often still is for the people back in Sudan: “as the specific that might illuminate the universal” (Eggers, “It Was Just Boys Walking”\(^2\)). With his story, he did not only want to make people aware of the situation, but also really reach them as human beings and find some understanding and compassion for his cause as a refugee and as a new immigrant of the United States. Although Valentino got the opportunity to speak publicly about his experiences in readings, he longed to “reach out to a wider audience” (Eggers, BW) in the form of a book that could address many people in an individual way, and this is how Dave Eggers came into the picture.

Valentino wanted to recount his story in a book, but he realized that at that point in time, his English was not proficient enough yet to put such a detailed account down himself. He decided to talk to Mary Williams, the founder of the Lost Boys Foundation. At the end of 2002, Williams contacted Dave Eggers through a letter, in which she explained the Lost Boys’ cause as well as Valentino’s specific wish. Having already collected other types of testimonies, such as that of American public school teachers in *Teachers Have It Easy: The Big Sacrifices and Small Salaries of America's Teachers* (2005), Eggers could be the right person to collaborate with Valentino. He already knew a couple of things about the Lost Boys’ situation, but the “cry for help” he received from Valentino really appealed to him. They made arrangements to meet up and very soon it became clear that Eggers and Valentino would enter this project together. As Eggers said: “It’s hard to explain how or why, but we both knew, from those first days together, that the project was real, and that we would see it through” (Eggers, BW). The result of their collaboration would eventually become *What Is the What*, but they still had a long way to go.

The process as well as the result of Valentino’s and Eggers’s collaboration turns out to be rather complex, both in form and content. Formally, we may notice the complexity of the narrative by just looking at the very first page of the book. There it says *What Is the What, The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, A Novel by Dave Eggers*. The work claims to be an autobiography, but while “auto” means “oneself”, it has not been written by the first person narrator who is telling his life story. The account also claims to be a novel, although the notion of “autobiography” implies non-fictionality and not fiction. In the first chapter of this dissertation, we will start off by examining the history of the collaboration between Dave Eggers and Valentino Achak Deng and look at how the project evolved. We will examine *What Is the What*’s blended form and genre and inquire how this “miscellany” came about. In this context, we will draw some interesting parallels with “testimonio”, a Latin American literary genre, which has some formal aspects in common with Valentino’s and Eggers’s project, such as a collaborative working method and what we could call a humanistic goal. We will investigate this type of goal in *What Is the What* and inquire in what way it is being reached. The humanistic goal of testimonio implies an addressee, someone who listens to the other in the form of a so-called “testimonial contract” between the addressor and the addressee. We may wonder whether a same contract with an addressor and an addressee is also present in *What Is the What*. We will examine this by looking at the people whom Valentino addresses throughout the narrative and in what way they respond to him. Do they acknowledge his cause or reject it? Within our research we will dedicate special attention to the goals which Valentino proposed in his preface and how they differ from the very end of the narrative.

When we look at the content of *What Is the What*, we notice a certain level of complexity too, as two different narratives are intertwined. The first one is Valentino’s story of his experiences in Africa. He talks of his journey through Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya and how he has lived in the refugee camp of Kakuma for ten years. The life which Valentino describes in this narrative is at many times, if not constantly, one of scarcity, cruelty and conflict. It describes the constant struggle of a young child without parents. In the second chapter of this dissertation, we will examine this loss of Valentino’s parents and more specifically of his mother as his main traumatic experience. Valentino has no idea whether his mother is still alive or dead, it is a situation of uncertainty which is called “ambiguous loss” (Boss qtd. in Luster, et al. 445). How does Valentino cope with this “ambiguous loss” and with the other atrocities he experiences on his way? In this second chapter, we will analyze
some factors which keep him hopeful, such as the other Lost Boys and his faith. We will investigate how Valentino relies on the other Lost Boys as a source of friendship and strength and how he learns from them. Concerning his faith, we will look at this relationship with God, in what way Valentino sees him and how his belief may shift under certain circumstances. In our study, we will, where necessary, compare our findings with some other studies of coping strategies used by other Lost Boys.

The second narrative of What Is the What is Valentino’s account of his new life in the United States. It is from this perspective that he relates his whole story. One the one hand, Valentino embraces the new opportunities that are offered to him in his new homeland. He is thankful for being able to start over with a clean slate, enough material goods and the help of organisations such as The Lost Boys Foundation and its volunteers. One the other hand, however, he describes how being an African refugee in America is far from easy. While Valentino and other Lost Boys are future-oriented and want to move forward, beyond their status of refugees, they are often impeded by prejudices. They want to blend in but Valentino notices how they keep being regarded as “others”, as if they exist outside society or do not exist at all in the eyes of the American society. Stereotypes and clichés about Africa, Africans and refugees being “backward” and “uncultured” are rampant and they often lead to discrimination and racism. Valentino feels uncomfortable, irritated and often hurt but he refuses to be straitjacketed and seeks to counter the prejudices and go against the stereotypes. In his account, Valentino goes against these “stigmas” by making his story deviate from other stories about the Lost Boys, often categorized as “human-interest stories”.

These accounts, which are abundantly present in the American media and are aimed at a large audience, seek to perpetuate clichéd images such as the ones abovementioned, while confirming the American self-image of “the promised land”, where with hard work, everyone is able to live the American Dream. In these stories, refugees are often presented as empty, waiting to become fulfilled by the American Dream, which is represented as becoming a becoming completely washed over by consumerism and material culture. In our third chapter, we will compare the characteristics of these human-interest stories with the ideas about Africa, the American Dream and consumerism conveyed in What Is the What. We will see how Valentino is keeping a critical distance from notions such as “Americanization” and its material culture. He “writes back” and shows the refugee/African perspective on life in American society. Moreover, we will examine how the real American Dream which
Valentino is keeping alive, differs considerably from those presented in the human-interest stories. Trying to make it come true will cause Valentino more disillusionments and disappointment than he ever expected.

Chapter 1: The Peculiar Genesis of What Is the What

1.1 A form characterized by a remarkable collaboration

The form of What Is the What is, to put it mildly, quite peculiar. It refuses categorization and rather prefers to be different genres at the same time. If we start off by examining the title of the book, What Is the What, The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, a Novel by Dave Eggers, we can distinguish two different genres and what seem to be two different writers or narrators. As Guy Reynolds states, “[t]he semiotic shaping of the book’s design and title carries mixed messages, foregrounding both Eggers’s writing, and its status of fiction, while placing Deng at the center and underlining the work’s autobiographical nature” (7). If we first focus on the Eggers-Deng collaboration, we notice that this way of working between a person having gone through hardship and a writer who is putting down this person’s story is not new, and can also be found in the genre of Latin American testimonio. “Testimonio” can be traced back to the collaboration between the Cuban Esteban Montejo and anthropologist Miguel Barnet, who in 1966 worked together on Montejo’s biography called Biografía de un cimarrón (Biography of a Runaway Slave). It recounts his life story as he was born as the son of slaves, ran away and hid as a fugitive before entering the 1898 Cuban War of Independence. Montejo did not know how to read or write, and just like Valentino, who realized his level of English was not proficient enough yet to write his own book, he wanted to tell his story to the outside world but needed someone’s help to get it on paper and therefore decided to work together with a writer, in this case Barnet.

As Kimberley Nance says in the introduction to her study of testimonio, titled Can Literature Promote Justice?, Barnet chose to elide his own interview questions and write in the first person voice of his speaking subject […] This technique became a commonplace of Latin American testimonio, as did Barnet’s assertion that the project he undertook with Montejo was more than the life story of an individual. Montejo,
Barnet insisted, gave voice to an entire class of people whose history had been ignored. (1)
The first-person narration forms another parallel with Eggers and Valentino as does the fact that they intended to link Valentino’s story to a greater cause, that of making the voice of the victims of Sudan’s civil war heard. However, while such a collaboration seems like a fascinating idea, working out the project proves not be easy, especially not for the writers. Nance states that,

like all participants in the testimonial project, writers face a unique set of constraints. Like the speakers, writers face challenges in transforming experience to representation, in deliberately shaping that representation, in imagining and keeping in mind an audience, and resisting socially sanctioned forms that are inadequate to persuasion. (120-1)

This was no less the case for Eggers. The form of What Is the What as an autobiography and a novel is in fact the result of his struggle with his own voice in the work as well as with the form, which he thought should reach a wide audience of readers. The decision to use this form made more things possible, for Eggers as well as for Deng. Before the book took its final shape, Eggers had to go through quite some difficult stages.

1.2 An autobiography….And a Novel

The moment when Eggers and Valentino decided to sail into their project, Eggers were very optimistic about the pace at which they thought it would proceed and be finished. To record Valentino’s story, the two men talked for hours and hours on the phone and e-mailed on a massive scale. While the recording an sich was not really a problem, as Eggers and Valentino usually agreed on the content, the process of writing proved to be quite difficult. Their initial idea was that Valentino would tell about his life experiences in Sudan, Ethiopia and Kakuma and Eggers would write them down in a decent form, which he thought would be completed in “one year tops”. However, this very form turned out to be the “central struggle” (BW) for Eggers, as he says, “I had yet to figure out just how to write the book” (BW). In his essay “It Was Just Boys Walking”, published in The Guardian in 2007, Eggers describes the development of his co-operation with Valentino and how the blend of an autobiography and a novel came about.

For one thing, Eggers found that “there were great limitations, in this case, to the oral history model” (BW). Eggers had already been working on other recordings of oral accounts
such as those of American public school teachers in *Teachers Have It Easy: The Big Sacrifices and Small Salaries of America's Teachers* (2005). This book was the result of a co-operation between Eggers, public school teacher Daniel Moulthrop and the director of Eggers’s own schooling project Valencia 826, Nínive C. Calegari, who sought to “create a book that would explain teachers’ lives and make a case for better teacher compensation.”

Through the McSweeney’s website, they looked for teachers from all over America who could be interviewed “about their lives and their economic struggles” (McSweeney’s). However, Valentino’s story proved to be a different kettle of fish. Eggers notes that “Valentino was six years old when he left his home and began his 800-mile journey to Ethiopia, and thus his memory of that time is very spotty. When we looked at what we had from our recording sessions, it was fascinating, but it did not transcend the many human rights reports and newspaper articles already available to the world” (BW). The part of Valentino’s story about his early childhood memories could not be considered to be entirely reliable, and even if they had been able to acquire all the facts, Eggers found that it still would not have contributed much to the existing works on the Lost Boys- of which we will discuss a part later on. Eggers had no clear idea of what to do with the material.

In order to gain more clarity, Eggers and Valentino decided to travel to southern Sudan in December 2003, back to where it all started. As Eggers says, “I knew that we would have to return to southern Sudan, to Valentino’s hometown of Marial Bai, if either one of us hoped to tell the story with any degree of accuracy” (BW). This trip enabled Valentino to finally see his parents again for the first time since the beginning of the war in the late 1980s. However, it also confronted him with the precarious circumstances in which the people of his village were still living. Eggers writes how “Valentino, usually so quick to smile and impossible to discourage, was weighed down those days in Marial Bai … There was almost no livestock, and the homes, all made from mud and thatch, were small, temporary-seeming. We visited the hospital, one room resembling a cement bunker …” (BW). Valentino realized that he had been very lucky to find shelter in a safe refugee camp and to resettle in the United States, as this offered him a lot of opportunities which the people of Marial Bai did not have. Again, it became clear to him that the Sudanese cause needed a voice, and he knew that Eggers and he himself had the means in hand to create this voice and try to make it heard.

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3 This information was found on the McSweeney’s website but did not mention an author nor a date on which the information appeared. [http://www.mcsweeneyes.net/books/teachers.html](http://www.mcsweeneyes.net/books/teachers.html).
Back in the United States and extremely touched by what they had experienced in Sudan, Valentino and Eggers now felt a real urgency to get Valentino’s story out in the open, as quickly as possible. This meant that Eggers had to get back to his writing process, so he decided to start off with an article on their trip to Sudan in *The Believer* magazine. His problems with the writing and his authorial status were still there, but the article did shed a light on the complications. Eggers realized that using a third-person narrator to talk about Deng’s life story would create a distance from the events while at the same time it would place Eggers too much to the forefront as the author of the book. After all, the work would deal with Deng’s personal experiences, so he should be at the centre of attention. As Eggers says, “in the book, I knew I had to disappear completely” (BW). Of course, with this decision the struggle for the right form did not end, but now Eggers at least knew that he would have to choose a first-person narrator. He notes that “[Valentino’s] voice was so distinctive that any other way of telling … would be criminally weak by comparison” (BW). Caroline D. Hamilton suggests that this also entails an advantage for Eggers personally: “Eggers’s name remains but his presence as author is absent. One very pertinent consequence of this is that Eggers is able to continue to write and explore ideas about suffering and hope while being immune from critical attacks on his own life and person” (92-93). The consequence of this first-person narration was that the book would become an autobiography written by someone else. The first remarkable concept was born, and the second would follow quickly.

As mentioned above, Deng’s description of his childhood years was vague and hardly factual, which hindered the genre of non-fiction Eggers was aiming for. The lack of dialogue in the recording of Valentino’s account obstructed that even more. As Eggers writes, “my standards for what would qualify as non-fiction were strict; as a journalist I was trained not to put any dialogue between quotation marks unless it was on tape. We had no such thing and Valentino couldn’t remember who said what at almost any point in his life, and thus the book would be without any dialogue at all” (BW). Eggers knew that a book without dialogue “would be parched, and likely to reach only those already interested in the issues of Sudan” (BW) and this was not the audience they were aiming for. In their opinion, Deng’s story should mainly reach readers who did not know anything about the matter, and to achieve this goal they were in need of a more attractive form. A year after their trip to Sudan, Eggers still had not found a solution and eventually he became frustrated with the whole project. With regret he saw no way out but to give up on the project, but then, all at once, he did see the light.
Eggers realized that if he wanted to appeal to a broad audience he had no choice but to leave the non-fictional focus behind. This reminded him of two things. The first was that in Kakuma refugee camp, Deng used to be a member of a drama society, “whose mandate was to write and perform one-act plays to educate the residents of the camp in various issues—HIV/AIDS, gender equality … [s]o [Valentino] knew that one usually needs to adapt the facts of life and shape them in such a way that they came alive in the minds of an audience” (BW). His second thought was that:

I realised that so many of the books I’d brought with me [to my writing cabin] for inspiration, and the books I’d been reading on the shelves of the book-filled rented cabin, were novels. The books about the war and upheaval that I’d turned to again and again, and that best (in my opinion) communicated the realities of war, were in fact novels. … Only with a bit of artistic licence could I imagine the thoughts in Valentino’s mind the first day he left home, fleeing from the militias, never to return home … Only in a novel could I apply what I had seen in the various regions of southern Sudan to describe the land, the light, the people. (BW)

In this way, the concept of an autobiography written by somebody else became even more peculiar. What Is the What would also turn out to be a novel, a blend of fiction and non-fiction. And thus the genre as we know it today was born.

1.2.1 Consequences of the Miscellaneous Form

If What Is the What is such a peculiar blend of fiction and non-fiction, of a novel and an autobiography, one might start wonder what the consequences of this form and genre could be. According to Jared Gardner, this particular blend ensues that “the readerly self-interest of fiction and the authorial self-interest of autobiography are in a fundamental tension” (22). Gardner points out that autobiography and fiction an sich have “competing demands” (22), but in What Is the What these seem to be quite in harmony: “The claims of truth and authenticity (and the demands of those claims on the reader’s faith and respectful distance) exist equally and collaborate productively with the invitations of fiction to enter into the life and mind of another (suspending disbelief but never erasing it, and collapsing all respectful distances)” (22). In a regular autobiography, the reader remains the observer, who is looking at the life of a certain person from a considerable distance. It is not his life. However, through a fictionalized autobiography, this distance becomes smaller, as the reader is now also allowed to step entirely into the life of this person and “become” him, in a way.
This claim seems to be true for the form *What Is the What*, as Eggers already pointed out himself. The fictional form allows for imaginative elements, which are able to create a higher level of intimacy, as, unlike in an autobiography, no one really knows or needs to know what is real and what is not. This helps the reader to get closer and become involved on a much higher level. Thanks to the fictional form, we can look into Valentino’s six-year old mind and realize the importance of his relationship with his mother, which he describes in a very intimate way:

I spend a long time contemplating her beauty. She is taller than most women, at least six feet, and though she is as thin as any woman in the village, she is as strong as any man. She dresses bravely, always in the most glorious yellows and reds and greens, but she favors yellow, a certain yellow dress, the pregnant yellow of a setting sun. I can see her across any land or through any brush, can see her from as far away as my eyes can penetrate: I have only to look for the swishing column of yellow, moving toward me across the field, to know my mother is coming. (Eggers 35)

An excerpt like this could never appear in a purely factual autobiography, because, as Eggers already pointed out, Valentino did not remember his early childhood well enough. However, through a fictional form with still quite a high level of autobiographical elements, the reader is able to fathom Valentino’s special relationship with his mother. He might realize better what it meant to Valentino, which is something a pure autobiography could not do. As Gardner points out: “In telling Valentino’s story in this hybrid, multimodal form, Eggers at once (via autobiography) commands the respect and attention of the reader to the story of an other, even as he (through fiction) invites the reader to inhabit his life, such that the alien landscape of southern Sudan or the refugee camps of Ethiopia and Nigeria become not alien, but “home”” (22).

