Beyond Identification in Human Rights Culture: Voice of Witness's *Voices from the Storm* and Dave Eggers's *Zeitoun*

In this article, we analyse two testimonial narratives written or published with the help of Dave Eggers, an American author, editor, and publisher whose oeuvre shows a marked interest in harnessing the power of narrative to engage in human rights activism. In doing so, Eggers relies on the affective charge attributed to testimonial narratives within human rights culture as a critical means of informing and engaging a broad audience. Specifically, the article deals with two separate versions of the same man's testimony, Abdulrahman Zeitoun, respectively written or published by Eggers in conjunction with Zeitoun. The first appears in *Voices from the Storm: The People of New Orleans on Hurricane Katrina and Its Aftermath*, an oral history collection published as part of the Voice of Witness book series that Eggers helped to found. The second, *Zeitoun*, is a narrative non-fiction account that expands on the protagonist's experiences before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005. As is the case with many human rights narratives, the explicit goal of these texts is to educate readers about human rights crises, narrate the humanity and suffering of their protagonists, and, by extension, convince readers to include them in the circle of people whose rights deserve recognition and protection. In both versions of this testimony, the protagonist's humanity and suffering are focalized through the victim, and it is this act of collaborative witnessing that offers victims the opportunity to claim rights.

In order for a testimonial narrative to fulfil this function within human rights culture, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith explain in *Human Rights and Narrated Lives*, affectively charged and sensationalized stories are typically chosen for circulation that "target privileged readers in anticipation that they will identify with, contribute to, and become

advocates for the cause" (27). The audience for these narratives is mostly made up of rights-bearing individuals whose engagement with the text is supposed to enable the subjects of these narratives to claim their place as rights-bearing human beings in their own right. This means that the ability of a testimonial narrative to cultivate cross-cultural identification is paramount to its transformative capacity as a rights tool for engaging privileged audiences. In other words, the disempowered victim of a testimonial narrative presents him- or herself as a human subject demanding recognition, and that demand is first and foremost made of the reader. Witness narratives in particular, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain, "educate and bind readers" in that they convince readers that "a narrative is joined to an embodied person" and that "the reading experience constitutes a cross-cultural encounter through which readers are positioned as ethical subjects within the global imaginary of human rights advocacy" (590). Identification, we show, is a crucial textual strategy as well as a communicative process in extending the reach of human rights.

On the one hand, Eggers's testimonial works are typical of a human rights culture that expects victims to narrate their traumatic experiences in a way that aligns their subjectivity with the "human" in human rights. His works are also characterized by a tendency to solicit readerly empathy through identification so that readers may recognize the injustice that befell the narrating or narrated subject and become advocates on their behalf. On the other hand, these works break with the identificatory paradigm when they foreground the risk of obfuscating global inequality within a universalist discourse based on fundamental sameness. This risk, which results from *overidentification* on the part of the reader fed by a feeling of universal sameness, is defined by Kimberly Nance in *Can Literature Promote Justice?* as "fusion," a process by which the reader moves "out of the addressee role to share the subject position" and thereby sheds the ethical commitment to recognize

injustice and to take action against it (53).[1] Eggers's critical assessment of this practice complicates the ways in which his works aim to affect reader's cross-cultural engagement with victims within a global human rights culture.

In the first half of this article, we assess the limits of the genre of testimonial narrative in order to set out the theoretical case for a mode of affective readerly engagement that moves beyond (without fully abandoning) straightforward identificatory practices. Mark Antaki has observed that interdisciplinary studies into law and literature such as Lynn Hunt's *Inventing Human Rights* tend to overstate the efficacy of testimony. In its adherence to "the romantic fantasy" of literature as a morally transformative force, he points out, Hunt's work tends to promote "so-called progressive genres that allow for criticism of existing social structures—but without subjecting these progressive genres themselves to critique" (976). Theoretically, we argue, postcolonial studies perspectives and more recent research into human rights informed by those perspectives have much to

[1] Fusion is one of a series of unproductive reader engagements with a text, according to Nance, all of which shut down the narrative's ability to move the reader to action. The others are the process by which the reader passes responsibility to act on to someone else ("Forwarding"), the evasion of responsibility ("Abjection"), and passive engagement with the text so as to remain beyond its "field of address" (53). Fusion is especially relevant here as it pertains to the expectation that readers engage with literature, particularly testimonial narratives, through identification. The issue at hand, as Nance points out, is that this unhelpful type of identification "is accomplished through a multiplicity of *uncritical* identifications" (54, our emphasis). Eggers's works, we argue, warn against such uncritical identifications.

contribute to such a critique. These perspectives have shown how narratives of disempowered subjects are often codified and constrained according to the precepts of human rights discourses, and are bound by the strictures of simplifying neo-colonial conceptions of postcolonial subjectivity in the process.

The second half of the article uses the chosen case studies to consider how Eggers's narratives cultivate differing forms of engagement between their disenfranchised subjects and their (mostly Western) readership. The Voice of Witness oral history collection stimulates a *diffuse* form of identification with different victims of a single rights abuse or crisis, rendering the crisis itself accessible to readers without automatically universalizing the multifarious experiences of that crisis for the reader. *Zeitoun*, for its part, radically emphasizes *difference* between its subject and its readers, thus explicitly sabotaging the simplistic identification that it cultivates at the start in order to create a sense of surprise or even shock in the reader. Overall, the article shows how Eggers's testimonial work is both shaped by the narrative directives of human rights discourses and itself actively reshapes a discourse of universal sameness as a means of engaging the disempowered on fairer, more equal, and arguably more empowering terms.

