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## Making Strangers Indelible: Eggers, Ondaatje, and Civil War

Guy J. Reynolds

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, greynolds2@unl.edu

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# Making Strangers Indelible: Eggers, Ondaatje, and Civil War

Guy Reynolds

*University of Nebraska–Lincoln*

Paper read at International Conference on Narrative,  
Austin TX, May 1–4, 2008

## *1. Ondaatje and indelible strangers*

With no-doubt foreseen timeliness, the German social theorist Ulrich Beck argued in 2000 that a new era had begun. Describing a ‘Second Age of Modernity,’ he stated that ‘towards the end of the twentieth century the condition humana opens up anew... A new kind of capitalism, a new kind of economy, a new kind of global order, a new kind of politics and law, and a new kind of society and personal life are in the making, which both separately and in context are clearly distinct from earlier phases of social evolution.’<sup>1</sup> Beck pointed to an explosion of ‘empirical indicators of cosmopolitization’: dual citizenship, international travel, transnational ways of life, and an increasing awareness of global ecological crisis.<sup>2</sup> This age of ‘liquid modernity’, to use Zygmunt Bauman’s phrase, is an era where the ‘contact zone’ now spreads throughout the world.<sup>3</sup> If, in the classic age of exploration, the contact zone could be located on the margin, on the beach where Captain Cook met the indigenes, then in the contemporary world contact takes places regularly, all around us. In contemporary fiction, the streets, airports, public squares and downtowns of the world have become loci for narratives of contact with strangers. And the globalized world, often celebrated in the dizzying futurism of business and political pundits, takes on a very different aspect when looked at through fiction’s prism or through the skepti-

cal passages of recent travel writing. The strangers are now amongst us; the distance of empire, of metropolises and their far-flung colonies, has given way to the death of distance, and an era of mass nomadism. Writers and literary intellectuals, themselves usually products of this world, have charted over the past twenty years the emergence of this global 'street': new spaces of mingling and co-existence, but also suspicion and hostility. Words such as 'stranger' and 'strange' have taken on a new significance.

My focus here is on the emergence of a globalist fiction during the last thirty or so years, an English-language narrative that radically-reconfigured Henry James's 'international theme' in the 1970s and thereafter. Unsettlingly, there is no shortage of contenders for a recent literary genealogy (spread across nations, spilling over from any single locus) focused on Manuel Castell's 'Fourth World': works set amongst the global underclass, amidst the Civil Wars and refugee camps that make up a large part of 'liquid modernity'.<sup>4</sup> A whole recent literature – one thinks of works by Edwidge Danticat, Nuruddin Farah, Abdulrazak Gurnah – focuses on refugees, civil wars, resettlement camps.<sup>5</sup> In this paper I want to suggest some initial readings of this writing by looking at two of the best-known Fourth World narratives: Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and Eggers's *What is the What*.

In an interview with *Wasafiri* (2004), Michael Ondaatje reflected on the composition of *Anil's Ghost* (2000). He expressed his resistance to fore-planning and his commitment to writing as a space for discovery. Central to Ondaatje's aesthetic is a concept of the 'open' text and a commitment to composition as an exploratory act. 'I begin a book with shamelessly little to go on.' This process is a movement out of self and into otherness: 'The books I distrust...are those that are basically advertisements for the self.' 'What the novel should allow, with all its time, space and language, is the opportunity to enter another life, or to invent something small and distinct, or to make indelible a stranger lost to history.' The process of making such a figure 'indelible' begins in the drawing together of 'experienced or imagined fragments': 'Gradually these pieces of mica are drawn together to make up a scene, then a landscape, eventually a vista and social context.'<sup>6</sup> One might see this process as the result of a post-colonial writer's resistance to plot and pre-determined narrative, *tout court*. Even in his own work, the novelist remains on guard against preconceived

narratives and committed to productive hesitancy. The opposite to such hesitancy (and the beautiful patterns of mica that then result), is *plot* in all its design and determinism. In Ondaatje's work the movement into 'otherness' he described in 2004, combined with his open and exploratory compositional method, has implications for how we read his texts. Writing about others, and writing through fragments, Ondaatje constructs texts that demand careful and hesitant exploration. Resistant to fore-planned narratives as he is, he shapes elliptical narratives where meaning emerges in an understated way, and where the reader is actively implicated in processes of creative reading. Ondaatje's readers have to work hard to place the pieces of mica together, in order to give shape to larger pictures. His books present a variety of documents and texts that establish a complex and layered relationship to 'liquid modernity'.

