'[N]ew constellations for thinking about normativity': Rethinking Judith Butler's 'frame' with reference to Dave Eggers' *What Is the What*

Daniel O'Gorman, Oxford Brookes University

This article aims to critique Judith Butler's recent use of the concept of the 'frame' in the context of the war on terror. While many of the questions that Butler raises about the ways in which violence is framed in the post-9/11 world are perspicacious, I argue that this conceptual reliance on framing actually stands in the way of her ability to answer them. Instead, it causes her to inadvertently exacerbate precisely the kind of framing process that she is ostensibly attempting to deconstruct. By making this argument, I do not mean to negate the ultimate goals of her project, nor the headway she makes towards them in other ways. Neither am I attempting to undercut her ideologically, by taking what some might interpret as a Badiouian position that rejects her as a proponent of a nihilistic 'ethics of difference'.[1] Rather, my aim is essentially to push her thinking further, holding her to account when she claims that her point is 'not to paralyze judgement, but to insist that we must devise new constellations for thinking about normativity if we are to proceed in intellectually open and comprehensive ways to grasp and evaluate our world'.[2] I suggest that Butler's analysis of the frame *does* in fact involve a partial paralysis of judgement, which prevents these 'new constellations for thinking about normativity' from being as fully realised as they otherwise might be.

With reference to Dave Eggers' biographical novel, *What Is the What* (2006), a text that actively strives to challenge the media-driven post-9/11 framing of reality by telling the 'real-life' story of a marginalised figure, this article contends that literature can prompt its reader to think about the framing of contemporary reality in ways that may help more radical 'new constellations' to begin to emerge. I make this case in two parts. In the first, I analyse Butler's understanding of the frame, showing why her approach to literature plays a

1

key part in what is problematic about her theorisation. In the second, I explain how Eggers'
novel offers a more nuanced and radical approach to the process of framing post-9/11 reality;
an approach that foregrounds the textuality of the frame and suggests that the reality it limns
might be more open to interpretation than Butler's analysis allows.

1. Butler's frame

'Grievability' and new empathic ties

Butler has employed the notion of the frame as a means of helping to explain why, during
wartime, the Western mass media can sometimes appear to deem the lives of certain people
more worthy of grief than those of others. The idea is developed primarily over the course of
two of her most recent major studies: *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009). In
each book, Butler attempts to confront what she identifies as a dehumanising 'derealization
of loss' – or in other words, an 'insensitivity to human suffering and death' – that is enacted
through an imbalance in the degree of compassion with which prominent media outlets
respond to (or 'frame') death, depending on where it takes place and who it is that dies.[3] In
response, Butler aims for an ethics based upon the establishment of new empathetic global
ties. She insists that the creation of such ethical ties is 'not a matter of a simple entry of the
excluded into an established ontology, but an insurrection at the level of ontology, a critical
opening up of the questions, What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be
unmade?'.[4]

   In *Precarious Life*, as an example of what she describes as a kind of 'hierarchy of
grief' in Western discourse, Butler cites the case of a Palestinian citizen of the United States
who attempted to submit obituaries to the *San Francisco Chronicle* for two families killed
by Israeli troops, only to be eventually rejected on the grounds that the newspaper 'did not
wish to offend anyone'.[5] She suggests that by placing these lives outside of its frame of

'grievability', the newspaper's politically-motivated editorial stance might actively contribute to the perpetuation of an imperialistic culture of violence: '[w]hat is the relation,' she asks, 'between the violence by which these ungrievable lives were lost and the prohibition on their public grievability? Are the violence and the prohibition both permutations of the same violence?'.[6] She later asserts that media coverage of the war on terror is generally constituted by images that 'do not show violence', but that contain 'violence in the frame [of] what is shown'.[7] The resulting 'derealization of loss', she posits, 'becomes the mechanism through which dehumanization is accomplished, ... [taking] place neither inside nor outside the image, but through the very framing by which the image is contained'.[8] As its title suggests, in *Frames of War* Butler explores the idea further, emphasising its power to capture and to dominate: 'As we know,' she writes,

> "to be framed" is a complex phrase in English: a picture is framed, but so too is a criminal (by the police), or an innocent person (by someone nefarious, often the police), so that to be framed is to be set up, or to have evidence planted against one that ultimately "proves" one's guilt.[9]

She goes on to explain that:

> [t]o call the frame into question is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable. ... Something exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality; in other words, something occurs that does not conform to our established understanding of things'.[10]

The drive to reduce and contain reality causes the frame to help perpetuate a kind of dominating, Orientalist epistemic violence against those represented within it. It is, as such,

of particular use to those in power during times of war, whether they consciously exploit it or not.

Forestalling judgement

As I have already stated, I argue that Butler's analysis of the frame is problematic because it partially forestalls judgement, and as such ultimately maintains some of the 'mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion' (to borrow Paul Gilroy's phrase) that underpin the very normativity that she wishes to challenge.[11] Despite numerous attempts to avoid an over-reliance on East/West or Third World/First World binaries, I would suggest that such binaries remain implicit in her argument: while the frames through which war is represented are shaped by what she claims are a set of hegemonic, normative values, she never gives any clear sense of precisely what these values are or by whom they are perpetuated, besides a loosely defined 'non-figurable and, to some extent, non-intentional operation of [state] power'.[12] While in Butler's earlier work on gender, the normative values under analysis are of a clearly defined type (heteronormativity, in particular, specifically denotes a privileging of heterosexual experience in a deeply gendered contemporary society), in the broader context of US foreign policy the values implied by the term have become considerably more diffuse.