A crucial question is whether Eggers's role in the ventriloquism of the subaltern disconnects the testimonial subject's narrative from its socio-historical context by reframing it for Western audiences. Indeed, do these narratives, in their specific attempts at addressing Western audiences in a more productive way, end up relocating (and thus distorting) the victim's voice and experiences within the boundaries of a Western human rights culture? The narratives take the important step of carefully managing the reader's engagement with the testimonies they contain, yet they struggle to address fundamentally

the rights culture within which they help these testimonies to circulate. Even though they ask for more than simplistic identification—and, in doing so, productively reshape part of the existing rights culture in which they are embedded and which the reader brings to bear on the text—these narratives also reinforce the idea that the socio-cultural environment in which abuses occur exists beyond the purview of the narrative's rights culture. For all their narrative efforts in inviting Western audiences to engage their narrators on more equal terms, we conclude, these texts ultimately fail to embed those narrators and the different cultures from which they emerged into an expanded rights discourse.

Testimony, Alterity, and the Ethics of Reading

In an interview with Sean Bex and Stef Craps on the occasion of Eggers's being awarded the 2015 Amnesty International Chair at Ghent University, the author commented on what he sees as the power of testimonial narratives to illuminate rights issues and violations. Speaking directly to Voice of Witness's aim of "amplifying" unheard voices so as to foster "empathy-based understanding of contemporary human rights crises" ("About"), he explained his belief that "you almost always have a better understanding of a situation through a first-person narrative—seeing what one person says and then seeing a broader view of it" (qtd. in Bex and Craps 562). In order for a testimony to achieve this, he went on to say, it needs to be transformed into a legible and engaging story that maintains the illusion of direct contact between the reader and the disempowered subject by replicating as faithfully as possible the latter's speech.

According to this logic, victims of rights abuses have a considerable incentive to codify their experiences according to the protocols of the human rights culture within which

their testimonies will circulate and be read. Schaffer and Smith specifically argue that collections of testimonial narratives tend to format the particular experiences of rights violations according to "standardized structures and thematics of presentation" (47). These standardized texts are characterized by self-assertiveness and narrative clarity on the part of the narrator as a means of claiming recognition for rights violations and articulating membership of a global rights community. The problem with narrative requests for access to such a global rights community, as Schaffer and Smith go on to explain, is that "empathetic identification" between rights-bearers and disempowered subjects may come with "the potential cost of reducing difference to sameness" (47). The key difficulty that arises from a discourse based on universal sameness is that it may end up covering over the glaring inequalities that derive from hierarchical power relations between Westerners and others instead of illuminating and eroding them. The storytelling imperative of human rights culture, as Jennifer Rickel explains, is for individuals to narrate themselves as "fully developed human persons" who can thereby claim to be part of a narrative of universal humanism (160). In other words, the aim is for the testimonial subject to constitute itself as a complex and particular human being, not a carbon copy of the reader's abstract humanity. The central concern for such texts is thus their capacity to capture the attention and empathy of rights-bearers as well as unsettle the dynamics of power that silence those who have to actively clamour for such rights.

One potential problem with this is that rights-bearing audiences can simply decide to assuage their newfound cross-cultural empathy through simple acts of charity or even expressions of sympathy rather than address the conditions that allow abuse and violence. In *States of Denial,* Stanley Cohen distinguishes three forms of engagement with the subject of suffering in a text: sympathy, empathy, and identification. He explains that "*sympathy*

means feeling sorry for victims; *empathy* means feeling what their suffering must be like to them; *identification* means imagining yourself in their position" (216). The danger, on the basis of these definitions, is that empathic and identificatory engagement with an individual's particular experiences is all too easily transformed into hierarchy-reinforcing sympathy for a disempowered collective that readily confirms rather than challenges existing neo-colonial power relations.[2] When human rights advocates represent disempowered subjects in a way that shows them as a deprived collective whose suffering and humanity is universalized so as to make them deserving of charity, they risk thereby rendering their individual experiences irrelevant; sympathy can reinforce a charitable hierarchy between the privileged West and a reductively blurred group of impoverished others rather than promoting horizontal cross-cultural connections based on the equality that human right officially promotes.

Dominick LaCapra's notion of "empathic unsettlement" is meant precisely to safeguard against overidentification to the extent that one becomes a surrogate victim, proposing instead that one should empathize in such a way that understanding takes place *without* a blurring of the subject positions of victim and witness. Still, LaCapra himself becomes entangled in the terminological complexity besetting the vocabulary of other-oriented affect when he insists that his notion of empathic unsettlement is to be kept separate from "unproblematic identification" and "patronizing sympathy" (38). Even though

[2] It is worth nothing that there is a considerable slippage between these terms. Both empathy and sympathy entail a certain form of identification, and it is, as we will show, further possible for empathic forms of engagement to slip into the type of hierarchy-reinforcing sympathy that is under discussion here.

we agree with LaCapra that these are to be avoided, precisely because of the unproductive engagement with the disempowered subject they cultivate, our analysis of Eggers's testimonial works shows that various forms of identification, empathy, and sympathy can and, in fact, do co-exist within the same text. Rather than aiming for an elusive conceptual purity, we want to trace the different types of interpersonal awareness displayed by LaCapra and Cohen, as well as the inevitable slippage between them, in the analysis of how testimonial narratives engage the reader. If the subtle empathically unsettled connection with the victim contemplated by LaCapra provides one suggestion as to what an ethical relationship with victims may entail, it is also the case that more appropriative or patronizing forms of engagement are similarly part of the identificatory cues provided by a testimonial narrative.

Whereas human rights scholars such as Schaffer and Smith have paid attention to how affect furthers the human rights project, postcolonial critics have sought to illuminate how access to the narrative and testimonial means to generate such affect can be restricted or denied to those whose rights are yet the very ones that need to be recognized and protected. Modes of thinking are thus revealed that perpetuate inequality in a global community that purports to have accepted universal equality. In *Postcolonial Melancholia,* Paul Gilroy makes the point that continued emphasis on racial difference "obstructs empathy and make[s] ethnocentrism inescapable. It becomes impossible even to imagine what it is like to be somebody else" (63). The point here is not so much that race should not be a consideration in cross-cultural engagement, but that a radical emphasis on racial difference places interlocutors in a prefabricated category of others for whom empathic interaction is placed beyond the remit of Western readers. Anticipating this discussion, Gayatri Spivak's famous question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" not only asks why a privileged

audience may not be open to hearing disempowered subjects, but also allows us to ask whether the involvement of a privileged author such as Eggers in ventriloquizing their speech may perpetuate their silencing as subjects even while voicing their experiences.