*Anil's Ghost* begins with an 'Author's Note' which gives a conspectus of the Sri Lankan civil conflicts and tells us, 'the characters and incidents in the novel are invented'.<sup>7</sup> The novel's epigraph is a 'Miner's folk song' – a plaintive worksong; then comes an italicized passage obliquely introducing Anil, placing her in conjunction with some form of forensic activity and tangentially referring to Central America in a brief allusion to the 'Guatemalan heat'.<sup>8</sup> A further page break, the insertion of the simple word 'Sarath' (a name? a place?), and then we decidedly enter a narrative about a 'she' who one imagines will be the center of a narrative already charged with many puzzles of time and place. Ceaselessly, in spite of the syntactical simplicity of Ondaatje's clean sentences, the text presents us with narrative secrets whose meanings will only be revealed as the novel unfolds. Take the opening sentences of 'Sarath':

She arrived in early March, the plane landing at Katunayake airport before the dawn. They had raced it ever since coming over the west coast of India, so that now passengers stepped onto the tarmac in the dark.

By the time she was out of the terminal the sun had risen. In the West she'd read, *The dawn comes up like thunder*, and she knew she was the only one in the classroom to recognize the phrase physically. Though it was never abrupt thunder to her. It was first of all the noise of chick-

ens and carts and modest morning rain or a man squeakily cleaning the windows with newspaper in another part of the house.

As soon as her passport with the light-blue UN bar was processed, a young official approached and moved alongside her. She struggled with her suitcases but he offered her no help.<sup>9</sup>

Ondaatje is, of course, a poet as well as a novelist, and his sentences' careful weighting demands we read these paragraphs as prose poetry: a poetry framed by larger patterns of prolepsis and recursion. The meaning of an Ondaatje text is almost encoded, such is the pervasion of ellipsis in his structures. His thinking through of cultural and political problems works poetically by forsaking explicit argumentation in favor of oblique strategies. The careful selection and juxtaposition of words encourages us to lean more heavily on those terms, to see them as a language that characters might live or die by, not the shopworn discourse of the public realm. In this passage the repetition of 'west'/'West', and the different nuances of the term suggested when it is non-capitalized and then capitalized, will resonate through the novel: 'west' as a merely geographical term, and 'West' as a form of political-ideological banner. Anil, a young Sri Lankan woman, is educated and trained in the West, and various forms of western place (London, the western United States) serve as counterpoint to the text's main 'Oriental' focus. The larger question the narrative asks is how the West can understand – through intercessions such as the United Nations agency for which Anil works – the non-western world. Through these repetitions and minor flickers of terminology Ondaatje encourages us into a creative reading process where we recognize global politics as a linguistic mapping of foreign cultures. His technique of near-superimposition or skewed-repetition, where a word is layered on top or another which it almost (but not quite) resembles, is vital. There is 'the west' and 'the West'. These near-echoes – this flickering – helps to create a relentless but enticing instability in *Anil's Ghost*, a ceaseless disruption.<sup>10</sup> Moving through the prose, looking for such flickers, Ondaatje's reader is above all discriminating, alerted to semiotic quivers – a 'made' reader (to adopt

David Trotter's term). The forms of careful reading are not dissimilar to that attentive humanity which is one of Ondaatje's themes: nursing in *The English Patient*; forensic science in *Anil's Ghost*.