It is also worth noting that Butler's emphasis on the power of mainstream news outlets to reinforce 'certain larger norms' makes almost no acknowledgement of blogs, social media and other online methods of news distribution: as David Gauntlett argues in his article 'Media Studies 2.0', '[c]onventional concerns with power and politics are [now] reworked ... so that the notion of super-powerful media industries invading the minds of a relatively passive population is compelled to recognise and address the context of more widespread creation and participation'.[13] This is not to say that such innovations have necessarily undercut mass media power, but simply that given their patent impact on the ways in which contemporary war is framed, it is odd that she merely glances over them.

The main problem is not simply that Butler avoids a detailed explication of her

suggested link between media framing and state power: more importantly, it is that she appears to make an implicit assumption that the reader shares her own value judgements about the norms that this link is perpetuating. Developing the point with a discussion of the framing of the war on terror during the 2005 Abu Ghraib controversy, for example, Butler suggests that 'the problem ... is not just internal to the life of the media, but involves the structuring effects that certain larger norms, themselves often racializing and civilizational, have on what is provisionally called "reality"'.[14] This is, of course, not a new claim, and has been repeated frequently in the dozens of books about 9/11 and the mainstream media published in Europe and the United States throughout the last decade.[15] My point is that Butler makes her argument in a way that reinforces precisely the kind of 'structuring effects' on reality that she ostensibly aims to critique. Specifically, her use of the noncommittal pronoun, 'certain', *appeals* to her reader's existing prejudices rather than challenging them, an appeal that recurs when she repeats the word at key points throughout: 'certain secular conceptions of history'; 'a certain conception of freedom'.[16] The implied meaning in each instance is easy to determine, but only in an imprecise, conversational sort of way: to discern what she means in more exact terms is a difficult task, and any attempt at detailed interpretation may vary in key ways from what Butler herself has in mind. I do not mean to be pedantic here (it would of course be impossible for Butler to avoid using shorthand completely), but in each of these cases, 'certain' is used to indicate – and to subtly pass judgement upon – a set of 'conceptions' that are of central concern to her thesis. By relying on the reader to take her implied meaning for granted, she reinforces an existing, consensually agreed-upon left-wing 'constellation for thinking about normativity', which by her own reasoning should itself be subject to an 'ontological insurrection'.

Mark Neocleous identifies a similar lack of specificity in his review of *Frames of War* for *Radical Philosophy*:

Symptomatic of the lack of clarity concerning the book's central purpose is the

number of rhetorical questions that appear again and again through the text, with some rhetorical questions containing more than one question. ... One is tempted to respond with a version of that item of 1980s' corporate bullshit directed at workers who bring their bosses problems when they should be bringing solutions: 'Don't give me questions, Judith, give me answers'.[17]

Although I would not go as far as Neocleous in my critique (his extremely harsh review dismisses *Frames of War* all-but-entirely), highlighting Butler's rhetorical questions is important because it again draws attention to an apparent reluctance on her part to substantiate the normativity that 'we' need to devise new constellations for thinking about. It raises the possibility that this reluctance to specify might actually be an inability, as doing so would require her to question the ideological assumptions upon which her own left-wing academic language relies. The problem here is that by exempting these assumptions from a full analysis, Butler comes uncomfortably close to perpetuating precisely the kind of unhelpful cultural relativism that, in its more crass manifestation as conspiracy theory, she elsewhere rightly dismisses as 'simply [another way] of asserting US priority and encoding US omnipotence'.[18]

A problem for literature: the 'visual divide' and *Poems from Guantánamo*

As I have already indicated, I do not dispute Butler's basic assertion that ideologically inflected norms of one kind or another are at play in the process of framing reality: she explicitly accepts that 'full inclusion and full exclusion are not the only options', and that, as such, 'the point [of analysis] would not be to locate what is "in" or "outside" the frame, but what vacillates between those two locations, and what, foreclosed, becomes encrypted in the frame itself'.[19] However, the nuance of this argument is once again undercut later on, when she resorts to an analysis of the globe that does not blur the boundary between the 'inside'

and the 'outside', but instead relies on an overly clear-cut 'visual divide' between the First and Third worlds:

> [t]he critique of the frame is, of course, beset by the problem that the presumptive viewer is "outside" the frame, over "here" in a first world context, and those who are depicted remain nameless and unknown. In this way, the critique I have been following stays on this side of the visual divide, offering a first-world ethic and politic that would demand an outraged and informed response on the part of those whose government perpetrates or permits such torture.[20]

Butler is, admittedly, trying hard to question the discursive structures in which her own 'ethic and politic' is framed. Nevertheless, it is also evident that the characterisation of this ethic and politic as 'first world' – and, thus, '"outside"' the frame – relies on an assumption that the 'presumptive viewer' has no meaningful access to the world on the other side of the visual divide. By this I do not mean to make the Orientalist argument that this 'third world' reality is actually in some way straightforwardly knowable. Nor do I want to suggest that the representations of it within Western media-driven frames might be more accurate, so to speak, than Butler claims. Rather, what I am taking issue with is specifically the implication, inherent in this notion of a visual divide, that the 'first world' reality on one side of the frame is somehow less authentic than the 'third world' reality on the other: as she has herself argued elsewhere, on the topic of Giorgio Agamben's heavy reliance on the categories of sovereignty and *bare life* in his analysis of post-9/11 US counterterrorism policy, '[w]e need more complex ways of understanding the multivalence and tactics of power to understand forms of resistance, agency, and counter-mobilization that elude or stall state power'.[21] The idea that the frame can divide visual reality into clear-cut 'sides' is fundamentally flawed, and contradicts the more complex analysis of the framing process that Butler undertakes elsewhere in her study.