1.3 Broadening the Subject
The form of Eggers’s plan finally went into a concrete direction, but the same could not be said about *What Is the What*’s content. Eggers initially planned to only write about the experiences Valentino had in Africa and make his story heard by the outside world. However, Eggers realized that those were not the only cruel things Valentino had been through in his life. One evening in 2005, Eggers received an e-mail by Valentino, titled “A BAD DAY” (BW). Valentino wrote how that day he had been mugged by complete strangers in his own apartment in Atlanta. Although Valentino had been through many hardships, he was startled
by the nature of the violence these people used against him. He explains how “when he had been the target of militias, of Antonov bombers, of government troops, it had never been personal. Now there had been people in his apartment, one with a gun to his head, who truly seemed to despise him. There was an intimate aspect to the attack that was new to him, and was haunting him nightly” (Eggers, BW). Although he was severely hurt and treated very violently, the police chose not to investigate the crime any further. As Eggers says, “this was the extent of worry about a gun to the head of an immigrant from Sudan” (BW).

Both Eggers and Valentino were dumbstruck by the way Valentino was being treated in the United States. While he was in pain and despair at the moment of the crime, no one seemed to really care about doing something about it. The burglary was in fact not an isolated incident but rather the pinnacle of a number of smaller collisions Valentino seemed to have with American people in his daily life. Against his expectations, Valentino’s difficulties did not cease in the United States, but in a sense gave way to different ones. Eggers realized at this point that “the book needed to be not only about Valentino’s experiences in Sudan and the camps, but also about the unforeseen struggles of his life in the US.”(BW) The attack in his apartment would become the framework for the book, the point of view from which Valentino would relate the things that happened to him in Africa but also later in the United States. From this perspective, both Valentino’s issues before and after his resettlement would be addressed.

The question remains whether this addressing and recounting of Valentino’s problems has really brought something about, within but also outside the frame of the novel. The aims of the book are to reach out to an audience that is willing to hear about the problems of Valentino in Africa as well as in the U.S. and to illuminate the situation of the Sudanese people and refugees in general. Does the narrative convey real hopefulness about humanity and altruism, or are these ideals being distorted or reversed? In this discussion it is interesting to first take a look at What Is the What’s preface, which expresses Valentino’s intentions and the collaboration in his own words. In the examination of the preface, it is again useful to draw some parallels with the genre of testimonio. We will discuss the preface of What Is the What and then compare it to the body of the book and to its concluding last chapter. As we will see, the differences between Valentino’s initial address to the readers, the novel itself and its last chapter are very strong and in many ways even prove to be contradictory.
Chapter 2: What Is the What’s Goals

2.1 What Is the What’s Preface and the Notion of the “Addressee”

Before the beginning of the narrative, What Is the What contains a (non-fictional) preface, written by Valentino himself, in which the collaboration with Eggers concerning the book is explained as well as its specific goals. Valentino writes how the book began as part of my struggle to reach out to others through public speaking. I told my story to many audiences, but I wanted the world to know the whole truth of my existence … I wanted to reach out to a wider audience … my desire to have this book written was born out of my faith and beliefs in humanity; I wanted to reach out to other to help them understand Sudan’s place in our global community. I am relieved that Dave and I have accomplished this task through illumination of my life as an example of atrocities many successive governments of Sudan committed against its own people. … To struggle is to strengthen my faith, my hope and my belief in humanity. Since you and I exist, together we can make a difference! (xiv)

The main idea here is that, thanks to his “faith and beliefs in humanity” (xiv), Valentino endeavoured to work on this story together with Dave Eggers to make people understand his suffering and to set it as one example of the many atrocities that happened during the Sudanese civil wars. In this preface, it seems that Valentino truly hopes but also believes that people are willing to listen, that his personal story might change something in those people and that the specific testimony will shed light on the global issue. These basic notions which Valentino sets out in the preface can also be found in the genre of testimonio. As Nance states: “the tripartite combination of a first-person narrative of injustice, an insistence that the subject’s experience is representative of a larger class, and an intent to work toward a more just future soon came to define the genre” (4). But will Valentino’s goals, as they are presented in this preface, really be reached?

In her study on testimonio, Nance also dedicates a chapter to the notion of the reader and the addressee within the text, which is also important in the examination of What Is the What’s goals. Because “testimonio” is a politically engaged genre, which deals with the recounting of traumatic events, it aims for people to change their way of thinking or acting or at least be moved by the account offered. Early traumatologists such as Cathy Caruth have
also insisted on the significance of people reading or listening to the traumatic histories of others. Stef Craps and Gert Buelens cite Caruth when she argues that “the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand ‘a new mode of reading and listening’ that would allow us to pass out of the isolation imposed on both individuals and cultures by traumatic experience […]” (1-2). Craps and Buelens also note that: “With trauma forming a bridge between disparate historical experiences, so the argument goes, listening to the trauma of another can contribute to cross-cultural solidarity and to the creation of new forms of community” (2).

However, not every reader is able to respond to a traumatic testimony in this manner. Nance mentions the important notion coined by Jean-François Lyotard, namely “‘the testimonial contract’, the relationship that must exist if testimony is to result in social action” (48). She notes Elzbieta Sklodowska’s summary of how “Lyotard’s conditions of possibility for effective testimony include “an addressee, someone not only willing to listen and accept the reality of the referent, but also worthy of being spoken to; an addressor, a witness who refuses to remain silent; a language capable of signifying the referent; and a case or the referent itself” (Sklodowska, qtd. in Nance, 48). These notions of the addressor and especially of the addressee are closely related to Dori Laub’s commentary on bearing witness to trauma. He states that “[b]earing witness to trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other—in the position of one who hears … The witnesses are talking to somebody […]” (Laub 70-71). In the context of What Is the What it is interesting to investigate whether all the necessary elements of this testimonial contract are really present, and whether there really is “an other” listening to Valentino. While we may be sure about the presence of Valentino as the addressor who wants the world to know about the Sudanese cause, the existence of a real addressee in the novel is more precarious.

For one thing, we have to make a distinction between two groups of people being addressed in the book. One the one hand there are the readers of the novel outside the story, who seem to be interested in Valentino’s past, as they mostly voluntarily take the book in their hands to learn about it. On the other hand, we also need to include the people to whom Valentino in what he himself calls “silent stories” (Eggers 29) and what Guy Reynolds calls “imaginary conversations” (7). In her essay on “Sociolinguistic Implications of Narratology”, Jarmila Mildorf refers to David Herman, who, among other divisions, makes a distinction
between these two types of addressees. The first group, the real readers outside the frame of the novel, are talked to in what he calls “apostrophic” or “vertical address” (47). The second group of addressees, within the frame of the narrative, is talked to in the form of “fictionalized” or “horizontal” address (Herman, qtd. in Mildorf, 47). However, the boundaries between those two types of addressees are not always that clear. Some utterances seem to be directed to both groups, such as those from the preface, “Since you and I exist, together we can make a difference!” (xiv). Others look as if they are only directed at the imaginary addressees, but may in fact, at all times, include a message for Valentino’s two audiences. Mildorf also underlines this fuzzy boundary between the two addressees:

In other words, second-person narratives draw us into the story as we inevitably identify to a certain extent with the ‘you’ addressed in the narrative. A paradox is thus created: while we can keep a distance by observing how the text implicitly creates an audience for itself, we already also become members of that audience and are lured into participating in the storyworld. (47)

Valentino’s imaginary conversations are held with people who live in his neighbourhood in the U.S. He comes across them in his daily life and he feels that they should hear his story. These conversations are “silent” as he does not address the people out loud but in his mind. While Valentino addresses them, it is by no means certain that this group is willing to hear his plight. On the contrary, he is trying to reach these people in this way just because he feels that they are completely ignorant, indifferent or even violent to him. As Valentino says, “I would tell them to the people who had wronged me. If someone cut in front of me in line, ignored me, bumped me or pushed me, I would glare at them, staring, silently hissing a story to them … Do you have any idea? … Can you imagine this” (29)? He states that after a while he not only addressed them to those who did wrong to him, but to all people—which also supports our suggestion from the previous paragraph: “The stories emanate from me all the time I am awake and breathing, and I want everyone to hear them … [I]t is my right and obligation to send my stories into the world, even if silently, even if utterly powerless” (29).

Reynolds states that Eggers uses these imaginary conversations as an instance of “post-modern technical imagery at the service of a political writing of engagement” (7). In other words, it should serve to “transcen[d] the barriers between people in order to make empathetic human connection” (Reynolds 7-8). Reynolds talks about how in You Shall Know
Our Velocity!, the conversations “enable the Eggers character to create a fragile and temporary but enticing sense of community: moments of ironic contact and contingent solidarity” (7-8). He notes that “the same device appears in What Is the What” (8) and gives the example of how Valentino imagines talking with the members of the fitness club where he works. While this device indeed appears in the narrative, it is doubtful that this contingent solidarity is really created with the people whom Valentino addresses. While Reynolds illustrates his point with Valentino’s imaginary conversations with the people from the gym, he leaves the two most important potential “addressees” unnoticed, namely TV Boy, who is “guarding” Valentino after the burglary in his flat and Julian, the receptionist at the hospital. The question is whether they are in any way real addressees, “who are willing to listen and accept the reality of the referent and [are] also worthy of being spoken to” (Nance 50). Through the examination of Valentino’s so-called imaginary conversations with TV Boy, Julian as well as with other people around him, we can try to gain a clearer insight into the achievement of or rather deviation from the goals and beliefs which the novel’s preface conveys. Do we really have the feeling that Valentino’s account is being received with open arms by the people he is addressing or is he rather crying in the desert? If we go back to Dori Laub, he would say that the notion of Valentino’s silent stories already goes against the concept of bearing witness, as he notes that “[t]estimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude” (70-71).

An Analysis of the “Addressees”

2.2.1 Valentino and TV Boy: Diminishing and growing distance

As mentioned earlier, the point from which Valentino starts to tell his story is that of the scene of the mugging in his flat. Valentino’s friend Achor Achor is off to his girlfriend, and while he himself is alone at home, a woman comes to his door and asks whether she can make a phone call. Valentino lets her in and is immediately being punished for his goodness, as the woman and a man who is with her, called Tonya and Powder, hit him severely and steal anything of value in the flat. While Valentino is being threatened, hurt and robbed, he wonders if these two people would refrain from doing this if they knew what he has been through. We can see how he is quite pessimistic about this: “I wonder if my friends Tonya and Powder would care if they knew. They know nothing about me, and 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). The two go away but plan to come back and they leave a ten-year-old boy-presumably their son- to watch the hurt and barely conscious Valentino. This boy’s attention
is completely on the TV and on very little else in his surroundings, so Valentino calls him TV Boy before he will find out his real name. As we will see, Valentino’s opinion of this boy will change through the course of his observations and so will his hope that this boy would see him as another human being, someone worth acknowledging.

Upon noticing the boy guarding him, Valentino feels hurt that even a supposedly innocent child like this does not seem to see that there is another human being in the room. He is lying on the floor, severely hurt, in need of help, but the boy ignores his presence completely. How is that possible? Valentino describes the scene as follows:

As I lie here, my brain grows more lucid, and I begin to wonder more about this boy. He has not once turned to look at me. I cannot see the screen but I hear laughter bursting from it and it’s the saddest sound that I have heard since arriving in this country. If I am right, and this boy is guarding me, I will definitely leave Atlanta. (27)

The way this boy is blind to his presence seems to serve as the pinnacle of all the blindness people show to him but of which we do not know anything yet here at the beginning of Valentino’s narrative. It seems as if the laughter is directed at him and his helplessness. As a reader we have no idea yet about what Valentino has been through in Africa and in his new homeland, but the disappointed tone about the way he is being regarded has already been set.

Valentino initially seems to be angry at the fact that this boy seems to deny and ignore his suffering completely. He starts to tell him a silent story, about his past and present life, about the atrocities he has been through, addressing him as TV Boy. In his mind, he talks to him about his experiences in Sudan and about his life in the U.S., how he misses his girlfriend, Tabitha: “TV Boy, I miss her with a growing heat that surprises me and will likely engulf me.” Valentino talking to TV Boy about the atrocities can be seen as some kind of measurement or even punishment- as mentioned above- for the fact that this boy does not notice Valentino. However, having been with him in the room for some time, Valentino begins to feel some understanding for this boy. He realizes that TV Boy probably does not know anything about what he has been through in Africa: “I am somewhat sure that this boy, now sitting with the TV again, Fanta in hand, knows nothing about what I saw in Africa. I wouldn’t expect him to, nor do I fault him … Unlike many of my fellow Africans, I don’t take offense at the fact that many young people here in the United States know little about the lives of contemporary Africans” (30). Valentino thinks that maybe it has more to do with ignorance.
than with him voluntarily closing his eyes. This ignorance reminds Valentino of himself and his own knowledge of the world at that age: “I see only the profile of this boy’s head, and he is not so different than I was at his age… I was far older than he is when I realized that there was a world beyond southern Sudan, that oceans existed” (29-28). This first comparison with himself leads Valentino to draw a second one, namely between TV Boy’s problems and the problems he himself has been through: “I do not want to diminish whatever is happening or has happened in his life. Surely his years have not been idyllic; he is currently an accomplice to an armed robbery and is staying up much of the night guarding its victim” (29). It leads to him becoming less harsh towards the boy’s attitude, but is this justified?

While Valentino is telling his silent story to TV Boy, lying on the floor of his apartment, the hours go by but he still remains hurt and unseen. Valentino still finds it impossible that a child can act this way and thus he is not able to really blame TV Boy for being emotionless, for being “unaware that there is a bound and gagged man on the floor” (47). He looks for an explanation as he slowly comes to see TV Boy as a victim of his environment in America, just as he himself was one in Sudan and seems to become one in the U.S. In this way, his initial identification with the boy becomes even stronger and this brings him to the idea of saving the boy:

I almost cannot believe myself, but at this moment, I am contemplating ways that I might save you, TV Boy. I am envisioning freeing myself, and then freeing you. I could wriggle my way out of my bindings, and then convince you that being with me will serve you better than remaining with Tonya and Powder. I could sneak away with you, and could leave Atlanta together, both of us looking for a different place … TV Boy, but wherever we go, I have an idea that I could take care of you. It was not so long ago that I was like you. But first we have to leave Atlanta. You need to move far away from these people who have put you in this situation, and I need to leave what has become an untenable climate. (48)

By running away and taking TV Boy with him, Valentino imagines saving his own situation as well as the boy’s corrupted one. While this is probably just a wild plan, it still conveys how Valentino cherishes hope about making the boundaries collapse between him and the child. It still seems possible for Valentino to reach him, to make himself known to this boy.
However, things quickly take another turn. When he notices that the tape around his mouth is starting to loosen, Valentino tries to address TV Boy, this time not in silence but for real:

Excuse me,” I say. My voice is soft, much too quiet. There is no indication he hears me. “Young man,” I say, now in a normal volume. I don’t want to startle him. I get no reaction. “Young man,” I say, now louder. He turns briefly to me, disbelieving, as if he noticed the couch itself talking. He returns to the television … “Please!” I yell. He leaps in his seat. “Boy! You must listen to me!” (50)

The boy seems to ignore what Valentino is shouting and rather conceives his cry as the noise of an irritating fly. Instead of answering, TV Boy takes a phone book and throws it at Valentino to make him stop. It hits him on the head and increases his initial pain, caused by the violence of the robbery. As if nothing happened, TV Boy goes back to the kitchen. While up until that point Valentino still maintained hope about a possible connection with this boy, it now seems to have faded: “This boy thinks I am not of his species, that I am some other kind of creature, one that can be crushed under the weight of a phone book. The pain is not great, but the symbolism is disagreeable” (50). While the boy does not seem to consider Valentino as a human being like himself, with this violent gesture he does acknowledge Valentino’s existence. At least for now.