Here is the moment where Ondaatje positions in his story a very explicit commentary on how stories end:

"'American movies, English books – remember how they all end?' Gamini asked that night. 'The American or the Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That's it. The camera leaves with him. He looks out of the window at Mombasa or Vietnam or Jakarta, someplace now he can look at through the clouds. The tired hero. A couple of words to the girl beside him. He's going home. So the war, to all purposes, is over. That's enough reality for the West. It's probably the history of the last two hundred years of Western political writing. Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit.'" <sup>11</sup> (*Anil's Ghost*)

How stories 'end' is symptomatic of how the West reads the developing world. In conventional narratives ('American movies, English books') the conclusion is a moment of departure: the sojourner leaves. For the 'tired hero', the war 'is over.' For Ondaatje's character, Gamini, war cannot end with departure; he is a doctor, embedded in civil war's unending catastrophes. "'Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit.'" Gamini's words constitute a warning about the fate of narrative in this age of refugees: the lure of departure and false endings, the temptation to turn crisis into 'a book.' To write a book might seem a testimonial act, but in Gamini's sarcastic diagnosis it is an evasive act. After all, 'the war...is over': 'That's enough reality for the West.' How to end – when to end – can be acts of power. The moment of departure is closure for the Western architects of narrative, who will now 'hit the circuit'; but for those left behind, the story continues. Ondaatje nudges us to think about narrative's sense of an ending and how endings relate to the construction of global narratives of involvement and disengagement between the rest and the West.

## 2. *Dave Eggers and the refugee crisis*

Read backwards from *What is the What*, Eggers's career shapes itself around a series of questions. What are the limits of suffering? How can the author act on the world? What is the relationship between the fictional and the documentary? Is travel writing a significant form? His earlier work negotiated boundaries between the real and the fictionalized, and displayed an abiding interest in sorrow. From a formalistic point-of-view, Eggers's career has occupied two intriguingly and superficially incompatible positions: the work emerges from the tensions of a writing rooted in highly personalized experience (*Staggering Genius's* tragedies, for instance) and his love of collaborative, social authorship (found throughout many of the activities of his *McSweeney's* publishing house).

In Valentino Achak Deng's Preface to *What is the What* the purposeful tone underlines Deng's agency in the work's production by underscoring emotional commitment and didactic impact. 'This book is the soulful account of my life', but also 'As you read this book, you will learn about the two and a half million people who have perished in Sudan's civil war.' The claims for personal authenticity and public enlightenment are familiar features of the American writing of 'witness' (one of *McSweeney's* imprints is, indeed, 'Voice of Witness'); the text's complexity grows from a relationship between a didacticism rooted in authenticity and Eggers's formalistic manipulations. Here is Deng's characterization of the work's genesis:

This book was born out of the desire on the part of myself and the author to reach out to others to help them understand the atrocities many successive governments of Sudan committed before and during the civil war. To that end, over the course of many years, 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. It should not be taken as a definitive history of the civil war in Sudan, nor of the Sudanese people, nor even of my brethren, those known as the Lost Boys. This is simply one man's story, subjectively



told. And though it is fictionalized, it should be noted that the world I have known is not so different from the one depicted within these pages. We live in a time when even the most horrific events in this book could occur, and in most cases did occur.<sup>12</sup>

The twists and turns, self-corrections (and contradictions) are fascinating. This is a work of fiction, a tale 'subjectively told', but 'the world I have known is not so different.' For Deng and Eggers, there is an entwined moral and political point to collaboration: the desire 'to reach out to others to help them understand.' That is, collaboration, and the complexity of the creative relationship between the two men, are framed by the necessity of making contact with a wider audience. The real world and its political turmoil frame authorship. Authorship thus possesses a political necessity, even if the act of making fiction remains flagrantly central.

The dialogue between the two men, and Valentine's preface to the novel, raises crucial questions of agency and authorship. Whose book is this? One can read this passage as an answer to the accusation, surely anticipated by Eggers, that he had created a subaltern tale: terrifying African material finally signed by the white author. The novel is subtitled 'The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng' and 'A Novel', and then carries Eggers's name. The semiotic shaping of the book's design and title carries mixed messages, foregrounding both Eggers's writing, and its status as fiction, while placing Deng at the center and underlining the work's autobiographical nature.