This division of reality into authentic and inauthentic experience is most clearly evident in Butler's discussion of Marc Falkoff's poetry anthology, *Poems from Guantánamo: The Detainees Speak*, a volume which 'includes twenty-two poems that survived the censorship of the US Department of Defense'.[22] To place this in context, Butler draws attention to the book's claim that '25,000 lines of poetry written by [detainee] Shaikh Abdurraheem Muslim Dost were destroyed by military personnel'.[23] In her analysis, the poems in the collection 'offer a different kind of moral responsiveness, a kind of interpretation that may, under certain conditions, contest and explode the dominant schisms running through the national and military ideology'.[24] In addition, they 'constitute and convey a moral responsiveness to a military rationale that has restricted moral responsiveness to violence in incoherent and unjust ways'.[25] Although Butler's use of the word 'explode' is uncharacteristically hyperbolic, the notion that the poems have the potential to in some way challenge the 'dominant schisms' in contemporary political ideology is perfectly legitimate: they provide a perspective on reality that is at odds with that contained within most Western media frames.[26]

Indeed, in her close reading of a selection of individual poems, there is little evidence of any such explosion of frames taking place. Her analyses are generally – and to their credit – more subtle than this, focusing on the ways in which the physicality of the poems (some of which were originally carved into Styrofoam cups) has helped the detainees to potentially 're-establish a social connection to the world, even when there is no concrete reason to think that any such connection is possible'.[27] In doing so, her close readings draw attention to the ways in which the poems *blur*, rather than explode, the emotional boundaries between the United States and the rest of the world. For instance, in her response to a poem by Abdulla Majid al-Noaimi, which contains the lines 'the tears of someone else's longing are affecting me / My chest cannot take the vastness of emotion', she writes: 'he is, as it were, dispossessed by these tears that are in him, but that are not exclusively his alone'.[28] This is not an explosion of the frame so much as a reconfiguration of it. The closest that

Butler comes to providing clear evidence of how the frame is exploded comes in her suggestion that the volume's opening poem, a meditation on the paradox of 'fight[ing] for peace' by Shaker Abdurraheem Aamer, 'expos[es] the hypocrisy of the US military'.[29] This may well be the case, but even if one takes his 'drive toward exposure' (as she goes on to put it) at face value, it remains a far cry from an explosion of the dominant schisms that characterise the frame's underlying ideology.[30]

It is a little later on that her argument becomes most problematic, when she writes that 'the poems break through the dominant ideologies that rationalize war through recourse to righteous invocations of peace; they confound and expose the words of those who torture in the name of freedom and kill in the name of peace'.[31] One might make the obvious point here that the poetry anthology, edited with a transparent political agenda by a vocal US liberal, itself clearly exists within its own left-wing ideological frame (one that is, in turn, 'framed' by the fact that thousands more poems were destroyed by the military). What is more troubling, however, is that when Butler suggests that the poems 'break through the dominant ideologies that rationalize war', she is reading them with a striking absence of critical analysis. While her description of the poetry 'as evidence and as appeal' indicates that she is approaching it as testimony first and as art second, nowhere does she question the veracity of the writing's content.[32] If the Department of Defense has been draconian in its censorship, then I would suggest that Butler is overly trusting, granting the poems a sense of truthfulness and authorial reliability that would surely be absent in her response to any other text, literary or otherwise.

'The body breathes,' she writes, 'breathes itself into words, and finds some provisional survival there. But once the breath is made into words, the body is given over to another, in the form of an appeal'.[33] The metaphor of the body 'breath[ing] itself into words' imbues the poetry with a sense of physical authenticity that Butler clearly does not intend to be taken literally, but I would argue that her need to resort to overtly figurative language here in the first place belies the notion that the poems are in some way 'break[ing] through'

an occlusive, homogenous frame. She writes that the poems constitute 'a network of transitive affects', and that they are 'insurgent interpretations', but I think it would be more accurate to say that this is what they *bring about*. As with any work of literature, rather than breaking through or exploding a homogenous frame, the poems can necessarily only *connect* with the complex matrix of signs that make up any reader's individual contextual reality – or, to borrow a term from Derek Attridge, *idioculture* – at a given time. (Attridge defines idioculture as 'the singular, and constantly changing, combination of cultural materials and proclivities that constitutes any individual subject, the product of a specific history of exposure to a variety of cultural phenomena').[34] I am thinking in particular here of Derrida's much-cited argument that:

> there has never been anything but writing, there have never been anything but supplements and substitutional significations which could only arise in a chain of differential references. The "real" supervenes or is added only in taking meaning from a trace or an invocation of supplements [*un appel de supplément*]. And so on indefinitely, for we have read *in the text* that the absolute present, Nature, what is named by words like 'real mother,' e.t.c. have always already escaped, have never existed; that what inaugurates meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence.[35]

The poems may reconfigure the reader's reality in a slightly new way or they may not, but in either case, what takes place is a process of reshaping an already existing reality, not the replacement of a false reality with one that is somehow more true.

