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The Ordeal of the Alien: The Case of a Sudanese "Lost Boy" in America

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Stories about refugees, asylum seekers, boat people, illegal aliens and migrants are found almost every day in any newspaper in the world. Not only in economic terms does the world seem to have become global, migration is also playing its part, whether this takes place voluntarily or involuntarily. After more than 20 years of civil war in the southern Sudan[1] with severe displacements and loss of life approximately 4,000 young men and boys were accepted in 2001 as refugees to the United States. This ended their over ten-year history of flight and migration by foot from southern Sudan via Ethiopia and Kenya to, ultimately, the United States. This group, most of whom have settled in the State of Georgia, has become known as the "Lost Boys of Sudan."[2] On arrival in the States these refugees were given one change of clothes and a three-month guarantee of government support. After that, they had to fend for themselves.

Valentino Achak Deng is one of these Lost Boys. He is also the protagonist in American author Dave Eggers's *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng: A Novel* (2006). The novel blends the voice of a Sudanese refugee with that of an established American writer and the reader never gets the feeling from the writing that this is only Egger's book or only Deng's or a comprise between the two. The book seems to belong to both protagonist and writer equally, hence perhaps the addendum "A Novel" after title and subtitle. The result is a partly fictional, partly factual hybrid account of Deng's autobiographical narrative. As Deng says in the Preface, "This is a soulful

account of my life" (5). Speaking together in fact and fiction, Egger and Deng provide us with a complex vision of the ideological push and pull within the religious, ethnic and racial contexts of the United States as a nation as well as war-torn Sudan. As Deng continues in the Preface, "I told my story orally to the author. He then concocted this novel, approximating my own voice and using the basic events of my life as the foundation. Because many of the passages are fictional, the result is called a novel" (ibid).

Eggers' *What is the What* is not a classic immigration novel as it deals with migration rather than immigration. The story of immigration is usually one of upward mobility, whereas migration is more linked to issues such as capitalism and economic globalization. Immigration has been a central given since the 1800s in the history of the United States. Until the 1960s and 70s, immigration meant integration in the main stream of Anglophone society, whereas in the second half of the 20th century previously marginalized immigrant groups started to express their distinctive characteristics as more and more of these groups presented themselves as hyphenated-Americans. As Gregory Jay argues in *American Literature and the Culture Wars*, American society had come to see itself as a "conglomerate of distinct groups rather than as a social contract among highly individual and independent persons" (72). Towards the end of the 20th century, due to forces of capitalism, empire and globalization, immigration increasingly took on the guise of migration, when refugees from Africa started to be admitted to the US for humanitarian reasons and illegal aliens from Mexico and Asia found their way to lowly-paid jobs. These entrants did not come as part of a group but as individuals looking for

survival and finding temporary shelter rather than gaining access to a middle class consumer-culture life-style and modernist assumptions of a coherent ethnic identity.

What is the What opens in Atlanta, where protagonist Valentino Achak Deng works at a health club and attends a community college. Valentino, as he is known in the gym, is a real-life character, originally from Southern Sudan. His shocking experiences such as starvation and thirst, as well as encounters with man-eating crocodiles and lions during his 1500 kilometre long march to refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya depict him as a victim of a regional conflict of war. But his life took a drastic turn when, after having lived for 14 years in refugee camps in East Africa, he was resettled in the US in 2001 under the auspices of the United Nations. In Atlanta he met Mary Williams, Jane Fonda's adopted daughter, whose biological parents were radical Black Panthers from East Orlando, California. Mary Williams was instrumental in setting up the Lost Boys Foundation that helped rebuild the lives of approximately 3,000 of the original 20,000 lost boys who had escaped the government-sponsored destruction of their tribes between 1987 and 2001.

Dave Eggers is a contemporary American novelist, well-known for his tour-de-force first novel called *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. In 2004 he started the *Voice of Witness*, a series of books that use oral history to illuminate human rights crises around the world. And it is in this context that Eggers and Deng met at a fund-raising basketball match in Atlanta organized by Mary Williams when the Atlanta Hawks were playing the Orlando Magic.

Eggers was impressed by Valentino Achak Deng's life-story. Originally he had intended to write Deng's biography but the events proved too resilient and moving to put

on paper just like that. After several rewrites it was decided by both narrator and narratee that Deng's life-story had to be conveyed in the form of a novel as there were too many gaps in Deng's memories of his childhood and subsequent flight. By choosing the novel form Eggers was able to weave all sorts of events into the story that had happened, but that Deng had difficulty remembering. After all, Deng had left his village when he was only six years old. The original intention of the book had been a story of triumph, the story of how a refugee child from Africa eventually reaches America. But the tone of the novel changed when Deng finds his quest for safety, community and fulfilment in the US in many ways even more difficult than life in the refugee camps.

