

“THROW YOUR HEAD TO THE WORLD”:  
INNER EMPTINESS AND “THE OPEN ROAD” IN THE WORK OF  
DAVE EGGERS

by

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## ABSTRACT

Despite being overshadowed by David Foster Wallace and therefore only cursorily understood, the work of Dave Eggers is deserving of more critical attention. Eggers's work is unified in its tendency to depict a uniquely American philosophical emptiness and the subsequent attempt to escape it. This emptiness is related almost exclusively to inwardness, to the philosophy that affirms the myth of a "true self" which exists internally and necessarily apart from the material world—a philosophy perpetuated especially by our largely digital and vicarious culture. Eggers's novels and short stories are the dramatization of the attempt to escape this emptiness by way of travel and therefore, along with such predecessors as *Huckleberry Finn*, *Moby-Dick*, and *On the Road*, fit into a distinctly American tradition which D.H. Lawrence has called "the Open Road." But Eggers also problematizes "the Open Road." He shows how international travel can often function as a sort of first world emotional therapy. True to his often-ambivalent style, though, Eggers affirms "the Open Road" tradition by showing its alternative to be a sedentary life of disengagement and narcissism. He suggests that "the Open Road" be traveled, but with sociopolitical awareness and a more clear-eyed empathy. Ultimately, Eggers's work is a rejection of abstraction in its many forms and an invitation to a life more pragmatic and action-oriented.

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CHAPTER ONE—  
YOU SHALL KNOW MY VELOCITY: AN INTRODUCTION

The work of Dave Eggers is often a footnote to David Foster Wallace, as so many things are. The critical consensus seems to be that Wallace pioneered a post-postmodernism or ‘new sincerity,’ and from his pioneering masterpiece *Infinite Jest* sprang myriad followers, writers walking the trail that Wallace blazed. While this may be true in a limited sense—Eggers has said he is essentially “on the same page” with Wallace (qtd. in Den Dulk 7)—Eggers’s work deserves attention in its own right. That this is true has become increasingly clearer over the last decade as he has published a steady stream of highly praised fiction—this on top of his already famous debut *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000).

What, then, is the essence of his value? What, that is, is unique about Eggers? In addition to its playful inventiveness and eclecticism of style, Eggers’s work is unified in its tendency to depict a uniquely American philosophical emptiness and the subsequent attempt to escape it. This emptiness shown in Eggers’s work is related almost exclusively to inwardness, to introspection, to the philosophy which affirms the myth of a true self which exists internally and necessarily apart from the material world. There is, in fact, in his work, a clear disdain for inwardness which manifests itself in different ways. For example, in both *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (henceforth *AHWOSG*) and *You Shall Know Our Velocity* (2002), the narrator-protagonists frequently reference the desire to escape their own minds, to rid themselves of the ceaseless onslaught of self-awareness which can control them to a debilitating degree.

Another, though very different example of a manifestation of this theme, comes through Eggers’s depiction of several of his characters’ relationships’ with alcohol. Alcohol, his stories suggest, is an agent of inwardness, something that stifles engagement with external reality and

leaves us stuck in solipsism. Technology, too, his work seems to say, reinforces inwardness. Most explicitly in his novel *The Circle* (2013), Eggers explores the ways technology, especially the internet, acts as an agent of inwardness, a sort of “introverter” and thus disengages us from the physical world, all while masquerading as an “extroverter,” a highly engaged and even philanthropic enterprise.

As mentioned above, this emptiness gives rise to the impulse towards fulfillment, towards escaping and avoiding the subsequent solipsism of what critic Allard Den Dulk calls “hyperreflexivity.” In Eggers’s stories, this impulse for escape often expresses itself in the form of travel. In this way, Eggers exists in a distinctly American literary tradition described at length by D.H. Lawrence in his chapter on Whitman in *Studies in Classic American Literature*. He writes,

The Open Road. The great home of the soul is the open road. Not heaven, not paradise. Not ‘above’. Not even ‘within’. The soul is neither ‘above’ nor ‘within’. It is a wayfarer down the open road.

Not by meditating. Not by fasting. Not by exploring heaven after heaven, inwardly, in the manner of the great mystics. Not by exaltation. Not by ecstasy. Not by any of these ways does the soul come into her own.

Only by taking the open road . . .

The journey itself, down the open road. Exposed to full contact. On two slow feet. Meeting whatever comes down the open road. In company

with those that drift in the same measure along the same way. Towards no goal. Always the open road. (181)

Lawrence's expression of the aversion to inwardness will allow us to clearly see Eggers existing in this tradition with such predecessors as Samuel Clemens, Herman Melville, Jack Kerouac, John Steinbeck, and, of course, Walt Whitman. Clemens's, Melville's, and Kerouac's best known novels all begin with characters setting out on a journey with explicit intentions to evade or escape the pain of some inner issue. The wide world, this tradition suggests, especially foreign terrain (or waters in Melville), is the field on which the inner turmoil must be confronted or simply overwhelmed and smothered with motion.

Eggers both exists in and problematizes this tradition; he both affirms and rewrites it. While his characters do set out on journeys to escape inner problems, Eggers brings to our attention the cultural, political, and moral implications of international travel as a sort of first world emotional therapy. Eggers' Americans abroad are always hyper-aware of their place as such and the political implications.

Related to this is Eggers's depiction of an ever-smaller world at the hands of neocolonialism, globalization, computer technology (especially as it relates to privacy), and climate change—all forces strengthened and perpetuated by the American military, free-market, and media. Thus, much of Eggers's work functions in part as a lament to the disappearing "frontier" or "the open road" as Lawrence has it, as well as a lament to the ways in which many Americans view and approach foreign countries, namely, through political abstractions and cultural stereotypes disseminated by the American media rather than culturally immersive travel and face-to-face dialogue. In this way, Eggers's work can be seen as a multi-faceted and

thorough indictment of American culture, especially foreign policy. He shows the American zeitgeist to be one of isolation and solipsism, of utter and unprecedented disengagement from material reality. He shows that this is an ethos which augurs an unpleasant future, both psychologically and materially.

Eggers's short story "Another," from his collection *How We Are Hungry* (2004) serves as a succinct introduction to the themes in most of his other works and will open up my broader exploration. "Another" begins, like many stories do, with an introduction to the inner turmoil of its protagonist. The unnamed narrator-protagonist is, we learn mostly from context, a middle-aged man on business in Cairo, Egypt. Of his recent psychological state, he says, "I'd been having trouble thinking, finishing things" (7). This is emphasized in the story with abrupt and inconclusive ends to paragraphs. The opening paragraph, for instance, ends with "at that point in my life, if there was a window at all, however small and discouraged, I would—" (7). The story's style therefore, as a product of its protagonist's mind, reflects the narrator's self-diagnosis. He further elaborates on his state of mind: "Words like *anxiety* and *depression* seemed apt then, in that I wasn't interested in the things I was usually interested in, and couldn't finish a glass of milk without deliberation" (7). This introduction signals to us that the arc of the story, if it is a happy story, will be one in which the protagonist escapes these debilitating inner issues, is drawn out of himself, and re-engages the physical world.

This is precisely what happens. The American businessman finishes his business (as a courier) and has plenty of time to kill before he leaves Egypt. He meets an Egyptian man who offers to take him on a horse ride to the Pyramids for a fee. Despite his lack of experience with horses, he accepts the offer out of what seems to be sheer boredom. The journey is at first very

uncomfortable—"I slid to the back of the saddle and pulled myself forward again . . . It was the most violence I'd experienced in years" (10)— but improves as he watches his guide and learns to sync his movements with the horse's. The two men stop and go inside the Red Pyramid though they are not "truly impressed by the box we were in, though we both momentarily pretended at awe" (14). They then ride to another pyramid and have a similar reaction. The American businessman finds himself enjoying the horse rides between pyramids more than the pyramids themselves, about which he ultimately concludes, "We learn nothing inside" (15). The two men then light out for the next pyramid.

A cursory reading of this story might lend itself to the trite and cliché moral "Enjoy the journey" or something similar. While this reading is not inaccurate, it is wildly incomplete. The pyramids in the story, far from merely serving as a conveniently exotic setting for a short story, come to represent, in light of the narrator's early description of his symptoms, the human heart (psyche, soul, mind, etc.) divorced from physical or material reality. The narrator describes the second pyramid as "a sacred chamber, a room that had held a queen, or pharaoh, though again the room was bare" (15). The bareness of the room suggests the emptiness of the human heart emphasized by the deliberate use of the word "chamber."

That "Another" is an affirmation of external reality and a rejection of inwardness is further confirmed by the answer to the question posed by the narrator: "If these kings believed, why would they hide themselves in these plain boxes under these heavy stones?" (15). In what seems to be some sort of nonverbal communication, communication perhaps invented by the narrator (the guide does not speak English), the guide responds, "Ah, but they didn't believe" (15). We are briefly left wondering "believed what?" The answer comes shortly. As they

leave the pyramid and stand outside, the narrator tells us that “I swung my hand around to encompass all the air. ‘Good outside now,’ I said” (15). The “kings,” it seems, did not believe in the external world as an extension of and necessary component of the soul. Rather, they took refuge in inner abstractions and hid themselves from the world. In contrast, the protagonist, by learning to seek fulfillment not through inner processes but through engagement with material reality, escapes his self-diagnosed anxiety and depression. This rejection of inwardness and affirmation of external action is a major theme running through almost all of Eggers’s stories.

But Eggers sees clearly the potential problems of an unchecked, politically-blind affirmation of “the open road.” In “Another,” Eggers addresses this by having the story set in Cairo “a few weeks after some terrorists had slaughtered seventy tourists at Luxor” (8)— a reference to the Luxor Massacre which occurred on November 17, 1997. Eggers is, in this and other works, emphatic about the political implications surrounding Americans abroad. The American businessman says, “There were plenty of Egyptians who would love to kill me . . . I was yelled at by some and embraced by others . . . I was a star, a heathen, an enemy, a nothing” (9). Of his guide, Hesham, he later says, “We could ride together across the Sahara even though we hated each other for a hundred good and untenable reasons” (12). It is through the businessman’s relationship with Hesham that another major theme in Eggers’s work is revealed. We come to see that the “good and untenable reasons” for the two men’s supposed hatred are abstractions, the result of political and sometimes strictly theoretical *ideas* rather than reality. On their horse rides between pyramids the men develop an unspoken respect for one another simply by interacting in the physical world together. As they begin to ride faster and further immerse themselves in the immediacy of their journey across the desert, the political reality and

source of their supposed hatred fades and gives way to mutual respect and an atmosphere untainted by national or sociopolitical identity. The narrator tells us,

I rode as anyone might have ridden at any point in history, meaning that it was only him and me and the sand and a horse and saddle—I had nothing with me at all . . . however disgusting we were, however wrong was the space between us, we were really soaring. (12)

By immersing themselves in material reality rather than political abstractions, the men transcend the political and media-manufactured animosity, the, as Said puts it, “standardized molds”(26) and exist as mutually respected equals.

In a less obvious way, Eggers here (and elsewhere) implicates academics in the perpetuation of stereotypes. Hesham is not treated in the story as an “Egyptian” or “African” or anything other than a human being. In fact, the arc of the protagonist’s journey follows his path away from seeing Hesham as a symbol of national identity and towards seeing him as an individual. This might seem to devalue or deny political reality. So be it. As Terry Eagleton reminds us, “There is no natural connection between having an ethnic identity and exercising political citizenship” (127). To associate an individual character with an event of national and political significance (the way the narrator initially assumes Hesham hates him because of the recent terrorist attack), is a form of nationalism. It is an affirmation of the political invention of national identity. It is to see a person as, in one way or another, an extension of the state rather than an individual. Or, it is to see an individual as a symbol in a fiction concocted and perpetuated by politics and political scholars. As Said writes in *Orientalism*, “popular caricatures of the Orient are exploited by politicians whose source of ideological supply is not only the half-

literate technocrat but the superliterate Orientalist” (108). This sort of once-removed nationalism is a difficult thing for academics to accept because it gives us much less to say in a profession that rewards, above all else, saying things.

Related to this is the way Eggers’s critics often seem to revel in a similar sort of abstraction, the way they, in other words, read his works through devised and self-perpetuated categories. This superficial and lazy way of reading his works obscures and discredits the practical and sometimes dire realities towards which they point. Part of my aim, therefore, in my analysis of Eggers will be to point to and discredit some of these superficial readings which often put Eggers himself in the spotlight as opposed to his themes. This, I hope, will reorient the discourse on Eggers around the more serious, interesting, and interrelated issues of debilitating inwardness and Western privilege.