With TV Boy’s violent action, one would think that Valentino’s attempts to get through to him would cease. However, this is not true. Valentino claims to be “less sympathetic” (51) to him but when the phone goes off and TV Boy answers with his own name, Michael, he starts to feel closer to him again. While the name of “TV Boy” was more of an impersonal epithet invented by Valentino, this real name seems to make him more human. Although he has been hit by him with a book, Valentino starts to believe again that Michael’s behaviour is caused by his environment: “So, it is Michael. Michael, I am happy to know your name. It is a name with less menace than TV Boy, and further convinces me that you are a victim of those charged with protecting you … Perhaps you, too, are a child of war. In some way I assume you are” (52, 57). However, Valentino’s understanding for the boy is not all-embracing. The name reminds him indeed of innocence but also of pain, just like the two ideas this boy represents for Valentino: “Michael is the name of a saint. Michael is the name of a boy who wants to be a boy. Michael was the name of a man who brought the war to Marial Bai” (52).
In his mind, Valentino continues to talk to “imaginary conversation –Michael” about the way Marial Bai was taken over by the murahaleen, how everything was destroyed and his people had to run. After some time, the boy needs to answer his phone again. He seems to be cross with the people at the other end and this gives Valentino a reason to try reaching “real-life Michael” again:

I must try again to reason with the boy. Perhaps he is comfortable enough with me now, with my unmoving presence, that he will not fear my voice. And it’s evident that he is upset with his accomplices. Perhaps I can forge an alliance, for I still harbour hope that he’ll see that he and I are more alike than are he and those who have placed him there. (72)

However, it is all in vain. Hurting Valentino with the book did not prove to be sufficient, because upon Valentino’s attempt to talk to him, Michael literally shuts him up by pushing his foot on Valentino’s mouth:

“Young man!” I say, projecting my voice down the hall. “Please don’t drop anything on me! I will be quiet if that’s what you want.” Now he is above me, and for the first time, he is looking into my eyes … Do you want me to be quiet? I will stay quiet if you’ll stop dropping things on me. He nods to me, then takes his foot and gently steps on my mouth, pushing the tape back into place. To have this boy pushing my mouth closed with his foot- it is too much to accept. (73)

The only thing that Michael seems to want is for Valentino to shut up. He does not want to hear his cry for help and he certainly does not want to be addressed. By throwing the book and even by pushing the tape back on Valentino’s mouth, Michael still acknowledged that Valentino was there, in some lower form of existence. However, in the next step that Michael is going to undertake, Valentino will degenerate from a lower existence to a non-existence. Michael will block him out of view. He will cover Valentino with objects so that can deny he is there and no one else will be able to see or hear him:

He first pushed the coffee table closer to the entertainment center … Now he drags a chair from the kitchen. He places this near my head. From the couch he brings one of the three large cushions that sit upright … He has effectively eliminated me from his view. (73)

Valentino cannot believe that the boy is capable of doing this. If this boy could have seen what he had seen, Valentino believes he would not have acted this way. Again, in his silent
conversation, he forces him to come along with him in his story and experience what he has experienced. In his addressing it is remarkable how Valentino shifts from human “Michael” back to inhuman “TV Boy”, in accordance with Valentino’s expectations of the boy’s behaviour, shifting from possibly human to inhuman:

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

When Michael enters Valentino’s room and is going through his belongings, Valentino becomes forgiving again: “his searching makes him seem more human to me. My fondness for him grows again, and forgiveness fumbles back into my heart” (109). Despite everything that has happened, Valentino still finds it easy to put himself in the shoes of this obnoxious, indifferent boy: “Though it causes me frequent pain, I find it very easy to place myself in the shoes of almost any boy” (116). However, concerning Michael, Valentino eventually decides to see it as a lost cause. He has done everything within his reach to approach this boy and has held on to his positive and forgiving attitude but nothing has helped. “Michael,” I say again, and am surprised at how tired I sound. The door to my room closes. I am here and he is there and that is that”(116). The door to a possible connection between them has literally closed. After this scene, Tonya and Powder come back and take Michael with them.

After the investigation of the relationship between Valentino and TV Boy, we can conclude that while Valentino is a true addressor, who indeed “refuses to remain silent” (Sklodowska, qtd. in Nance, 48) and keeps on trying to attract the attention of TV Boy/Michael, TV Boy himself is not an addressee at all according to Lyotard’s definition. He is not willing to listen and does everything he can not to hear Valentino: he blocks out his noise and even Valentino’s presence and existence. In this way, he does not “accept the reality of the referent” (Sklodowska, qtd. in Nance, 48), he rejects it even and is as such not “worthy of being spoken to” (Sklodowska, qtd. in Nance, 48). Can we find a real addressee among the other people Valentino is trying to talk to, or will those other attempts of his prove to be as pointless as the one with Michael?
2.2.2 The Christian Neighbours and the Police: Two “Lost Addressees”

After he has been left by Tonya, Powder and Michael, Valentino starts shouting as loud as possible, trying to reach at least one person in the building. While he is thinking of potential saviours, his Christian neighbours first come to mind, with whom Valentino as a Christian feels a certain connection: “Christian neighbors below, where are you tonight? Would you hear me if I called? Would it be enough to simply bang the floor?” (139). No one seems to answer Valentino’s cries, and once again he starts a silent conversation with them: “Christian neighbors, because it interests you, I will tell you about the slave raids, the slave trade” (140). This “because it interests you” starts to sound very ironic in the context of what will follow, because no matter how hard Valentino is shouting, no one seems to have ears for him: “In a furious burst, I kick and kick again, flailing my body like a fish run aground. Hear me, Christian neighbors! Hear your brother just above! Nothing again. No one is listening. No one is waiting to hear the kicking of a man above …You have no ears for someone like me” (142). What used to be cry for help, prompted by the robbery, has again turned into a general cry for attention for his situation as a refugee, who has no one to listen to him: “There is someone in Atlanta who is suffering, who has been beaten, who came to this city looking for nothing but an education and some semblance of stability, and he is bound in his apartment” (162) For Valentino, this emotional pain seems to be much tougher to carry than the physical one: “Where are these people? I know that people are hearing me. It is not possible that they are not hearing me. But they see it as beyond their business. […] Is the noise of the world so cacophonous that mine cannot be heard?” (162)

Valentino will have to wait until Achor Achor comes home before being able to grab anyone’s attention. The two friends immediately decide to call the police. Waiting for them to come, Valentino imagines being helped properly: “When the police cars arrive I will have plenty of time to describe the events. I will be taken to the station to look at the pictures if criminals who resemble those who assaulted me” (233). However, in reality it will turn out to be quite different. It takes almost an hour for a policewoman to get there, “dressed in half of a police uniform” (236), which seems to predict that Valentino will only be helped “half”. The policewoman “listens” to Valentino’s story and instead of taking strong measures, she gives him a card saying “COMPLAINT CARD” (238). As she explains herself: “this is the way we define a matter like this” (239). Valentino can see that she has only written a few words down. Apparently his case is not urgent enough for the police to intervene: “the sense of defeat I feel is complete. I had, for the fifty minutes while we waited for the officer’s arrival, mustered so
much indignation and thirst for vengeance that now I have nowhere to put the emotions.”
Achor Achor and Valentino decide to go to the hospital” (239).

2.2.3 Reaching Out for Julian
When Valentino and Achor Achor arrive at the hospital, they are received at the reception by
an African-American man: “He looks over us with great interest, a curious grin spreading
under his thick mustache. As we approach, he seems to register the injuries to my face and
head. He asks me what happened and I relay a brief version of the story. He nods and seems
sympathetic. I feel almost irrationally grateful to him” (240). Valentino has a positive feeling
about this man and his situation and is convinced now that he will be helped in time. Even
when it turns out that he does not have a health insurance, the receptionist, called Julian,
assures him that he will be taken care off: “But don’t worry. We’ll treat you whether you have
an insurance or not” (241). It is true that Valentino will be treated, eventually, but it seems
that he will first have to wait for another half a day.

Julian has created some expectations in Valentino about being helped but, when after
fifteen minutes still nothing has happened, Valentino starts to wonder whether something
might be wrong. Is he not important enough to receive immediate care? “Fifteen minutes is
not so long to wait for high-quality medical care, but I did expect something more from
Julian. I feel the disappointment, hard to justify but impossible to ignore, in knowing that my
injury does not impress Julian or this hospital enough that they throw me onto a gurney”(242).
Valentino feels that he is being treated rather unfairly here, and starts to look for a reason. He
wonders whether it might have to do with his insurance or with paying. Valentino goes back
to Julian’s counter to find some explanation, which will lead to a peculiar situation:

“Excuse me,” I say, “but I was wondering if the delay in the treatment is due to
a question about my ability to pay … And I wanted to make sure that it is clear
that I can pay.” The look on his face indicates that I’ve said something
culturally indelicate. “Valentino, we’ve got to take care of everyone who
comes in here. By laws, we do. We can’t turn you away. So you don’t need to
show your credit cards.”(242-3)

It seems that Valentino has read the situation correctly; he has caught Julian doing him wrong
but is “punished” for it. Because it has only been fifteen minutes since Valentino arrived,
Julian can still pretend Valentino just needs to wait because there is not enough staff and not
because of mistreatment. Hearing Valentino expressing this and predicting the situation
makes Julian even reverse the roles, right on time. Julian blames Valentino for being so suspicious, while for now, Valentino seems to be right.

Soon, the fifteen minutes have become two hours, and Valentino is still waiting. Now we know he was right in questioning the delay. Valentino does not understand why this man, who seemed so understanding to him, is not undertaking any action. In the whole waiting room there is no one else but him and Achor Achor, so why isn’t there anyone helping him? It is at this point that Valentino, who now clearly feels mistreated, starts to address Julian in a silent conversation, just as he did with TV Boy and his neighbours:

It’s six o’clock Julian. We have been in the waiting room for two hours. The pain in my head has not diminished, but is less sharp than before. I expected help from you, Julian … because this hospital is very quiet, the emergency room virtually devoid of patients, and I am one man sitting in your waiting room with what I hope are minor wounds. It would seem to be easy to help me and send me home. I cannot imagine why you would want me to be staring at you. (244)

It seems that Julian does not have ears for his cause. Just as with TV Boy/Michael, Valentino feels that somewhere inside Julian there is some compassion to be found, but he is not sure how to reach it. For now, he finds him lax. A considerable distance has been created between the two of them:

Does this interest you, Julian? You seem to be well informed and of empathetic nature, though your compassion surely has a limit. You hear my story of being attacked in my own home, and you shake my hand and look into my eyes and promise treatment to me, but then I wait. We wait for someone, perhaps doctors behind curtains or doors, perhaps bureaucrats in unseen offices, to decide when and how I will receive attention. You wear a uniform and have worked at a hospital for some time; I would accept treatment from you, even if you were unsure. But you sit and think you can do nothing. (250)

After many hours of waiting at the reception, Valentino will finally receive medical care. Julian comes to him and guides him to the MRI room. Up until this point, Julian did acknowledge Valentino’s presence but preferred him to remain quiet, just as TV Boy did. He was also almost on the verge of completely denying Valentino’s presence and his pain. By making him wait for hours and hours in an empty waiting room, Julian was starting to pretend
Valentino was not there. However, unlike TV Boy, who finally blocks Valentino from his view and makes him disappear, Julian moves in the opposite direction, as Valentino is gradually starting to appeal to him. Julian begins to answer Valentino’s needs, not only functionally, in his job as a medical receptionist, but also emotionally, as a human being. At this point he starts to acquire some understanding for Valentino’s situation of being assaulted. An illustration of this can be found in the fact Julian starts to link his own life with Valentino’s. He tells him how he, too, has been mugged in his home. By comparing himself to him, Julian establishes a connection with Valentino, however small it may be:

“Let’s go, Valentino.” Julian is standing in front of me. He has returned. “MRI. Follow me.” … “Sorry you got mugged man,” he says. … “Happened to me, too. A few months ago”, he says. “Same kind of thing. Two kids, one of them had a gun. They followed me home from the store and got me in the stairwell. Stupid. They were about two hundred pounds, both of them put together.”(312)

From this moment, Julian’s behaviour becomes completely different. He is friendly to Valentino, reassures him and even makes small jokes, for instance about the MRI: “You ever done one of these?” Julian asks me. “No,” I say. “I’ve never seen a machine like this.” “Don’t worry. I doesn’t hurt. Just don’t think of cremation” (313). After the MRI, the two of them go back downstairs. Julian continues his story of his own mugging, which will make the initial gap between them close even more: “‘Then I called the cops. Took them forty-five minutes to get there.” “This is the same with me,” I say. Fifty-five minutes.” Julian puts his arm around my shoulder and squeezes my neck in an apologetic way… “Makes you wonder what sort of problem gets the cop running, right?” Because Julian is smiling, I force a chuckle” (315-6). This last sentence seems to denote that while Julian himself feels addressed by him, the situation remains doubtful for Valentino. Up until now, Julian has only had an ear for Valentino’s present problem. This interest of his may also still carry an element of self-interest as he can use it to vent his own frustrations about getting mugged. However, right before Valentino leaves the hospital, it appears that Julian has also been addressed by Valentino’s problems of the past: “He turns to leave me but then remains. He stares at his clipboard for a long moment, then looks at me through the corner of his eye. “You fight in that war, Valentino, the civil war?” I tell him no, that I was not a soldier. “Oh. Well good, then,” he says. “I’m glad.” And he leaves” (317).
Even though it may only be in a slight way, Valentino has found some kind of addressee in Julian. As in Lyotard’s definition, Julian seems to have “accepted the reality of the referent” (Sklodowska, qtd. in Nance, 48), by eventually helping Valentino out, not only through his job but also by addressing his problems emotionally. He has acknowledged that Valentino exists and is a man in need of someone who understands him. By offering enough input himself in his attempts to talk to Valentino, Julian appears also “worthy of being spoken to” (Sklodowska, qtd. in Nance, 48). However, the question remains what one should think of the many, many hours Valentino has been kept waiting by Julian and the hospital staff. We could assume that Julian is a person who was initially passive and unwilling to react and that he has come to regret this attitude later on.

2.2.4 The People from the Gym: Keeping Up Appearances?

Valentino’s latest job is one at the reception of a fitness centre. Every day, he needs to check the customers’ membership cards before they enter the gym. While Valentino does not really know these people, their faces are familiar to him. Every time he scans someone’s card, the picture of his or her face stays frozen on his computer screen and it seems that these images serve as a point of departure for Valentino to address the members. While they themselves go inside, their faces stay with Valentino and these seem to give an extra humanization to his silent conversations, as if these people are still there to listen to him. However, while Valentino is trying to address the members silently, we may notice how, in his real conversations with them, the distance remains.

The first face which appears is that of a man called Matt Donnelley. When Valentino just started working in the club, Matt showed quite some interest in Valentino’s past and even offered to help him out if he liked: “When I started at the club, he spent some time one morning talking to me, asking about the history of the Lost Boys and my life in Atlanta. He was well read and sincerely interested in Sudan; he knew the names Bashir, Turabi, Garang. He was a lawyer, he said, and told me to call him if I ever needed any help or legal advice” (481). For a while, it seems that there was a chance at the establishment of a connection between the two men. However, Valentino never knew why to call Matt and relates how “since then we have exchanged only compulsory greetings” (481). The distance between them, once small, has widened overtime.
The distance between Valentino and the fitness members is also maintained because he is often keeping up appearances. The customers try to be nice to him and ask him questions when they come in, but to Valentino, these are in fact nothing more than pleasantries. Therefore, he is not able to talk to these people truthfully, although he feels an urge to do it: “They smile at me and some exchange a few words. One middle-aged man … asks me how my classes are coming. I lie and tell them they’re all fine. “Headed to college?” he asks. “Yes, sir,” I say” (504). The same goes for one of the members, called Dorsetta Lewis, who always asks if Valentino is “hanging in there”. While he answers her question positively every time, Valentino actually hates the expression. It makes him feel as if he is not making any advancement in his life but just throws in the towel:

“Still hanging in there?” she asks. “I am, thank you,” I say. “All right then,” she says, “that’s what I like to hear.” … The truth is that I do not like hanging in there. I was born, I believe to do more. Or perhaps it’s that I survived to do more. Dorsetta is married, a mother of three and manages a restaurant; she does more than hang in there. I have a low opinion of this expression, “Hang in there.” (504)

These superficial instances of contact with the regular costumers seem to have numbed Valentino and he becomes a bit grumpy. In fact, it initially makes him turn against the person in the gym with whom he might establish a real, temporal connection, or what Reynolds would call “moments of contingent solidarity” (8). This person is called Sidra, she is a new member of the club and has not (yet) taken a distance or switched to pleasantries like the other customers, but wants to be genuinely friendly to Valentino. This touches him quite deeply, and he regrets the angry face he has made when she entered:

A new woman enters the club, someone I have never seen. She is white, very large … “Hello”, she says. “Haven’t seen you before. What a wonderful smile you have.” I try to frown, to seem hard-hearted. “I’m Sidra,” she says … “I’m new. I’ve only been here twice before. I’m, you know, making some changes.” She looks down at her girth shyly, and I immediately feel that I should say something. I want to make her feel better. I want to her to feel blessed. I want her to know that she has been blessed. To be here now, to be alive as she is, to have lived always in this country, Sidra, you are blessed. (519)

Valentino feels how, unlike the other customers, Sidra has in some way opened up to him. Confronted with a certain honesty about her weight problem, Valentino wants to console
Sidra by blessing her. However, this blessing also implies a comparison with Valentino’s own situation and in a way entails a competitive element. Sindra should be happy that she is alive and well and that she has never been in Valentino’s situation.