In what follows, I aim to demonstrate how Dave Eggers' *What Is the What* (which, like Falkoff's volume, attempts to challenge media-driven post-9/11 frames of reality by telling the story of those whom they marginalise), can be read in a way that undermines, first,

Butler's understanding of the frame as a structure inflexible enough to be exploded, and second, the problematic authenticity that – as in her reading of the Guantánamo poems – she implicitly confers upon those who are subjugated by it. I suggest that a more nuanced understanding of the framing process is evident in a number of questions arising from the book's authorship, not least that of whether it fits within the conventional narrative frames of fiction or non-fiction at all.

2. '[A]n insurrection at the level of ontology': *What Is the What*

'Imaginary journalism'

Dave Eggers is co-founder of the San Francisco-based non-profit *Voice of Witness* book series, which publishes volumes of oral history intended to '[e]ngender greater awareness, discussion and action in response to [social and human rights] injustices'.[36] He is well known for his advocacy of storytelling as a means of helping to encourage political change. This advocacy has been evident in Eggers' own writing since around the time of the organisation's establishment in 2004, and is clearly at play (albeit in a gestative form) in his short story collection of the same year, *How We Are Hungry*, which includes within it the arrestingly-titled flash fiction piece, 'What It Means When a Crowd in a Faraway Nation Takes a Soldier Representing Your Own Nation, Shoots Him, Drags Him From His Vehicle, and Then Mutilates Him in the Dust'. Evoking a 'derealization of loss' not unlike that which Butler discusses, 'What it Means...' describes a man's feelings as he stares, while 'sitting in his home, comfortable, wearing warm socks and drinking orange juice', at photograph of a soldier being tortured to death in another part of the world.[37] Eggers has since published a number of politically-charged works, including the critically acclaimed *Zeitoun* (2009), a powerful biographical account of the injustices undergone by a Syrian American man and

his family in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, as well as the novel *A Hologram For the King* (2012), a parable about the wane of American power during the global recession.

The point at which Eggers' writing first develops beyond identifying a *need* for the kind of new empathic ties that Butler calls for (as in 'What it Means…'), and instead begins actively striving to engender them (as in *Zeitoun*), can be traced to his 2006 publication, *What Is the What*, the novelised autobiography of real-life Sudanese 'Lost Boy' Valentino Achak Deng. The book recounts Deng's life story from an early childhood in the Southern Sudanese village of Marial Bai in the early 1980s, through his experience of death, disease and displacement during the Sudanese civil war, up until his present life as a refugee in the United States after 9/11. At a first glance, the writing appears to do away with the stylistic reflexivity characteristic of Eggers' earlier work (*A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* [2000], *You Shall Know Our Velocity* [2002], and *How We Are Hungry*). Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that there is still a degree of hermeneutic playfulness at work in the text, particularly in the games that the narrative plays with the boundary between fact and fiction. Despite being authored (in a literal sense) solely by Eggers, in its Preface, Deng himself claims that 'all of the major events in the book are true. The book is historically accurate, and the world I have known is not different from the one depicted within these pages'.[38] Likewise, the book's flyleaf proclaims its subtitle to be 'The Autobiography of Valentino Achack Deng', but then adds directly beneath this: 'A Novel by Dave Eggers'.[39] As Elizabeth Twitchell notes in an article on the novel for *American Literature*: 'From the very first page of the book, the reader is disoriented, suspended in a space of uncertainty and multiplicity. … "Truth" is subservient to the book's more urgent message, which is grander than the experience of any single person'.[40]

It would be easy to be cynical here by attributing the book's labelling as a novel to the powers of marketing. Its British publisher, Penguin, officially categorises the work as 'fiction' on its back cover, and, as Thomas Jones has pointed out in an otherwise highly

favourable review of it for *The London Review of Books*, '[while it] may make sense from the point of view of publicity and sales ... it also inspires unease: Achak may benefit from the text, but he doesn't own it; he has become a character in a fictionalised version of his life story that legally belongs to someone else'.[41] However, Jones is quick to assert that '[p]ractically speaking, this hardly matters: the motives for and consequences of Eggers's actions are unquestionably benevolent, and the book could not have taken the form it has without Achak's consent and blessing'.[42] Indeed, despite any problems that it might raise, the description of the book as both an autobiography *and* a novel signposts, from the very start, a kind of hermeneutic tension that is at play throughout what initially appears to be (at least by Eggers' standards) a fairly straightforward first-person narrative. Indeed, as Twitchell puts it elsewhere in her article: 'In its blend of fact and fancy, the novel gestures toward a form of empathic exchange that is both self-aware and deeply committed, one that might be capable of refiguring the power relations that have so long bedevilled Western representations of Africa'.[43] In this light, it might be useful to describe the book in the way that David Amsden does in a piece in *New York* magazine: namely, as work of 'imaginary journalism'.[44] (It is for this reason that, throughout this article, I refer to *What Is the What* as 'the book' rather than as 'the novel').