Commenting on "Can the Subaltern Speak," Spivak explains that an ethical relationship with the other must involve "a transaction between the speaker and the listener" (Spivak, "Subaltern Talk" 289), something which is potentially rendered more difficult if someone other than the subaltern has stepped in to take on the role of speaker. Spivak notes further that one of the problems with the assumption that the subaltern will assert themselves and claim (what Western audiences recognize as) a voice is that it conveniently allows audiences to remain passive, never requiring them to question their own position in the dialogue: "The effort required for the subaltern to enter into organic intellectuality is ignored by our desire to have our cake and eat it too: that we can continue to be as we are, and yet be in touch with the speaking subaltern" ("Subaltern Talk" 292). For Spivak, there can be no true dialogue between the subaltern and the privileged without a more substantially transformative process in which barriers of privilege and power that prevent an ethical engagement with disempowered others are broken down. As Judith Butler explains, once the frames that determine whose life is recognized in full start to come apart, it becomes possible to come into contact with those lives that have hitherto been excluded (12). This movement, as Rosalind Morris notes, challenges the slippage between the normative equality upon which human rights are based and the rather reductive insistence on fundamental sameness that stands in for that universalist aspiration in human rights culture. Instead, Morris affirms Spivak's idea that an ethical dialogue with the other asks us to acknowledge their rights on the basis of *a shared humanity as well as their alterity* (Morris 97)—an alterity that, for Spivak, is fundamental to the very identity of the other

("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 27).[3] In order for such a dialogue to be successful, the privileged audience must be willing to acknowledge the equality of the other precisely by understanding them as both different from Western rights-bearers and yet in possession of the same common humanity in whose name human rights speak.

The question then becomes to what extent narrative testimonies provide a discursive space to negotiate shared humanity and difference. In *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge emphasizes the importance of breaking down absolute alterity as a road towards comprehension: "Absolute alterity, as long as it remains absolute, cannot be apprehended at all" (3). Attridge goes on to stress that literature can be instrumental in breaking down such absolute alterity in a productive way while preserving the particularity of the other's experiences and allowing the reader to accept (without neutralizing) the other into their frame of reference. This idea centres on Attridge's argument that the imaginative process of constructing story-worlds with fictional others is cognitively related to the reader's

[3] It is important to distinguish this alterity, the particular identity of each individual subject, from the process of othering that lies at the heart of neo-colonial modes of thinking, which erase the particularity of the subaltern in favour of what Spivak discusses as catachreses in "Practical Politics of the Open End." There, she uses catachresis to refer to master words that transform particular subjects through sweeping definitions for which there are no literal referents, such as "true worker" or "true woman" (104). In this article, alterity is used as a counterweight to appropriative identification in which the particularity of the other is erased. We will distinguish between the necessary respect for Zeitoun's alterity and the negative implications of radical "othering" through catachresis by focusing on how the latter is bound up with Zeitoun's mixed roots and the abuse he suffers as a result of racial profiling.

engagement with the subaltern (32-33). Both processes, according to Attridge, present readers with an other and ask them to make them real and knowable, making the cultural force of literature dependent upon the efforts of "responsible readers" (131).

Attridge argues that the reader is able to actualize the other through an identificatory process in which "otherness" is introduced "into the field of the same" in a way that "reshapes cultural norms and habits" (136). This field of the same differs from the type of flattening sameness that obscures inequalities in that the distinctive experiences of the other are preserved in the identificatory process set out by Attridge. Sameness in Attridge's more enabling sense is only extended on the basis of a shared humanity that yet acknowledges the distinct particularity of the other: "To respond fully to the singular otherness of the other person (and thus render that otherness apprehensible) is creatively to refashion the existing norms whereby we understand persons as a category, and in that refashioning—necessarily inaugural and singular—to find a way of responding to his or her singularity" (33).

While Attridge's sophisticated account of textual identification provides an alternative to the flattening identificatory sameness that denies the alterity of the other, it arguably underestimates the singularity facing readers in a literary text—a singularity that may at times preclude identification. For Gert Buelens and Dominiek Hoens, the force of a literary text lies in its ability to disrupt the reader's interpretative frames rather than, as Attridge would have it, rendering those existing beyond those frames visible to them through a process of identification (159). This opens up a space for the literary text to carve out a more multidimensional reading experience in which the reader is inflected more intensely and more directly by their encounter with the other whose story they engage with.

Buelens and Hoens's contribution offers a way to overcome the problem of passivity that pervades less productive and more gratuitous engagements with the subaltern in which Western audiences' privilege is not disturbed. It makes it possible to attend to the ways testimonial narratives present readers with numerous interpretative cues, not all of which are conducive to straightforward identification with the protagonist. It allows a more fine-grained analysis of the different discursive processes by which human rights are negotiated and contested when disempowered subjects find ways to speak to rights-bearing audiences.

In the following analyses, we will use these insights to complicate a commonplace assumption, expressed perhaps most memorably by Richard Rorty, that "sad and sentimental stories" can move us to recognize and defend the rights of others (185), in two ways. First, we will broaden the analysis beyond the central relationship between the narrating (or narrated) subject and the reader, taking into account the full complexity of the discursive space staged by the text, including its relation to the socio-cultural context within which these texts operate and that they seek to reform. This will make for a more nuanced understanding of the rights work performed by testimonial texts.[4] Second, we will focus on different forms of other-oriented affect and avoid forcing testimonial narratives into narrow and reductive forms of identificatory interpretation. In this way, we want to explore textual

[4] In "The Difficulty of Imagining Other People," Elaine Scarry argues that notions of empathic engagement through identification have led to "an overly optimistic account" of what imagining other people can achieve, to the extent that it is seen as a legitimate means of bypassing "legal provisions and constitutional procedures" (99). She admits that fictional texts "bring other persons to press on our minds," but insists that we must "recognize the severe limits of imaginative accomplishment" (104).

efforts to diversify audience engagement with the disempowered subject that actively seek to counteract a discourse of absolute sameness through straightforward identification. Paying attention to different modalities of readerly engagement, and situating them in a dense discursive context, we show how Eggers's work, even if it does not warrant Rorty's optimism about the ability of texts and affects to move audiences to action, illustrates the affective force of literary texts as a means of expanding "the universe about whom such moving stories might be told" (Laqueur 54).