2.3 What Is the What’s last chapter

Now that we have compared the preface of What is the What to its body we may conclude that the goals which Valentino proposes in the preface are not quite being reached within the frame of the novel. While in the preface, Valentino expresses his faith in humanity and his beliefs in overcoming the distance between people, those feelings start to crumble in the novel itself. His disappointment with the people around him in the United States is growing all the time, and except for the example of Julian, who eventually seems to grab Valentino’s reaching hand, and maybe Sidra in a slight way, Valentino does not really find much understanding.

If we now compare the preface with the last page of the book, we notice a remarkable difference. At the very beginning of What Is the What, Valentino addresses his readers positively, he puts himself and them on the same level: “Since you and I exist, together we can make a difference!” (XV). Here, Valentino acknowledges the existence of the other while he also believes that the other acknowledges his. He believes in the power of his own story as well as in the addressees. This optimistic preface provides a great difference with the very end of What Is the What. At this point, Valentino narrates how he will continue telling his story, no matter what, to people who listen and to people who do not listen, “because to do anything else would be less than human” (535). However, it seems that the mutual acknowledgement of both himself and his addressees as well has now faded: “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). Throughout Valentino’s account of his experiences in the U.S., we have noticed how he is often treated subordinately or is ignored when he wants to tell his story. Many people do not seem to have ears for his cause, and this makes him doubt whether he actually exists in their eyes. At the end of his narrative, Valentino still acknowledges the existence of the other, because it seems impossible to him not to see other people and talk to them. But he realizes now, sadly, that people often do not acknowledge him in return.
However, to end this on a brighter note, one should also still be reminded of the addressees outside the novel, who are addressed in the “apostrophic” way (Herman, qtd. in Mildorf 47). In contrast with those talked to in Valentino’s –fictional- silent conversations, these people have responded to his story in a very different way. When we look at what *What Is the What* has made possible in “the real world”, one would become anything but pessimistic. Many people around the world have expressed their appraisal for Valentino’s story and have shown that they really are addressed. For instance, on the Facebook page of The Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, we found many reactions from people around the world who have been touched by his account: “An amazing brave man making a difference in this world. Honored to read your story” … “Thank you for the life-altering book "What is the What?" and bravo for the work you are doing to increase education in Sudan” … “I just read *What Is the What* and am astounded by your courage, Valentino. You're are truly a hero!”

The Valentino Achak Deng Foundation has been established together with the publishing of *What Is the What* in 2006. All the profits of the book go to it and with the money, the foundation has been able to finance its first major project: the building of a secondary school in Valentino’s village, Marial Bai (“History of the foundation”, valentinoachakdeng.org).

Within the frame of the narrative, Valentino finds it hard to make his voice heard, but in the real world it is as clear as a bell.

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4 These are some reactions from the Facebook page of The Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, which can be consulted via [http://www.facebook.com/ValentinoAchakDengFoundation](http://www.facebook.com/ValentinoAchakDengFoundation)
Chapter 3: Valentino’s Flight: Coping With Atrocity

3.1 The Loss of Valentino’s Mother as His Primary Trauma

3.1.1 From His Mother’s Arms into the Civil War

Valentino’s account of his experiences in Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya is characterized by innumerable traumatic events. On his flight from Marial Bai to Kakuma refugee camp, he comes across hunger, disease, drought, the death and murder of peers, dangerous animals and the violence of rebels. For instance, on his way to Ethiopia, Valentino suffers from a severe eye disease which turns him almost blind, and one of his most precious friends, William K, literally dies from hunger. The first atrocious experience which Valentino narrates in What Is the What is of the crossing of the Gilo river, which will bring the Lost Boys from Ethiopia, again in war, back to Sudan. Valentino’s robber, Powder, is the one who triggers this memory with him during the mugging, at the very beginning of the narrative:

I stare up at Powder and I know who he brings to mind. The soldier, an Ethiopian and a woman shot two of my companions and almost killed me. She had the same wild light in her eyes, and she first posed as our savior. We were fleeing Ethiopia, chased by hundreds of Ethiopian soldiers shooting at us, the River Gilo full of our blood, and out of the high grasses she appeared. Come to me children! I am your mother! Come to me! … Two of the boys I was running with, boys I had found on the bank of the river, they both went to her. And when they drew close enough, she lifted an automatic rifle and shot through the chests and stomachs of the boys. They fell in front of me and I turned and ran. Come back! She continued. Come to your mother! (6)

Janice Goodman, who interviewed and investigated the narratives of fourteen resettled Lost Boys, notes that, concerning the Gilo river crossing, “all of the participants told a story about it, many of them reported that it was the most traumatic event of their life” (1185). In the context of Valentino’s story, this passage might be even more important. For one thing, it is no coincidence that this is the only excerpt which is told twice by Valentino, once at the very beginning and once in his chronological account of the events in Africa. The reason for the repetition of this passage may not lie with the overall atrocity of the scene, which needs an extra emphasis, but with one specific element, namely the appearance of a (false) mother figure. A cruel woman pretends to be the mother of the boys and then shoots them when they
try to approach her. This instance of pure cruelty seems to be stamped indelibly in Valentino’s memory. While he is going through many different kinds of atrocities, none of them seem to be as traumatic as the loss of his mother, which represents the end of his real childhood and the beginning of his flight away from home. The loss of Valentino’s mother and his longing for her, runs as the main thread through the whole of his account and is resonated at many different moments.

At the start of his story, Valentino talks about Marial Bai and how things were like when he was only six years old. His depiction of his hometown comes in the form of a perfect daydream, a day which he has memorized to conjure up anytime he wants: “It is the day I memorized and the day I still feel more vividly than any day here in Atlanta” (33). Valentino starts to describe life in Marial Bai before war entered; how he goes to school, how he meets his friends William K and Moses and helps his father in his shop. From the beginning of his account, however, Valentino’s attention almost immediately shifts to his mother, as she is depicted in a dream-like, idealized manner, in which her yellow dress also seems to take on a significant, symbolic place:

I spend a long time contemplating her beauty. She is taller than most women, at least six feet, and though she is as thin as any woman in the village, she is as strong as any man. She dresses bravely, always in the most glorious yellows and reds and greens, but she favors yellow, a certain yellow dress, the pregnant yellow of a setting sun. I can see her across any land or through any brush, can see her from as far away as my eyes can penetrate: I have only to look for the swishing column of yellow, moving toward me across the field, to know my mother is coming. (35)

To be one with her seems to be Valentino’s ultimate wish: “I often thought I would like nothing better than to live forever under her dress, clinging to her smooth legs, feeling her long fingers resting on the back of my neck” (35).

According to Valentino’s description, things seem to go quite well in the town of Marial Bai, but they are bound to turn around abruptly. The civil war situation starts to intrude the village and with this the ending of Valentino’s childhood, through the violence on and the later loss of his parents, is near. The first “step” in the loss of his childhood, which Valentino experiences, is not related to his mother but to his father, Deng. While the transactions with Deng’s different customers - among which are Arabs as well as Sudanese - are usually
conducted in a friendly manner, this becomes different in the run-up to the civil war. Government soldiers as well as rebels start to populate the village and the latter begin to threaten him in his own shop. They refuse to pay for the goods they get, and when Deng dares to protest, violence breaks out: “And with that, without any sort of passion, he kicked my father in the face … At that moment something in me snapped. I felt it, I could not be mistaken. It was as if there was a handful of taut strings inside me, holding me straight, holding together my brain and heart and legs, and at that moment, one of these strings, thin and delicate, snapped” (68). Here Valentino is almost literally telling how, with the torturing of his father and the war being introduced in his village, the process of the loss of his childhood is initiated. As he says himself: “And that day, the rebel presence was established and Marial Bai became a town at war with itself- contested by the rebels and the government” (68).

The presence of the rebels implies that the real civil war is not far away anymore and for Valentino, this will also mean the end of the warmth and safety of his mother’s arms. She plays a significant role in what seems to be Valentino’s last happy memory of his childhood:

There is an intimacy between mother and son, a son of six or seven. At that age a boy can be still a boy, can be weak and melt into his mother’s arms. For me though, this is the last time, for tomorrow I will not be a boy. I will be something else- an animal desperate only to survive … I like to think that I was luxuriating in the final moment of childhood when the sound came. (75)

The sound he refers to is made by helicopters, which come flying above Marial Bai and start shooting. It is the first time people are killed, but it will not be the last. From that day on, the prospect of a “tomorrow” becomes precarious to Valentino. The Arab horsemen, also called “Baggara” or “murahaleen”, who side with the government, begin to attack Marial Bai. Valentino is able to flee with his mother to his aunt’s house and hides in a grain hut. From his hiding place, he witnesses the awful abduction of women and children, who will be forced into slavery. Among them is also his friend Amath:

I could see the village from a mouse-sized hole and watched when I could bear it. …The horsemen had no use for the grown men. They wanted the women, the boys, the girls, and these they gathered on the soccer field … The moment I thought to look for Amath, I saw her … They threw each girl onto a saddle and then used rope to secure them, as they would a rug or a bundle of kindling. (92-93)
This will be last thing Valentino sees of his village and of his mother. She leaves the hut to see what has happened outside and does not come back. Having no idea where his father or his mother are, or whether they are still alive, Valentino decides to run. With his flight, he is leaving his childhood behind.

3.1.2 Ambiguous Loss

By fleeing Marial Bai, Valentino’s trek into violent, unknown territory has started: “I had no plan. I could continue running, but I had no ideas about where I was or where I would go. I had never gone farther than the river without my father, and now I was alone and far from any path”(95). For a while, Valentino will wander on his own before joining other walking boys whom he meets on his way. When he has ended up with them, we can see how Valentino goes through different emotional phases concerning his parents’ loss. In the first, early stage after his departure from Marial Bai, he refuses to accept what has happened and he goes into a denial phase. He may be walking with these parentless boys, but he does not want to acknowledge that he might be parentless himself. He distances himself from them: “But the farther we walked the more certain I was that I did not belong in this group. These boys seemed sure that their families had been killed, and despite what the old man and the nursing woman had said in the light of the fire, I had convinced myself that this had not happened to mine” (117). However, after a while, this denial phase stops. Valentino starts to acknowledge the uncertainty of his situation. He becomes aware of the fact that his parents might indeed be dead, that his situation might be alike to that of the other boys. It is a conversation with one of the Lost Boys’ “leaders”, Dut Majok, which opens his eyes:

- I only want to go to Marial Bai. I don’t want to go to Bilpam.
- Marial Bai? You saw Marial Bai from the tree! You remember? Marial Bai is now the home of the Baggara. There’s nothing there. No homes, no Dinka. Just dust and horses and blood. You saw this. No one lives there now. –Achak, stop. Achak.

He saw something in my face. I was exhausted, and I suppose it was then that I finally felt the crush of it. The possibility, the likelihood even, that what had happened to the dead of Marial Bai, to the families of these sullen boys, had happened to my own family. I pictured all of them torn, punctured, charred. I saw my father falling from a tree, dead before he landed. I heard my mother screaming, trapped in our burning house. (118)
We can notice here how Valentino’s denial has made room for uncertainty: his parents might be killed or just as well be alive.

In their article on the Lost Boys losing family, Tom Luster et al. cite Pauline Boss, who calls this uncertainty about the death of family members “ambiguous loss” (445). He defines it as “a situation of unclear loss resulting from not knowing whether a loved one is dead or alive, absent or present” (Boss qtd. in Luster, et al. 445). According to Boss, “ambiguous loss” can be divided into two types: “the first type involves a family member who though physically absent remains psychologically present because it is unclear whether the person is still alive; the second type […] involves a person who is physically present but psychologically absent because of conditions such as dementia, addiction, or depression” (Boss qtd. in Luster et al. 445). In *What Is the What*, we notice how Valentino’s ambiguous loss is definitely of the first type. While his mother is not physically with him anymore, she stays in Valentino’s mind all the time. Luster et al. mention Conde, who points out how “during the long period of separation, some of the youth had idealized their parents” (Conde qtd. by Luster et al. 446). In her analysis of the representation of the “Lost Girls” in the Lost Boys tales, Anne Harris makes a similar remark when specifically focusing on women in *What Is the What*. She states that “in Eggers’s text … women are idealized, indistinct visions” (48). One may see that this is indeed the case for Valentino’s image of his mother. To escape the threats of his journey, he often loses himself in idealized, intimate daydreams of her. In many of these visions, the bright yellow colour of her dress seems to function as an element of hope, to which Valentino wants to hold on:

“But soon it was over and I was home. I was home and helping my mother with the fire … For my mother’s benefit I kept my eyes closed most of the night, but at least a few times on these nights, I had opened my eyes to find my mother’s open, too. On those occasions we shared a sleepy smile. And it was this way tonight, when I found myself again warm in my mother’s home, close to her yellow dress, the heat of her body” (146) … I thought of Amath and my mother and her yellow dress. I knew that I would die soon and hoped perhaps that she was dead, too, and that I could join her. I did not want to wait in death to see her. (220-221) … I closed my eyes, Tabitha, and I conjured my mother as best as I could. I pictured her in yellows, yellow like an evening sun, walking down the path. I loved to watch her walk down the path toward me, and in my vision, I allowed her to walk the entire way. (361)
3.1.3 Only One Real Mother

Having lost both of his parents in the chaos of the war’s onset and being especially traumatized by the loss of his mother, Valentino is seeking and longing for the warmth and protection of a mother figure in other women. In the environment of the Ethiopian refugee camp of Pinyudo, the Lost Boys come into contact with people from an indigenous tribe, called the Anyuak. It is one of the Anyuak women, Ajulo, who triggers Valentino’s desire when giving him food one day. Among the scarcity of the camp, her rare, selfless kindness seems to resonate his mother’s love and touches Valentino deeply:

Come alone and you can eat with me any day, Achak. When she said that, Julian, she touched my cheek, and I crumpled. My bones fell away and I lay down on her floor. I was in front of her, heaving, my shoulders shaking and my fists trying to push the water back into my eyes. I was no longer able to know how to react to kindness like this. The woman brought me close to her chest. I hadn’t been touched in four months. I missed the shadow of my mother, listening to the sounds inside her. I had not realized how cold I had felt for so long. This woman gave me her shadow and I wanted to live within it until I could be home again. (264)

Ajulo even offers Valentino to become her son. Valentino contemplates this, but he knows it is not right. Acknowledging this woman as his mother would mean considering his own mother dead and completely lost and he is not able to do that. His mother has become “more distant and distinguishable” (265), but by still seeing her as his real mother, Valentino maintains a spark of hope about her being alive. He seems to prefer the doubt and the ambiguous loss, as it also enables him to stay hopeful.