From this reorientation what I hope will emerge is a clear understanding of how Eggers problematizes but ultimately affirms the tradition of “the open road,” while simultaneously problematizing the abstractions perpetuated by academics. As I hope to have demonstrated, he does all this in his short story “Another.” And as I hope to further demonstrate, he does all this in most of his other works. By examining Eggers’s major works of fiction, we will see that he fits into the journey-as-escape tradition and goes even further by philosophically rejecting the inwardness that sparks many of these journeys. We will also see that he, as mentioned above, both problematizes and affirms this tradition in service of expressing or, better yet, revealing

America to itself. Let us, then, first turn to the American tradition of escape and Eggers's place within it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, I will be excluding several works for different reasons (forgivable, I'm sure, in the study of an author as prolific as Eggers). I will have only a few brief comments on *What is the What* (2006) in my discussion of critical reception of Eggers's work and its relationship to some of his major themes. *Zeitoun* (2009) and *The Monk of Mokha* (2018) are strictly nonfiction. Also, *The Wild Things* (2009) is a novel labeled "For Young Readers" and is thus not within my present scope. His screenplays for the films *Where the Wild Things Are* (2009) and *Away We Go* (2009) are also omitted for similar reasons. His book of short stories, *Short Short Stories* (2004), is primarily a work of humor and thus also outside my scope. Eggers has also published: a box of short stories called *One Hundred and Forty Five Stories in a Small Box* (2007), a portfolio of animal drawings with accompanying text called *It Is Right to Draw Their Fur: Animal Renderings* (2010), a short story from the perspective of a shower curtain printed on a shower curtain (2012), a children's book about the history of the Golden Gate Bridge called *This Bridge Will Not Be Gray* (2015), and most recently, a clearly autobiographical story with photographs about flying in a "two-seat open-air flying machine" called *Understanding the Sky* (2016). All these works are deserving of their own study but fall outside my intention of illuminating certain themes in Eggers's fiction.

CHAPTER TWO—  
THE “GARDEN OF REASONS”: EGGERS AND THE TRADITION OF ESCAPE

*“Who am I that in my yearning for America I cry over and over: I’ve got to get out of here?”*  
*William T. Vollmann, Riding Toward Everywhere*

In *Travels With Charley*, John Steinbeck, in one of his many musings on the role of travel in Americans’ lives, writes,

When the virus of restlessness begins to take possession of a wayward man, and the road away from Here seems broad and straight and sweet, the victim must first find in himself a good and sufficient reason for going. This to the practical bum is not difficult. He has a built-in garden of reasons to choose from. (4)

The truth of Steinbeck’s pronouncement is certainly evident in many of the canonical works of American fiction. No further than the first page of *Moby Dick* does Melville make clear Ishmael’s reasons for taking to the sea. The impetus for his voyages, Ishmael tells us, is not the desire for the sea itself but the escape the sea offers, the retreat from, as he puts it, the “damp, drizzly November in my soul” (1). In the first pages of *Huckleberry Finn* Clemens, too, depicts Huck’s penchant for “lighting out” as more a desire for escape than adventure. It is the Widow Douglas’s taking in of Huck as her son, her attempts, that is, to “sivilize” (373) and domesticate him which, in Huck’s mind, necessitate a journey. Kerouac’s *On the Road* goes a step further and not only fits in to this tradition but promotes it, makes an ethic out of journeys of escape.

Kerouac’s novel creates a sense of virtue in what Eggers, in *You Shall Know Our Velocity*—a highly Kerouac-influenced road novel of a sort—calls “unmitigated movement” (9). Again, with Kerouac’s novel, it is the first page, the first sentence even, which reveals the impetus for escape. We learn of Sal’s recent divorce and his accompanying “feeling that everything was dead” (1).

Like Ishmael's and Huck's, Sal's adventures on his journeys are desirable and inevitable but ultimately incidental results of the desire to escape some inner pain.

Many of Eggers's novels and short stories fit into this tradition. His first book, *AHWOSG*, is a blend of fiction and autobiography. We learn, if we read the copyright page, that "This is a work of fiction, only in that in many cases, the author could not remember the exact words said by certain people." Then, in the Preface we are told "this is not actually a work of pure nonfiction" (ix). Finally, in the acknowledgments, we are urged outright to "PRETEND IT'S FICTION" (xxi). That Eggers wishes us to read his book as fiction is also confirmed by his prefatory survey of the story's major themes and the "Incomplete Guide to Symbols and Metaphors" (xxxviii). Commenting in the survey of major themes on the "gimmickry inherent in all this" self-aware, meta-textual writing, Eggers "preempt[s] your claim of the book's irrelevance due to said gimmickry by saying that the gimmickry is simply a device, a defense, to obscure the black, blinding, murderous rage and sorrow at the core of this whole story" (xxvii). Like the canonical fiction at which we have already briefly looked, the early pages of Eggers's book reveal the substance of the narrator's inner turmoil, his "rage and sorrow."

The novel is essentially the story of the death of Eggers's parents within a short time of one another and his subsequent care of his 8 year-old brother Toph against the backdrop of moving to mid-1990's San Francisco and starting the short-lived *Might Magazine*. The opening chapter chronicles the slow and painful death of Eggers's mother, who, when the story begins, is confined to the living room couch and dying of stomach cancer. The prose switches between journalistic descriptions, dialogue, and large sections of stream of consciousness. The death of Eggers's father is also briefly recounted throughout the opening chapter though in much less

detail. Eggers, of course, establishes his style and many of his themes at the outset, but his primary intention in the first chapter seems to be to relate the despair of waiting for a loved one to die and the ways in which we avoid the accompanying potentially overwhelming sadness. Memorably, Eggers uses a moment from what seems to be the television show *American Gladiators* as a metaphor for his mother's encroaching death. He writes,

On the TV an accountant from Denver is trying to climb up a wall before a bodybuilder named Striker catches him and pulls him off the wall . . . The accountant steps down and then starts up the left side of the wall, but suddenly Striker is there, out of nowhere . . . and he has the accountant's leg, at the calf, and he yanks and it's over. (8)

That this moment is described in such detail and in the same chapter as his mother's "losing battle" with cancer allows us to understand it as a foreshadowing of her death and an introduction to the theme of distraction, especially by way of entertainment. In light of this theme we can read the end of the opening chapter as congruent with Melville, Clemens, and Kerouac. With little set up as to the plans of the protagonists, Eggers concludes with a mere insinuation that his mother has died and, of his brother, writes, "I take his hand and we go through the window and fly up and over the quickly sketched trees and then to California" (41). The lack of context (so far) for the journey to California suggests, again, that escape, not adventure, is the motivating factor. And the escape is, accordingly, from an inner/emotional issue—the death of parents in this case.

Eggers's next book and first work of unambiguous fiction, *You Shall Know Our Velocity* (2002, henceforth *Velocity*), is similar to *AHWOSG* in its reason for its protagonists' escape-

based journey. The novel tells the story of the international travels of best friends Will Chmielewski and Hand. Their journey takes place for two primary reasons: 1) their best friend Jack has recently been killed in a car accident and the constant mental replaying of and reflection on the gruesome accident makes them want to engage in, as mentioned earlier, what Will calls “unmitigated movement . . . serving any or maybe every impulse” (9). Adding to their motivation and making their journey possible is 2) the recent money Will has come into and the unique way in which he has come into it. “I’d been given \$80,000 to screw in a lightbulb,” Will tells us. “There is almost no way to dress it up” (4). A picture of Will screwing in a lightbulb is featured in his employer’s brochure and spotted by an ad agency who offers \$80,000 for the right to use his silhouetted likeness on lightbulb packages (42). It is thus the death of Jack and the guilt of Will’s recently arbitrarily acquired wealth that prompts Will and Hand to leave the United States and attempt to circle the globe in one week, all the while giving away Will’s money.

Like the opening chapter of *AHWOSG*, *Velocity* makes the connection between the journey and the inner turmoil of the protagonists explicit early on. Will says, “Jack was twenty-six and died five months before and now Hand and I would leave for a while . . . and I had this money that had to be disseminated and so Hand and I would leave” (2). With deliberate and emphatic use of the phrases “and now” and “and so” Eggers unambiguously shows the travels of his characters to be an attempt to escape their psychological despair and guilt.

Several stories from Eggers’s collection *How We Are Hungry* also fit in to this tradition, most notably the previously discussed “Another,” as well as “The Only Meaning of the Oil-Wet Water” and “Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly.” Each story involves an American abroad seeking escape from inner turmoil. “Oil-Wet Water” tells the story of Pilar on vacation in Costa

Rica, surfing and sleeping with her old friend Hand (the same Hand from *Velocity*). Aware of his tendency to begin stories with immediate and blatant reference to the protagonist's inner state, here Eggers inverts this tendency with the opening lines, "Pilar was not getting over divorce or infidelity or death. She was fleeing nothing" (19). This story still, however, shows its main character trying to escape certain ideas, namely, the idea of a true self apart from material reality. This is seen primarily through Pilar's rejection of any transcendental deity and the tenets of Pantheism. Pilar's journey to Costa Rica, therefore, is an escape from a philosophy.

Pilar has time off from work, and because she is unmarried, uninvolved, and knows Hand to be in a similar situation, she accepts his invitation to join him in Costa Rica near his temporary job-site in Nicaragua. As Pilar predicts, she and Hand eventually have sex, but, as the narrator explicitly states, "This story is not about Pilar and Hand falling in love" (24), and later, "This story is equally or more about surfing" (39). It is, in fact, while surfing that Pilar's real journey takes place, her journey, that is, from the abstractions of spirituality to an immersion in and reverence for the beauty of the physical world, human and otherwise. Contemplating bathroom graffiti she has seen which reads "*Sex invented God*," the narrator tells us that "the only transcendental experiences she'd had began with provocation of her skin" (44). Later, while Pilar is standing in the ocean, we are told why she was at least briefly interested in Pantheism: "because she liked seeing things and wanted to believe in these things that she loved looking at-- loved the notion that it was all here and easily observable, with one's eyes being in some way the clergy . . ." (51). She ultimately rejects any unifying system of religious thought and opts instead for the affirmation of and immersion in the natural world with no attendant spirituality:

But then why God at all? The oil-wet water was not God. It was not the least bit spiritual. It was oil-wet water, and it felt perfect when Pilar put her hand into it, and it kissed her palm again and again, would never stop kissing her palm and why wasn't that enough? (52)

Though in a slightly different way than the previously discussed stories, we see Pilar's journey to be a rejection of inner abstractions and a process of engagement with material reality by way of travel.

A similar spiritual abstraction is represented in "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly" by the peak of Mount Kilimanjaro. And, as the title suggests, it is this abstraction represented by the peak, which its protagonist ultimately rejects. The story follows Rita (an American), as well as a handful of other tourists and their accompanying local porters on their journey up Mount Kilimanjaro. The ostensible reason for Rita's trip is recreational; the trip was meant to be taken with her sister. Her sister, though, has become pregnant and cannot go. We also learn that Rita was a foster parent to two children but has recently, for financial reasons, ceded custody to her own parents. Her trip to Tanzania and climb up the mountain thus become an attempt to escape the pain of missing her former foster children. Yet again we see a journey to a foreign country as a means of escape from psychological issues at home. This story, however, comes to be much more than an escape; it comes to be a clear indictment of irresponsible and morally-bankrupt tourism. More on this later.

More recently, Eggers's novel *A Hologram for the King* (2013, henceforth *Hologram*) further shows him in the American tradition of escape. Alan Clay is an American businessman in Saudi Arabia to pitch new hologram technology to hopefully be implemented in the still

theoretical Economic City envisioned by Saudi King Abdullah. More than his previous works, in *Hologram*, Eggers shows the journey to be the means of not simply escaping but negating the issues which prompted the journey. Early in the novel we are told that if Alan succeeds in pitching the product and ensuring a contract, “his commission, in the mid-six figures, would fix everything that ailed him” (4). What ails him are his financial responsibilities (namely, his daughter’s college tuition), a mysterious and worrisome growth on his upper back, and a general feeling of purposelessness. Like “Another”—arguably a prototype for *Hologram*<sup>2</sup>—the important drama takes place mostly apart from the official business of the trip. That is, the protagonist’s growth occurs during and because of his free time. Though again a story of adventure in a foreign land like “Another” and *Velocity*, *Hologram* is much more somberly toned. Indeed much of the book’s appeal is its poignancy, its refusal of blind optimism as well as easy cynicism. While clearly not as exuberant as his earlier work, *Hologram* too depicts Alan’s journey as a way out of a psychological rut, justified though that rut may be.

Finally, *Heroes of the Frontier* (2016), Eggers’s most recent novel, is a return to the road novel but with a very different setting and set of circumstances. Josie is recently-divorced and has two kids, Paul and Ana. The novel follows the three as they drive through Alaska. Part of Lawrence’s description of “the open road” closely describes the plot of *Heroes*: “Meeting whatever comes down the open road. In company with those that drift in the same measure along the same way” (181). What comes down the road in Eggers’s novel is a second-rate

Luxembourgish magician, an abandoned archery field, forest fires, and part-time folk musicians

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<sup>2</sup> Beyond the obvious surface-level similarities (American businessmen abroad) between these two texts, in *Hologram*, Eggers uses at least one phrase which recalls “Another” and highlights the considerable shift in tone between the texts. In “Another,” the businessman says, “I swung my hand around to encompass all the air. ‘Good outside now,’ I said” (15). Compare this to the philosophy of Zahra at the end of *Hologram*: “. . . I find just about all of it, she said--and swept her hand around the room, encompassing the house, the sea outside, all of the Kingdom, all of the world and sky--very, very sad” (307).

among, of course, many other things. The novel has, as Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times* notes, an improvised feel to it. Improvisation is, we see, especially in a late scene in which Josie, with little musical knowledge, conducts a band of folk musicians, a major theme of *Heroes*. Josie's improvisational, make-it-up-as-you-go philosophy on her journey is a result of the way in which her journey begins. Early on the narrator tells us that Josie's husband, Carl, has left her and has already become engaged to another woman. Her trip to Alaska is an attempt to "disappear" (4) during the time in which Carl is to be remarried. Josie and her kids' journey is thus most blatantly a journey of escape.