Frames of representation

Deng's narrative can be divided into two chronological frames. First, there is an 'outer' frame, which constitutes his recent life in America, during which he undergoes numerous difficulties and hardships. The most significant of these is the armed robbery of his apartment, the event with which the book opens. In addition to this, there is also an 'inner' frame, in which the adult, refugee Deng tells the story of his late childhood and adolescence as a displaced 'Lost Boy' in Sudan and Kenya during the civil war. He recounts this story, in

fragments, to a number of people that he encounters during his time in the US. However, it is not always entirely clear whether he is literally speaking to these figures, or simply imagining what he would say to them if they would care to listen.

In either case, as Robert Eaglestone has argued in *Studies in the Novel*, the narrative can be viewed, like a number of Holocaust texts, as an 'allegory of failed understanding', in which 'figures not involved in the traumatic events are shown in their misreading or incomprehension of the events involved'.[45] In this way, it is possible to read Deng's 'silent' testimony as roughly analogous to the poems by Guantánamo detainees that Butler discusses, signifying a particular kind of emotional pain alien to mainstream US experience. However, the book makes no suggestion that the incomprehension Deng faces is wholly the result of media-driven frames. Although the people he meets continue to reduce him to a pre-conceived African stereotype (one of his assailants in the first chapter even goes so far as to address him simply as 'Africa'),[46] in each instance it is a matter of choice: all he requires is for them to engage him as an equal and actively listen to his story, yet this repeatedly proves a step too far. It is this *choice* not to listen that is bitingly critiqued in the book's closing sentences: 'How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist'.[47]

The most prominent way in which this artificial boundary between Deng and his US (non-)interlocutors is confronted in the book is through a complete disregard for it in the narrative's form: drawing equally upon both the traditional Sudanese oral storytelling style and the written word of the novel, Eggers gives a new, post-9/11 spin to Salman Rushdie's famous claim that postcolonial fiction is a means by which 'the Empire writes back to the Centre'.[48] This presents a challenge to the logic upon which Butler bases her notion of the frame. Specifically, through its combination of storytelling styles (oral and written), as well as storytelling forms (fiction and non-fiction), the text draws attention to the epistemic violence not only intrinsic to an imperialist framing of the world, but also to that of the outwardly anti-imperialist notion that the framing process can be so powerful as to render

the colonial subject completely unrepresentable. (Butler makes this case with reference to the war on terror, which she suggests is framed by '[a] mechanism through which certain lives and deaths either remain unrepresentable or become represented in ways that effects their capture ... by the war effort'.)[49] The unrepresentability of the colonial other in this case contains within it the presumably unintentional implication that issues of representation are somehow, at least to a degree, less problematic in the case of the uncolonised Western self.

It is the sense of 'either/or' absolutism in this argument that the hybridity of Eggers' narrative reveals to be most problematic. Indeed, the very nature of its blending of influences raises questions about whether 'hybridity' is itself a suitable term for the kind of interweaving of worlds upon which it is founded, or whether it too is part of the same 1990s lexicon of postmodern critical theory in which Butler's notion of the frame is also steeped. After all, hybridity, like the frame, whilst ostensibly acknowledging the hyphenated construction of human identity, remains reliant upon the notion that there are at least two presumably homogenous entities, or worlds, from which the hybrid strands of identity are spun. Even to suggest, as I have, that a narrative like that of *What Is the What*, which combines African and (even more vaguely) 'Western' influences, is to come dangerously close to an essentialising acceptance that there is an African world and a Western world in existence in the first place.

The question of how to configure a new critical language with which to engage this fissiparousness has, of course, been much debated. Perhaps most notably, Deleuze and Guattari have suggested that identity can be better accounted for through the concept of an 'assemblage'; that is, a reality which is literally assembled from the shifting fragments of other assembled realities.[50] However, my point here is not to pit terms like 'assemblage', 'hybridity', and the 'frame' against one other in a lexicological competition. Rather, my aim is to highlight just how contestable each of these terms are when subjected to questioning. Butler herself acknowledges a need for a new idiom, and edges towards a more mellifluous model of reality when she posits that it is no longer sufficient (if indeed it ever was) to think

15

about the globe in terms of a crudely delineated 'First World' and 'Third World'. As she writes in *Precarious Life*: '[w]e would be wrong to think that the First World is *here* and the Third World is *there*. ... These topographies have shifted, and what was once thought of as a border ... is [now] a highly populated site'.[51] Indeed, Eggers' Deng mirrors this point almost exactly when he says: '[s]ome sociologists, liberal ones, might take issue with the notion that one society is behind another, that there is a first world, a third. But southern Sudan is not part of any of these worlds. Sudan is something else, and I cannot find apt comparison'.[52]

The fact that Eggers writes this specifically from a 'non-Western' point of view, wilfully delving into an imaginative representation of Deng's mind, is crucial in that it enables him not only to account for a shifting of topographies, but also to participate in an active deconstruction of them. Although, here, one might again draw attention to the potential ethical problems that such an act of representation might raise, I would once more go along with Elizabeth Twitchell when she suggests that '*What Is the What* engages the specter of discursive imperialism yet undermines its importance by questioning our assumptions about what makes for "authentic" representation. We are left with a voice that is both hybrid and singular, distinctly audible and yet impossible to locate'.[53] Deng's narrative, I would argue, encourages the insurrection at the level of ontology that Butler's analysis ultimately stops short of providing, and it does this not simply by attempting to 'explode' the frames – or 'topographies' – of war, but also by drawing attention to the inherent narcissism of any attempt to delineate reality along the lines of a hegemonic visual divide. In one of a number of instances in which Eggers attempts to convey the universality of Deng's story, he writes: 'I knew that the world was the same everywhere, that there were only inconsequential variations between the suffering in one place and another'.[54] *What Is the What* indicates that in order for new empathic ties to begin to emerge, one needs to recognise the overlap between multiple coexisting, occasionally incommensurable realities,

and as such to emphasise the degree to which human experience, and in particular the experience of violence, is shared.