Although the story of African annihilation is used as a backdrop for the story of American resettlement, the novel starts off with a scene of local US violence, thus immediately putting a damper on both the protagonist's and the reader's expectations of another immigrant success story. Eggers introduces a narrative strategy that is repeated in various situations throughout the novel: Deng narrates his past life in his village and as a refugee to an unhearing and unbearably oblivious American "other" – initially the six or seven year old Michael who holds him captive but usually people who refuse to or cannot hear him speak: "When I first came to this country I would tell silent stories. I would tell them to the people that had wronged me" (32). Often these stories in the US present are then connected with the beginning of the destruction in Deng's society in the midst of civil war.

In the opening pages of the novel Deng's apartment in Atlanta is broken into by thugs. An armed man and woman enter into his apartment, remove everything of value, kick and beat Deng in the ribs and stomach, tie him up and tape his mouth. To make

things even worse, his attackers were African Americans who consistently and humiliatingly call him "Africa" during the attack (ibid: 9). From the initial "sir" when they ring his doorbell asking for his permission to make a phone call, he is, subsequently, dehumanized and objectified into an entire continent, "Africa." The thugs then start calling him "Fucking Nigerian motherfucker" (14), Nigeria probably being the only African country familiar to them.

After a while they depart with whatever they manage to take from Deng's meagre belongings. They leave Deng bound and gagged in the care of their son Michael. Deng thus comes to realize that violence is not an exclusively East African problem. Held captive by a boy not much older than he was when his wanderings as a refugee began, he starts to recount to his uninterested young captor memories of his own childhood in the village of Marial Bal in Southern Sudan. Deng who fails to capture the boy's sympathy, gets increasingly frustrated: "Michael, I have little patience left for you. I am finished with you, and wish you could have seen what I saw Be grateful, TV Boy. Have respect. Have you seen the beginning of a war? Picture your neighbourhood, and now see the women screaming, the babies tossed into wells. Watch your brothers explode. I want you there with me" (72). It was the experiences in Sudan that were "the beginning of the end of knowing that life would continue." Later, when the boy leaves Deng, still tied up and gagged, he frantically tries to attract his neighbour's attention by kicking the floor, but no one hears him. "I am loud. I am, I am certain, being heard. I am kicking with a smile on my face, knowing that everyone outside is waking to the sound of someone in trouble. 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 now

bound in his own apartment" (149). No one hears him. Finally he manages to untie himself.

Initially, after having called the police, he is confident the thugs will be caught: "Thoughts of Tonya and Powder being pursued, being caught, filled me with great satisfaction. This country, I am sure, does not tolerate things like this. It occurs to me that this is the first time an officer will act on my behalf. The thought gives me a giddy strength" (214). But Deng's trust in the justice system is soon dented when after a long wait a young Asian-American female police officer finally arrives on the scene and only leaves a piece of paper the size of a business card. It is a complaint card for him to complete. She does not seem to be impressed by his misfortune: "She is leaving, and I cannot bring myself to care. The sense of defeat I feel is complete. I had, in 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. I collapse on my bed and let everything flow through the sheets, the floor, the earth. I have nothing left. We refugees can be celebrated one day, helped and lifted up, and then utterly ignored by all when we prove to be a nuisance. When we find trouble here, it is invariably our own fault" (218). No wonder Deng feels defeated.

When he finally manages to get to the trauma ward of the hospital, he is left on his own for 14 hours without receiving any help before he decides to leave in desperation. He feels also let down by the African-American ward nurse Julian, whom he had at least expected some racial solidarity and assistance from. Julian, although very friendly, fails Deng. We are never told whether this is out of xenophobia or a sheer lack of interest in Deng's life-story. The repetition of injustice by African Americans on African refugees

seems to prevent change or improvement of life for the refugee. As Paul Gilroy puts it in an essay on the postcolonial city: "Alien refugees who have settled across the street or down the road are consigned to the permanent twilight of their infrahumanity, while the iconic, superhuman figures of Michael Jordan and Co. look down, smiling benevolently from on high from the billboards" (206). Deng feels frustrated and his expectations of racial solidarity are dashed.

In any case, desperate he will not make it in time for his early morning shift at the health club and thus lose his job, Deng leaves the trauma unit in frustration, untreated and angry with himself. "I am tired of needing help. I need help in Atlanta, I needed help in Ethiopia and Kakuma, and I am tired of it. I am tired of watching families, visiting families, being at once part and not part of these families" (319). But each time he finds himself giving up on America, "the persistent habit of realizing all that I have here and did not have in Africa" (315) gnaws at him.