Like his predecessors, Eggers shows travel to be both a retreat from inner/emotional problems and/or a means of negating or solving those problems. Whether escaping or negating, the implicit message is the same as Lawrence's: the open road, a journey through the physical world, that is, is the means by which problems are solved. Many of Eggers's characters, especially in *Heroes* and *Velocity*, feel the need to escape even the place they have recently escaped to, to, in other words, constantly move in order to avoid being consumed by some inner pain. As the narrator of *Heroes* tells us, ". . . the planet was nothing, nothing at all, just another place to leave" (121). But far from a cynical depiction of retreat and denial, Eggers's work is ultimately an affirmation of surfaces, of the material world, of physical reality in and of itself.

CHAPTER THREE—  
 “QUIET HAS ITS OWN SET OF PROBLEMS”: THE EMPTINESS OF INWARDNESS

*“If you go deep/ Into the heart/ What do you find?/ Grief, grief/ Grief”*

*Kathleen Raine, “Introspection”*

As I hope to have demonstrated through my discussion of “Another” and my brief comments on “The Only Meaning of the Oil-Wet Water,” Eggers does not simply depict his protagonists’ journeys as escapes from some inner turmoil, he, through his stories, rejects inwardness. As mentioned earlier, Eggers’s rejection of inwardness is essentially the rejection of the conception of the self existing apart from physical reality. This, of course, is a philosophical problem going back at least as far as Plato’s mind/body question and one that has a distinct place in American literature.

In his book *The Law of the Heart: Individualism and the Modern Self in American Literature*, Sam Girgus traces and examines different conceptions of the self and modernity’s impact on those conceptions. The lineage of self-conception of which Girgus writes has two basic strands. The first strand is most apparent in the works of the transcendentalists. Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” and Whitman’s manic celebration of the self in *Leaves of Grass* represent what Girgus calls an individualism of pragmatic experience, which “attempts to present a self that relates a sense of its own autonomy and individuality to the mutability of reality” (6). Despite Eggers’s clear rejection of the deification of nature commonly associated with transcendentalism (which we saw by way of Pilar in “Oil-Wet Water”), it is this tradition of self-conception that Eggers fits into more readily. Girgus contrasts this view of the self with a second strand he finds in writers such as Poe, Cooper, and Charles Ives. In these writers,

[W]e get a turning inward away from pragmatic experience, autonomy, and history toward an inner self that achieves a false sense of security for itself, its ideals, its vision of truth and hope. The ‘inner’ self feels free and secure through its sense of transcendence of the dangers, questions, uncertainties, turmoils, and demands of ordinary experience. (6)<sup>3</sup>

The self of Emerson and Whitman is characterized by engagement with reality whereas the self in Poe, Cooper, and Ives is characterized by a retreat from reality and disengagement from practical experience, what Isaiah Berlin calls “a strategic retreat into an inner citadel” (qtd in Girgus 13). This inner retreat is precisely what much of Eggers’s work rejects.

This rejection of inwardness could not begin any sooner in Eggers’s work. The front cover of the hardback edition of *AHWOSG* has two inscriptions. They read “Mercy is Not a Cure” and “Quiet Has Its Own Set of Problems.” Already, though of course with no context at this point, Eggers expresses disdain for the abstraction of ‘mercy’ and hints at his major theme of the debilitating effects of hyper-self-awareness that come with ‘quiet.’ *AHWOSG* is, accordingly, a noisy book of deliberate, self-conscious gimmickry and grandiose purple prose. As critic Richard Poirier in *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature* says of *Moby-Dick* and *The Ambassadors*, “their extravagances of language are an exultation in the exercise of consciousness momentarily set free” (7). Eggers’s “extravagances of language, though, are more in service of showing a consciousness *seeking* rather than finding freedom. Both the gimmickry and somewhat ironic grandiosity of Eggers’s style in *AHWOSG* are the results of the narrator’s expressed desire to escape his own mind. This can be seen through the

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<sup>3</sup> More recently, Terry Eagleton, in his book *Culture* (2016), makes a similar comment. Speaking of the tradition of art as retreat or “escape,” not for characters but for readers, Eagleton frames the problem as art “offering us an imaginary resolution to real contradictions” (20). Later, we will see the wider social implications of this tradition.

emphasis on distraction. After the death of his parents, Dave and his brother Toph move to California, and we are told that one of Dave's highest priorities is keeping both himself and his brother entertained and distracted, lest the rage and sorrow of their past surface and overwhelm.

Eggers writes,

It is an unsaid mission of mine, the source of which is sometimes clear and sometimes not, to keep things moving, to entertain the boy, to keep him on his toes . . . Because Beth is always pulling out old photo albums, asking Toph how he feels, I feel I have to overcompensate by keeping us occupied. (77)

This "need to keep constantly occupied" (79) is further highlighted by the inclusion of seemingly irrelevant information and details. Far from irrelevant, this information is a way for Eggers to demonstrate the many ways Dave and Toph deal with life after their parents' deaths. There are, for instance, diagrams of their apartments which display floor-plans most conducive to sliding long distances while wearing socks (56, 68). There is also a detailed list of recipes for the meals they eat most frequently (76-77) and several clearly hyperbolic descriptions of the brothers' Frisbee throwing abilities. All this is part of the "gimmickry" Eggers mentions in the preface and, accordingly, acts as "a defense" (xxvii) against the inner pain of their situation.

What is perhaps most interesting about this unspoken rule of "No Silence" (53), this, that is, insistence on distraction, is that, while, as we've already seen, Eggers acknowledges distraction as a form of denial, he never gives any indication that this is a bad thing. The denial, or repression, that is, is not in service of some eventual cathartic outpouring of pent up emotion. In fact, Eggers seems to only affirm distraction (avoiding dwelling on emotional pain via games

and engagement in practical activities). Thus, we see Eggers rejecting inwardness and its potentially debilitating effects and affirming external reality and its pragmatism.

This rejection seems to be intended as a corrective response or counterweight to the overly interior and arguably solipsistic understanding of the world so prevalent in American culture. That is, Eggers's book (and, as we'll see, most of his other work) may not seek to *outright* reject interiority but to help balance our culture turned so severely inward. Suggesting this is the attention Eggers gives to alcohol. A disdain for alcohol's tendency to stifle engagement with the physical world is expressed first in the somewhat counterintuitive inclusion of "deleted material" in the preface. In a short passage deleted from the section of the fictionalized interview with MTV's *The Real World*, Dave says, "Alcoholism and death make you omnivorous, amoral, desperate." The interviewer then asks, "Do you really believe that?" Dave responds, "Sometimes. Sure. No. Yes" (xi). Later, slightly more subtly, while at a bar drinking beer with friends, Dave tells us, "We know that the beer has been brewed on the premises because, right there, behind the bar, are three huge copper vats with tubes coming out of them. That is how beer is made" (114). The deadpan description of the vats hints at Eggers's attitude toward alcohol. Just a few pages later his attitude is made explicit. Still at the bar, he writes,

Just this loitering, lolling, this drinking of beer in thick glasses . . . this is obscene. How dare we be standing around, talking about nothing . . . Why do we all bother coming out, gathering here in numbers like this, without starting fires, tearing things down? . . . We are wasting this. (118-119)

It is, we see, alcohol's ability to make complacent, to neutralize the power and energy of youth, that is the foundation of Eggers's critique.

The connections between alcohol and debilitating inwardness can be seen even more clearly through the character of Dave's long-time friend, John. Dave gets a call from a friend saying that their mutual friend, John, may have overdosed on pills of some sort. Dave rushes to John's apartment and finds him sitting on his couch with an almost-empty bottle of wine and a bottle of pills in front of him. Dave calls the cops and as he waits says, "I look at the bottle, almost empty. He's alone and drinking Merlot in the afternoon . . . What kind of person drinks wine by himself in the afternoon?" (231). Dave confronts John about the reasons for his behavior: "Don't tell me this is because you stopped dating someone" (232). John responds, "It's not that. It's this," as he indicates his head (232). Clearly, for John, alcohol is an attempt to escape his inner pain. (In addition to a recent break-up, John's parents have died recently, too). Rather than negating, alcohol is fueling John's pain. When the cops arrive, John swallows 25 pills and is taken to the hospital. As Dave watches John sleep on the hospital bed, he, as we've seen him do several times before, invents a conversation with John. In Dave's mind, John gets up and tries to leave, saying, "I'm not going to be a fucking anecdote in your stupid book . . . Find someone else to be symbolic of, you know, youth wasted or whatever" (238). Here, Eggers depicts John's inwardness as not only debilitating but banal. Still in his mind, Dave says to John,

[Y]our current crop of problems, and this new drinking thing--it's all just boredom. Emphasis on the *bore* part. It's *bor*-ing. You're bored. You're lazy. I mean, every single thing is so boring--alcohol, pills, suicide. I mean, no one will even believe this shit, it's so fucking boring. (239)

Dave puts forth a conception of alcohol much different than John's. Far from an alleviator of inner problems, alcohol pushes John further into himself and disconnects him from his friends

and the rest of the world. Even as John recovers and is given a perfunctory pep talk by Dave, we are told that Dave believes that John “will never put his body and brain to much use at all” (244). John does indeed become a symbol of wasted youth.

Echoes of the theme of alcohol’s stifling tendencies are also apparent in *A Hologram for the King* and *Heroes of the Frontier*. In *Hologram*, Alan uses the illegal alcoholic drink supplied by a recent business acquaintance, Hanne, to help him sleep. His almost nightly solitary binges with the substance, however, only drive Alan to further and more pessimistic dwelling on his problems. Probing the mysterious growth on his back with a knife, Alan jumps to the conclusion that “There was a tumor attached to his spinal cord, and soon it would send cancer up and down the nerve corridor, to his brain, to his feet, everywhere”(100). This line of thinking, coupled with more drinking, leads Alan to attempt minor surgery on himself. He finds a serrated dinner knife and “slowly twisted it into the growth”(102). What Alan, in his drunken state mistakes for direct action, is in reality the opposite; his drunken, half-assed surgery actually makes the growth worse, we learn when Alan finally goes to the doctor— a decision made while sober. His drinking is thus a form of avoidance and denial.

We see this also in how Alan’s reactions to news stories change as his level of drunkenness increases. On a previous sober night, Alan is disturbed by reports of the BP oil leak as well as “One of the last flights” (81) of NASA’s shuttle program, so disturbed that he turns off the TV. While drunk on the night of his botched self-surgery, Alan hears another news story.

Eggers writes,

He turned on the TV. Something on the news about a flotilla leaving Turkey, heading for Gaza. Humanitarian aid, they said. Disaster, he thought. He sipped

again from the glass. The last few sips had, he realized, moved him from mellow to giddy. (100)

That Alan's thoughts about the disaster do not extend beyond "Disaster," and quickly turn into a reflection on his own level of intoxication, especially when contrasted with his earlier agitation at the news, shows alcohol to have in some way distanced him from the reality of the news story. As Alan gets even drunker, Eggers emphasizes the temporary unreality alcohol allows Alan to inhabit: "Taking another sip, he decided it was wonderful. It was all beyond wonderful. Being drunk was rewarding" (105). Alan's "reward" is his disengagement, his self-created and temporary acceptance of that which normally outrages him. Like the loitering, beer-sipping wasted youth in *AHWOSG*, in Alan too, alcohol instills complacency.

*Heroes*'s heroine is no exception. We learn of Josie's relationship to alcohol in Eggers's opening lines contrasting two types of happiness. He writes,

There is proud happiness, happiness born of doing good work in the light of day, years of worthwhile labor, and afterward being tired and content . . .

Then there is the happiness of one's personal slum. The happiness of being alone, and tipsy on red wine, in the passenger seat of an ancient recreational vehicle parked somewhere in Alaska's deep south . . . (3)

Eggers thus depicts Josie's relationship with alcohol similarly to Alan's-- as a temporary refuge and avoidance of reality. But, perhaps most explicitly in *Heroes*, Eggers clues us in to his intentions of depicting his character's drinking as a microcosm for her larger journey. Later on the opening page of the novel, Eggers writes,

She was happy this night, with her pinot, in this RV in the dark, surrounded by unknown woods, and became less afraid with every new sip from her yellow plastic cup. She was content, though she knew this was a fleeting and artificial contentment, she knew this was all wrong-- she should not be in Alaska, not like this. (3)

Here, Eggers connects both Josie's tipsiness and her trip to Alaska to "a fleeting and artificial contentment." We thus come to understand Josie's journey as a sort of self-created parallel world, a world created to avoid the real one.