'We live in a time when even the most horrific events in this book could occur,' write Eggers/Deng. This sense of witness and urgency creates the hybrid forms of Eggers's recent work, where overt didacticism merges with baroque formalism. In a sense, Eggers places post-modern technical machinery at the service of a political writing of engagement that Steinbeck would have understood. One such technique is to construct imaginary conversations as a means to create imaginary American/global communities. Both *What is the What* and his great globalist novel, *You Shall Know Our Velocity!* feature imaginary conversations where the protagonist conceives himself transcending the barriers between people in order to make empa-

thetic human connection. In *Velocity* Eggers imagined conversations between his American traveler, Will, and the foreign hosts whose languages he cannot understand. Will has actual dialogues with these Others, but also imagined dialogues, played out in his head and introduced with a dash rather than inverted commas. Some of these imagined conversations touch directly on the novel's exploration of the young Americans' charitable responsibilities to the impoverished global South:

- You do more harm than good by choosing recipients this way. It cannot be fair.
- How ever is it fair?
- You want the control money provides.
- We want the opposite. We are giving up our control.
- While giving it up you are exercising power. The money is not yours.
- I know this.<sup>13</sup>

These imagined conversations enable the Eggers character to create a fragile and temporary but enticing sense of community: moments of ironic contact and contingent solidarity. The same device appears in *What is the What*, as Valentine Deng imagines himself in conversation with the members of the gym where he works.

Fourth-world narrative often works with narrative's basic building blocks, returning us to elemental patterns of cause-and-effect, a tragic sequentiality familiar from classical tragedy or the Book of Job. *What is the What* asks the reader to think about justice in terms of brutal narrative sequence: expectation and prolepsis, flashback, unforeseen event. Is what happens to Deng 'fair' in any conceivable political or metaphysical way? His story strains the limits of what narrative can contain, but it is only through the basic templates of narrative sequence that one can start making sense of what has happened. His life is a compound of the relentlessly static – fixed in space and in terms of his life-opportunities (the refugee camp) – and the unsettlingly fluid, with its sudden migrations or abrupt violence. In this lifetime of numbing inaction and deathly action, the middle-ground of human experience seems to have disappeared. For Eggers, Deng's story must have presented fundamental problems of

narrative sequence. Eggers and Deng faced a problem of narrative proportion in constructing *What is the What*: the life was either emptied of action, or too full of it.

For much of his life, events work against Valentine Deng's human agency. War-zones, refugee camps, African bush, and American margin: this is a pilgrim's progress through places where it is almost impossible to become the agent of one's own life. Deng becomes a dangling man, caught between action, awaiting movement and catharsis. Deng's world is that of the highway or the airport waiting room, and the manifold cities of the Sudanese diaspora. It is, as his narrative makes clear, simply rather difficult to make sense of a globe where one might remain fixed in a refugee for over a decade, only to enter the free world of transience, where one's friends remain close only in terms of cellphone contact.

I use the term 'dangling man' deliberately: the narrative echoes classic twentieth-century American novels such as *Dangling Man*. *What is the What* wears its inter-textuality lightly, but one cannot but be reminded of an earlier generation of American novels that diagnosed the self's existential crises. Deng is both an invisible man and a dangling man, either hardly seen and recognized by the Americans around, or caught in a limbo where nothing ever seems to happen. *What is the What* is a suggestive updating of these American Century texts, though even as he revisits the motifs of those texts, Eggers transforms them. The heroes of Bellow's work (one thinks of *Dangling Man* itself, but also of *Seize the Day* and *Herzog*), of Mailer's work (especially *An American Dream*), and of Ralph Ellison, too, move between cathartic and violent explosions of energy and self-scrutinizing stasis. But Deng 'dangles' between possible futures less out of a philosophical expansiveness and opportunity, as would a Bellow hero or Mailer's Rojack, than because the economy and the educational system stymie his development. Crime, social breakdown and the multiple traumas of the refugee create other limbos – a stumbling movement across the post-modern landscape. Physical violence, as with the assault at the start of the novel, locks the refugee into brutalized stasis. Unlike Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Deng will ultimately have a political role to play – the very act of working on the book, and continuing to publicize the Sudanese Lost Boys, shows that Deng has rejected the radical isolationism of Ellison's hero, locked

away in his basement in last desperate defense of autonomy. Such a fate had seemed likely at the start of *What is the What*, but the communitarian vision of Eggers and Deng carries the protagonist out of the basement and onto the street.