Diffuse Identification in Voice of Witness's *Voices from the Storm*

Voice of Witness, the first case study for our analysis of the affective cues generated by testimonial narratives, is a non-profit organization that seeks to illuminate human rights crises across the globe through edited collections of testimonies. The stated aim of the book series is to foster "empathy-based understanding" of those crises by "amplifying the voices of individuals most closely affected by injustice" ("About"). In many ways, the series is typical of anthologies about rights violations, by Schaffer and Smith's definition of the genre: they write that "such anthologies gain their ethical force by gathering multiple narratives of shared victimization into one volume whose purpose is to challenge and rewrite history, call the reader to recognition, and spur action" (45). There is a clear similarity between this description and the self-description in Voice of Witness's educational guide book *The Power of the Story*, which explains that oral history is about combining facts with people's interpretations of facts in order to come to a deeper understanding of a historical moment and its memorial afterlife (6). The guide book, which helps teachers use Voice of Witness books in the classroom, distinguishes itself from what it calls "the dispassionate stance of

traditional social science" and instead cultivates "a capacity for empathy and identification, for greater joy and immense indignation and, above all, a willingness to be changed in the process" (7). One of the interesting ways in which this identificatory logic is reinforced in the exercises suggested in *The Power of the Story* is by leaving an open space in a "critical reading log." In this log, students are free to reflect in whatever way they choose on the extent to which they feel connected to the testifying subjects in the Voice of Witness books.

The texts included in these books lend themselves to empathic engagement in part because they have been moulded into a narrative form that suits such an affective relationship. Eggers, a co-founder of the series, explains this as being one of the hallmarks of the project:

> We decided that the Voice of Witness books would edit everyone's story . . . into a linear narrative, without changing words. That would be what the reader could rely on—that we would tell a compelling linear narrative with the narrator's original words and phrasings and idiosyncrasies of speech, which takes some editing. (qtd. in Bex and Craps 563)

Writing about one of the first books in the series, *Surviving Justice: America's Wrongfully Convicted and Exonerated*, Barbara Eckstein points out how this narrative effect is created by the volume's complete effacement of the mediator, since the questions of the original interviews are sacrificed to create a linear narrative (109). She wonders whether this process does not "obscure the authority of the interviewing/editing/narrating voice" that necessarily shapes the narratives (110). Eggers explains his role as editor as part of the necessary mediation required for these testimonial narratives to be made amenable to a Western audience. He expresses his belief that editors of the series "serve the narrators well only

when the book itself is compelling and can be read by a broad audience" (qtd. in Bex and Craps 563).

Voices from the Storm brings together thirteen different testimonies of people affected in some way by Hurricane Katrina (Zeitoun's is one of them), which hit New Orleans in 2005 and occasioned a humanitarian crisis. It is organized chronologically, detailing particular days or events in the lives of victims as the storm progresses, and structured according to major moments before, during, and after the storm. There are two main structuring devices at work in this volume that have a direct impact on the rights work it performs. The text is first divided into four sections that relate to the life-changing impact of Hurricane Katrina, entitled "Life before the Storm," "The Storm," "The Week After," and "Looking Back." Instead of providing full testimonies from start to finish, *Voices from the Storm* breaks them up in order to fit them into a chronological day-by-day narrative. In a very basic sense, this imposes a narrative structure onto the whole—the anthology becomes a story of Hurricane Katrina narrated by several survivors rather than a collection of disparate survivor testimonies that happen to deal with the same event. The focus is shifted away from individual narrators, in other words, and towards the way in which certain sections of their testimonies contribute to a more encompassing picture of key moments before, during, and after the storm. Apart from this distinctive chapter division, the first device also works through the insertion of a two-page list of "Narrators" with two-line biographies for each at the start of the anthology (40-41). The biographies are thus not introduced with each person's story; instead, all of the biographical information is grouped so as to allow the individual narratives to be split up according to the anthology's overall narrative of Hurricane Katrina—a narrative the introduction to the book calls "a rich tapestry of oral histories" (Vollen and Ying 1).

The second structuring device, a list of appendices at the back, works towards the same goal of focusing attention on the broader crisis and the inadequacy of the government's response, once again leading the reader away from individual narratives. In the appendices, a picture is created of the flooded city that demonstrates that disempowered African-Americans (lower wealth, lower educations, fewer means) were disproportionately affected by Hurricane Katrina because they were the ones left stranded in the city of New Orleans. These appendices make it clear that in having thirteen narrators from this particular background narrating their hardships, *Voices from the Storm* has not skewed its representation towards a select group of victims, but touches on the very essence of the broader issue at hand. It actively promotes, therefore, a synecdochal reading of these testimonies as being representative of the broader experience of the survivor community which largely, disproportionately, and unfairly consisted of disempowered non-white Americans.