The creation of a parallel and fleeting world is nothing new in American fiction. It is in fact the guiding observation of Poirier's previously mentioned *A World Elsewhere*. Poirier writes,

The classic American writers try through style temporarily to free the hero (and the reader) from systems, to free them from the pressures of time, biology, economics, and from the social forces which are ultimately the undoing of American heroes and quite often their creators. (5)

But Josie can never quite escape the pressures of reality. We see this most clearly in the book's final pages. After a nightmarish experience in the woods during a lightning storm, Josie, Paul, and Ana come upon a recently abandoned cabin (presumably due to the storm) that has been decorated and set up, food and all, for a family reunion. It is as if the three are receiving their prize for the difficult journey they have been on, as if the party were set up especially for them. This leads to something like a transcendent moment for Josie. As her kids fall asleep after feasting on the party food, we are told, "Josie looked at the bright flaming faces of her children and knew this was exactly who and where they were supposed to be" (384). Despite this moment

of peace and affirmation, the novel concludes on the next page with a single-sentence chapter reading, “But then there is tomorrow” (385). Eggers seems to express an ambivalence towards Josie’s journey; on the one hand, it is an avoidance of reality, a parallel world created to escape the pressures of her “ordinary world” (Poirier 6), not unlike a state of drunkenness. On the other, the journey is an adventure that brings Josie closer to her children (the abandoned party being a “family reunion” is hardly coincidental) and provides her kids themselves new perspectives. After the storm and feast, Eggers writes of Paul, “He stared into the fire, his face aglow and seeming far younger than it was—perhaps reborn. His ice-priest eyes had found a new untroubled happiness” (384). Eggers acknowledges the temporary nature of Josie’s and her children’s journeys but refuses to strictly characterize them as mere distraction, as their “undoing,” because, unlike the fleeting and inward refuge afforded by alcohol, journeys in the external, material world, Eggers shows, can be eye-opening and transformative, regardless of their impetus.

We can read Alan’s journey in a similar way. Like Josie’s, Eggers connects Alan’s drinking to his larger trip to Saudi Arabia, stating, “He finally understood why people drink alone, and drink more than they should drink alone. An adventure every night!” (106). Like his nightly “adventures” in his hotel room, Alan’s business ventures in Saudi Arabia are ultimately unrewarding. He does not get the contract with the King. After Alan finally gives his hologram presentation to the king, we are told, in an administrative and perfunctory tone “that the contract to provide IT to the new city had gone to another firm that . . . could deliver the IT far quicker and at less than half the cost” (311).

But by the end of the novel, this comes as no surprise. Alan's real journey, in accordance with Poirier's observation, takes place necessarily apart from the practical financial pressure on Alan. A romance develops between Alan and the doctor who performs his surgery on the growth on his back, Zahra. Like Josie's climactic and transcendent experience in the woods and cabin, Alan and Zahra's romance leads to a rejuvenating experience for Alan, namely, swimming in the ocean with a topless Zahra. This experience gives Alan some perspective and leads him to a sober awareness of his position in the world but at the same time instills in him an affirming exuberance. Alan's journey reaches its emotional and philosophical peak when Eggers writes of Alan,

He glanced outside, at the sun-soaked sky, at the sea unknowable, and in their vastness he found strength. A million dead in that water, billions living under that sun, that sun a hard white light among billions more like it, and thus all of this was not so important, and thus not so difficult. No one was watching, and no one outside of he and Zahra cared about what would happen in this room—such strength born of insignificance!—so he might as well do as he wished, which was to kiss her. (298)

That Alan's rejuvenation comes in the form of an encounter with both nature and human skin should by now come as no surprise, for it is engagement with physical reality that Eggers repeatedly and adamantly affirms. This is also why, again, while acknowledging the fleeting nature of his characters' journeys and the inherent avoidance in the creation of a parallel world, Eggers does not, in the end, dismiss 'the open road' as simple denial. Through this affirmation

can be seen an implicit aversion and even disdain for inwardness, which, to Eggers, equates to disengagement from reality.

A disdain for inwardness is also demonstrated in *Velocity*, again in relation to distraction and alcohol with, in this case, much more emphasis on distraction. As they venture from one country to the next, Will and Hand are too busy to be significantly distracted by alcohol. Though in instances when their motion slows or stops altogether, they inevitably seek a drink as a means of quieting their minds and distracting them from the despair and guilt which prompted their journey. After a day in Senegal, Will tells us that “The day had been long, and soon we would stop moving and pushing and just rest. We needed to eat, and I wanted beer. I wanted four beers and many potatoes, then sleep” (112). Later, in Morocco, after a particularly emotionally turbulent day: “we’d bought a bottle of wine and [Hand] was letting me drink it because he knew. I filled and drank six glasses and was out cold, blissful and stupid” (187). Will’s desire for alcohol is inseparable from his desire to escape his mind. “I could drink to pass out and keep from thinking,” he says but then reminds himself, “The grand design was movement and the opposition of time, not drinking, hiding, sleeping” (184). Like with John in *AHWOSG*, as well as Alan and Josie, Eggers here again frames alcohol as a retreat in his association of “drinking” with “hiding” and “sleeping.” And again like John, alcohol is depicted as a faulty means of escaping psychological pain.

Will’s desire to escape his mind is perhaps the most dominant theme of the novel, and the manic, hyper-self-aware style is a manifestation of this theme. The examples of his expressions of this theme are too many to cite, but a cursory sample would include: “I wanted the voices silenced and I wanted less of my head generally” (27), “Too much time in my head would bring

me back” (40), “I feared my head once I went to bed” (139), “I want out of this fucking head” (148), “I need sections of my head removed” (157), “I don’t want even two minutes with my head” (184), etc. The debilitating effects of introspection are the root of Will’s frequent reference to his mind. Like the pleasant distraction provided by Dave and Toph’s immersion in games and practical activities in *AHWOSG*, it is only when Will and Hand are moving, are absorbed by the motion of the present moment that their problems are quelled. Again, Eggers only affirms this distraction: “The only times they are not with me are those times when speed overwhelms, when the action of the moment supersedes and crowds out” (150). Solutions to inner problems, Eggers again shows us, are not found within the self but necessarily outside of it.

This is not a promotion of denial or repression; it is a validation of the material world as an agent of healing. Eggers displays a fluidity between the self and the physical world which functions as a strong affirmation of material reality and a rejection of philosophical dualism which allows and perhaps invites withdrawal from the world. Will describes how his younger self sought refuge from inner problems not in action but in retreat. He says, “The idea was to solve the problems of the world via removal, withdrawal, starting with me. There was no order in the world but there would be order in how I moved through the world” (153). Will’s, in Berlin’s phrase, “strategic retreat into an inner citadel” (qtd. in Girgus 13), succumbs to the false dichotomy of man and nature (the same false dichotomy that allows dualism to soldier on) and is an example of Girgus’s “negative freedom” (12). Girgus writes,

Negative freedom concerns freedom from interference by external forces that can limit the action of the individual. Negative liberty basically proclaims the

existence of a recognizable frontier between the powers of the individual and the infringement of the state or community. (12-13)

By depicting the outer world as an effective solution to inner pain, *Velocity* shatters the notion of this frontier. The continuity or fluidity of world and self of course means that the world has a claim on the individual, has, that is, some measure of influence or control over the individual but also means that, in turn, the individual, as an extension of the world (and vice versa), has a claim on the world. *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, its very title suggests, is Will and Hand's claim on the world, their assertion of the power inherent in dedicating their minds and bodies not to some inner or theoretical abstraction like god or traditional conceptions of the soul but to material reality. In yet another conversation that is Will's invention, Hand says to Will, "Fuck your head. You don't need your head. Remove your head from its casing and throw it to the world . . . Throw your head to the world!" (158). This imperative, we can now see, essentially comes to mean 'Immerse yourself in the physical world. Unite mind and matter. They are, after all, one and the same.'

Anticipating the symbolism of both the pyramids in "Another" and the mountain in "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly," later in *Velocity*, Will and Hand drive up a mountain in Morocco expecting the view to be revelatory and rewarding. The removal, though, of themselves from the town below and being barely able to see each other (232), renders the experience cold, dull, and meaningless: "We stood on the mountain, what we figured might be the top of the mountain, and for a second I thought I heard water, but then didn't. There was nothing" (233). To withdraw from the world, to, that is, remove one's self from the, yes, sometimes overwhelming

world of human relationships and the, yes, sometimes chaotic natural world, may yield less pain overall, but it also renders life, Eggers suggests, cold, dull, and meaningless.

Through an examination of Eggers's depiction of inwardness, we can see emerging two very different conceptions of distraction: distraction from the world and distraction from the self. Distraction from the world is often represented by indulgence in alcohol, which Eggers shows to be an agent of inwardness, a means of retreating from reality into the self which, again, Girgus tells us merely "achieves a false sense of security" (6). Distraction from the self is often represented by immersion in nature, sexual experiences, and social issues. Distraction from the self might be more accurately labeled engagement, given Eggers's enthusiastic affirmation of it.

Succinctly summarizing most of these issues is the conclusion to Eggers's short, entirely dialogue novel *Your Fathers, Where Are They, And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?* (2014). The story's protagonist, the disaffected and troubled thirty-something, Thomas, kidnaps, shackles, and interrogates people from his past, including an astronaut, a congressman, a school teacher, and his own mother, in hopes of understanding how his life and American culture itself have come to the dismal place he perceives them to now occupy. The issues explored in this novel range from the end of the Space program to police brutality to child molestation. The novel ends while Thomas is in a building in an abandoned military base with the kidnapped congressman. Authorities have tracked down Thomas and are outside the building. This exchange between Thomas and the congressman concludes the novel as well as Eggers's wide-reaching indictment of American culture. The congressman calls out to the authorities, "We're in here! Everyone's safe." Thomas, defeated and hopeless, says, "God, that sounds really horrible, doesn't it? Nothing in the world sounds worse than that, to be here and safe. Say it again. I don't

think they heard you.” The congressman obliges: “We’re in here and we’re safe.” Thomas replies, “Jesus Christ. That is the saddest thing I ever heard” (212). The wide range of social problems is diagnosed in this final exchange as a result of being “in here,” of, that is, in more ways than one, retreating inward.

CHAPTER FOUR—  
 “PEAKS MEAN NOTHING”: PROBLEMATIZING “THE OPEN ROAD”

*“The glory of the protagonist is always paid for/ by a lot of secondary characters”*  
*Tony Hoagland, “The Hero’s Journey”*

As we have seen, many of Eggers’s stories fit into the American tradition of escape and depict these journeys as reactions to inner problems. Based solely on this we might be tempted to conclude that Eggers, like so many American writers, depicts the wide world as America’s stomping ground, the field over which privileged Westerners are free to roam, explore, and, as is often the case, work out their first world emotional issues. But this is not the case. Far from blindly accepting this conception or fitting into this unfortunate tradition, Eggers seriously and constantly problematizes his characters’ journeys abroad. As we saw in the introduction, the political tension between the American businessman and the Egyptian guide, Hesham, is at the center of the drama in “Another.” Similar issues are raised in *Velocity* and “Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly.” In both, the journey itself comes under scrutiny of both Eggers and his protagonists.

This is true to a sometimes maddening degree in *Velocity*. Will is constantly scrutinizing, assessing, and reevaluating his reasons for taking the trip, the political implications of the social hierarchy implicit in charity (87), and his personal interactions with people of foreign countries. This constant scrutiny is the result of a growing frustration of Will and Hand as the story unfolds to accomplish the goals of their journey, which, as mentioned earlier, are to escape both the guilt of their arbitrary wealth and the emotional trauma of Jack’s death. The first obstacle to accomplishing these goals is the difficulty of escaping what Eggers shows to be the ever-widening grasp of American culture. Describing the presence of neo or corporate colonial forces,

social critic Curtis White writes, “We’re strangers on our own shores thanks to the way in which corporations and their franchises have colonized our cities and towns, turning them into one big McSame” (*The Barbaric Heart* 175). In *Velocity*, Eggers shows us how White’s critique extends far beyond “our own shores” by often pointing out the presence of American culture in increasingly distant and unexpected locations, themselves indistinguishable from America to Will and Hand. In Morocco, for instance, as they drive to Marrakesh, Will takes in the passing scenery and tells us, “So far it could be Arizona” (194). Then, in Estonia, he says, “At the nearby bank, looking precisely like every bank in America, glass and steel and expensive signage, I cashed more traveler’s checks” (270). Finally, later in Estonia, the point of these comparisons is made clear. Will tells us,

The road was monotonous . . . Estonia could look like Nebraska and Nebraska could look like Kansas. Kansas like Morocco. Morocco like Arles . . . every country now seemed to offer a little of every other country, and every given landscape, I finally realized, existed somewhere in the U.S. (273)

Despite their journey being one of escape, Will and Hand’s inability to experience foreign countries outside of a comparison with the U.S. stifles their ability to forget the guilt and trauma they associate with home.