'[T]he collapsible space between us'

In the book's final paragraph, Deng says that he will continue to tell his stories 'because to do anything else would be less than human'.[55] He then directly addresses the reader, saying: 'I covet your eyes, your ears, the collapsible space between us'.[56] It is the ability of storytelling to literally 'collapse' the space between people, to transcend the barriers of identity, that, in *What Is the What*, is the central component of the ontological insurrection necessary for an establishment of new empathic global ties. It encourages 'new constellations for thinking about normativity' not so much by exploding a dominant frame, but rather by connecting with and reshaping it. In contrast to Butler's argument, empathy is generated through an *increase* in judgement: by imagining oneself into the specificities of Deng's represented experience, one is able to make a more empathically-informed, discriminating response to the violence he has witnessed, and to think even more critically than Butler does about one's own part in it (even if this part simply constitutes a 'first world' impassivity).

The key word here is 'imagining'. I want to avoid falling into the trap of implying that Eggers presents his reader with a straightforwardly authentic account of Deng's experience, as I think Francine Prose comes close to doing in an otherwise insightful review for the *New York Times*:

> You know precisely who the boys were because you have experienced their mass migration and the mass murder that occasioned it through the eyes, and in the compelling voice, of Valentino Achak Deng. By the time the members of Eggers's large and youthful fan base have repeatedly consulted the book's map of East Africa,

tracing the Lost Boys' wanderings, they will be able to visualize the geographical positions of Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya with a clarity surpassing their possibly hazy recall of anything they might have memorized for a World Civilization class.[57]

While Prose is right to suggest that the book will put its readers in a better position to 'visualize' Deng's war-torn East Africa, it is important to remember that this visualisation is an act of imagination: rather than helping the reader to 'know precisely' the experience of the Lost Boys, it does the opposite, drawing urgent attention to exactly how *little* she knows of it, even after sifting through the book's 535 pages. The book does not encourage its reader to know the experience of the other so much as it prompts her to question the extent to which she 'knows' herself. As Attridge puts it in his article: 'Just as the work at the time of its birth [finds] possibilities for otherness within an apparently coherent cultural fabric, embodied in the artist's idioculture, so the work at the time of its reception can exploit the possibilities for otherness in the apparent coherence of the culture embodied in the reader's idioculture'.[58] The book reconfigures the reader's reality not by exploding the frame by which it is limned, but by challenging its perceived coherence: the boundary between the familiar and the strange is rendered newly mellifluous. (In this sense, one might also view the text as a prime example of the kind of 'New Sincerity' that Adam Kelly identifies in the work of David Foster Wallace and his contemporaries: a kind of fiction in which '[f]ormer divisions between self and other morph into conflicts within the self, and a recursive and paranoid cycle of endless anticipation begins, putting in doubt the very referents of terms like "self" and "other," "inner" and "outer"'.)[59]

The imaginative collapsing of space is perhaps most evident in one of the narrative's recurring tropes: shadows. Shadows are prevalent throughout the text. Often they are sinister and frightening: for instance, the army of janjaweed horsemen that descends upon Deng's village at the start of the civil war is described as being 'like a shadow made by a low cloud ... a shadow mov[ing] quickly over the land'.[60] At other times, however, they

18

provide relative safety and relief: in the very same scene, Deng hides from the horsemen 'in the shade ... amid a dense thicket'.[61] Likewise, when, later on, Deng is given shelter in the hut of a village woman who reminds him of his lost mother, he says: 'I missed the shadow of my mother, listening to the sounds inside her. I had not realized how cold I had felt for so long. This woman gave me her shadow and I wanted to live within it until I could be home again'.[62] In most cases throughout the book, however, the signification of these shadows is ambiguous. The Lost Boys are described as inhabiting a 'shadow world' [63], and are themselves frequently referred to as 'shadows'.[64] In other words, shadows occupy an ambiguous area somewhere in the middle of a continuum between dark and light. Neither good nor evil, moral nor immoral, shadows work as a kind of figurative tie between the many worlds that are brought into contact through the nexus of the text. They reflect the shifting hermeneutic ambiguity engendered by the narrative itself, collapsing the space between the worlds of fact and fiction, the text and its context. More importantly, they attest to an understanding of the mechanics of representation that is more fluid than that offered by Butler's outline of the frame.