Within this collection of oral testimonies, Zeitoun narrates his story in eleven episodes. Initially his testimony feels out of place in the volume. He does not struggle to survive before or during the storm and even has enough food to feed abandoned dogs as he roams the now almost post-apocalyptic landscape of New Orleans. Yet his interruptions are given ever more prominence as the volume's story of Hurricane Katrina develops, becoming the first narrative fragment on 31 August and 1 September in the build-up to his eventual arrest and detention without charge on 5 September. The volume narrates the steady progression in government mismanagement of the crisis, noting particularly the refocusing of attention on combating looters and terrorists instead of search-and-rescue by Mayor Nagin on 31 August (that is, precisely when Zeitoun's testimonial fragments are given prominence). The image created is one of a gradual creep in government mismanagement,

neglect, and abuse in the wake of Katrina, affecting first those at the very bottom before eventually reaching even the well-to-do but still ethnically marked Syrian-American Muslim Abdulrahman Zeitoun. In other words, while the mismanagement of the natural disaster by the US government caused the disenfranchised African-American community to be affected disproportionately, as shown by the appendices, the homeland security intervention that followed in its wake exacerbated this crisis, according to the text, by rebranding survivors from different (and not just African-American) ethnic minority as potential terrorists based on their ethnicity and/or religion.

Zeitoun comments on the authorities' decision to arrest him, linking his arrest to the post-9/11 context of religious and racial tension in the US: "First, I think [the arresting officer] saw my name, and when he see us together, he overreact. . . . I think he thought he catch a group of terrorists" (239). This is precisely the type of interaction between the facts and testimonial narratives the volume hopes readers will pick up on: statistics (reproduced in the appendices) tell the story of which people were most affected by the storm, but testimonial narratives can illustrate just how they were affected and why the government's response exacerbated an already dreadful situation. What this brief discussion shows is that *Voices from the Storm* works towards presenting its testimonies *metonymically*, with each fragment becoming a synecdoche that builds a larger picture of government crisis mismanagement deteriorating into rights violations in the context of post-9/11 racial and religious tensions. Both the narrative structure of a chronological story of the storm and the appendices with their focus on the demographic picture of New Orleans contribute to our understanding of Zeitoun's experiences as part of the wider racially motivated rights violations in the storm's aftermath and the socio-ethnic tensions in the country more broadly.

This metonymic procedure impacts upon the empathy-based identificatory relationship *Voices from the Storm* seeks to cultivate, which is also central to human rights culture more broadly. It is clear from the structural analysis that the focus of *Voices from the Storm* leads towards a greater understanding of the overall picture of life in New Orleans before and after Katrina, with individual narrators serving as conduits to facilitate that process. This fits with the overall conception of the role of testimonial narratives in the series as noted by both Eggers himself and Mimi Lok, the series' executive director and editor. The latter conceives of the stories as pieces of a puzzle that contribute to an overall picture created in the minds of the reader after they have read through the various perspectives: "I think you get at the universal through the particular. We make it so that each voice in a collection—there are usually around thirteen or fifteen voices per collection—highlights something different, a different side of the situation" (qtd. in Bex and Craps 562). Eggers concurs with this view, adding that "you almost always have a better understanding of a situation through a first-person narrative—seeing what one person says and then seeing a broader view of it" (qtd. in Bex and Craps 562). The stated aims and structural devices thus balance individual narrators' experiences with an overall presentation of the crisis.

This balancing act contributes to the text's nuanced approach to identification. With its tapestry of narrators and fragmented storylines, *Voices from the Storm* is actively checking the reader's identification every few pages. These checks guide the reader into channelling their brief spats of empathic engagement into a metonymical impression of the crisis. Lok's description of individual narrators feeds this metonymical logic, as she seems to understand their experiences as being representative of a "type" of person, which allows the volume to give voice to more than just the individual stories of these particular narrators:

"Some stories can be taken as emblematic for a crisis, some are surprising in that this could have happened to this kind of person" (qtd. in Bex and Craps 562). Such a metonymical approach would be detrimental to the preservation of the distinctive experiences of a victim in a singular narrative, as it would amount to having a single victim represent all victims; and as that victimhood would arguably cover every inhabitant of the United States, it might induce U.S. readers of such narratives to figure themselves as what LaCapra calls "surrogate victims" who feel they have a claim on the real victim's subject position and think they are entitled to speak for them, rather than letting them speak (78). The volume avoids this by bringing together different perspectives, through which the reader's metonymical reading experience is consistently curbed. As a result, while identification is encouraged by each testimonial narrative, an ethically problematic and politically debilitating overall equation of victims through a logic of sameness is forestalled. With straightforward single-perspective identification thus ruled out, the textual cue for the reader seems to be one of *diffuse identification*. This type of affective engagement, as encouraged by the text, allows the reader to gain greater understanding of the human rights crisis at hand as a result of their dispersed recognition of and engagement with the humanity of individual victims.

The diffuse identificatory processes stimulated by *Voices from the Storm* achieve three things with regard to the victims, readers, and overall crisis. First, the complexity of victims is established through the provision of multiple perspectives. All of these perspectives are grounded in the same rights crisis, but simultaneously show how a wide range of victims was affected differently. Second, the straightforward identificatory practice that sees equality as sameness is forestalled in the text by moving the reader out of the interpretative comfort zone that human rights culture's emphasis on a stable sense of humanity. This is achieved by qualifying the identificatory drive with each new perspective

that is introduced. Third, the testimonial narratives and extensive appendices collude to create a larger picture that transcends the victims and that highlights some of the broader social, legal, cultural, and political dynamics that lead to rights abuses. As such, the volume can claim to provoke cross-cultural understanding for rights crises in a way that avoids some of the pitfalls that plague the rights work usually performed by testimonial narratives in human rights culture.

For all this, the volume fails in one important respect: it does not complicate the position of the reader—something that is yet crucial for addressing the reasons human rights crises often remain beyond the purview of the very discourse (human rights) that aims to address them. In "amplifying unheard voices," as its slogan would have it, *Voices from the Storm* never gets around to dealing with the question *why* these voices fall on deaf ears, *why* they need amplification; it merely mediates their narratives in such a way that privileged readers are coaxed into engaging with them productively. As such, the project perpetuates the constraints of the human rights culture and fails to interrogate that culture's implication in the crises it presents. This means that readers, even if they are invited to bemoan the rights violations, are equally allowed to maintain their uncomplicated position as rights-bearers as they gaze at the suffering of disempowered others. As we will see, this privileged position is one that *Zeitoun* will come to problematize.