But this problem extends far beyond the banks and natural landscapes of foreign countries. Will and Hand also cannot escape American popular culture, especially music. A cursory sample of pop culture references in *Velocity* includes: “Huey Lewis” (57), “James Dean and Marilyn Monroe” (68), “*Top Gun*” (68), “Yosemite Sam” (132), “Prince” (168), “Schwarzenegger in *End of Days*” (182), “Pizza Hut” (207), “LL Cool J” (259), and

“Nirvana” (290). The American cultural references range from the canonical (Marilyn Monroe) to the obsolete (LL Cool J) but are experienced with equally high frequency in places as diverse as Morocco and Estonia. Eggers problematizes “The Open Road” by showing the numbing sameness of neocolonialism. The cultural hegemony of America, we see, has converted even remote locations into something like an extension of America, cultural colonies. Escape for Will and Hand, therefore, is always hard earned, a product of their proactive attempts to avoid tourist cities and tourists themselves who, Will tells us, “begged to be despised” (175).<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, Will and Hand themselves see people as approximations of American celebrities. Waiting for their flight in Chicago, Will says, “Next to us a white man, resembling in every way David Carradine in his latter *Kung Fu* days, was talking to another man . . .” (25). This man is subsequently referred to simply as “Carradine.” Later, referring to Hand’s brother, Will tells us he had “Shawn Cassidy hair” (130). Eggers shows American pop culture to be foundational to his characters’ experiences of the world. It is, we see, their frame of reference. American culture is presented as inescapable not just externally through environmental sameness and American music and movies but internally; American culture colors the way Will and Hand see the world and thus is presented as a sort of colonization of their minds. We get the impression that even if all of their destinations were utterly foreign and exotic in environment and culture, Will and Hand would still project American culture onto their experience of the foreign. As Daniel Boorstin writes in *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, “[T]he more we move about, the more difficult it becomes not to remain in the same place” (110).

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<sup>4</sup> Further and even more obviously disparaging tourism, Will thinks, “To travel is selfish—that money could be used for hungry stomachs and you’re using it for your hungry eyes, and the needs of the former must trump the latter, right? And *are* there individual needs? How much disbelief, collectively, must be suspended, to allow for tourism?” (274).

This has serious implications in the protagonists' interactions with others. As critic Sean Bex writes in his article "Particularizing the Universal: Dave Eggers Writes Human Rights," *Velocity* "constantly problematizes the protagonists' relationship to disenfranchised others" (89). Bex claims correctly that the novel "consciously embeds . . . charity within a self-serving logic of personal healing" (86) and thus shows Will's and Hand's instinct to charity through the mostly impersonal giving away of money to merely "underscor[e] the difference between the moneyed West and the impoverished rest" (89). Eggers thus calls into question and "reveals the limitations of the cosmopolitan ideal that travel and cross-cultural encounters in and of themselves further the universal enjoyment of rights" (90). In other words, Eggers suggests that being there is not enough. Progress, that is, does not occur through simple and disengaged mingling of cultures, especially when the foundation of that mingling is financial and thus a reinforcement of socioeconomic hierarchies. Like the American businessman and Hesham in "Another," it is not simply each other's company that allows them to transcend the sociopolitical animosity but their willingness to *act* together. What we see in *Velocity* are mostly failed attempts to actually engage with others. Despite Will and Hand's exuberance and energy to travel, their inability to experience others on their own terms (not through an American cultural lens) and Will's seeming inability to escape his own mind, evidenced especially by his constant invention of dialogue with strangers, renders their trip largely ineffective. Also, despite Will's explanation of his mother's accusation that his charity is "condescending" that "It's a defense you use to defend your own inaction" (125), his mother's explanation ultimately plays out through his charity's failure to lead to meaningful encounters. Showing up, Eggers seems to say, is not enough. Lawrence's "Open Road" can only function as an agent of healing and progress if it is experienced on its own terms,

if, that is, those encountered are not defined through the solipsistic projections of one's own culture. Revealing this to at least at times be Will's mindset, in Morocco, he says, "The road was too crowded. Where were they all going? They were like extras . . ." (244). That Will conceives of foreign others as "extras," a term perfectly condescending and, as a film and television term, a product of Western culture's influence on his mind, reveals the essence of his inability to engage. As poet Tony Hoagland reminds us in his poem "The Hero's Journey," "The glory of the protagonist is always paid for/ by a lot of secondary characters."<sup>5</sup>

Hoagland's observation seems to be the guiding principle of Eggers's short story "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly." The story is essentially the process of the American protagonist, Rita, being drawn out of her privileged Western worldview and into one which sees everyone, in Hoagland's conception, as both protagonist and secondary character. Bex again provides a succinct summary. He writes,

In focusing on the group dynamics both within the tourist group and between the Americans and the Tanzanians, the narrative shows the detrimental effects of adhering to a (neo) colonial logic by revealing how it restricts the circle of individuals who are recognized as worthy of empathic engagement. (90)

So conditioned are we as Western readers to empathize with the Western protagonist, and through Eggers's deliberate choice to focalize the narration through Rita, that the process of both Rita's and the reader's realization of the inhumane working conditions of the porters is an egregiously slow one. Through most of the story, the porters are backgrounded, seen as givens or

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<sup>5</sup> This seems as good a place as any to suggest a more thorough Postcolonial reading of *Velocity*, starting with the assumption that Will and Hand, through Eggers's emphasis on their respective ugliness and handsomeness, are representative of the duplicitous intentions of American foreign policy. As Will says, "Nothing we did ever resembled in any way what we'd envisioned. Maybe we couldn't help but make a mess everywhere we went" (241).

extras, not as people but as tools to help the paying hikers achieve their arbitrary and commodified goal of reaching the peak of Mount Kilimanjaro. The exploitation inherent in the porters' circumstances is masked not only by Eggers' choice to have the story unfold through Rita's limited perspective but through the nature of adventure tourism; it can mask the exploitation more easily than, say, a resort because the emphasis in adventure tourism is not on the customers' leisure but their hard work. But Mount Kilimanjaro is a tourist attraction nonetheless and its difficulty ultimately attests to the widening reach of commodification and commercialization. Despite the resolve and resilience necessary to climb the mountain, the paying hikers are still participating in what Boorstin, in reference to tourism, calls a "pseudo-event" (117). The touristic and commercial aspect of the mountain climb is emphasized by Eggers's consistent use of the phrase "paying hikers" to refer to Rita and the other tourists.

Eggers also shows Rita to fall prey to the trope of the rejuvenating power of proximity to the poor. This trope, as described by Slavoj Žižek in his analysis of James Cameron's *Titanic* in the documentary *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2012), treats the people of the lower class as a sort of tool for the revitalization of the upper class. The experience for the upperclass is therefore a syphoning or harvesting of the supposed innate vitality and authenticity of the poor. This trope perhaps sheds light on the, as mentioned above, commodification of arduous adventures like mountain climbing. The revitalization or working out of first world issues cannot happen in a first-world setting like a resort; the tourists must put themselves in an approximation of a third world position to be effectively reinvigorated. This is why, Žižek argues, Rose must descend into the ship's underworld, to the ale-soaked floors on which the big-hearted troubadours and ragamuffins dance away their sorrows in order to work out her relationship issues. The drama of

“Up the Mountain,” is Rita’s slowly becoming aware of her complicity in this trope, her realization that her therapeutic journey is made possible by the economic oppression and commodification of the disenfranchised.

After finally making it to the top of the mountain, Rita is informed that some of the porters died overnight in their tent due to the cold and insufficient clothing and gear (197-198). Rita was unaware of the porters’ deaths due to her altitude sickness, and when she questions a fellow hiker as to why she (Rita) was not informed, the fellow hiker, Shelly, reveals the morally bankrupt and utterly solipsistic attitude of most of the paying hikers. Shelly explains,

I didn’t want to spoil all this for you. We’ve all worked so hard to get up here. I’m glad everyone decided to push through, because this is worth it, don’t you think? Imagine coming all the way out here and not making it all the way up for whatever reason. (198)

It is then that Rita begins to rapidly descend the mountain in a fury of anger and guilt. When she makes it to the bottom, she signs a guest log intended for all participants. Eggers writes, “There are thousands of names in the book, with each name’s nationality, age, and a place for comments . . . after all the names before her she adds her own” (199). Rita’s signature functions as her acknowledgment of her complicity in an exploitive, neocolonial industry. The log book further highlights this through the individualism implied by the “thousands of names” contrasted with the unnamed and usually collectively referred to porters.

Curiously, Eggers emphasizes the speed with which Rita descends the mountain: “She runs and then jumps and runs and then jumps, flying for twenty feet with each leap . . .” (198). Bex sheds light on the discrepancy between the title’s “Coming Down Slowly” and Rita’s urgent

descent. He writes, “Rita’s frantic sprint down the mountain stands in stark contrast to Grant’s decision turn back after the porters’ deaths, presumably to help with the slow descent back down with the bodies” (92). Eggers’s title thus functions in a few different ways. “Up the Mountain” refers to Rita’s initial lack of empathy; the peak is described twice as “blindingly white” (144, 180) and, like the mountain top in *Velocity*, represents disengagement from practical and material reality. This is further confirmed when, as Rita begins to descend the mountain, we are told, “Peaks mean nothing to her” (198), as well as Eggers’s use of “altitude sickness” (“to which the young were more susceptible” (144)) as an extension of this metaphor. “Coming Down Slowly” then is a reference to both the inevitable slow descent of the bodies of the deceased porters and Rita’s slow journey away from blind, disengaged self-importance towards a more clear-eyed empathy.

But empathy, or “shared humanity” as Bex calls it, is not enough. Even if the porters’ “humanity is recognized on an abstract level” (Bex 92) nothing necessarily changes, recalling Eggers’s inscription on the cover of *AHWOSG*, “Mercy Is Not a Cure.” In fact, “shared humanity,” in a way, reinforces the narcissistic notion that common ground is a prerequisite for respect, that we must in some way liken others to ourselves in order that we might not exploit or harm them. This is why in “Another” it is not the abstraction of the businessman and Hesham’s realization or acknowledgement of one another’s “humanity” which allows them to at least momentarily transcend their respective sociopolitical identities and the assumed accompanying animosity. Rather, it is in that story the immediacy and physicality of the experience (riding fast on horseback) which allows them to forget their differences. The political animosity is not so

much discredited as it is overwhelmed and made irrelevant by the speed and action of the characters' circumstances.

This may shed light on Eggers's emphasis, especially in *Velocity*, on speed and movement. Indeed, the titles themselves of both *Velocity* and "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly" refer to speed and movement. Because of this emphasis, I read Bex's conclusion that *Velocity* and "Up the Mountain" "bring to light the necessity of incorporating both rights bearers and the disempowered into a more open cosmopolitan outlook and dialogue" (94) as slightly incomplete. As we've seen, Eggers consistently emphasizes action over "outlook and dialogue," experience over discussion. As Bex mentions, Rita's transition to a more empathetic view begins when she starts to imagine the lives of the porters, which manifests in her decision to, when the hike is over, give her boots to a particular porter (182). This porter, Kassim, though, we are led to believe, is among the deceased. Rita ends up giving her boots to a "young boy . . . who offered to wash them" at the base of the mountain (199). Eggers's attention to the boots, given the story's clear concern with the issue of empathy, recalls the famous saying, "Don't judge someone until you've walked a mile in their shoes." By setting the story in the context of hiking (walking), Eggers literalizes this saying, and the literalization by its nature highlights the action implied in the phrase. True empathy and progress, Eggers suggests again and again, come only by way of immediate action and engaged participation—not by changing one's outlook or simply talking about issues, neither through, Lawrence reminds us, "Charity. Not through sacrifice. Not even through love" (181). There is, in these stories and others, a strong sense of urgency and morality, though, in Lawrence's words, "a morality of actual living, not of salvation" (181). As Bex notes, Rita's climb up Mount Kilimanjaro, "allows her to wrench herself free from her limited

empathetic framework to include those excluded by the hegemony” (93). Or, in Poirier’s words, Eggers “free[s] the heroes’ . . . consciousness from categories not only of conventional moralities but also of mythopoeic interpretation” (35). Rita’s gift of her shoes to the young boy suggests an implicit component of action in this new framework and perhaps a more hopeful future for the boy. Rita’s journey, then, is one away from Girgus’s “negative liberty” and the social and political apathy and complacency a retreat into the self implies and promotes.

What we can now clearly see is that, despite Eggers’s protagonists’ stated understanding of the reasons for their journeys (described at length in Chapter 2), namely, escape from emotional issues, the point of their journeys becomes the contextualization of these emotional issues. The journeys, that is, do not so much resolve the characters’ issues as they do reveal the privileged nature of them and the ignorance and arrogance in the assumption that the world at large is, by way of international travel, a means of first world emotional therapy and rejuvenation. In *Velocity* this is demonstrated through the inescapability of American culture abroad at the hands of neocolonial forces, and in “Up the Mountain” specifically through the morally bankrupt and solipsistic nature of tourism.

But, true to his often ambivalent style, despite the damning implications of his problematization of Americans abroad, Eggers again does not outright condemn international travel. Like his refusal to dismiss Josie’s journey in *Heroes* as simple denial, Eggers concludes *Velocity*, despite the constant scrutiny of Will and Hand’s journey, on a positive and affirming note. Will is by a pool at a wedding reception in Cuernavaca. Will says,

I jumped all the way in, all at once, and my heart froze. Man, I thought that was the end, right there. It stopped for a minute I swear, but then the sound and

pictures came back on and for two more interminable months I lived! We lived!

(371)

Towards Lawrence's "Open Road" Eggers expresses a complicated ambivalence whose maturity is proportionate to and signaled by its complexity. Despite the many obstacles to authentic and moral travel, Eggers seems to believe, like Will's inner projection of Hand, that "We are moved as often as we move" (148). For the alternative is a life of sedentary passivity, disengaged narcissism, and evermore vicarious experience. It is to Egger's critique of this alternative that we now turn.