The text's cultural work is communitarian, but not necessarily 'national.' 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. In fact, he describes himself as a 'representative of Sudan.' Given the racial and religious civil conflicts rending his country, the assertion of national identity is telling. Even so, in the face of such upheaval it might nevertheless be too difficult to shed one identity and take on another: Deng remains committed to the return to his homeland, at least within the narrative span of this work.

A major feature of the Anglophone literary world of the past three decades has been the growth of an exploratory internationalism located in magazines such as the reconfigured and re-launched *Granta* or *Transition*, and in new magazines such as *Guernica* (an online journal) or *Wasafiri*. Sometimes read within the ambit of 'post-colonial' studies, such journals also mark out a territory that is less 'post-' than 'pre-': articulations of a critical cultural internationalism that sits alongside, and interrogates, the assumptions of mainstream geo-political theory, with its systems analysis, its 'clash of civilizations.' In works by Ondaatje and Eggers, we see the fictional counterpart of the *reportage* or documentary photography that fills *Granta* or *transition*: turned towards the 'real', these are texts that seem to blend the documentary and the imagined, while remaining politically *engagee*, even didactic. And within such texts, the answer to the question posed by this panel, 'what does history have to do with it?', is that 'history' has, quite simply, *too much* to do with it. 'History' might simply erase Ondaatje's characters or Eggers's friend Valentine Deng. Writing then becomes, for these authors, a form of permanent marking, of cosmopolitan testimony, of 'making strangers indelible.'

# Notes

- 1 Ulrich Beck, 'The Cosmopolitan Perspective: Sociology in the Second Age of Modernity,' *British Journal of Sociology* 15:1 (2000), reprinted in Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen, eds., *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context, and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 62.
- 2 Beck, 'The Cosmopolitan Perspective,' 70-1, 79.
- 3 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).
- 4 Castells uses 'The Fourth World' to encompass zones of social exclusion within developed nations (for instance, in the inner cities of major American metropolises, or the Parisian *banlieues*) and the chronic 'underdevelopment' in many countries outside the industrial world. Contemporary authors such as Dave Eggers and William Vollmann, in their globalism and their attentiveness to domestic social exclusion (*What is the What* is an excellent example of this dualism) are 'Fourth World' novelists. Manuel Castells, 'The Rise of the Fourth World,' in David Held and Anthony McGrew, ed., *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 348-54.
- 5 See, for instance: Nuruddin Farah, *Links* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004); Edwidge Danticat, *The Dew Breaker* (New York: Knopf, 2004); Abdulrazak Gurnah, *By the Sea* (New York: New Press, 2001).
- 6 Michael Ondaatje, 'Pale Flags: Reflections on Writing Anil's Ghost,' *Wasafiri* 42 (2004), 61-2. See also 'Michael Ondaatje in Conversation with Maya Jaggi,' *Wasafiri* 32 (2000), 5-11.
- 7 Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* (London: Picador, 2000), no page given.
- 8 *Anil's Ghost*, 5.
- 9 *Anil's Ghost*, 9.
- 10 One might see Ondaatje's unsettling of our sense of the globe at this foundational level as a classic postcolonial maneuver. Recent historical work stresses how our sense of the world has been thoroughly shaped by European models of cartography. See the discussions, for instance, of the role of Mercator projection in map-making, a 'distortion' of space that, as Jack Goody points out, 'took on a specifically European slant that has dominated modern map-making throughout the world.' Jack Goody, *The Theft of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), 21.
- 11 *Anil's Ghost*, 285-6
- 12 Dave Eggers, *What is the What: the Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2006), 5.
- 13 Dave Eggers, *You Shall Know our Velocity!* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 118.