Thus the novel highlights the invisibility of immigrants (as discussed by Paul Gilroy) and the struggle of African refugees in the US. Deng also laments the loss of tradition: "The pressures of life here have changed us. Things are being lost" (329). He cries when his Sudanese friend Tabitha, with whom he was once in love is murdered by her boyfriend Duluma, a fellow Sudanese Lost Boy, presumably because of loss of face: "I allowed myself to find America complicit in the crime. In Sudan, it is unheard of for a young man to kill a woman. . . . I doubt that anyone in my clan could remember it ever happening, anywhere or at any time" (329). Her murder exemplifies the rift between the old and the new: "Some say it is the fault of the women here, the clash of new ideas and the old habits of men unwilling to adapt. Tabitha may or may not have had an abortion – I

did not ask her, for it is not my right – and then she left Duluma out of her own accord. Both choices would be unprecedented in traditional Sudanese society, and still quite rare in the relaxed moral context of [refugee camp] Kakuma" (330).

America means different things to the elders in traditional society. The Sudanese elders in Kakuma had not wanted the refugee boys to go to America: "You will forget your culture, they said. You will get diseases, you will get AIDS, they warned. Who will lead Sudan when the war is over? they asked" (430). But Deng's father whom he manages after all those years in the camps to trace on the phone just before his departure to the US, urges him to go: "You have to go, boy. Are you crazy? This town is still ashen from the last attack. Don't come here. I forbid it. Go to the United States. Go there tomorrow. But what if I don't see you again? I said. What? You'll see us if you get to the United States. Come back a successful man" (456). With the aid of IOM (International Office of Migration) Deng goes to the US and gradually starts to buy into the American dream of consumer culture: "We did not know much about America, but we knew it was peaceful and that there we would be safe. We would each have a home and a telephone. We could finish our educations without worrying about food or any other threat. We conjured an America that was an amalgam of what we had seen in movies: tall buildings, bright colors, so much glass, fantastic car crashes, and guns used only by criminals and police officers. Beaches, oceans, motor boats" (429).

And indeed, after having arrived in America, we see him withdraw into a private, domestic space, first as a house-guest of typical white middle-class families who provide humanitarian assistance out of curiosity for the exotic other, then with the aid of church charity into an apartment of his own, which he shares with a fellow Lost Boy called

Achor Achor. His domestic space is made up of mod-cons like audio-visual and computer equipment, electronic kitchenware and a private automobile. This spatial imaginary of consumer culture was made possible through the creation of a privatized and depoliticized subjectivity. That is, after arrival of the group of Lost Boys in the US, the group was dispersed over various cities, including Atlanta, and after initially having been taken care of by the state (with money for three months) and charity groups (with discarded consumer goods) the boys are left to fend on their own to pick up their lives and create their own private spaces. It is after being assaulted in his apartment in Atlanta, his failure to assemble enough credits to enter into college and the menial jobs he is forced to take on, that he comes to realize his unrealistic expectations of life in the US. Entry into the US does not automatically constitute the end of all trouble and the beginning of a comfortable existence for African refugees.

Deng's traumatic past and the bitter reality of the urban present are a constant reminder of what Saskia Sassen in *Cities in a Global Economy* has referred to as life in the contested spaces of urban economy, an economy that is made up of "a whole infrastructure of low-wage, non-professional jobs and activities that constitute a crucial part of the so-called corporate economy" (73). Cities like the one that Deng finds himself in have in her view become "a strategic terrain for a whole series of conflicts and contradictions" (73). On the one hand cities are places where a disproportionate share of corporate power is concentrated but on the other hand they are also places where a disproportionate share of the disadvantaged work and live, as attested to by the life of Valentino Achak Deng in *What is the What.* Deng's struggles in the US as described by Eggers are echoed 7 years later in an article by Kevin Sack in the *International New York*

Times on Jacob Deng Mach, also one of the Lost Boys, who desperately tries to join the Atlanta Police Force, but fails after several attempts.

Deng, the refugee from the Sudanese civil war, has turned into an icon of postcolonial globalization. In Saskia Sassen's words workers like Deng constitute part of the culture of globalization as much as international finance does. The large concentration of "others" in the city invites us to see, she writes, "that globalization is not only constituted in terms of capital and the new international corporate culture (international finance, telecommunications, information flows), but also in terms of people and non-corporate cultures" (73) while non-corporate cultures are supported by low-wage, non-professional jobs. Paul Gilroy argues in an essay called "The Status of Difference: Multiculturalism and the Postcolonial City" that the postmodern segregation by wealth has led to a proliferation of service workers like Deng: "The reappearance of a caste of servile, insecure and underpaid domestic labourers, carers, cleaners, deliverers, messengers, attendants, guards and others" (207). This has given rise to segmentation and casualization of employment, health and dwelling impacting negatively on life in the postcolonial city and leading to a destruction of civic order. As in *What is the What*, economic globalization and the lure of consumer culture seems the desirable route to prosperity for the downtrodden, at the expense of the downtrodden, Deng's treatment by both police and hospital staff being points in case.