CHAPTER FIVE—  
INWARD THE COURSE OF EMPIRE TAKES ITS WAY: TECHNOLOGY AND THE  
ILLUSION OF FREEDOM IN *THE CIRCLE*

*“Socializing on the internet is to socializing what reality TV is to reality.”*

*Aaron Sorkin, The Colbert Report (9/30/2010)*

New technologies are often ingratiated and embedded into a culture by advertisers appealing to consumers’ ideal visions of themselves. Exploration and escape, as we saw earlier through a brief look at some canonical American fiction, are very much a part of the American collective mythology and identity. But the myth of the American as pioneer and its attendant myth of rugged individualism are now obsolete and delusional. In our outsourcing of even the smallest of daily tasks to corporations, we have turned into, as Curtis White puts it, “a Done-Elsewhere-by-Somebody-Else Culture” and have effectively converted the once intrinsically American Emersonian conception of self-reliance into a sort of Luddism (*The Middle Mind* 10), a quaint memory, a source of cosmopolitan embarrassment. And yet the myth of American individualism lives on, its prevalence a kind of wink towards its dishonesty.

For an example of how advertisers capitalize on this, as I said, obsolete and delusional identity, look no further than the names of our automobiles—GM Trailblazer, Nissan Frontier, and of course the Ford Excursion, Expedition, Explorer, and Escape. The rhetoric of adventure is used in naming these cars as a sort of compensation for their function, which is primarily the routine navigation of the wilderness-less and ever-expanding suburbs (the Chevy Suburban at least has the decency to acknowledge this plain truth). As James Howard Kunstler puts it in his book *The Geography of Nowhere*, even after the onset of the “corporate industrial juggernaut” of the automobile industry, “Americans still liked to think of themselves as rugged individualists, as pioneers out on the frontier, no matter how many of them really worked as factory slaves or

office drones” (101). Only with bitter irony would someone refer to his or her daily drives between the asphalted destinations of home, the office, and, say, Applebee’s, as an “expedition.” But we, mostly unthinkingly, accept these terms and, especially through their associations with images of wilderness in advertisements, are encouraged to continue thinking (and only thinking) of ourselves as a nation of adventurers.

A similar compensation for and indirect acknowledgment of the lack of actual adventure is accomplished by the rhetoric used in certain aspects of the internet. One does not simply “browse” the internet but “surfs the web” using, once upon a time, “Netscape Navigator,” “Internet Explorer,” and “Safari”—terms whose laughable appropriation of the rhetoric of adventure is not incidental but integral to their success by fueling the delusional narrative of contemporary Americans as adventurers. Eggers’s novel *The Circle* dramatizes this appropriation.

If *Velocity* and “Up the Mountain” problematize “the Open Road,” *The Circle* vehemently and unequivocally problematizes its alternatives. As several critics have pointed out, Eggers is clearly concerned with the issue of privacy inherent in new technology, an issue briefly but presciently commented upon in *Velocity*. Will and Hand’s fellow traveller, Raymond

worked in cellphones. Something involving GPS and cellphones, and how, soon enough, everyone would know—for their own safety, he insisted. . . where everyone else in the world was, by tracking their cellphone. But again: for good not evil. For the children. For the children. For grandparents and wives.

It was the end of an epoch, and I didn’t want to be around to see it happen; we’d traded anonymity for access. (62)

This is a sort of eerie anticipation (in 2002) of the iPhone, its social justifications, and the Orwellian breaches of privacy it has afforded its creators and hackers. But beyond the issue of privacy, in *The Circle*, Eggers shows technology, especially social media, to be a corporate tool which marginalizes immediacy—technology as a means for corporations to situate themselves between people and their immediate experience of the world so that the label “people” becomes less appropriate and “consumer” evermore. This marginalization and abstracting of experience is precisely counter to Eggers’s promotion of immersion in the physical world and immediacy of experience that we have seen in our discussion so far.

*The Circle* tells the story of Mae Holland, a young college graduate who, through a lucky connection with her friend Annie, is employed in an entry-level position at the company The Circle, which is a conglomerate of social media, information, and commercial internet companies. The drama of the story is that Mae’s success at the company leads her to agree to livestream her daily life as she struggles with the moral and philosophical implications of the ever-widening reach (circumference?) of the Circle, one founder of which meets secretly with Mae to warn her of the dangers of the company’s seemingly totalitarian plans for the future. These warnings, however, along with Mae’s ex-boyfriend Mercer’s rants against the Circle, fail to persuade her; in the end, the Circle gets its way, and Mae has been thoroughly converted to its ideology. The novel ends with Mae speculating on how the Circle might further its agenda by reading people’s minds.

*The Circle* is one of Eggers’s best known works due in no small part to its clear and even at times preachy commentary on current issues of technology and, as a work of science or speculative fiction, might appear at first glance to be an outlier in the Eggers canon. But *The*

*Circle* is much more than a didactic story of surface level social commentary, an impression we might get if we read Fernanda Moore's egregiously short-sighted review "These Rotten Kids Today: Dave Eggers Hates Them" in *Commentary* in which she concludes, "Eggers has so much contempt for Mae, Mercer, and the rest of their supposedly lost generation that he can't even make their story interesting . . . he has become a curmudgeon before his time" (62).<sup>6</sup> That Eggers's supposed curmudgeonliness might be an appropriate orientation to the issues his novel explores goes unconsidered by Moore.

Given the importance placed on action and physical reality in Eggers's other works, our first clue in *The Circle* that his uncharacteristic pessimism might be warranted comes in an early scene in which Mae undergoes job-training. The lack of narrational commentary on the substance of Mae's job renders subtle its fundamental ridiculousness. Mae works in "Customer Experience" and is responsible for fielding customer questions and making sure her customer rating, a score based on customers filling out a survey about their experience with "Customer Experience," stays high. Thus we see—and the follow up questions Mae is instructed to send to customers who rate her anything but perfect suggest this even more—Mae's primary concern is maintaining a high rating, not necessarily helping customers. Mae's trainer, Jared, after her first customer query, says, "Now, that's good, right? Ninety-nine is good. But I can't help wondering why it wasn't a 100. Let's look" (51). He then instructs Mae to send a follow up survey inquiring how the "interaction could have been improved" (51). What we see in this scene is Mae being indoctrinated to the Circle's ideology of quantification. Digital interactions are converted into

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<sup>6</sup> Ironically, Moore's personalized attack on Eggers mirrors Mae's internalized counter-arguments to Mercer's rants against the Circle (Mae's primary argument is that Mercer is fat) in its failure to critically engage the issues under scrutiny, opting instead for irrelevant, individualized insults.

simple surveys which are in turn converted into statistics upon which business decisions are made. The experiences of the customer and employee are abstracted into something almost entirely theoretical and virtual. Mae's virtual interactions with customers are shown to be more about the interactions themselves than the substance of the questions.

More to the point, despite Jared's insistence that "No robots work here" (49), Mae's job is largely a sedentary, mechanical, and monotonous function. 'Sedentary' in fact is a recurring word in the novel and a reality for Circlers (employees of the Circle) compensated for by the myriad on-campus options for physical and social engagement. Despite this pervasive presence of Yoga, SoulCycle, and immaculate athletic fields, Eggers calls our attention to the utter lack of athleticism among Circlers. He writes, "Mae and Annie watched a trio of young men, pale and dressed like engineers, attempting to throw a football" (55). Later, Mae and a co-worker (Francis) are eating lunch together and see a group of Circlers "*approximating* a game of volleyball" (85, italics added). Francis, whose hands "seemed unusually delicate" (85), says, "Not such an athletic group" (85). Eggers emphasizes the Circlers' lack of athleticism to show the impact of their sedentary lifestyles—their time spent staring at an ever-increasing number of screens—on their physical abilities. He shows the endless options for exercise and physical play to be tools of obfuscation, to be as Curtis White says in a slightly different context, "a form of psychological triage for sorting and responding to the suffering of those in the corporate carrel" (*We, Robots*, 124). Not unlike the way automobile names compensate for their actual functions, the highly visible presence of opportunities for physical activities masks the truth that Circlers, because of their positions as such, lack the time, inclination, and competence to participate in physical play.

Socially and sexually Circlers are similarly inept and for the same reasons. Early in the novel, Mae has a sexual encounter with Francis representative, we can assume, of the ineptitude of most Circlers. In his on-campus apartment, Francis tries to flirt with Mae. He says, “I can never get over your waist . . . The line of it, how it bends in like some kind of bow . . . I love that you have hips and shoulders. And with that waist” (197-198). Mae is accordingly off-put by his abrupt directness but softens to Francis as she learns of his unfortunate upbringing through foster care—the sympathy from which leads to something like sex. Francis comments on Mae’s pulse, visible to him on her Circle-provided biometric bracelet. This leads to Mae experimenting with her control of Francis’s heart rate by touching him in increasingly provocative places. But, as Mae solidifies her sexual intentions, Francis prematurely ejaculates and the moment is over. Any sympathy we might feel for Francis disappears when we learn that he has been recording this encounter on his phone. When Mae reaches for the phone to delete the video, Francis says, “Don’t. It’s mine . . . This is a rare occasion for me, to have something like this happen. Can’t I keep a memento of the experience?” (204).

In this scene, Eggers paints a distinct picture of the social and sexual lives of Circlers backgrounded by the Circle’s technology-worshipping and abstracting ideology. We see Francis’s easy excitability as a manifestation of the distance between body and self encouraged by the vicariousness inherent in digital ideology. Even when he does have “something like this happen” (204), it is his instinct to convert it into a digital commodity. Physical reality and immediate experience are thereby demeaned and are, to Francis, secondary considerations. The material world becomes a mere content generator for the digital one. Francis’s and Mae’s encounter appears even more pathetic in contrast to the already discussed sex in “The Only

Meaning of the Oil-Wet Water” and *Hologram*. As mentioned, both of these scenes are connected with nature—Pilar and Hand surf and Alan swims in the ocean with Zahra—and, despite Alan’s poor performance, offer their lovers some form of transcendence. Francis and Mae’s experience begins and ends with digital gadgetry and accordingly leads only to awkwardness, worry, and dissatisfaction. Here again Eggers shows the ineptitude of second-hand experience and affirms material, bodily reality as the only possible means of catharsis and sanctuary.

Moreover, as in Eggers’s earlier novels, in *The Circle* we get more references to travel as a possible means of catharsis. But in *The Circle*, references to travel are almost always about its unattainability. For instance, when Mae meets the mysterious Kalden and learns that his name is Tibetan, Eggers is sure to have Kalden otherwise unnecessarily mention that his “parents always wanted to go to Tibet but never got closer than Hong Kong” (91). This quick mention of a particular instance of a lack of travel may be a reference to an earlier scene in which one of the Circle’s founder, Eamon Bailey, introduces a new technology (SeeChange) ostensibly meant to provide vicarious experiences of travel for those who for whatever reason cannot. In a presentation to an audience of Circlers, Bailey says, “Why shouldn’t your curiosity about the world be rewarded? You want to see Fiji but can’t get there? SeeChange” (69). Why exactly Bailey can confidently assume Circlers “can’t get there” goes intentionally unaddressed. Bailey then livestreams footage from all over the world, including Mount Kenya. Eggers writes, “The camera panned up, revealing the peak of the mountain, enshrouded in fog” (70). The image of a foggy mountain peak should be familiar to us given the previous discussion of Eggers’s metaphorical use of mountains in *Velocity* and “Up the Mountain”; it should clue us in to Eggers’s intention to depict the technology of “visual surrogates” as disengagement from the

natural world. This disengagement, we can now see, is the result of corporate manipulation. Bailey markets SeeChange by appealing to his audience's implicit "curiosity about the world" despite the reality that this technology will not facilitate but replace travel. That is, what is marketed by the rhetoric of adventure is really a means of preempting workers' impulses to adventure.

These manipulations do not go unnoticed by Mercer, Mae's ex-boyfriend and the novel's marginal and eventually dead voice of reason and morality. Mercer makes clear Eggers's position on vicarious travel. To Mae, he says,

I think you think that sitting at your desk, frowning and smiling [the novel's parallel to *liking*] somehow makes you think you're actually living some fascinating life. You comment on things, and that substitutes for doing them. You look at pictures of Nepal, push a smile button, and you think that's the same as going there. I mean, what would happen if you actually went? Your CircleJerk ratings or whatever-the-fuck would drop below an acceptable level! Mae, do you realize how incredibly boring you've become? (261)

Mercer's condemnation of Mae as boring should remind us of Dave's similar pronouncement about John in *AHWOSG* (239). Like John's banal and complacent-making drinking, Mae's conversion to the Circle's ideology renders her disengaged from the material world and stuck in a solipsism that insidiously sells itself as engagement and even philanthropy. SeeChange and the other technologies initiated by the Circle are pitched as solutions to problems of Human Rights but function as mechanisms of social control and consumer tracking. Eggers wants us to see that there are objective and moral differences between bodily/human/material reality and digital

reality—not, perhaps, inherently but because the middle man facilitating the vicariousness of digital reality is inevitably a corporate structure. The former affords at least temporary catharsis and freedom whereas the latter instils complacency and narcissism.