In their analysis of Lost Boys who had to cope with “ambiguous loss”, Luster et al. state: “As difficult as it was, living with ambiguous loss may have been preferable to knowing that parents were dead. The children could at least hold on to hope that they would see their parents again” (456). This point of view seems to count for Valentino as well. In Kakuma, Valentino receives the news that a man from Marial Bai, who remembers him, is in the neighbourhood. This could mean important news about his parents and their situation, but Valentino eventually decides not to meet him. He is not able to face a possibly awful truth and therefore chooses to stay in the dark:

But then I thought of Daniel Dut, another boy I knew who had awaited news of his own family, only to learn that they were all dead. For months afterward,
Daniel had insisted that he wished he’d never found out, that it was far easier to walk through life in doubt and with hope than knowing that everyone was gone. So I didn’t immediately seek out the Marial Bai man in the hospital. When I heard, a week later, that he was gone, I was not unhappy. (384)

As Valentino has to undergo such a terrible loss and has no option but to walk through the dangerous lands Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya, we may start to wonder how he is dealing with all these atrocities. Through an investigation of his account we will illuminate how he is trying to stay strong by relying on for instance the other Lost Boys, as well as on his strong belief in God.

3.2 Valentino’s Coping Strategies

When we go back to the very beginning of Valentino’s account, to his description of Marial Bai, we can see how it offers a depiction of what his life was like before the war made its entrance. For one thing, it teaches the reader some things about Dinka culture, such as about the community life and his polygamist family:

My mother is my father’s first wife, and she lives in the family compound with his other five wives, with whom she is friendly, even sisterly. They are all my mothers … as odd as that sounds … In a few years, circumcised and ready, Moses and William K will be sent to the cattle camps with the other boys, to learn to care for the livestock, beginning with the goats and graduating to cattle. My older brothers, Arou, Garang, and Adim, are at the cattle camp on this dream-day: it is a place with great appeal to boys: at cattle camp, the boys are unsupervised, and as long as they tend the cattle, they can sleep where they want and can do as they please. (34)

As Goodman points out: “Communal identity is strong in the southern Sudanese culture … They have a history of collective and communal living and responsibility for each other. At a very young age, Dinka boys traditionally leave their families for periods of time to live out in the fields with their peers tending cattle” (1191).

The account also shows what Valentino is passionate about, as for instance his faith. In this context, we find for an elaborate description of his baptizing. Unlike his father, who is assumingly animistic, Valentino wants to convert to Christianity:
The baptism was the idea of my uncle Jok; my parents, who opposed Christian ideas, did not attend … Facing Jok and Adeng, Father Matong [a Sudanese missionary] held his Bible in one hand and raised his other palm in the air. – Do you, with your whole heart and faith, offer your child to be baptized and to become a faithful member of the family of God? – We do! they said. (13-14)

According to Jay Marlowe, Valentino’s description of his daydream about his baptizing and the everyday life in Marial Bai can be called the “ordinary” side of the refugee story (“Beyond The Discourse of Trauma, 184 and “Dumbo Feather”). He believes that through the “understanding of one’s history, spirituality, culture, background, folklore” (184) we can start to get a better grasp of “the boys’ stories and responses of supporting one another, remembering and living by their parents’ teaching, maintaining hope and forms of survival” (184). Goodman also underlines this importance, when noting that “the cultural context of the participants’ lives might have played an important role in their coping abilities” (1192). This may indeed prove to be the case for Valentino’s earlier descriptions of his cultural context in the examples of the cattle camp and his baptism. We will see how the Lost Boys as his peers as well as his religion will help Valentino to stay hopeful. However, circumstances remain tough on his journey and even with this support, awful things keep on happening, they are just able to ease the pain now and again.

3.2.1 The Lost Boys as Valentino’s support: Finding and Losing hope
3.2.1.1 Deng

Not long after his flight away from Marial Bai, Valentino comes across another group of boys, who seem to be a lot like him and appear to be in the exact same situation:

The morning after I passed the airfield, after I had slept for a few hours in the branches of a tree, I awoke and saw them … I swept my eyes over the group, all boys of my age-set, some older, some younger, but all close in size and all of them looking hungry and tired and unhappy to see me. A few had bags with them, but most were like me, carrying nothing, as if they had fled their villages in the night. (116-117).

Valentino decides to join these boys for one day and one night, but he adopts an attitude of waiting. As has already been pointed out, Valentino at first takes a distance from these boys. While they are almost sure that their parents have died, Valentino refuses to believe that this is the case for him as well. However, once his attitude has shifted from denial to one of
ambiguous loss, Valentino starts to see the advantages of these boys as a group. He feels safe among them and believes they might help him to get his parents back: “I was in the grip of the belief that in a group like this, I would find my family or be found. … I considered it a good idea to be with them, so many boys … I felt safe with all of these boys, some of them almost men … I was sure the existence of us, so many boys walking in such a line, would become well known and my parents would come for me” (119). However, this very optimistic – and almost unrealistic- feeling does not stay with him very long, as one of the boys, called Deng, brings Valentino’s feet back on the ground: “-Were the Arabs afraid of the boys in your town? he asked. –No … -So why do you think the Arabs will be afraid of so many of us? Don’t be stupid. […] If they find us we’ll be taken or killed … We’re never safe. No one is easier to kill than boys like us” (120).

Despite the Lost Boys’ precarious situation, Valentino still feels that being among boys like Deng is as good as it can get for him. For one thing, in some way, they fill a part of the void created by the loss of his parents. They give Valentino something to hold onto, something that keeps him going. As Luster et al. state: “one of the most crucial and consistent sources of support the youth mentioned was their peers … For the youth, the shared experiences, understanding, and emotional support of peers formed the most valuable community that enabled them to make it through” (451). Deng is the person who makes Valentino realizes this for the first time, when he wakes up after having dreamed about his mother in Marial Bai:

Deng was above me, behind him not the warm crimsons and ochres of my mother’s home, but only the burnt black of the moonless sky. […] How strange it was to be sleeping there with all of these boys, in this interlocking circle, under a lightless sky. I wanted to punish Deng for not being my mother and brothers. But without him I could not live. To see his face each day- that was the only tether I had. (146-147)

Valentino becomes attached to Deng and starts to care about him, they are together all the time: “I sat next to Deng, watching him eat. It felt so good to see Deng eating (151) … I slept next to Deng (155) … Deng was still asleep, and I was so happy to see him sleeping comfortably” (156). However, Deng’s health is very weak. He becomes very ill and eventually dies of dehydration and starvation. The person who has kept Valentino going, is not there anymore and this makes Valentino isolate himself: “When Deng died I decided to
stop talking. I spoke to no one” (156). The boys move on and, as Valentino will regret later, he is not able to bury Deng’s body.

3.2.1.2 William K, the Storyteller of Hope

A feeling of optimism only returns to Valentino when he meets another Lost Boy, in the literal and figurative sense of the word. On their walk to Ethiopia, near the banks of the Nile, Valentino runs into William K, his old friend from Marial Bai, whom he thought was dead: “After so many weeks, it was William K. We embraced and said nothing. My throat tightened, but I could not cry. I no longer knew how to cry. But I was so thankful” (187). With William K in his environment, Valentino feels things will become more endurable again. In a way, William K brings back memories of his village and how there was a life for Valentino before their endless journey started. He provides a connection with what now seems like a lost past, a past in which his mother and father where still present:

We sat for some time, quietly, and I felt the trip to Ethiopia would not be very difficult. Walking with my good friend William K would make it tolerable. I’m sure he felt the same way, for more than once he looked at me out of the corner of his eye, as if checking to make sure I was real … It seemed his arrival, his resurrection came at a time when I was unsure if I could have gone on without him. Would I have gone into a hole like Monynhial? I don’t know. But without William K I would have forgotten that I had not been born on this journey. That I had lived before this. (187, 194)

The figure of William K will also be helpful to Valentino in another way. He often invents stories or makes up lies about things. While in Marial Bai his lies were often annoying Valentino, William’s fantasies now start to feel like a good way to escape his everyday misery and to dream of a better life:

The boys thought we would be in Ethiopia in a matter of days, and the proximity of our new life awakened the dreamer in William K, who filled the air between us with the beautiful lacework of his lies. … I tried to block out his voice, but his lies were gorgeous and I listened secretly. –Also our families are there … there were planes that came to Bahr al-Ghazal after we left, and the planes took everyone to Ethiopia. So they’ll all be there when we get there …His lies were so exquisite I almost wept. (195-196)
However, as their journey to Ethiopia continues, William K becomes ill, too, just like Deng, and his stories begin to sound more and more like hallucinations. He talks about their friend Moses, who, according to him, is already in Ethiopia, waiting for them. Valentino knows this cannot be true and hears the illness in his voice: “William did not sound good. I was glad that it was night and that I didn’t have to look into William K’s sunken eyes, his bloated stomach” (212). From then on, things go downhill very quickly. Just like Deng, William K dies.

However, Valentino does not want to make the same “mistake” as he did with Deng. To seek a form of closure, he will now bury his body. Valentino sees it as a very important task, which underlines his connection with his friend: “But I decided that I would bury him, that I would bury him even if it meant that I would lose my place within the group … He was mine and I did not want them telling me how to bury him or how to cover him or that he should be abandoned where he lay. I had not buried Deng but I would bury William K” (217-218).

After William K’s burial, Valentino becomes very sad, just like after Deng’s death, and he even thinks of lying down with him and dying too. However, even in his death William K seems to be able to help Valentino. William’s fantasies instil new hope in him, as they remind him of his parents and family and how they might be still alive: “I wanted to die with him … But then I thought of my mother and my father, my brothers and sisters, and found myself invoking William K’s own mythic visions of Ethiopia. The world was terrible but perhaps I would see them again. It was enough to bring me to my feet again. I stood and chose to continue walking, to walk until I could not walk” (218). Luster et al. point out that “many of the youth reported that hope of eventually being reunited with their parents helped them find the strength to get through the most difficult parts of their journey” (456). Thanks to William K and his fantasies, Valentino’s hope is indeed reinforced again, and he keeps on walking through the dangerous landscapes of Africa until he will finally reach Kakuma. Luckily, because, as we all know, there he will find out that both his mother and father are indeed still alive.

### 3.2.2 Valentino’s Faith

Throughout What Is the What, one can note how in many situations Valentino calls out to God and holds onto his faith. At one point in the novel, when he is already living in the U.S., Valentino claims that he “ha[s] never felt God’s direct intervention in any affairs at all. Perhaps I did not receive that sort of training from my teachers, that he is guiding the winds that knock us down or carry us” (357). One may point out how this seems to be quite a
contradictory statement, because we can notice how Valentino does feel the intervention of God at many different moments in his life, especially when he is still in Africa. When bad things happen, he often considers them punishments from God and he prays to change their course. When good things happen, he regards them as the help of his Lord. We may note how Valentino seems to regards his God as a big decision maker: on the one hand he is a helper, on the other hand a punisher. For instance, when the murahaleen come to Marial Bai, Valentino hides in his aunt’s grain hut and is not noticed by one of the horsemen who comes in. Valentino believes this is God’s help: “It was God who decided that the movements of Achak Deng would not produce a sound at that moment” (92). When he is going on a trip to Nairobi with his Kakuma basketball team, Valentino sees this exciting day as a gift of God: “The day was so bright. I remember distinctly feeling God’s presence that morning” (495). The same goes for his eventual departure from Kakuma. Valentino hesitates to leave Africa when he has finally found out that his parents are still alive. But because he believes this is God’s plan, a decision of his to help to him out, Valentino decides to go to the U.S.: “I had waited fifteen years to see my family, and now I was voluntarily taking myself even farther from them. Nevertheless, this was God’s plan. I could not believe otherwise. God had placed this chance in front of me, I was certain” (510).

In their analysis of coping strategies used by Sudanese refugees, Robert Schweizer et al. state how many of them “described how praying to God provided them with a way to cope with their present unhappiness and loneliness” (285). This is also the case for Valentino. When things are bound to take the wrong turn, Valentino calls out to God to try to make it better. Before he finds the other Lost Boys on his path, Valentino is wandering by himself through the wilderness in the dark. It is then that he prays to God to guide him and help him out. One may note how these prayers almost become like mantras. Valentino is using them to calm himself down and they seem to have a hypnotic effect on him:

As I ran thoughts came in quick bursts and in the moments between I filled my mind with prayer. Protect me God. Protect me God of my ancestors. Go quiet. … Quiet. Quiet. God who protects all people I call upon you to send away the murahaleen. Quiet. Sit now. Breathe quiet. Breathe quiet … Oh God of rain, let me find water. Let me not die of thirst. Quiet. Quiet. (97)

At the same time, Valentino’s Lord is also a punisher. He feels that the pain and sorrow which he has to go through is often influenced by God’s will, by his curse coming
down on him. However, Valentino tries to find an explanation, a reason for his misery. On the one hand, he attempts to believe that to receive help, he first needed to suffer. That he had to go through the pain to get to the blessing, which, at the moment of his contemplation, comes in the form of meeting four pretty sisters in Pinyudo camp in Ethiopia: “It seemed then that God had had a plan. God had separated me from my home and family and had sent me to this wretched place, but now there seemed to be a reason for it all. There was suffering and then there was grace. I was place in Pinyudo, it was clear now, to meet these magnificent girls … God intended to make up for all the misfortune in my life” (300). On the other hand, Valentino feels that the amount of blessing is completely off balance with his amount of pain and he believes that he must have done many things wrong to receive this kind of punishment: to lose his parents and some of his dear friends, such as Deng and William K:

I am inclined to think that I have done so much wrong, for otherwise I would not have been punished so many times, and He would not have seen fit to harm any of those I love … I do not want to think of myself as important enough that God would choose me for extraordinary punishment, but then again, the circumference of calamity that surrounds me is impossible to ignore. (314)

In her analysis of the Lost Boys’ faith, Janice Goodman states that “most of the participants readily accepted their life circumstances as God’s will rather than struggle with questions about why God would allow them to live and others die” (1187). This is quite different for Valentino. When Tabitha is murdered, which does not happen in Africa but in the U.S., Valentino starts to question his faith and God. Why did she and not someone else have to die? “I could not yet contemplate the reality of her death, so on that first day I thought about the causes and solutions, vengeance and faith” (357). Valentino has been hurt so much that he decides to reject his God, he has proven to be unworthy of guiding him on his way: “And yet, with this news, as we drove, I found myself distancing myself from God. I have had friends who I decided were not good friends, were people who brought more trouble than happiness … Now I have the same thoughts about God, my faith, that I had for these friends. God is in my life but I do not depend on him. My God is not a reliable God” (357). However, one should note that this is only a temporary phase. After a while, Valentino starts to believe again that his suffering serves a certain purpose. That he needs to step through the darkness to reach the light. He finds inspiration in figures such as Mother Teresa: “Suffering, if it is accepted together, borne together, is joy. Remember that the passion of the Christ ends always in the joy of the resurrection of Christ, so when you feel in your own heart the suffering of
Christ, remember the resurrection has yet to come- the joy of Easter has to dawn” (359). After a long struggle and a brief rejection, Valentino decides not to turn his back on his faith after all but to see it as a way of supporting him and helping him accept his misery.

Chapter 4: The U.S.: Encounters, Problems and Criticism

As mentioned earlier, the way Valentino is treated during and after the mugging is in fact the pinnacle of many other difficulties and problems which he has come across since his arrival in the United States. Valentino’s new homeland, which was presented to him as a country of new opportunities, has also proven to bring forth many challenges and problems. They are of a different nature, though, than those he has encountered in Africa. He feels how American society often looks at him in a stereotyped way. They think of him in fixed images such as “the refugee” and “the African”. We will investigate how these stereotypes often lead to discrimination, marginalization and racism. We will also discuss how, strangely enough, one of the strongest instances of racism seem to come from African-Americans, black people themselves. Stereotypes seem to be tossed back and forth between the Sudanese and African-Americans but Valentino wants to move beyond them.

As we will see, this is not the only form of stereotyping which Valentino does not want to perpetuate. In the second part of this chapter we will look at how Valentino’s narrative deals with and deviates from “the human-interest story”, a personalized form of news story which tends to confirm certain images which Americans have of themselves and Africans/refugees. We will investigate how Valentino deals with notions such as consumerism and the American Dream and how he offers criticism. In what way does he cherish an American Dream? And does this dream come true, or is he rather shattered by his new homeland’s society? In this respect it is important to investigate the figure of Tabitha, who seems to resonate with the figure of Valentino’s mother from the first chapter.