Rejecting Identification in *Zeitoun*

Zeitoun is Eggers's separate narrativization of Zeitoun's experiences, told by a journalistic third-person narrator in a two-part structure that largely shapes the audience's engagement with the protagonist. This third-person narrator alternatingly follows Zeitoun's perspective and that of his wife Kathy as they are each affected by Katrina and its aftermath. The first

section takes place before Zeitoun's arrest and sees the protagonist function as a typical hero character. The second section covers his arrest and detention, during which he is subjected to gross human rights violations. In this second half, he becomes trapped in a truly Kafkaesque situation in which he is accused of terrorist activities and simultaneously categorized as an "enemy combatant," an extra-legal category that places him beyond the proper judicial framework. As a result of this, he is unable to challenge the accusation in question. The contrast with the active hero in part one is conspicuous, and this has a significant impact on the affective operations of the text: whereas the character saving others from the storm is irresistibly likeable and recognizable as an ideal citizen and compassionate human being, the reader is forced to watch that same character become radically "othered," reduced to his essential racial foreignness, following his arrest. This is reinforced by the narrative when the period covering his detention is narrated more extensively from the perspective of Kathy, who, like the reader, struggles to come to terms with what has happened to Zeitoun.

Even if the protagonist is typical of the kind of self-assertive rights-claiming individuals that human rights culture promotes, Zeitoun is something of an outsider in that the first half of the narrative only marginally affirms the protagonist's claim to victimhood. As the analysis of the *Voices from the Storm* collection already emphasized, Zeitoun is not overly affected by the storm, does not have to struggle to survive, and engages in numerous makeshift rescue operations. If the "theatre of roles" to which David Kennedy likens human rights culture is typically populated by victims who are passive and innocent, violators who are abnormal, and human rights professionals who are heroic (14), *Zeitoun* complicates this distribution of roles: it aligns the protagonist with the role of the heroic activist rather than the helpless victim, and he thus becomes a strong candidate for the reader's identification.

A. G. Keeble makes the further observation that this version of the Zeitoun character resembles the "American heroes" in the official emergency services who helped deal with the aftermath of 9/11 (183).

This is particularly significant because this section of the narrative works hard to allow Zeitoun's Syrian-Muslim identity to coincide with his role as the quintessential American citizen-hero. When the storm hits, the images used by the text are initially derived from myth and legend, and only then home in on Zeitoun's particular character and experiences. The images used to describe the protagonist's feelings about the flooded city are not directly taken from the Qur'an, quotes from which periodically intersect the narrative, but from a cross-religious mythical hero recognizable to a Judeo-Christian audience. As the water floods the city, Zeitoun "could only think of Judgment Day, of Noah and forty days of rain" (94). In effect, the protagonist himself becomes a Noah-like figure in the following section, concerned only with salvaging people and animals from the flood in his canoe. He is an emphatically *American* Noah figure, though, because the image also echoes the American mythology of explorers and settlers conquering an exotic new land:

> He imagined floating, alone, through the streets of his city. In a way, this was a new world, uncharted. He could be an explorer. . . . He thought of the animals. The squirrels, the mice, rats, frogs, possums, lizards. All gone. Millions of animals drowned. . . . He was conflicted about what he was seeing. . . . The novelty of the new world brought forth the adventurer in him—he wanted to see it all, the whole city, what had become of it. But the builder in him thought of the damage, how long it would take to rebuild. (95-96)

As such, the position of the subaltern, which, as Joseph Slaughter explains, often reinforces a "patronizing sense of moral superiority" (104), is rendered in such a way that it is not only

available as an identificatory perspective but positively *desirable*, as it coincides with a subject position deeply ingrained in the privileged readers' worldview. By re-writing the mixed roots migrant as an American hero, the narrative's first half makes the character—including his Syrian roots and his migrant experience, sometimes illustrated by old photographs of his childhood and life at sea—a desirable object of identification.

This intermingling of vastly different identity markers would be highly problematic in its partial erasure of Zeitoun's distinctive cultural background, were it not for the sudden narrative break following his arrest. The fact that American heroes are meant to be representative of the nation as a whole makes it especially striking that this dramatic narrative shift is caused by a state-sanctioned intervention in New Orleans. The official rescue operation, bungled by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), is shown to fail utterly as it lets the city transform into a post-civilizational setting in which the normal social and legal order is suspended. Subsequently, the authorities' heavy-handed response to the perceived threat of terrorism in this extra-legal space marks the end of the Zeitoun character's heroic antics in the flooded city; at this point, the reality of the Syrian migrant is severed from the mythical image of the American hero. Zeitoun explains that, until he was arrested, he "had no experience with profiling" and had, therefore, been able to live as a hyphenated Syrian-American (213). The process of his arrest and detention radically breaks this dual identity, with the extra-legal space of the flooded city opening the gate for practices normally associated with socio-cultural contexts existing beyond the purview of human rights. As if to reinforce the similarity between the rights violations taking place in this chaotic setting on U.S. soil and the (neo-)colonial stereotype of pre-civilizational third world countries rife with barbaric legal systems, the protagonist perceives the former in terms of the latter: "Zeitoun was in disbelief. . . . arrested at gunpoint in a home he owned,

brought to an impromptu military base built inside a bus station, accused of terrorism, and locked in an outdoor cage. It surpassed the most surreal accounts he'd heard of third-world law enforcement" (218). Further emphasizing the neo-colonial resonances of this extra-legal landscape, the protagonist experiences his incarceration in animalistic terms, with the narrator describing those experiences as those of "an exotic beast, a hunter's prize" (213). *Zeitoun* calls into question the supposedly universal availability of rights within the United States by exposing the extent to which his hyphenated identity can be reduced to a position outside of the U.S. hegemony. The text does so by ascribing the fate of the protagonist to the "surreal" neo-colonial imaginary of so-called third-world countries, which is fantastical, unreal, and disorienting in its reliance on stereotypical visions of distant, uncivilized, and dangerous lands of others. This process of "othering" makes Zeitoun unavailable for readers' identification; while he still holds narrative interest, the terms in which he does so are too alien to warrant identification.