Eggers also wants us to see how this disengagement is only becoming easier and more pleasurable as the places to which we once escaped become evermore quantified and uninhabitable. The Circle’s campus is presented satirically as a paradise in the novel’s opening lines: “My God, Mae thought. It’s heaven” (1). But we come to understand that the Circle’s mechanically pristine paradise is an aesthetically equal and opposite reaction to the only hinted at chaos beyond its campus borders. This is a point well made in the article “Floods, Fortresses, and Cabin Fever: Worlding ‘Domeland’ Security in Dave Eggers’s *Zeitoun* and *The Circle*” in which John Masterson suggests, among other things, that the world outside the Circle, though given less attention, plays a significant role. I would suggest that the role it plays is to develop Eggers’s inversion of the typically American theme of escape into the wilderness. Masterson directs our attention to Mae’s initial reaction to the Circle’s campus:

Her hometown, and the rest of California, the rest of America, seemed like some chaotic mess in the developing world. Outside the walls of the Circle, all was noise and struggle, failure and filth. But here, all had been perfected. (*The Circle*, 30)

The confines of the Circle are thus depicted as a sort of escape from the rest of the world. Eggers’s depiction of an institution—in all its order and safety—as an escape is an intentional and stark inversion of the previously discussed theme of escape found in much American fiction. Recall Poirier’s observation that “The classic American writers try through style to temporarily

free the hero (and reader) from systems . . . which are ultimately the undoing of American heroes” (5). Poirier goes on to use *Huckleberry Finn* to clarify his observation. He writes that “the book creates two environments for the hero, the raft and the shore” (15). The raft comes to be associated with freedom and is “beyond economics,” while the shore is, “an investment in history” (15). This is an apt metaphor to understand Eggers’s intentions, for the Circle’s warped worldview conceives of freedom quite differently: as a product of its own systems. That is, to the Circlers, the raft is the shore and vice versa.

In accordance with Poirier, the undoing of the hero is her or his decoupling from the system. We see this clearly through the plight of Mercer, who seems to have a more traditional understanding of freedom. Mercer’s idea of freedom involves the right to be left alone, the right to do personally meaningful work, and the right to natural landscapes. But it is precisely when Mercer retreats in Thoreauvian fashion to a cabin in the woods that Mae tracks him down using the Circle’s cameras and drones, which leads to his car wreck and death. That Mercer cannot escape even after his retreat into some obscure forest’s cabin hints at an even more provocative inversion of American literary tropes, this time with serious environmental implications. Leo Marx’s classic *The Machine in the Garden* analyzes the relationship between technology and landscapes in American fiction and observes that “to withdraw from a great world and begin a new life in a fresh, green landscape” is a recurring theme that “was embodied in various utopian schemes for making America the site of a new beginning for Western society” (3). The Circlers are nothing if not utopians—as Mae muses, “Who else but utopians could make utopia?” (30). But, again, in contrast to the traditional American conception put forth by Marx, utopia in *The*

*Circle* is quite conversely conceived of as a withdrawal from the “fresh, green landscape” into the “great world” of polished and systematized technological convenience.

This may be a result of the absence of a healthy and desirable landscape outside the Circle’s campus. The “failure and filth” (30) to which Mae refers may signal the steadily declining environment. Eggers shows our childish retreat into the comfort and distraction of technology as the path to an environmental paradigm which renders Marx’s conception of the machine in the garden (technology as an intrusion and affront to nature) to be obsolete to the point of inversion. That is, it is now the garden which intrudes upon the machine, nature which intrudes upon technology. Even the title of Freese and Harris’s relatively recent collection of criticism *The Holodeck in the Garden* (2004) implies the existence of a garden, a paradise upon which technology intrudes. But, as Donna Haraway reminds us as far back as 1985 in her “Cyborg Manifesto,” “The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden” (9), and then later, “A cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden” (65).<sup>7</sup> The garden, in other words, is gone (if it ever really *was*) and is not coming back. It is perhaps the sick alchemy of American pragmatism and economic rationalism which, when our world becomes unbearably ugly, allows us to simply change the definition of beauty. But in terms of environmental degradation, this pragmatism and rationalism function as irresponsibility and denial. Eggers shows that the Circle’s ideology, which we recognize as an only slightly exaggerated version of contemporary America’s techno-capitalist ideology, is directly counter to the traditional American conception of freedom through escape to the wilderness. We see also that this is due to the expanding reach

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<sup>7</sup> D.H. Lawrence puts it in franker terms, as we might expect, when, speaking of American “virgin soil,” he writes, “Poor virgin, prostituted from the very start” (29).

of digital ideology and its attendant disengagement's negative impact on the environment. And all of this, again, while we are bombarded by the the rhetoric of adventure and freedom.

These inversions are made even clearer when Mae is confronted by co-workers about not digitally sharing her habit of solo kayaking. After a weekend trip to her parents' house, Mae's otherwise carefully maintained social media Participation Rank (or for short—and note the Orwellian resonance—“PartiRank”) suffers, and she is confronted by her superiors, Denise and Josiah. They ask her to account for her undocumented time away from the Circle. When Mae mentions that she, among other things, went kayaking, Denise and Josiah are confounded. They ask, “When you go kayaking, what do you see?” (186). When Mae confirms that she sees “seals, sea lions, waterbirds, and pelicans” and that she did not take pictures, Josiah responds, “If you'd been using a tool that would help confirm the identity of whatever birds you saw, then anyone can benefit . . . But documentation aside, I'm just fascinated why you wouldn't mention kayaking anywhere” (187). Like Mercer's, we see Mae's inclination towards solitude in nature to be counter to the Circle's goal-oriented, efficiency-worshipping, utilitarian ethos, which is revealed to be ultimately about economic concerns. Mae protests, saying that “It's just kayaking.” Josiah replies, “Do you realize that kayaking is a three-billion-dollar industry?” (188). But Josiah's earlier phrase “documentation aside” should clue us in to the fact that the Circle's aversion to Mae's affinity for nature and solitude is not simply practical but ideological. The Circle, as Masterson points out, is not just “a corporate behemoth” but “a metaphysical ideal” (722). It is this metaphysical ideal to which Mae and Mercer's impulse for solitude, and the traditional American idea of freedom run counter. Eggers's decision to have Mae's sense of freedom expressed through kayaking comes very near to literalizing Poirier's “the

raft and the shore.” *The Circle* is largely the story of the shore slowly but surely encroaching on the raft. Or rather, it is the story of the water receding until there is only shore, rendering the raft useless. Either way, we see a world declining in places worth escaping to and escape as an increasingly subversive act to the, only apparently benevolently, ruling order. The next time Mae goes kayaking alone, after illegally borrowing a kayak, she is met on the shore, thanks to SeeChange cameras, by police officers with handcuffs (271), making even clearer the connection between corporate technology and social control. Far from Marx’s elucidation of what he calls the “Middle Landscape,” in which technology and nature exist symbiotically in a sort of compromise, the Circle is only interested in nature if it is quantifiable and marketable, which then of course renders obsolete the traditional definition of nature and the freedom it once afforded.

What should be becoming clearer is that *The Circle* is not a mere cautionary tale about our contemporary over-reliance on gadgetry and social media, that it is not the mere grumblings of a curmudgeon. No, *The Circle* is a speculation on the past, present, and future of American imperialism and a demonstration of its manifestation’s evermore fundamental integration into daily American life. As Masterson puts it, “What appears to be a future-oriented vision is . . . a more historically embedded critique of US imperialism, stretching back at least to the nineteenth century” (731). Eggers’s audacious and far-reaching vision owes, as I said, considerably to Orwell’s *1984*, but, in *The Circle*’s critique of imperial capitalism, owes perhaps just as much to Frank Norris’s *The Octopus* (1901) and even shares Norris’s central metaphor. The “octopus” in Norris is the ultimately faceless and unaccountable force of the railroad which “fling[s] the echo of its thunder over all the reaches of the valley . . . with tentacles of steel clutching into the

soil” (617). Similarly, but with a 21st century update, in Eggers the octopus which the Circle’s aquarium houses and Mae is responsible for showing her online viewers, is symbolic of the tentacle-like reach of digital postmodern capitalism. Eggers writes, “[T]he octopus instantly spread itself up like a welcoming hand. As it had done when alone, it traced the contours of the glass, feeling the coral, the seaweed, always gentle, wanting to know all, touch all” (471-472).

We can see that the difference between these two writers’ similar metaphors lies in the difference between the railroad’s obvious “terror of steel and steam” (617) and the Circle’s more subtle smiling veneer or “welcoming hand.” This is so because, despite the novel’s Orwellian resonance, it is a relatively new and different manifestation of totalitarian power which Eggers illuminates and critiques. It is a critique of, in political philosopher Sheldon Wolin’s fine phrase, “Inverted totalitarianism” (xiii). In his book *Democracy Incorporated*, Wolin explains,

Inverted totalitarianism, in contrast [to “classic totalitarianism”], while exploiting the authority and resources of the state, gains its dynamic by combining with other forms of power, such as evangelical religions, and most notably by encouraging a symbiotic relationship between traditional government and the system of “private” governance represented by the modern business corporation. The result is not a system of codetermination by equal partners who retain their distinctive identities but rather a system that represents the political coming-of-age of corporate power. (xiii)

In light of Wolin’s observations, in *The Circle*, we can see the internet as a new frontier (like the West for the railroad in Norris) whose pioneers, despite their smiley-faced veneers, function as conquerers of digital territories. Like all imperial projects, these pioneers perpetuate oppression;

they disenfranchise and immobilize the citizenry under the insidious pretenses of humanitarianism and mobility. “[F]or all of their countercultural pretensions,” Curtis White writes, “corporations like Google, Amazon, and Apple are still corporations. They seek profits, they try to maximize their monopoly power, they externalize costs, and, of course, they exploit labor” (*We, Robots* 128). Having mapped, measured, and mostly destroyed the physical world, it is now the digital one that American capitalism has in its sights.

Further (and finally) reflecting this commentary is the scene in which Mae is introduced to her duty as a Circler to respond to at least 500 survey questions a day. The surveys are explained as an attempt “to take the pulse of a chosen sampling of Circle members” which helps the Circle in “tailoring our services” (228). Pete, the employee introducing the surveys to Mae, explains that a voice in her headset will ask her questions to which she will respond with one of three answers: “*smile, frown, or meh,*” after which she will hear the ‘ding’ of a bell (229). He also explains that Mae can choose an audio signal to remind her to return to the survey should she become distracted by her other work. Mae chooses, with Pete’s encouragement, the sound of her own voice saying her own name. After Mae first hears her chosen audio signal, Eggers writes, “She wasn’t sure she wanted to hear her own voice saying her own name, repeatedly, but she knew, too, that she wanted to hear it again as soon as possible” (231). Once Pete leaves Mae to her new assignment, the first survey question she is asked is, “For vacations, are you inclined toward one of relaxation, like a beach or luxury hotel, or are you inclined toward adventure, like a white-water rafting trip?” Mae answers, “Adventure” and then responds to follow-up questions about type and length of adventure. The voice soon asks, “Would you be willing to pay 1,200 dollars for a weeklong trip down the Grand Canyon,” to which Mae replies, “Meh” (232). Mae

then becomes distracted when she is bombarded by customer queries, her typical work. After a few minutes, Mae is reminded to return to her survey by the loud and unaccountably pleasing sound of her own voice saying her name in her head. The survey voice then repeats the question about the Grand Canyon. This time Mae answers yes, directly after which Eggers writes, “The bell rang” (233).

That Eggers concludes this passage with this Pavlovian phrase paints the poignant picture of dozens of Circle employees in headsets, mesmerized and seduced by the sound of their own voices, saying their own names, drenched in proverbial Pavlovian drool. Even more poignant, though, is Eggers’s clear depiction of the commodification of adventure. Like the hike in “Up the Mountain,” Eggers shows adventure to be a mere extension of the tourism industry through the question’s association of both adventure and relaxation with vacation. But unlike the commodification in “Up the Mountain” and the neocolonialism in *Velocity*, what we see in *The Circle* is not the direct impact of imperialism on the wide world but its domestic and corporate roots, the smiley-faced veneer by which such ideology is marketed to and embedded within American culture. As Masterson explains, the novel’s theme of “mapping and measuring”—certainly a prerequisite for commodifying—is related to “the once imperial now neoliberal tenet that territorial boundaries are no barriers at all” (733). We see how corporations appeal to people’s best instincts and faith in progress via technology in order to expand the territory they can colonize with their respective business. Thus, the Grand Canyon becomes a thing to be sold, and escape into nature with which the Grand Canyon was once associated becomes a quaint notion. In *The Circle*, it is not disbelief that is suspended which allows for commodification and control as Eggers suggests in *Velocity* (274); rather, it is consent that is manufactured.

Like the natural world, experience itself becomes a marketed product, and one that is further commodified and abstracted through corporate technology's ability to offer vicarious experiences. Masterson, again, cuts to the heart of the issue and is worth quoting at length here:

The discourse of making the world a better, cleaner, and safer place . . . is once more shown as a veneer for more imperial tendencies, in which the world itself becomes a version of the campus/Circle vision of “national entitlement” . . .

Eggers amplifies this impression by foregrounding tensions in the very notion of experience: a concept that, in peculiar ways, has become securitized and sanitized.