9/11 and the language of the frame

This more fluid framing of reality is evident in the way that the Sudanese war casts its shadow over another traumatic event in the text: 9/11. The book is, of course, ostensibly 'about' Sudan, but – as with many contemporary US novels – its structure makes it impossible to read without also thinking about 9/11 and the war on terror.[65] The reader is prompted to empathise with the plight of the Lost Boys through a figurative tying of their largely unreported collective trauma to the more widely discussed experience of New Yorkers following September 11. Eggers' depiction of the 'web of money and power and oil' driving the Sudanese civil war holds a mirror up to the complexity of global conflict since 9/11, encouraging precisely the kind of 'new constellations for thinking about

normativity' that Butler calls for, while also lending the issue of Islamist terror a sense of nuanced historicity by locating it in a complicated historical context.[66]

Constituting a meeting point of sorts between the book's inner layer and its outer layer, the 9/11 attacks are particularly memorable to Deng because they take place just before he flies to the US to begin his new life as a refugee. There is a brief foreshadowing of the attacks approximately halfway through the book, when, seemingly in passing, Deng mentions that '[o]nly forty-six refugees were scheduled to fly to New York on September 11, and one of them was me'.[67] More importantly, it is the event with which the narrative culminates: recalling his initial encounter with the attacks on a television screen in Kenya, Deng portentously states that among his fellow Lost Boys, '[i]t was generally agreed that any war the United States would be engaged with would be the biggest war the world has ever known. I took what I had seen of explosions in films and extrapolated. The coming war would look like that, fire filling the sky, covering the world'.[68]

Of course, none of this necessarily contradicts Butler's aim to widen the potential scope of empathy by rendering the 'ungrievable' grievable. What distinguishes the empathic affect generated by *What Is the What* from that described by Butler is that in this case it is the framing of violence itself that makes possible the creation of new empathic ties. This is not so much because it expands the borders of the dominating Western frame in a gesture towards greater inclusiveness: rather, it is because it draws attention to the unstable textuality of the frame itself. It demonstrates, in other words, that the frame can be a powerful colonial tool, but only – paradoxically – insofar as one continues to 'read' it in a consensually expected way, thus *perpetuating* the notion that it is a powerful colonial tool. While *What Is the What* does prompt its reader to challenge the framing of reality, it also goes further by encouraging her to likewise challenge the *language* upon which the frame relies. Arbitrarily delineated categories such as 'Western' and 'non-Western' are brought into question, and ultimately woven together in a complex and multitudinous mesh of realities: by empathising with Eggers' representation of Deng (that is, by imagining herself

into his experience), the reader is not exploding the frame so much as ceasing to comply with its *terms*.

It is the terms of the frame, rather than the frame itself, that constitute the ultimate boundary for Deng as a refugee in the United States after 9/11. Shortly before he gets on the plane to New York in Nairobi, a friend of his says: '[y]ou're a soul whose human form happened to take that of a boy from Sudan. But you're not tied to that ... . You don't have to accept these limitations. ... What right do all these people have to draw boundaries around the life you can live?'[69] However, it is not until he has lived for some years in the US, and experienced the suffocating restrictions placed upon him simply through his African refugee identity – not just from people who are outwardly hostile toward him, but also from liberals whose extension of hospitality is rarely unconditional – that he comes to accept the truth in this advice, and to begin to live his life independently of both dominating frames *and* the well-intentioned liberal sentiment that continues to play by the rules set by such frames. He begins to embrace the uncertainty of his future, using it as a tool to help build a new life for himself: 'Today I have options,' he says in the book's closing chapter, adding: 'For years I have vowed to return home, but not until I had finished my college education. … I believe this day will come. It is, though, taking longer than expected'.[70] He has started to understand the way in which his identity is constructed, both by himself and by others, and to begin using its malleability to his advantage. As Butler herself puts it (channelling Hannah Arendt) in *Who Sings the Nation State?*, '[t]he problem is not just one of inclusion into an already existing idea of the nation, but one of equality, without which the "we" is not speakable. ... [When] we hear illegal immigrants declaring in the streets, "*el pueblo unido jamás sera vencido*," ["*the people united will never be defeated*"] we can trace the rhetorical terms through which the nation is being reiterated, but in ways that are not authorized – or not yet'.[71]

Deng's narrative, like the immigrant declaration that Butler cites, articulates a challenge to precisely this process of hegemonic 'authorization'. '[The Lost Boys] had been

thrown this way and that,' he says, again towards the end of the book, 'like wind in a hysterical storm. ... But we're no longer rain ... . We're men. Now we can stand and decide. This is our first chance to choose our own unknown'.[72] Whether this chance will be taken is left unstated, but the resulting ambiguity is central to the way that any reading of the narrative necessarily challenges the hegemony of the frame: it is not the framing of the unknowable other that, in itself, perpetuates the entrenchment of hegemonic norms, but rather the unthinking adherence to a language that aligns the notion of unknowability with otherness in the first place. Like Deng, the reader is challenged with the task of building her own unknown. The narrative invokes her sense of individual responsibility as a world citizen in a way that gestures towards a different kind of ontological insurrection: she is not let off the hook, so to speak, by the notion of an all-encompassing frame held like a blindfold over her eyes by hegemonic media discourse. Rather, by moving beyond the language of the frame, the reader is able to begin more radically devising the 'new constellations for thinking about normativity' that Butler otherwise rightly calls for, but in a way that involves a deeper and more honest examination of the basic assumptions inherent in terms such as 'I', 'we' and 'us'.

Notes

1 Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. 20. In a critique of Lévinas' work on externality, upon which Butler has drawn heavily in her recent books, Badiou argues: 'This commonsensical discourse has neither force nor truth. It is defeated in advance in the competition it declares between "tolerance" and "fanaticism", between "the ethics of difference and racism", between "recognition of the other" and "identitarian" fixity'.
2 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 144–5.
3 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 148.
4 Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 33.
5 Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 35.
6 Ibid., p. 36.
7 Ibid., p. 147.
8 Ibid., p. 148.
9 Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 8.
10 Ibid., p. 9.