What makes Zeitoun's exposure to the absurdities of law and democracy different from that found in Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, a benchmark of the literary imagination of the absurdities of administration, is that Eggers's protagonist, unlike Kafka's Joseph K., is initially presented in realist terms that invite identification; the reader is not immediately plunged into an alienated world. This only occurs after the reader has already identified with the character and the setting before they undergo a shift towards such a world; as soon as the storm hits New Orleans, the novel's setting changes and the protagonist becomes an enticing object of identification, claiming the heroic status of an adventurous character in a dangerous setting. *Zeitoun*'s narrative structure is fundamentally disruptive; readers' affect is manipulated to shift from identification with Zeitoun to alienation from the hero in the second half. In the second half, and much like Joseph K. already at the outset of *The Trial*,

the protagonist becomes an abstract human being suffering at the hands of a simultaneously devastating and absurd anti-terror operation. As if to match the way he is reductively "othered" by the authorities, the narrative strips the character of the depth that stimulates the reader's identification with him in the first half. The post-arrest section, when told from the perspective of Zeitoun, contains no photographic material reinforcing his image as a loving father, proud brother, and adventurous traveller. As such, he becomes unavailable as a particular individual with which the reader can *continue to* identify. Following Zeitoun's arrest, the text maintains two versions of the protagonist: with increasing force, the reader is continually confronted by the contrasting images of the bare life form of a man inhumanly detained and the likeable and particular character of Zeitoun that lingers on in his wife Kathy's storyline as well as the reader's memory of the first half of the narrative.

As the reader is ejected from Zeitoun's perspective, Kathy becomes increasingly enticing as an identificatory perspective as she seeks to find out what happened to her husband after they lose contact following his arrest. Kathy is a sympathetic character, introduced to the reader before the storm hits as a caring mother and a competent manager of the family business. She is an American who converted to Islam just before meeting her husband. As such, she too claims a precarious hyphenated identity as an American and a Muslim. As Zeitoun roams the estranging space of post-Katrina New Orleans, Kathy flees the city with their children, staying initially with her brother in Baton Rouge, eighty miles outside of the flooded city, and eventually with a friend, Yuko. As her husband is "othered" in the setting of New Orleans following his arrest, Kathy experiences related forms of othering within a more ostensibly American setting. Once she reaches her family, the narrator explains, she could expect to be told to take off her hijab by siblings unwilling to recognize her conversion to Islam as genuine and seeing it instead as an obligation imposed on her by

her husband (57). Asides such as these, focalized through Kathy, underscore the socio-cultural attitudes underlying the extreme racial profiling experienced by Zeitoun. Kathy's perspective matters further, however, because it remains available to the reader as a point of identification within the narrative from which to perceive the story of Zeitoun's victimization. No matter how many times Kathy recalls prejudiced behaviour towards her, she does so from an American perspective in a recognizably American setting. A scene early on in the book in which Kathy confronts an instance of Islamophobia serves as a useful example. After a young girl throws insults at her and tries to remove her hijab, Kathy returns in kind: "They assumed, no doubt, that a Muslim woman, presumably submissive and shy with her English, would allow her hijab to be ripped from her head without retaliation. But Kathy let loose a fusillade of pungent suggestions, leaving them dumbfounded and momentarily speechless" (46). Despite her hyphenated identity, scenes such as these serve to distance the reader from their potential prejudices and make Kathy's perspective easier to relate to. Through Kathy, the reader is led into seeing the individual prejudice she successfully confronts turned into a systemic violation of rights less easily combated at an individual level.

In the second half of *Zeitoun*, neither the setting of the protagonist's incarceration nor the character of Zeitoun stimulate any form of identification informed by ideas of sameness or relatability for an audience of privileged Western readers. As much as the first half invites precisely such identification, the second half disavows it entirely. In the extra-legal space of the makeshift prison, Zeitoun realizes the cells there are purpose-built for those flagged up by a system of racial profiling: "It was as if the entire operation, this bus-station-turned-military base, had been arranged for them" (211). It contains a twisted echo of Kafka's famous parable about the man from the countryside, which reflects Joseph K's

situation in an abstract way. This parable tells the story of a man who waits in vain in front of a door that will allow him access to the Law, only to discover the gate was built especially for him. Similarly, Zeitoun is incarcerated in a purpose-built prison to which he is given "access" once he has been relabelled a terrorist by the guards who will not let him leave and will not reasonably answer any questions. The comfortable perspective of Kathy, into which the reader can more easily settle, further encourages the reader to recognize the irreconcilable difference of Zeitoun's situation. Upon his release, and underscoring the extent to which her husband had been "othered" throughout his detention, she demands that Zeitoun's wallet be returned to him with his ID card, so that she has "proof that her country recognized her husband as a citizen" (317). Despite this interlude in which the protagonist is stripped of his status as the full citizen upon which human rights is based, the reader remains invested in the protagonist throughout the story, as a result of the pre-arrest section of the narrative and the sympathetic perspective of Kathy, which provides readers with a strong cue to maintain some form of relationship to him. Once the narrative explains how Zeitoun is dehumanized by a discourse that collectively labels people like him "terrorists" and erases the relatable person described in the first half, the text invites the reader to re-establish that humanity. In *Zeitoun*'s emphasis on the alienating quality of both the setting and the person wrongfully imprisoned, however, the only way for that re-humanizing process to take place is for the reader to identify with Zeitoun as a human being (rather than, say, as a fellow American). In effect, the text asks the reader to construct the "human" in human rights in order to find a means of maintaining a connection with the now thoroughly "othered" character whose rights are being violated.