4.1 Stereotyping: “the African” and “the Refugee”

Throughout Valentino’s account of his life in the U.S., we may notice how people think about Africa and refugees in stereotypes and prejudices. A small but striking illustration of an African stereotype can be found in the international phone card which Valentino uses in the U.S. to call to Africa, and which pictures quite a peculiar scene:
I use one of the phone cards I bought from Achor Achor’s cousin in Nashville. He sells $5 phone cards that in fact give the user $100 worth of international long distance … The one I have is very strange, and was probably not made by Africans: its bears an unusual montage: a Maori tribesman in full regalia, spear in hand, with an American buffalo in the background. Over the images are the words AFRICA CALIFORNIA. (470)

The image that is depicted on Valentino’s card is problematic in two ways. Firstly, it represents a tribesman, which serves to portray Africa in a stereotypical, primitive way. Secondly, and ironically, this picture does not show an African, but a New Zealand tribesman, which makes the underlying idea of the whole picture even more disturbing. Indeed, while seeking to represent Africa in what seems to be a clichéd way, the western designers even fail to do it accurately. This seems to prove how homogeneous a non-western concept such as that of a tribesman looks to them.

The abovementioned passage from the narrative may in fact remind one of Binyavagna Wanaina’s essay “How to Write About Africa”, which criticizes western writers’ way of portraying Africa by giving them ironic advice on how to depict the continent:

Always use the word ‘Africa’ or ‘Darkness’ or ‘Safari’ in your title. Subtitles may include the words ‘Zanzibar’, ‘Zulu’, ‘Zambezi’, ‘Congo’, ‘Nile’, ‘Big’, ‘Sky’, ‘Drum’, ‘Sun’ or ‘Bygone’. Also useful are words such as ‘Guerillas’, ‘Timeless’, ‘Primordial’ and ‘Tribal’ … Never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book, or in it […] If you must include an African, make sure you get one in Masai or Zulu or Dogon dress. 5

When Valentino is being mugged and beaten up in his apartment, his attackers keep calling him “Nigerian”, as if no other African nationality could possibly exist: “Fucking Nigerian motherfucker!” … “Fucking Nigerian! So stupid!” (9) … “Hey Tonya, come out here and look at the Nigerian prince” (15). Because Valentino is African, it does not really matter what country he is from, as to those people all those countries are the same. Again, we can think of Wanaina, who “advises” writers to “treat Africa as if it were one country” instead of a diversified continent.

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5 The article was published in *Granta* 92: The view from Africa, Winter 2005 and was consulted online via http://www.granta.com/Magazine/92/How-to-Write-about-Africa/Page-1 on March the 5th, 2010
Melinda Robins, who made a study of the American newspaper coverage of the Lost Boys, also remarks how stereotyped the image of Africa still is in the minds of many American people and how this image is often perpetuated by the media. She quotes Beverly Hawk, who notes “how the US media construct and perpetuate images of African countries as hopelessly confusing and of their people as doggedly ‘backward’, unwittingly promoting the hackneyed ‘dark continent’ label … The image of Africa in the American mind is worse than incomplete: It is inaccurate” (Hawk qtd. in Robins 29-30). Douglas H. Johnson makes a same remark when arguing that “the coverage of Africa in the Western media has in any case suffered from an atavistic return to the ‘Heart of Darkness’ style of explanation which was so characteristic of journalism in an earlier age” (Johnson, xii). Just as there are stereotyped images about Africa, so there are similar ones about refugees. As Jay Marlowe states in “Beyond the Discourse of Trauma”, “resettling refugees can find themselves in a contested landscape whereby political, economic, social, cultural and media-driven forces influence the wider public’s perception of them” (186). For instance, Valentino describes the idea that the west has of a refugee camp and recounts how things actually are in reality:

There is a perception in the West that refugee camps are temporary. When images of the earthquakes in Pakistan are shown, and the survivors seen in their vast cities of shale-colored tents, waiting for food or rescue before the coming of winter, most Westerners believe that these refugees will soon be returned to their homes, that the camps will be dismantled inside of six months, perhaps a year. But I grew up in refugee camps. (370)

4.2 Discrimination and Racism

In *What is the What*, we notice how stereotyping leads to inequity, stigmatising, discrimination, racism and invisibility, which we have already examined to some extent in the first chapter, through the reactions of TV Boy, Julian and the policewoman. The discrimination which Valentino experiences comes in different forms, though. On the shop floor, for instance, Valentino notes how he is treated differently than his colleagues:

Achor Achor, and most of us, have learned various and conflicting rules of employment here. There is a strictness that is new, but it also seems shifting and inequitable. At my fabric-filing job, my coworker seemed to operate under vastly different rules than I. She arrived late each day and lied about her hours. She did not seem to work at all while I was present, allowing me-she called me her assistant, though I was no such thing- to do all the day’s work. Short of
reporting her work ethic, I had no recourse but to work twice as hard as she, for two-thirds her pay. (234)

Valentino encounters a similar unfairness when applying for a college. It seems that because Valentino is an African refugee, these schools are not eager to accept him as a student. However, there are very few of them that would admit that directly. Some application officers play hide and seek to avoid direct contact with Valentino or to refrain from giving a clear explanation. When he comes back from the hospital, he checks his voicemail and finds a message from Madelena, an admissions officer of a Jesuit college, who on Valentino’s visit to the college seemed eager to enrol him. However:

[S]ince then, they seem to have arrived at a dozen or more reasons why my application is incomplete. First, they said, my transcript was not official enough; I had sent a copy, when they needed a certified original. Then I had failed to make a certain test that earlier they told me was unnecessary. And all the while, every time I had tried to reach Madelena on the phone, she had been gone. Periodically, though, she calls me back, always at an hour when she knows I will not pick up. (471-72)

Again, this is the case here, as Madelena has left Valentino a message on his voicemail, which enables her to avoid a direct confrontation with him and thus, in fact, with her own unfairness:

“Valentino, I’ve talked to my colleagues here at the college and we think you should get some more credits under your belt from the community college” … “The last thing anyone wants to happen is for you to come all the way out here only to be unsuccessful.” … This continues for a while and when she hangs up I can hear the relief in her voice. She will not have to deal with me, she assumes, for another year. (472)

According to Marlowe, there are a few conceptions of refugees which influence people’s opinion of them and also have an influence on the refugees’ chances in a resettled, or what he calls “redistribution” context. He states that “the arguably a priori conceptions of refugees as scarred, weak and traumatized can essentialize people and communities within the context of trauma and associated negative effects”(186). He refers in this context to Nancy Fraser, a critical theorist who developed a theory of “redistribution” of financial sources and the “recognition” of people, in this case of refugees in their resettlement contexts. Marlowe mentions Frazer when pointing out that:
recognition is a question of social status that allows group members to participate as ‘full partners in social interactions’ through what [Frazer] terms the parity of participation. However, the ideal of parity is often not achieved, particularly with minority groups and those not enjoying privileged positions of power. (186)

Thus, Fraser acknowledges that recognition through misrecognition can cause social subordination as “institutionalized patterns of cultural value constitute actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other, or simply invisible, hence less than full partners in social interaction” (Marlowe 186-87). The examples given above are indeed instances of Valentino, as an “actor”, being treated as such. Through Fraser’s theory, we might start to understand why he is often “left out” or treated as “subordinated”, as illustrated above. Because of his status as a part of a minority group, namely that of African refugees, he is often not “recognized” as “a full partner in social interaction” and is therefore not treated on an equal basis.

However, while Marlowe insists that assumptions about refugees as being traumatized or damaged limit their opportunities in their new country, one might state that in Valentino’s case his experiences of inequity might have more to do with racism. While it seems also true that Valentino is getting fewer chances because people have certain thoughts about him being a resettled refugee, it still seems to be more about him being a person of colour and an African. An illustration of this can again be found in the context of his search for a college:

When I finally spoke to an admissions officer at one school, a man who agreed to be candid with me, he said some interesting things. “You just might be too old.” I asked him to explain … “Look at it this way,” he said. “There are dorms here. There are young girls, some of them only seventeen years old. You know what I mean?” I did not know what he meant. “Your application says you’re twenty-seven years old,” he said. “Yes?” “Well, picture some white suburban family. They’re spending forty thousand dollars to send their young blond daughter to college, she’s never been away from home, and the first day on campus they see a guy like you roaming the dorms?”(473)

In this passage, Valentino’s status as a refugee with assumingly no money is underlined by the admissions officer. The officer seems to feel the need to point out that the people who populate the college are considerably wealthier than Valentino and therefore seem to have more right to go there than Valentino. In this way, Valentino is again being treated as “a less than full partner in social interaction” (Frazer, qtd. in Marlowe, 186). At the same time, it is
quite clear that Valentino’s rejection has nothing to do with his age – which is obviously used an excuse- but everything with the way he looks. It is no coincidence that the admissions officer uses the adjective “white” to contrast it with Valentino not being white and that he sees Valentino’s physical appearance as the main reason not to allow him. The officer points out how the college girls will mostly be chased away by the way he looks and in Valentino’s case that means black and African.

4.3 The Lost Boys vs. African-Americans

Another, often more violent kind of racism directed against Valentino, is the one he experiences with some African-Americans. His attackers, Tonya and Powder, both African-American, call him “Nigeria” and “Africa” and they are not the only African-Americans who have a violent attitude towards Valentino or Africans in general. While Valentino has been prepared for “U.S. life”, he has not anticipated discrimination like this:

But while Sasha told us that in America even the most successful men can have but one wife […] he did not warn us that I would be told by American teenagers that I should go back to Africa. … I was about to get off at my stop when two African-American teenagers spoke to me. … “Yo freak, where you from?” I turned and told him I was from Sudan. This gave him a pause. Sudan is not well known … “You know,” the teenager said … “you’re one of those Africans who sold us out.” He went on in this vein for some time, and it became clear he thought I was responsible for the enslaving of his ancestors. Accordingly, he and his friend followed me for a block, talking to my back, again suggesting that I go back to Africa. This idea has been posed to Achor Achor, too” […] (18-19)

Valentino and Achor Achor are not the only ones who encounter such instances of discrimination. Many others among the Lost Boys experience the same and this starts to puzzle them: “One of our friends, who had been in the U.S. longer than we had, had just been assaulted on his way home. I am sad to say again it was young African-American men, and this set us wondering how we were being perceived” (16-17).

According to Godfrey Mwakakigale, the violent attitude of some African-Americans towards Africans has to do with an unwanted, uncomfortable confrontation and identification of those people with Africa. In his book Relations between Africans and African-Americans: Misconceptions, Myths and Realities (2007) Mwakikagile states that “there is a perception
among a significant number of Africans, backed up by empirical evidence derived from personal experiences with black Americans, that their brothers and sisters, or cousins, in the United States, don’t want to be closely identified with Africa, if at all and have a negative attitude towards their ancestral homeland and its people” (171). Their refusal to identify themselves with Africa is the result of a confrontation between the country in which they were born and the continent in which their roots lie. On the one hand, African-Americans have grown up in what Mwakikagile sees as the most powerful and most developed continent in the world. They are “a product of American culture in terms of mentality, attitudes and values”. On the other hand, the continent where they originally come from is the poorest in the world, and this brings forth a stark contrast. As Mwakikagila states: “the contrast between the two is glaring, and ruthlessly public, often thrust into the international area and spotlight when people around the world, including black Americans, see millions of Africans dying … All this has a profound impact on African Americans and their image as Americans, yet at the same time as Africans, as well ” (172). It might be possible that when they meet newly resettled African people such as Valentino or one of the other Lost Boys in real life, this “poor image” of Africa comes to mind. This might lead to an even stronger confrontation of these two contrasting worlds within their own identity and may thus offer a possible explanation for their behaviour and its resulting violence.

However, one should also note that among the Sudanese community in the narrative, these negative feelings and prejudices are often mutual and were already induced even before the Lost Boys came to America. Apparently, they have already been “informed” and warned about African-Americans through films and by the elders of Kakuma:

Though I have a low opinion of the teenagers who harassed me, I am more tolerant of this sort of experience than some of my fellow Sudanese. It is a terrible thing, the assumptions that Africans develop about African-Americans. We watch American films and come to this country assuming that African-Americans are drug dealers and bank robbers. The elders in Kakuma told us in no uncertain terms to stay clear of African-Americans, the women in particular. (19)

Melinda Robins mentions a similar “warning” by elders, which is quoted by Ellen Barry in another article on the Lost Boys, which appeared in The Boston Globe in 2001. As Barry notes: “the elders spoke words of advice into a Sanyo boom box so the young men could
carry cassettes of recorded wisdom with them to America … : “There are many Negroes in America. Don’t think you know them because of their hair” (Barry, qtd. in Robins, 42).

As we can see, the image which the Lost Boys themselves have of African Americans is nearly as clichéd and just as mediatized as the one which some African Americans have of them. Mwakikagile, an African living in America himself, experiences this too: “And there seems to be some credibility to the charge that may be a significant number of Africans, not all of us but probably a large number amongst us have a negative attitude towards black people in the United States” (132). He finds an explanation for this in the arrogance of many intelligent Africans who come to study in the U.S. and look down on them. However, this is definitely not the case here. Valentino does not count himself among those with a negative attitude and tries to distance himself from it by breaking the stereotyped pattern. To him, there have been enough African-American people who have proved the Lost Boys’ attitude is wrong, such as Mary Williams, who founded the Lost Boys Foundation. “How surprised they [the elders] would have been to learn that the first and most important person to come to our aid in Atlanta was an African-American woman who wanted only to connect us to more people who could help” (19).

4.4 What Is the What and the Human-Interest Story, Moving beyond the Stereotypes

According to Valentino, the stereotyping of the African-Americans is not the only kind of stereotyping the Sudanese community perpetuates; he also finds that the Lost Boys confirm certain clichéd images of themselves. In What is the What we notice how Valentino criticizes the African stereotyping by putting a part of the blame on the Lost Boys and more specifically on the stories they tell. To please a certain audience of writers and readers with their accounts, the boys perpetuate certain images of themselves as a group of “poor unaccompanied African children, walking through the desert”. They add certain “expected elements” to their accounts and exaggerate them, which makes the stories sound very similar and inauthentic:

Didn’t we all eat the hides of hyenas and goats to keep our bellies full? 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. …[O]ur experiences were very different depending on when we crossed Sudan … Even so, the tales of the Lost Boys have become remarkably similar over the years. Everyone’s account includes attacks by lions, hyenas, crocodiles. All have
been witness to attacks by the murahaleen … to Antonov bombings, to slave raiding. But we did not all see the same things. … But now, 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. (21)

By making their stories live up to the expectations of a western audience, the Lost Boys just help to confirm the stereotypes of them which prevail in the media instead of moving beyond them. As Robins states: “Brock (1992:157) describes how media content help to create the images and promote the paradigms that define Americans’ relationship to and expectations of Africa and Africans” (30). Although Valentino provides commentary on the boys’ behaviour, he also confesses that he is sometimes doing the same and therefore believes that this actually does not give him the right to point the finger at them: “My own story includes enough small embellishments that I cannot criticize the accounts of others” (21). This statement is interesting in two ways. For one thing, it is metafictional, as Valentino is reflecting here on the telling of his own story, which is in fact put down by Eggers. Therefore, it is not only he but also Eggers who has created these embellishments. On the other hand, this reflection also allows Valentino to comment as a “viewer of his own story”, as he is looking at it from a distance, and here he might be a bit hard on himself. The fact that What is the What has become a novel and not a completely non-fictional account makes it more acceptable to deviate from “the facts”. Valentino’s confession that things like this happen and that he himself is “guilty” of doing them too, makes his account in some way more truthful and sincere than those stories which claim to be accurate.