11 Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (Oxford: Routledge, 2007), p. 45.

12 Butler, *Frames of War*, pp. 73–4.

13 David Gauntlett, 'Media Studies 2.0', *Theory.org* (2007; revised March 2007; posted with new introduction, January 2011): http://www.theory.org.uk/mediastudies2.htm.

14 Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 74.

15 In a particularly impassioned example, Douglas Kellner has argued that '[the US] corporate media, especially television, are part and parcel of the New Barbarism, spewing forth almost unopposed propaganda for the Bush administration and fanning war fever and terrorist hysteria, while cutting back on vigorous political debate and varied sources of information as it produces waves of ideologically conservative talk shows and mindless entertainment'; Douglas Kellner, *From 9/11 to Terror War: The Dangers of the Bush Legacy* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), p. 24.

16 Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 104.

17 Mark Neocleous, 'You've Been Framed', *Radical Philosophy*, 158 (2009), p. 53.

18 Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 9.

19 Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 75.

20 Ibid., p. 93.

21 Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation State? Language, Politics, Belonging* (London, New York and Calcutta: Seagull, 2007), p. 42.

22 Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 55.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., p. 58.

25 Ibid.

26 Cathy Caruth has also used the phrase 'explosion of the frame' in a discussion of media representations of war in her recent essay, 'Lying and History':

> If the Pentagon Papers have the force of a revelation, it cannot be because they reveal any facts that are not known (including the facts of the lies themselves) but rather because they produce, from within the very medium of the image (the public press), the force of an explosion that transmits and makes legible the explosion of the fact in the modern world. It is, perhaps, the performance of a kind of *explosion of the frame* of the media through the very media that create this frame. (Cathy Caruth, 'Lying and History', *Eurozine*, 9 March 2009: http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-03-09-caruth-en.html.)

I would argue that Caruth's use of the word 'explosion' is more appropriate than Butler's, for two reasons: (1) it refers to a disclosure of specific, classified information about US Government involvement in illegal activity; and (2) the 'frame' here pertains to the way in which a particular story is reported, rather than to a broader discursive structure that perpetuates hegemonic norms.

27 Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 60.

28 Ibid., p. 59.

29 Ibid., p. 57

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., p. 61.

32 Ibid., p. 59.

33 Ibid., p. 61.

34 Derek Attridge, 'Context, Idioculture, Invention', *New Literary History*, 42. 4, pp. 682–3.

35 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Jonathan Culler, qtd in Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 106. Butler is, of course, perfectly entitled to take a different approach, but if this is the case then it should be more clearly signposted.

36 *Voice of Witness* website: http://www.voiceofwitness.com/about/.

37 Dave Eggers, *How We Are Hungry* (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 17–18.

38 Dave Eggers, *What Is the What* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. xiv.

39 Ibid., n. pag.

40 Elizabeth Twitchell, 'Dave Eggers's *What Is the What*: Fictionalizing Trauma in the Era of Misery Lit', *American Literature*, 83.3 (2011), pp. 637–8.

41 Thomas Jones, 'This Is Not That Place', *The London Review of Books*, 29.12 (21 June 2007): http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n12/thomas-jones/this-is-not-that-place.

42 Ibid.

43 Twitchell, 'Dave Eggers's *What Is the What*', p. 635.

44 David Amsden, 'Truly Heartbreaking', *New York Magazine* (22 October 2006): http://nymag.com/arts/books/reviews/23147/.

45 Robert Eaglestone, '"You would not add to my suffering if you knew what I have seen": Holocaust testimony and contemporary African trauma literature', *Studies in the Novel*, 40.1–2 (2008), pp. 80–81.

46 Eggers, *What Is the What*, p. 4.

47 Ibid., p. 535. Adam Kelly cites this sentence as an example of the kind of 'direct acknowledgement of reader by writer, and vice versa' that is characteristic of David Foster Wallace's notion of a 'New Sincerity' in contemporary American writing; Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction', in David Hering (ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace* (Los Angeles and Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), p. 146.

48 Salman Rushdie, qtd. in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), n. pag.

49 Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 147.

50 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 7–8.

51 Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 49.

52 Eggers, *What Is the What*, p. 49.

53 Twitchell, 'Dave Eggers' *What Is the What*', p. 639.

54 Ibid., p. 349.

55 Ibid., p. 535.

56 Ibid.

57 Francine Prose, 'The Lost Boy', *The New York Times* (24 December 2006): http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/24/books/review/Prose.t.html?pagewanted=all.

58 Attridge, 'Context, Idioculture, Invention', p. 693.

59 Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity', p. 136.

60 Eggers, *What Is the What*, p. 89.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., p. 264.

63 Ibid., p. 269.

64 Ibid., p. 156.

65 Notable examples of such novels include *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy (2006), *Chronic City* by Jonathan Lethem (2009), and *Open City* by Teju Cole (2011).

66 Eggers, *What Is the What*, p. 438.

67 Ibid., p. 236.

68 Ibid., p. 526.

69 Ibid., p. 464.

70 Ibid., pp. 534–5.

71 Butler, *Who Sings the Nation State?*, p. 60.

72 Eggers, *What Is the What*, p. 531.