Zeitoun offers an interesting variation on the way narrative typically functions in human rights culture in that it shifts straightforward identification with the victim to a

process of mediated identification through the abstracted "human" in human rights. It does so, as we have shown, by facilitating a move towards disidentification on the part of the reader in their negotiation of the two halves of the protagonist's story. This is important because it not only counteracts the process by which difference is allowed to elide into sameness, but it also undermines readings of *Zeitoun* in which his ethnically diverse roots are essentialized and subsequently perceived as a threat. Kelly Oliver explains the latter process when she writes: "If we conceive of ourselves as self-identical, and we conceive of identity as opposed to difference, and we conceive of anything or anyone outside of the boundaries of ourselves as different, then we will conceive of anything different or outside of ourselves as a threat to our own identity" (2-3). In *Zeitoun*, the protagonist is drawn from within recognizable and relatable circumstances into a position of being "outside" and "different," and this movement ultimately prevents him from being constructed as a radical "other" unrelated to the reader. Instead, the reader is confronted with various complex versions of the protagonist, which include the straightforwardly identifiable, the (only intermittently) radically other, and, perhaps most importantly, the abstractly human. As such, the traditional pattern, in which privileged readers recognize disempowered subjects and in doing so recreate a "subject-other/object hierarchy" (Oliver 9), is disrupted.

Even if it avoids the twin dangers of overidentification with victims and abstraction, *Zeitoun* only partially overcomes the central identificatory issue at the heart of human rights culture. It is important to stress at this stage that the reader is only able to form a productive relationship with Zeitoun, one in which his rights claim is recognized in a non-appropriative way, once he has been arrested and his rights have been violated. As such, the rights claim in the narrative is only introduced once the protocols of identification have been destabilized and the reader's affective engagement has been channelled to a subject who is American

first, and only then Syrian and Muslim. While this is certainly productive as a mean of recovering Zeitoun as a human being worth caring about, it problematically erases his specifically Syrian-Muslim background that lies at the heart of the rights violations he endures. The "Syrian" aspect of his "Syrian-American" citizenship never appears in anything more than a reductively assimilated form in the hero section of the narrative, where the protagonist's migrant background is incorporated into the far more amenable prototype of the American hero. Once he has been arrested, his Syrian identity is subsumed under the stock character of the "enemy combatant." The racial profiling that allows the protagonist's rights to be violated in the extra-legal space of post-Katrina New Orleans is only addressed in the form of an abstracted humanity made available to the reader for affective engagement. Consequently, when the character is reintroduced into U.S. society upon his release, he emerges, in the eyes of the reader, simply as a human being able to be incorporated into American society. The latter is underscored by his wife, who forcefully asserts Zeitoun's place in that society by insisting that state officials return documents proving her husband's American citizenship rights (317). His diverse cultural affiliations, central to the rights violations he endured, thus fade into the background. In the final pages, Zeitoun only exists as a model citizen contributing to the re-building of New Orleans. As in the mythical model of the city on the hill, he vows that New Orleans should be "better," that the storm "removed the rot," and that the foundations are being strengthened (325). As such, his incarceration has thus not only distances the protagonist from the Syrian-Muslim part of his identity, but the storm that made his detention possible is presented as having magically cleansed the country of the prejudices that caused his rights to be violated. In this sense, the rights-claim in the narrative is never brought to bear on the particularity of Zeitoun as a character, with all its attendant hostility, and only on his abstracted humanity. The purview

of Western human rights culture is thus not extended through the narrative's careful negotiation of the reader's affective engagement with it. Instead, *Zeitoun* carefully reimagines Zeitoun's character in such a way that it can be accommodated by the existing rights culture without disturbing that culture's fundamental limitations and problems.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined at a textual level how Eggers's collaborative testimonial projects, involving both individuals and collectives, cultivate affective engagement with their readership in order to participate and intervene in human rights culture. Our approach, which brings together recent understandings of the centrality of affect and identification to human rights culture with the cross-cultural and geopolitical awareness of postcolonial studies, lays bare some of the affordances and constraints of the testimonial narrative and of the ways in which this genre is used in human rights culture. Testimonial narratives are often reduced to a means of enforcing straightforward identification through a crushing notion of human sameness that denies those differences that are typically at the heart of rights crises. Designed to expose these blind spots, our analytical approach complicates our understanding of the functioning of testimonial narrative.

The analyses of Voice of Witness's *Voices from the Storm* and *Zeitoun* have shown that Eggers's projects complicate the role of affect and identification in significant ways—through a form of diffuse identification in the former and through disidentification or sabotaged identification in the latter. In *Zeitoun*, this provides a strong cue for Zeitoun's basic humanity to be recognized while rendering his experiences in the extra-legal space of

post-Katrina New Orleans beyond straightforward identification. The type of sustained attention to the textual function performed by testimonial narratives in our discussion complicates some of the commonplace assumptions held about the nature of those narratives' contribution to human understanding and empathy, and it shows Eggers's effort to establish the disempowered subject as recognizable and equal in a way that does not reinforce a neo-colonial dynamic of rights-bearers patronizingly granting that recognition and equality.

Additionally, however, parts of Eggers's textual strategies and manoeuvring are somewhat compromised by the constraints of the testimonial narrative as a genre within human rights culture. Even though *Voices from the Storm* is able to convey the diversity of experience of the crisis in New Orleans, it fails to complicate the essentially biased perspective of privileged readers as it upholds their position as rights-bearers gazing at the suffering of others. *Zeitoun* overcomes this limitation by focusing explicitly on disrupting the reader's interpretative framework in such a way that they are forced to recognize the protagonist's humanity when he is forcefully abused as a result of racial profiling. However, the narrative struggles to bring its rights-claiming efforts to bear on the particularity of the protagonist's cultural affiliations, despite their centrality to his incarceration. The racial profiling that leads to his arrest and detention are cordoned off in the extra-legal setting of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Careful attention to these affective textual negotiations in texts such as Eggers's collaborative testimonial works can help us understand the obstacles, challenges, and outright contradictory processes behind the progressive use of testimonial narratives in human rights culture.

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