In *What is the What* Deng does not seem to be able to take root anywhere, being constantly on the move, straddling from one "non-place" to the next, from refugee camps in Africa to relief centres in the US. Non-place is a concept introduced by Marc Augé, in *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, a non-place is a space

that "cannot be defined as relational, as historical, or concerned with identity" (77-78). It is supermodernity that has produced these non-places. Augé cites examples of these "non-places" as constituting "a world where people are born in the clinic and die in the hospital, where transit points and contemporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions (hotel chains and squats, holiday clubs and refugee camps, shantytowns threatened with demolition or doomed to festering longevity)" (78). These non-places are linked with an experience of solitude, as an individual passenger passes through them: "Assailed by the images flowing from commercial, transport or retail institutions, the passenger in non-places has the simultaneous experiences of a perpetual present and an encounter with the self" (105), a world having "thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting and ephemeral" (78) and a world depicting "a very particular and modern form of solitude" (93). A non-place is a space where people do not connect, or if they do, only temporarily, fleetingly.

Desperate and lonely during his peregrinations from camp to camp in East Africa, and later on in the US, Deng moves from non-place to non-place. Like all the names and non-names he acquires in the course of his short life–Valentino Achak Deng, Africa, Sleeper, Dominic, Gone far my man – his life becomes a series of re-inventions, recycling, which has become like a survival strategy in the refugee camps: "The essence of the idea is that one can leave the camp and re-enter as a different person, thus keep his first ration card and getting another when he enters again under a new name" (346). In his attempt to get more rations by leaving the camp and re- entering as a new person, he is forced to ride on a truck amongst dead and almost dead people, is almost forced into service by the insurgents, again almost starved to death and ultimately loses the few items

he owned and those his friends invested in the endeavour: one of the many deaths, reinventions and resurrections in the story. Up to the moment he finally leaves for Atlanta, he realizes that in his life up to that point "everything moved in a single direction. Always I fled" (458). Moving from one non-place to the next he hopes to finally land up in a real place and by the end of the novel he decides to leave.

One of the last persons Deng talks to in the novel is a woman who comes to work out in the gym where he works at the reception. Dorsetta, an African-American woman, tells him to "hang in there," but he thinks both their lives are worth more: "The truth is I don't 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 . . . Dorsetta, I pretend that I know who I am now but I simply don't. I'm not an American and it seems difficult now to call myself Sudanese. I have spent only six or seven years there, and I was so small when I left" (449). Yet Deng is able to take his life into his own hands when he decides to leave his job and Atlanta: "We had been sent into the unknown once, and then again and again. We had been thrown this way and that, like rain in the wind of a hysterical storm. But we're no longer rain, I said – we're no longer seeds. We're men. Now we can stand and decide. This is our first chance to choose our own unknown" (472). Like Jacob Deng Mach who calls the American dream "a continuous process,"[3] Valentino Achak Deng continues to believe in the American Dream in spite of the misfortunes he suffered in the US: "I am leaving this job now and I am leaving Atlanta . . . I will reach upward. I will attempt to do better" (473). Deng wants to tell his story and have his story told and addressing both author and reader he says, speaking out

"gives me strength, almost unbelievable strength . . . I covet your eyes, your ears, the collapsible space between us. I will tell stories to people who will listen and to people who don't want to listen, to people who seek me out and to those who run" (475). Deng wants his voice to be heard.[4] His story of migration has shown that the political has become the personal, the personal the political. The city in which the protagonist of the novel found himself on arrival in the US has become a place of refuge to him, his rootlessness having become his shelter. The city offered him sanctuary yet also excluded him. In the end he decides to take destiny into his own hands.

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Notes

[1] Southern Sudan gained sovereignty and became an independent state in 2011

[2] The "Lost Boys" of Sudan still feature regularly in the international press. In 2013 *The International New York Times* featured an article on Jacob Deng Mach, another "Lost Boy" and his attempts to try and join the Atlanta police force.

[3] Jacob Deng Mach says, "As you have seen, since I came to this country I never stopped doing something. . . . So if this door [he wanted to join the Atlanta police force, but failed the entry test twice] is closed for me, I think God will open another door. . . . The American dream is a continuous process."

[4] In 2003 Deng returned with Eggers to his village Marial Bal where he was reunited with his parents. After the publication of *What is the What* Eggers and Deng toured the world for almost a year to promote the book. The author of this article met them on 30 May 2007 in The Hague, The Netherlands where she interviewed both writers.