In fact, Valentino’s criticism of the Lost Boys’ accounts corresponds in many ways with Melinda Robins’s commentary in her article “‘Lost Boys’ and the promised land” (2003), in which she makes a thorough investigation of the American newspaper coverage of the Lost Boys’ stories. According to Robins, these stories have some remarkable characteristics which serve specific goals. For one thing, she notices how the Lost Boys accounts are usually removed from their political and historical context and complexity and are made into personal stories to attract the interest of an American audience. She quotes Tuchman, who notes that “since many Americans aren’t interested in foreign news, the media attempt to meet their civic responsibility to inform the electorate by turning complicated
foreign stories into local stories and in the process lose the complexities of international and economic forces”(30-31). Robins shows how the “ideal” format for localized stories such as those of the Lost Boys is the human-interest feature, which is easy and pleasant for audiences to read. Secondly, Robins also suggests that this simplified form helps to confirm certain “simplified versions of ‘Africa’ and ‘Africans’”(33) while at the same time it perpetuates certain images the U.S. have about themselves, such as “a self-image of individual achievement and the notion of a manifest destiny of continuing” (33), what we could call “living the American dream”. As Robins points out:

the ‘Lost Boys’ stories reveal Americans’ most-cherished beliefs about themselves and the USA, even as they satisfy the need not only to help the weak but also to tame and civilize. These stories valorize American compassion and willingness to help others less fortunate than themselves around the world. The Sudanese ‘Lost Boys’ are shown as coming to a mostly color-blind land of opportunity in which they can pull themselves up by their bootstraps by embracing the American way, thus eliding the realities of being a black man in the USA (34) … [T]hey are constructed as waiting to be filled by American material culture (35) … the media tell the story of an America whose democracy is defined by material success, a garden where the poor and dispossessed can find succor by working to buy consumer goods. (38)

For one thing, we should point out here that What is the What is definitely not decontextualized as a narrative. Throughout Valentino’s account, we notice how Dut Majok’s “lectures” inform Valentino as well as the reader thoroughly and even critically about Sudan’s history of civil wars and even its colonization:

The British people became involved in southern Sudan … in the 1800s (191)… Someday I will tell you about a man named General Gordon, who tried to abolish slavery in our land (191-2) … But the British had been involved in a war of their own … they decided to grant control of the country to the Sudanese … this is where the British sowed the seeds for disaster in our country (192).

At the same time, What Is the What is also definitely not “eliding the realities of a black man in the USA” (Robins 34), as it also offers critical insight into Valentino’s experiences with discrimination and racism in his new homeland and is thus far from regarding America as a colour-blind land. We have noticed how Valentino counters stereotyped representations of
Africa and the Lost Boys as well as how he criticizes the way he is being treated as a person in the U.S. However, we may now start to wonder what his relationship is with American consumerism and its ideals. Is Valentino an empty man waiting to be filled with American material goods and the ideals of the American dream? Or is he as critical of these notions as he is of stereotyping and discrimination?

4.4.1 Consumerism and Material Culture

Upon his arrival in the United States, Valentino immediately experiences a sharp contrast between the basic material life in Kakuma and Sudan, often characterized by poverty and hunger, and American materialism. Things such as television or freezers overwhelm and confuse him as well as the other Lost Boys: “For our first many weeks here, we [Achor Achor and Valentino] did not know which foods belonged in the freezer, which in the refrigerator, which in the cabinets and drawers. To be safe, we placed most items, including milk and peanut butter, in the freezer and this proved problematic” (28). However, while Robbins notes that many writers of the Lost Boys stories “stress that the young men are unaware of American cultural products” as if before their arrival they were completely isolated from western culture, *What Is the What* offers a more nuanced image: “We watched television most of the day and night, interrupted only by naps and occasional games of chess. One of the men living with us in those days had never seen television, outside of a few glimpses in Kakuma. I had watched television in Kakuma and Nairobi, but never had seen anything like the 120 channels we had been provided in that first apartment” (17). Valentino points out that only one of the men had never really watched television, not all of them, and that he himself had watched it frequently. The excerpt demonstrates that the Lost Boys did have encounters with material culture before coming to the U.S.. For them, contact with western material culture items such as televisions was not completely “non-existing” but rather very sporadic back in Africa and has become a part of their daily lives in their new western homeland. The depiction of the “primitive” Lost Boys as entirely unaware of western consumerism and the idea of many writers of human-interest stories “that these young men seem to come from a land outside of time or history” (Robins 36) thus becomes more nuanced here.

Support for the fact that the Lost Boys have already been slightly introduced to western culture may also be found in their stay in a refugee camp such as Kakuma, organized by the UN. The stay at a camp like this provided culture-wise some kind of transitional phase between their original tribal Dinka culture and the western one. As Luster et. al. state:
Although these young men have strong identity with their cultures of origin, studies conducted while they were still in refugee camps noted the strong influence of Western nongovernmental organizations on their development. As one Dinka representative said, ‘These boys don’t belong to the Dinkas any more, their culture is UNICEF’. (457)

It is in fact Valentino’s stay at Kakuma which enables his first startling encounter with consumerism, and it does not take place in America—as suggested by human-interest writers—but in Africa, when he and the other members of the Kakuma Drama Group take a trip to Nairobi. It is here and not in the United States that Valentino will first get to know some aspects of modern society and consumerism, and the awe and surprise he feels during his stay in the city is much stronger than upon his arrival in the United States:

I have to attempt to communicate the awe that comes over a group of young people like us, after spending many years in a camp at the edge of the world, upon seeing something like Nairobi, one of the largest cities in Africa.(455) … It was the first time I had been in a theater …. To have ice cream! We actually had to choose between two ice cream vendors! (458)

Although Valentino feels comfortable with the relative wealth of his new life, this does not mean that he becomes completely “Americanized”. While Robins notes that human-interest writers tend to depict how the Lost Boys “become fulfilled only when they enter middle-class American life”, for Valentino this is not the case. Living in America does not necessarily make him become an American, as Valentino does not try to hide his Sudanese descent and is not ashamed of where he comes from. He faces the reality of southern Sudan’s problems but he refuses to see his country as inferior, despite his own description of its primitiveness:

But in southern Sudan, we are by any estimation at least a few hundred years behind the industrialized world. Some sociologists, liberal ones, might take issue with the notion that one society is behind another, that there is a first world, a third. But southern Sudan is not any of these worlds. Sudan is something else, and I cannot find apt comparison. (49)

As Guy Reynolds states,

[for unlike most Americanization narratives one can think of, What Is the What fails to present the uplift of entering this new national space or the renewal heralded by the ‘making’ of Americans. Deng wants to become
educated and to succeed, and his compatriots talk of the West’s material plenitude; but Deng sees himself in terms of ineradicable national identity being and remaining Sudanese. […] (10)

Valentino refuses to become completely American but he is also simply not able to stop seeing the differences between the Americans and the Sudanese in the U.S. He feels that even if the Sudanese did want to blend in completely, this would prove to be impossible. When the Lost Boys have gathered to watch a basketball game, Valentino makes the following remark:

It was at once heartening and shaming. We were, as a group, healthier than we had ever been before, but next to these NBA players, we looked frail and underfed. […] Even our leader, Manute Bol, with his small head and huge feet, resembled an oversized twig pulled from a tree. Everyone from Sudan, our group’s appearance implied, was starving and poorly built. No suits could be made to give us the illusion of ease and comfort in the world. (167)

Valentino does not want to be Americanized, but he feels he is not able to be, either.

4.4.2 Criticizing Consumerism and U.S. Society

It is not only by showing his pride of Sudan and acknowledging his own identity that Valentino proves that he has not become completely Americanized. He also utters quite some criticism of material culture. In Valentino’s addressing of TV Boy, we may notice a first, slightly sharp commentary on material culture, in which the people involved in it seem to be in need of constant entertainment and distraction: “TV Boy, you are no doubt thinking that we’re absurdly primitive people … And yes, the world we lived in was an isolated one. There were no TVs there, I should say to you, and I imagine it would not be difficult for you to imagine what this would do to your own brain, needing as it does steady stimulation” (40). The light, ironic commentary which Valentino displays here will in fact only become more and more pronounced as he notices how the U.S. wealth and culture also start to have a negative influence on his personal life.

4.4.2.1 U.S. Society Dividing the Lost Boys

Valentino notices a first negative development within the group of the Lost Boys. Initially, everything seems to be pleasant for the Sudanese in their new environment. At a birthday party, Valentino expresses his happiness about their situation in the U.S.: “That we had all survived, that we were all wearing suits, new shoes, that we were standing in a
cavernous glass temple of wealth! We greeted each other with hugs and open smiles, many of us in shock.” (168). However, having been in their new country for a while, the Lost Boys start to become divided into different “castes”, as in this new material culture society, some of the boys get more opportunities than others:

There was one group among us who were dressed differently than the rest, wearing sweatsuits, visors, baseball hats and basketball shirts, accentuated with gold watches and chains. These men we called Hawai 5-0, for they had just returned from Hawaii, where they were working as extras in a Bruce Willis movie … Now they were back in Atlanta, determined to make clear that they had been somewhere, were now of a different caste than the rest of us. (168)

Situations like this often lead to jealousy. Many of the Sudanese expect that because they went through nearly equal experiences in Africa, the wealth in the U.S. should be equally divided as well: “It is very complicated here in the Sudanese community; there is so much suspicion. Each time someone tries to help one of us, the rest of the Sudanese claim that this is unfair, that they need their share. Didn’t we all walk across the desert? they ask” (21). After a while, this jealousy starts to become a burden on Valentino’s life: “In Atlanta there were one hundred and eighty pairs of eyes upon us all at any point, and there seemed never to be enough of anything to go around, no way to distribute anything equitably” (169). However, at a certain point he decides to “giv[e] up on the politics of the young Sudanese in Atlanta” (171) and grab the chances he can get to move forward in his new life. But does Valentino feel that he manages to do this? As we will discuss in the next section, it seems that the western values will also affect his personal life.

4.4.2.2 American Dream or Nightmare?

Another negative development which Valentino experiences as a consequence of western consumer society is related to his own aspirations and their failure. When Valentino has just arrived in the U.S., we can notice how he cherishes hopes and dreams about his new life and keeps alive what we might call an “American Dream”. But what does this dream entail? Sarah J. Steimel, who studied the portrayal of refugees in human-interest stories, too, quotes Alan D. DeSantis’s definition of the “American Dream” as “a mythic story which posits that ‘with effort, hard work, optimism and egalitarian cooperation, anyone in America can achieve material success.’” (DeSantis qtd. in Steimel, 228) One may note how the notion of “material success” is emphasized in this definition. To move forward in life, you need
material success. Steimel also refers to Stuart Ewen, who argues that “in a world of consumption, freedom came to mean the freedom to buy the goods you choose and equality came to mean an equal ability to affect the market through purchases … immigration, specifically, is affected by these discourses” (232-3). However, in her study, Steimel points out that “refugees describe actively seeking two components of the American Dream: getting an education … and getting a good job […]” (228). Steimel notes that human interest stories such as the ones discussed above “repeatedly describe how refugees seek educational experiences once they arrive in America.”(228). Janice Goodman, who conducted several interviews with Lost Boys also states that “the valuing of education was one of the strongest themes in of the narratives and a predominant one in every interview” (1190).

This is no less the case for Valentino, who, even when still in Kakuma, already imagines America as a safe haven where he will be able to finish school and start a normal life: “We did not know much about America, but we knew it was peaceful and that there we would be safe … We could finish our educations without worrying about food or any other threat” (483). He feels that getting the proper education is essential to move up in life. In the novel, one may notice how Valentino’s strong focus even prevails in a dangerous situation such as the robbery, when he is enraged the most by the damaging of his textbooks:

I look up to find that the woman and Powder have my backpack, which contains nothing but my homework from Georgia Perimeter College. Imagining the time it will take to reproduce those notebooks, now so close to midterm exams, almost brings me to my feet again. I stare at my visitors with as much hatred as I can muster, as my god will allow. (11)

Just as with the Lost Boys community, things look good at the beginning of the U.S. stay. Valentino appears to be on his way to reach some goals. Apart from being helped by the Lost Boys Foundation and Mary Williams, he also gets the support of “sponsors” such as a man called Phil Mays, who tries to take care of practical difficulties which Valentino encounters in his daily life: “he appeared genuinely pleased to explain the most basic things, like boiling water on the stove or the difference between the freezer and the refrigerator. He approached each problem with the same careful and serious tone of voice and seemed only frustrated by the fact that he could not do more” (178). Valentino realizes that in comparison to the other Lost Boys, he is in quite a lucky situation: “Achor Achor had no such sponsor, he shared one, a woman in her sixties, with six other Sudanese, and it was not the same as the
concentrated attention I was getting” (178). He also comes into contact with Bobby Newmyer, a movie producer who wants to make a film about the Lost Boys, hires Valentino as one of his advisers on the project and even takes him on a holiday with his family. According to Steimel, “th[e] discourses [in the human interest stories] highlighting the personal importance of education are reinforced by the nonprofit workers who help the refugees get settled in the US” (228). To Valentino, both men prove indeed to be a great help in his quest for a college, as he notes how “[Bobby] and Phil together were assisting me with my college applications, and there was much work to do. I have almost completed the credits necessary … and Bobby was helping with a transition to a four-year college. We talked almost daily about it; he sent me brochures constantly” (184). All in all, Valentino’s situation initially looks hopeful.

However, despite these “helping figures” in his environment, Valentino notices that there is a large difference between his aspirations and reality. As noted above, he regularly comes across prejudice and discrimination and even with a lot of hard work, things do not turn out to be simple. To get into college, Valentino needs money and hence a job, but paradoxically, this same job seems to postpone his opportunities: “In Atlanta, when we saw people out of work, homeless people or young men drinking on corners in cars, we said, “Go to work! You have hands, now work!” But that was before we started looking for jobs ourselves, and certainly before we realized that working at Best Buy would not in any way facilitate our goals of college or beyond” (19). Gradually, Valentino becomes frustrated with this paradox: “The thought of all that time wasted, so much time sitting on that wooden stool, cataloging, smiling, thanking, filing- all the while I should have been in school- is too much to contemplate. My current hours at the Century Club and Fitness Centre are superficially pleasant, the gym members smile at me and I at them, but my patience is waning” (20). The moment when he is lying on the floor of his apartment, which is the point of view from which the first part of the story is told, seems to serve as the pinnacle of many frustrations. For one thing, it turns out that things did not end so well for the Lost Boys Foundation and that Valentino has “lost” Phil Mays and Bobby Newmyer: “Phil and Stacey moved back to Florida … The Lost Boys Foundation was disbanded in 2005 … Bobby died in the winter of 2005” (184) While these hope-bringing people have gone, Valentino himself is at the present moment being assaulted and robbed in his own apartment; “I am still in Atlanta, and I am still on the floor of my own apartment” (184-5).
Valentino feels how his initial American Dream of getting into a good school and moving away from his refugee situation is slowly crumbling. First, he becomes frustrated and starts to blame himself: “we are pathetic, I decide. [Achor Achor] is still working in a furniture store, and I am attending three remedial classes at community college. Are we the future of Sudan? This seems unlikely. Not with the way we attract trouble … We bring it upon ourselves” (236). In this way, Valentino’s account seems to correspond with another finding by Steimel about the refugee human interest stories. She states how “these … stories almost universally paint a picture of a difficult and frustrating life for refugees in the US with few, if any opportunities for economic advancement” (231). However, Steimel also notes how “none of the articles question the underlying material assumptions of the American Dream (e.g. by arguing that there are dreams more worthy than car insurance)” (233). In relation to Valentino, this is not the case at all. In fact, he does start to blame the country’s materialist assumptions, as in the context of the Lost Boys’ “decline”, as well as general U.S. society as a whole, and this because of one very important incident; the murder on his girlfriend, Tabitha:

I am tired of this country. I am thankful for it, yes, I have cherished many aspects of it for the three years I have been here, but I am tired of the promises … The pressures upon us, the promises we cannot keep with ourselves- these things are making monsters of too many of us. And the one person who I felt could help me transcend the disappointment and mundanity of it, an exemplary Sudanese woman named Tabitha Duany Aker, is gone. (7-8)

This passage points out how, to Valentino, other frustrations are less painful as long as Tabitha is around. However, after her death there does not seem to be anyone left to ease the pain. We will look at how Tabitha actually represents the real American Dream to Valentino and how her death serves as Valentino’s ultimate loss of this dream. This assumption proves implicitly that, to Valentino, there are indeed “dreams more worthy than car insurance” (Steimel 233).

4.4.3 Tabitha’s Death as the Real Loss of the American Dream

As mentioned above, it is after Tabitha’s decease that Valentino starts to blame U.S. society instead of himself. Schweizer et al. state that “Sudanese society is very patriarchal with clearly prescribed gender roles,” (180) while this is not the case for the US. America offers a girl like Tabitha opportunities and rights which she would never have been able to possess in
her own country. As a consequence, she also behaves differently than she would in Sudan: she goes out and dates several men. As Valentino says himself: “I imagined her telling her friends that I was ‘a nice boy’ while she kept her eye open for new opportunities. … she was a desirable young woman, new to the possibilities of this country, and she needed attention as much as she needed love. Perhaps even more so” (293). Her ex-boyfriend, Duluma, is not able to deal with her liberal values and her new American attitude. In a rage he goes to her door and stabs her twenty-two times. Valentino wonders how this is possible. According to him, things like this never seem to happen in Sudan, and thus he begins to blame U.S. society. This thought has earlier been instigated by Bobby Newmyer’s reaction to Tabitha’s murder: “Maybe it’s this stupid country … Maybe we just make people crazy” (358). Valentino starts to think about Bobby’s utterance, and it begins to make more and more sense to him: “Bobby had suggested that Tabitha’s murder was made possible by the madness of this country, and on occasion in those dark weeks after her death I allowed myself to find America complicit in the crime. In Sudan, it is unheard of for a young man to kill a woman. It had never happened in Marial Bai. … The pressures of life here have changed us. Things are being lost” (367).