The Circle's answer to the problems of lived, breathed, smelled, and felt experiences emerges from the comparatively abstract realms of algorithms and the actions of digital communities. Yet again, emphasizing calculations and solutions divorced from fleshy reality. (736)

Eggers's illumination of this divorce from “fleshy reality” is precisely the unifying theme in his work that I have been demonstrating. This theme has both historical and contemporary resonance—historical for its already demonstrated association with imperialism and its degradation of the physical world, contemporary for its commentary on the abstraction inherent in our internet-based and social media-obsessed techno-capitalist culture. See, for instance, the not ironic headline of a recent *Huffington Post* article, “These travel SnapChat accounts literally put the world in your hands” (Ramos).<sup>8</sup> This stifling insistence on vicariousness is, like we saw earlier, a form of inward retreat but is not, as before, a decision made by an individual; it is an insidiously engendered ideology.

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<sup>8</sup> They don't.

Despite his depiction of the problems, also directly connected to the history of imperialism, inherent in Americans “escaping” abroad in “Up the Mountain” and *Velocity*, in *The Circle* Eggers shows that an equal problem is the corporate-led commodification and degradation of both human experience and natural environments which render Lawrence’s “Open Road” and its attendant “morality of actual living” (181) things for nostalgia.

“And besides that,” as Mercer says, “it’s fucking dorky” (132).

CHAPTER SIX—  
 “THE FOURTH WORLD”: EGGERS AS AN INVITATION TO ACTION

*“It is time for us to lessen our addictive ties to theorizing and intellectual posing. Shut down the cameras and fold up the landscape partitions.”*

*Jimmy Santiago Baca, Working in the Dark*

What I hope to have shown is that Eggers’s work signifies; it directs our attention to the messy exterior world; it attempts to draw us out of ourselves and the “negative freedom” of inward retreat. Eggers, in short, *points*—to issues of human rights, neocolonialism, globalism, and environmentalism. Eggers’s engagement with these issues becomes clearer looking at the arc of his publication career which begins with the literally self-centered memoir *AHWOSG*, moves on to a more fictionalized though still somewhat autobiographical *Velocity*, then moves in to the even more other-directed genres of journalistic novels (*What is the What, Zeitoun*) and sociopolitically themed novels (*Hologram, The Circle, Your Fathers, Where Are They and the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?*). This arc mirrors the journey of many of Eggers’s protagonists, especially Rita in “Up the Mountain” and functions as a sort of invitation to his readers to opt out of the hyper self-reflexivity embedded deeply in our celebrity-obsessed and consumerist culture and to foster an identity more closely resembling that of a citizen. This invitation, though, is one that implies and necessitates a rejection of abstraction in its many forms.

In a scene near the end of *AHWOSG*, Dave returns to his hometown in Illinois to indulge in some nostalgia. Interestingly, Eggers mentions that as Dave visits his childhood home and other places of personal interest he carries a notebook with him. We know that this notebook is for taking notes for the very book we are reading. During a *Bookworm* interview with Michael Silverblatt, Eggers points to critics’ largely negative responses to the inclusion of the detail of his

notebook, to their suggestion of its previously mentioned gimmickry. However, as Eggers emphatically states, the notebook's inclusion is crucial to his goals in his memoir. The notebook was a fact of the reality he attempts to depict. Thus, strangely, the critics' accusations of gimmickry are precisely wrong. What they mistake for a cute, postmodern gimmick is actually an attempt to push past that self-reflexive paradigm and into one more brutally honest. How can a memoir of a writer not include the writing habits of its subject? It is as if, to critics, any mention or hint of self-referentiality allows them the easy categorization of postmodern gimmickry. This is lazy criticism. In that same interview, Michael Silverblatt wisely muses on the role he sees Eggers's work playing in the wider literary culture. He says,

The job at this time is to get past, to defeat this idea of irony and find out how sincerity can be arrived at without prostituting one's sense of the absurdity of the world. It's not an attempt to be untruthful or unfaithful and cynical; it's an attempt to include the fact of cynicism and move beyond it. ("Dave Eggers on *Bookworm*")

Eggers responds, "That's exactly it. There's an assumption that these two things can't coexist . . . Maybe more than those two things can coexist in any given work." For this attempt to "move beyond" cynicism Eggers is often lumped in with Wallace, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Jonathan Franzen as part of the so called "New Sincerity."

Sincerity, though, while certainly an incidental aspect of Eggers's work, is not an end in itself. If one is sincere merely for the sake of being labeled sincere, what is the point of that sincerity, and how sincere could it really have been in the first place? Sincerity is a label for a vessel for something else, not the thing itself; it is an *attribute* of a larger idea, not the idea. As I

said, Eggers's work points emphatically beyond itself. Thus, to stop the discourse with the label of 'sincerity' is to utterly miss the point of sincerity. As Amitav Ghosh writes in his most recent work of criticism *The Great Derangement*, "Sincerity has nothing to do with rationing water in a drought, as in today's California: this is not a measure that can be left to the individual conscience. To think in those terms is to accept neo-liberal premises" (133). Ghosh makes clear the connection between sincerity as a mere label or marker of identity, and the negative impact of individualism on the environment. Ghosh's observations are not unlike Girgus's idea of negative freedom; both suggest that much of 20th century Western literature is the dramatization of individual consciousness and therefore takes as its narrative structure what Ghosh calls "individual moral adventure" (127). This trend may be, and Ghosh implies as much, the result of or equal and opposite reaction to the significant deterioration of the external world starting with the Industrial Revolution, then the two world wars, and the ever-crystalizing realities of climate change. The focus on psychology and individual morality functions as the inward retreat we have seen Eggers consistently criticizing and rejecting.

What is of present interest, though, is the previously mentioned lazy categorization which characterizes too much contemporary literary criticism—in general and of Eggers especially. This is an issue explored in Eggers's short story "After I Was Thrown in the River and Before I Drowned," the concluding story of *How We Are Hungry*. The story is told from the perspective of a dog named Steven. Through his assessment of himself as a "fast dog" (211) and his exuberant descriptions of his love of running with his fellow dogs, we come to associate Steven with action and engagement in both community and nature. Steven says,

I run to feel the cool air cool through my fur. I run to feel the cold water come from my eyes. I run to feel my jaw slacken and my tongue come loose and flap from the side of my mouth and I go and go and go. (211)

Clearly, Steven glories in his immersion in the physical world and the physicality of his body.

As we should now expect of an Eggers protagonist, Steven values action over words. This theme first appears when Steven, commenting on human conversations in general, says, “You tell me that what is said is making a difference, that these words are worthwhile words and mean something. I see what happens” (212). Thus, when we learn that Steven regularly meets with other dogs in the woods to race and jump over “gaps” we understand that these races represent action as opposed to mere talk. This is emphasized and most clearly shown by the role the squirrels play in the races. Eggers writes, “on the branches of the rough gray trees are the squirrels. The squirrels have things to say; they talk before and after we jump” (215). We are then given some examples of the kinds of things the squirrels say about the dogs’ running and jumping: “He is running funny” (215), “She will not make it across,” “He did not land as well as I wanted him to,” “She made a bad landing. Because her landing was bad I am angry,” and “It makes me laugh that she did not make it across the gap” (216). In light of their distant and literally condescending commentary, the squirrels can be read as critics and the dogs whom they critique as writers. Through Steven, Eggers expresses confusion at the squirrels’/critics’ inherently negative orientation to the dogs’/writers’ actions and seems to even question the validity of their general role. He writes, “We look at the squirrels and we wonder why they are there . . . They sit and talk about the things we do” (216). Implied in Eggers’s critique is a distinction between critic and Accuser—a distinction made in a recent essay by Wendell Berry

who writes, “Though the Accuser typically is self-exempted, an actual critic is obliged to take up the work of a particularizing judgment” (7). The major irony here is that Eggers’s critics suffer from the very tendency towards abstraction that his work critiques. “The chief cause,” I.A. Richards writes, “of ill-appropriate, stereotyped reactions is withdrawal from experience” (qtd. in Vollmann 45).

Eggers’s work that has suffered the most at the hands of Accusers is his mostly nonfiction novel *What is the What* (2006), published, ironically, two years after *How We Are Hungry*. In *What is the What* Eggers tells the life story of Valentino Achak Deng, a Sudanese “lost boy,” in the first person, leading the book’s perspective to be criticized as “linguistic blackface” (qtd in Masterson 725). Or, more generally, as Sean Bex and Stef Craps write in their article “Humanitarianism, Testimony, and the White Savior Industrial Complex,” “Criticisms of *What is the What* concentrate on issues of voice appropriation, identity erasure, and neocolonial imperialism in relation to the role of testimony in human rights advocacy” (32). These are accusations, though, that Bex and Craps effectively dispute by pointing to the fact that “the privileged author has ceded control to the disenfranchised, both financially . . . and narratologically” (38). The writers ultimately redeem Eggers’s novel in their conclusion that it “fosters empathy between the reader and Valentino as individual human beings rather than appealing to the stock image of the civilized West aiding troubled Africa” (45).<sup>9</sup>

The distinction between “individual human beings” and “stock image[s]” is crucial to understanding Eggers’s goal in *What is the What* and the rest of his work. He wants us to see that

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<sup>9</sup> To this line of thinking I would add that to take into account Deng’s willful and enthusiastic collaboration with Eggers and still insist that Eggers is in some way denying Deng agency is highly problematic. It suggests an outlook that assumes that Deng, by his status as ‘not Western’ simply *cannot* have any agency. Or it assumes that Deng, for whatever reason, did not truly understand what he was doing. In short, to take the specific facts of the creation of *What is the What* and insist on Deng’s lack of agency is to suffer from the very assumptions the original critique means to point out.

in order to move forward, we must move beyond stereotypes and categorization, that the labels concocted by literary critics are not universal. Said seems to agree when he unambiguously writes, “I certainly do not believe in the limited proposition that only a black can write about blacks, a Muslim about Muslims, and so forth” (322). To accept that limited proposition would be to succumb to the abstraction of a category or type; it would be to accept a “matrix” from which “other myths pour forth” (307). The stereotyping of the Orient, which Said exhaustively traces, is a manifestation of the impulse to categorize. The conversion of the “typical materiality of an object” into a “precise measurement of characteristic elements” (119) is essentially a process of abstraction masquerading as science. This is the denigration of material reality which we have seen Eggers illuminating repeatedly and in varying contexts. From the rejection of the compartmentalization inherent in an overly interior/psychological relation to the world in *AHWOSG* and *Velocity* to the emphasis on mapping and measuring as a response to the outside world of “chaos and filth” in *The Circle*, it is the dishonest and incomplete nature of abstraction that Eggers wants us to see and reject in order that we might more fully immerse ourselves in the to some degree redemptive physical world that by our inward retreat and disengagement is fast fading.

It is as if Eggers wants to invite us into what he calls in *Velocity* “the fourth world.” Will and Hand go swimming at night in Senegal with a Parisian woman named Annette whom Will mystifies by describing as “not human in the way we were human . . . She had been carved and sanded” (142). Annette says that because they are awake and swimming while others sleep, they are in the fourth world on which she then elaborates:

Everyone is sleeping and we are here, in the sea. That is the fourth world. The fourth world is present and available. It's this close. But it's different. It's passive. We are make the action here. We come and then we create things that will happen. The fourth world is half thought, half actual. It's a staging ground . . . The main point is . . . that we have to cut from hope of continuity. Momentum. We must to see each setting and moment as whole. Different, independent. A staging ground. (143)

To Annette's imperative "to see each setting and moment as whole" we might justifiably add "person" and "work of art," for to do anything else would devalue both art and artist and reinforce criticism as simple categorization.

As I said, Eggers's work signifies; it points beyond itself to social and political issues, often involving a critique of the privileged West. Many of his critics, though, caught in the paradigm of mere categorization and stock images, see only the surface of his work—their "mouths" as with the squirrels "already forming the words they will say" (221)—and not the deeper reimaginings of the tropes he uses only to subvert. This is why in *Velocity*, a story about globetrotting Americans, money and guilt are the major themes. It is also why *Heroes*, a story which seems to simply celebrate the quintessentially American theme of escape, ends with the sentence, "But then there is tomorrow" (385). And it is why *What is the What* hyperbolically depicts Atlanta, Georgia as precarious a place to live as war-torn Sudan. Eggers uses our assumptions, especially our expectations about certain types of stories, to expose their flaws, the same way Rita's problems in "Up the Mountain" are not solved but contextualized. Lamentably, though, many of his critics remain in their self-enclosed and self-congratulatory circle of labels

and comparisons in service of not much beyond their own cleverness. By some dark logic, the act of pointing out perceived flaws (real or imagined) becomes a nobler act than, say, writing a book that contributes to the building of a school in post-war Sudan (Bex and Craps 34). The discourse, for example, on *What is the What* is more about the scandal of a white author writing in the voice of an African than about the unthinkable human rights violations towards which it points. “A dog, if you point at something,” David Foster Wallace writes, “will look only at your finger” (33).<sup>10</sup>

By now we should see that Eggers’s work is a rejection of abstraction in its many forms and an invitation to a life which values immersion in the physical world and practical reality. In an interview with Bex and Craps, Eggers says, “The cynics are not directly engaged in anything. They’re floating above, saying, ‘I sent an email, it didn’t have any effect, so I quit’”(567). Eggers implores us away from this “floating above,” away from the “blindingly white” peaks that disengage us both politically and socially and into a life of boots on the ground, walking with a more clear-eyed empathy than our predecessors along the open road.

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<sup>10</sup> Except for Steven

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