Valentino explains the downsides of their new homeland through the connection of the American Dream’s pressure, the stress to achieve things, with the cultural clash it causes. The new society’s values seem to offer such a stark contrast with the Sudanese ones that many of them, mostly the male part of the population, are not able to deal with it. As Valentino states: “There is a new desperation, a new kind of theatricality on the part of men” (367) Moreover, the incident of Tabitha being killed is not an isolated one:

Not long ago, a Sudanese man in Michigan … killed his wife, his innocent child, and then himself. … [T]his man’s wife wanted to visit her family in Athens, Georgia. He refused … I do not know why, but in traditional Sudanese society; the husband does not need a reason why; held over the woman’s head is the possibility of a beating, perhaps months of beatings … But the next day she was gone. When his wife returned with her daughter, he met them at the door with a knife […] (Eggers 368)

Valentino considers instances of violence such as these the results of the clash between the two different societies: “Some say it is the fault of the women here, the clash of their new ideas and the old habits of men unwilling to adapt” (368).
Tabitha’s death is a tough blow for Valentino. Her death means a great personal loss, as well as the loss of his American Dream which he cherished and wanted to share with her. His initial dream was to marry Tabitha and start an American family, but with her death this wish has faded: “I imagined us planning a wedding and creating a brood of children who would speak English as Americans do … but everyone disappears, no matter who loves them” (10). This failed dream comes to Valentino’s mind at the most unpleasant moments: “Talk of weddings brings Tabitha to mind, and the wedding we might have had, and I would rather not have that on my mind on the day when I have been beaten and robbed” (244). Right after Tabitha’s decease, Valentino goes through a dark mourning period: “I admit that I spent many weeks largely unable to move. I rarely went to class … I drove aimlessly … I turned off my phone” (367). However, at the same time, this period also gives Valentino time to think about his life and his faith. It makes him realize that he should leave this dark episode behind and start over: “I have examined my course, whether or not I have made mistakes, whether I have been a good child of God. And though I have tried to remain on course, I have also realized that it is time to start my life again. I have done this before- each time one life has ended and another has begun” (375). While Valentino describes how his first life ended with his departure from Marial Bai and the consequential loss of his family, the first part of his U.S. life finds an ending with Tabitha’s death. Making this comparison, we can distinguish a first similarity between the figure of Tabitha and his mother. The interesting interrelationship between those two women is worth investigating in more detail.

4.5 Tabitha as the Reflection of Valentino’s Mother

Just like Valentino, Tabitha has survived the Sudanese civil war, lived in Kakuma for a decade and been resettled in the United States. Because they share a past and a similar future, Valentino feels a strong connection with her: “She had come to the United States, to Seattle, from the refugee camp of Kakuma, too, and here we were, two children who grew up in that camp, so many years later living in America and sitting on this couch in this room” (27-8). In this context, we may repeat Anne Harris’s statement, which we already used in the analysis of Valentino’s mother. Harris notes how “in Eggers’s text … women are idealized indistinct visions” (48) and also refers to Tabitha. Tabitha is Valentino’s girlfriend in Kakuma as well as in America, and to the reader is it clear how there is quite a difference between Tabitha’s real nature and Valentino’s perception of her at many moments. In Africa, on their trip to Nairobi, Valentino and Tabitha share a kiss. The day after, Valentino himself is still shaken by the experience while Tabitha acts as if nothing happened: “When Tabitha arrived that
afternoon at the theater, I was so entranced by memories of the night before that I barely noticed the real Tabitha, who was purposely ignoring me” (466). In her description of Eggers’s depiction of women, Harris points out how it is no coincidence that Valentino “loved Tabitha most from afar” (48), an utterance which he relates to a description of her, walking down an escalator in a shopping mall:

when she finally appeared at the top of the escalator, … her face exploded into a smile so spectacular that all movement everywhere in the mall ceased. The people shopping stopped walking and talking, the children no longer ate and ran, the water stood still. … I devoured her walk down the steps, and I stored the memory away so I could conjure her always. (352)

We will indeed see how this passage will occupy a special place in Valentino’s memory and even gain symbolic value.

When we start to dig deeper into Tabitha’s idealization, we might actually start to see it as a continuation of Valentino’s idealization of his mother. It seems that with her presence in the U.S., Tabitha is filling the void created by Valentino’s primary trauma, namely the loss of his childhood and mother in Africa. She starts to mirror the figure of Valentino’s mother by filling in the emptiness she left behind. Two passages from the novel are significant in the drawing of this parallel. The first one is when Valentino talks about hanging out with Tabitha in his flat. That day, she is wearing a pink T-shirt which Valentino has bought for her: “Sitting next to her in that shirt was intoxicating and I loved Tabitha in a way that made me feel like an adult, like I had finally become a man. With her I felt I could escape my childhood, its deprivation and calamity” (28). In this excerpt, Valentino expresses almost literally how Tabitha is making up for the void created by the deprivation of his childhood symbolized by the separation from his mother. Just like the yellow dress of Valentino’s mother’s, the pink T-shirt which Tabitha is wearing in this passage functions as an important motif, as it reappears in a daydream that Valentino experiences after Tabitha has died: “You were there, Tabitha. You were there with me then and you are with me now. Just as I once pictured my mother walking to me in her dress the color of a pregnant sun, I now take solace in imagining you descending an escalator in your pink shirt, your heart-shaped face overtaken by a magnificent smile as everything around you ceases moving” (363). In this vision, the idealized memory of Tabitha in her pink T-shirt, standing on an escalator, now dead, has replaced the idealized image of his initially lost mother in her yellow dress, walking down a path in Marial Bai. Thus, Tabitha, in fact, mirrors the image of Valentino’s mother in two
ways; in life and in death. During her life, Tabitha is filling the emptiness of Valentino’s primary trauma, created by the loss of his mother, while with her own death she is replacing his mother’s.

**Conclusion**

Now that we have come to the end of this dissertation, we will draw some final conclusions about our discussion of the complexity of *What Is the What*. In the first chapter, we mainly focused on the form of the narrative and its particularities. First, we examined the genesis of the narrative and the history of Eggers’s “struggle” with the form of the account. At the beginning of their collaboration, Eggers had no clue about what to do exactly with Valentino’s story. To try to find more insights, the two men made a trip to Sudan, back to where it all started for Valentino. When they came back, Eggers realized that, to convey Valentino’s message as powerfully as possible, *his* voice should be in the centre, in the form of a first-person narration. With this decision, the concept of “the-autobiography-written-by-somebody-else” was born. However, Eggers still struggled with another formal aspect. Because of the lack of accuracy in Valentino’s descriptions of his earliest childhood, Eggers, educated as a journalist, felt that he could not call the account non-fictional. Coming from a He felt forced to leave the genre of non-fiction behind and decided to opt for a novelistic form, which would combine facts of Valentino’s life with fictional elements. Through this decision, Eggers did not have to comply with a high level of accuracy and was able to reach a wider audience of readers. Thus, the second “concept” of What Is the What as an autobiography *and* a novel, was born.

After this overview, we discussed the consequences of *What Is the What’s* formal “miscellany”. Jared Gardner pointed out that an autobiography and a novel have “competing demands”. An autobiography mainly deals with the “self-interest” of the writer, while a novel deals with the “self-interest” of the reader. However, Gardner argues that through blending a blending of these genres, *What Is the What* is able to remove these distinctions. Through a mix of the two, namely through the fictionalization of the autobiography, these competing interests are brought together as well. In this process, the boundaries which separate the reader from the subject in an autobiography collapse, and thus the distance between the two becomes smaller. Hence, the self-interest of the autobiography becomes the self-interest of the reader, as he or she becomes involved in Valentino’s life. Through the adding of fictional
elements to the autobiography, Eggers has been able to invoke the landscape of Valentino’s youth in a way that a regular autobiography would not have been able to do. In this way, the level of involvement which the reader experiences is at its utmost level.

In the second chapter, we explored some specific parallels between *What Is the What* and the Latin-American “testimonio”, a genre which deals with the testimonies of runaway slaves. Formally, the works that belong within the testimonio genre are also the result of a collaboration between a person who wants to put his life story—marked by hardship—down and a writer who helps him with this process. Just as in *What Is the What*, their goal is also what we could call “humanistic”: they want to reach an audience with the story and make its voice be heard. However, in her work on testimonio, Kimberly Nance insists on one important notion to succeed in this, namely the existence of the “testimonial contract”, a concept coined by Jean-François Lyotard. It is “the relationship that must exist if testimony is to result in social action” (48) and which implies “an addressee, someone not only willing to listen and accept the reality of the referent, but also worthy of being spoken to; an addressee, a witness who refuses to remain silent; a language capable of signifying the referent; and a case or the referent itself” (Sklodowska, qtd. in Nance, 48). The question was then whether all of these elements are actually present in *What Is the What*. While we were sure of the presence of an addressee, a language and a case, the existence the addressee seemed less certain, when we looked at the narrative. Thus, we investigated the presence of an addressee by investigating the several addressees whom Valentino talks to. For this, we first needed to make a distinction between the readers inside and outside the narrative. According to David Herman, the former group is talked to in the form of what he calls “apostrophic” or “vertical address”, the latter in “fictionalized” or “horizontal address” (Herman, qtd. in Mildorf, 47). As we argued, the boundaries between those two are never entirely clear.

In our discussion, we naturally focused on the “fictionalized” addressees within the narrative, the people whom Valentino talks to in what he calls “silent conversations”. The first addressee in this respect is TV Boy/ Michael, the boy who is guarding Valentino after he has been mugged. The relationship between the two shifts from hopeless to hopeful and back to hopeless. Valentino is initially able to have some understanding of this boy, he is takes in a forgiving position. However, after a couple of literal blows to his head, Valentino decides that it is impossible to get through to this boy. TV Boy could not be an addressee. After that we moved on chronologically with the story, to the discussion of Valentino’s Christian
neighbours and the policewoman coming to see him in his flat. The neighbours do not even hear Valentino, and while he has faith in them, this seems to crumble when his call is left unheard. The policewoman, however, does hear Valentino, but she fails to listen. She writes down his recount of the mugging, but instead of acting, she just classifies it as a regular complaint. In this way, we can consider them “lost addressees”, just like TV Boy. There is no testimonial contract present here. The next person whom Valentino is addressing in his silent conversations, is Julian, the receptionist at the hospital. In contrast with the other potential addressees, Valentino manages to establish some kind of connection with him. Initially, things are bound to fail between them, as Julian almost starts to deny Valentino’s existence. However, at the right moment, Julian begins to show a genuine interest in Valentino’s situation, as a refugee who has suffered in Africa as well as a newly resettled citizen of the US. In this way, he proves to be an addressee. A same balance between interested and uninterested people can be distinguished among the members from the fitness club where Valentino works. Most of them only exchange pleasantries with him when they enter. They are nice to Valentino, but that is as far as it goes. However, one member does make a small but significant exception. Her name is Dorsetta, she is a new member, and, unlike the other ones, she is sincerely interested in Valentino. Valentino is unfamiliar with her attitude, and initially even refuses to smile at her. However, he realizes that she wants to reach out for him and immediately regrets his mistake. In this way, we can find two addressees in *What Is the What* which comply Lyotard’s testimonial contract, namely Julian and Dorsetta. In their own way, they have proved “not only willing to listen and accept the reality of the referent, but also worthy of being spoken to” (Sklodowska, qtd. in Nance, 48).

In our third chapter, we zoomed in on Valentino’s African narrative, more specifically on the atrocious things which he experiences on his journey, among which the most important and traumatic one is the loss of his mother, and how Valentino tries to cope with them. Valentino loses track of his mother in the turmoil of the war’s onset, when Marial Bai is being attacked by the Arab horsemen. The impact of this traumatic event is reflected throughout the whole of his account. Valentino has no idea whether his parents are still alive or if they have died the moment when he has fled the village. We discussed how this state of uncertainty about the death of a loved one is called “ambiguous loss” (Pauline Boss, qtd. in Luster et al. 445) and we looked at how Valentino deals with it. While this situation causes him a lot of pain, we have seen how he feels more comfortable with it than with the thought of his parents being dead. While other mother figures, such as Ajulo, cross his path and offer to take him
under their protection, Valentino still prefers the ambiguous loss over the “maternal certainty” she wants to give him.

According to Jay Marlowe, it is important to look at the “ordinary side of the refugee story”, to understand how he or she copes with experienced atrocities, as this is often related to one’s “history, spirituality, culture, background, folklore” (“Discourse of Trauma” 184). In this description of Valentino’s “normal life” before the war, we see how his narrative focuses on his life in the community and in his polygamist family as well as on his baptism. We indeed noticed how these aspects of his culture reappear as coping strategies. On the one hand, the community of the Lost Boys offers a real support to him. We illuminated this through the discussion of Deng and William K, who help Valentino to continue his tough journey and encourage him when things are rough. In a same way, Valentino’s faith in God offers a strength that keeps him going. When he finds himself in difficult situations, he often prays to God to help him out. When good things happen to him, he often believes they are a gift of God. However, Valentino not only sees his God as a helper but also as a punisher, as someone who inflicts punishments on him for things he has done. Therefore, at a certain point, his relationship with his God becomes conflicted. Valentino does not understand what he has done wrong to deserve all these atrocities. For a moment, he starts to question his faith, but he eventually restores it. He tries to accept what has happened to him and see his faith as a way of trying to cope with it.

In our last chapter, we discussed the American narrative and how Valentino experiences his life as a new citizen of the United States. We focused here on his encounter with stereotypes and clichés which people in his environment seem to have about Africans and refugees, as for instance Africa is often still thought of as “the dark continent”. These stereotypes often lead to discrimination and racism. We discussed how Valentino experiences different forms of inequity. For example, in the workplace, his colleagues are able to work much less for a higher wage. Or when he applies for a college, people seem to look for different reasons not to allow him. However, these reasons often come down to the same thing: Valentino is a refugee and a person of colour. In different contexts, this makes him a persona non grata. In our discussion, we also dedicated special attention to one particular type of racism which Valentino experiences, namely that of African-Americans. Many African-Americans seem to make Africans their target of ridicule and verbal violence. We examined how this has often to do with the confrontation of a part of their own African identity with the
“misery” which Africa often presents and how this may evoke violent reactions. However, we also pointed out how this violent attitude is mutual: many African-Americans do not think highly of Africans and this feeling is reciprocated by many Sudanese.

In the second part we investigated how Valentino’s narrative is going against a certain type of story, often used to portray Lost Boys’ accounts, namely the “human-interest story”. This story form is used in the American media for the news coverage of “complicated” atrocious events, as for instance the Sudanese civil war. To present them to an American audience in a comprehensible way, the accounts often come in the form of personalized stories, in which one or several victims are placed at the centre. In the case of the Lost Boys’ accounts, they are often decontextualized, and seek to perpetuate images as aforementioned, of e.g. an African “dark continent”, while also confirming America’s self-image of a nation where everything is possible. The dichotomy between Africa and America is emphasized through the depiction of Sudanese refugees as empty “vessels” (Robins, 35) who are to be filled with the values of the American Dream. This American Dream is here presented in terms of the celebration of material success and consumerism. We discovered how *What Is the What* is not decontextualized at all, as several episodes of Sudan’s history are recounted throughout the story by characters. Moreover, we have seen that Valentino nuances this dichotomy, as he has shown how many of the boys were already familiar with some aspect of material culture before coming to the U.S. On top of that, Valentino also does not really become completely Americanized: he refuses to and is also not really able. In this way, he often offers criticism of the values presented in these human-interest stories and the tone of his voice becomes only sharper throughout the story. We notice how Valentino does cherish an American Dream, in the form of pursuing his education as a way of becoming successful. However, his real American Dream comes in the form of a happy life with Tabitha, his girlfriend. When he loses her, his dream is shattered and Valentino starts to blame the United States. As a last point, we drew some parallels between the figure of Valentino’s mother and Tabitha. They are both presented in forms of idealization and their depictions contain returning motifs which underline this. Because Valentino loses them both, they mirror each other in an even stronger way.
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