Typical Eggers:

Transnationalism and America in Dave Eggers's 'Globally-Minded' Fiction

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Abstract

Dave Eggers's *What is the What* and *Zeitoun* are transnational works in that their narratives detail a passage between nations and concentrates on the experiences of individuals of 'hyphenated identity'. The sequence of novels Eggers has published in the second decade of the twenty-first century mark a distinctive 'American turn' in his work which offers an alternative but complementary transnational perspective. *Hologram for the King* (2012), *The Circle* (2013), *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?* (2014) and *Heroes of the Frontier* (2016) focus on ordinary 'unhyphenated' American protagonists, and examine the United States both as a specific place and as itself typical of a nation in the globalised twenty-first century world. In their post-postmodern ethical approach to fiction and their assumption that fiction's duty is to 'make reality credible', as Philip Roth once put it, these novels are themselves typical of the values and practices of a specifically US historical category, Mark McGurl's Program Era, but also of categories of transnational fiction critics have recently described as 'global' or 'planetary'. Eggers's US quartet critiques globalization, but is ultimately more interested in asserting the value of connections between human beings in a globalized world.

Keywords

Transnational; typicality; global novel; post-postmodernism; planetarity; the Program Era.

‘He’s grappling with what it means to be American right now’:

Eggers’s American ‘Quartet’

To describe as ‘typical’ a novelist with as diverse a body of work as Dave Eggers’s requires some qualification. Yet the modest but steadily increasing body of academic criticism devoted to it has tended to regard it as representative of three prominent features of contemporary American fiction. One of these is Eggers’s ‘one-man zeitgeist’ status as a leading cultural entrepreneur and editor, pioneering an alternative ‘Generation X’ media culture (revolving around a kind of cool, witty, ironic but ethically-conscious brand of short fiction), chiefly through his company McSweeney’s Publishing and its promotion of the work of young authors.¹ Another is his concern with the issues of migrant experience and hybrid global identity which are central to both *What is the What* (2006) and *Zeitoun* (2009), and which are complemented by a range of philanthropic ‘extra-curricular’ ventures which involve lobbying for and directly helping the disadvantaged and unvoiced.² A third area is how exemplary Eggers’s writing is of a new kind of self-reflexive fictional technique which departs from postmodernism. Critics have contended that the self-reflexivity of Eggers’s first three books – *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), *You Shall Know Our Velocity* (2002), and *What is the What* – exemplifies a new kind of metafiction governed by the desire to ‘think one’s way into a shared space between one being and another’, as Peter Boxall puts it in a discussion of *What is the What*, rather than investment in ‘the wearily “postmodern” conclusion that all life is a fiction, that we are all fictional characters in search of an author’.³

As singular a figure as Dave Eggers would seem to be from one perspective, then, from another he has been regarded as typifying the modes and values of contemporary fiction after postmodernism. In fact these last two features, Eggers’s explicit ‘globalist’ vision of

social justice and the newly ‘post-postmodern’ ethical self-reflexivity in his work, relate to a key context for examining his work, which is central to this essay. Eggers is a transnational writer, and his transnationalism is another dimension of the ethical imperative behind his work noted by critics. Boxall includes him as the ‘world community of writers’ which he sees as typifying fiction in the early part of this century,⁴ while Caren Irr has listed Eggers, along with Christina García, Ha Jin, Rachel Kushner, Jonathan Raban, and Mona Simpson, as part of a group of ‘moderately globalist’ contemporary U.S. writers (her term to describe faith in an ideal of an ‘overlapping international cultural condition’).⁵ Though he features only fleetingly in Rebecca Walkowitz’s *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* his work would indeed seem ‘born translated’, in her memorable phrase, because of the way his stories invite empathy from an international readership. This ‘translatability’ marks him out as a US counterpart of the writers Adam Kirsch highlights as practitioners of what he terms ‘the global novel’,⁶ such as Haruki Murakami or Orhan Pamuk, writers whose fiction set in specific regions nevertheless can be appreciated easily from a global perspective.

A turn to the global – or to the transnational, or even the planetary (a label I shall return to in due course) – has been pinpointed by a number of theorists as a new context for surveying the contemporary cultural field after postmodernism. Postmodernism was, as David James has said, ‘inherently “transnational” from the start’ in that it registered the effects of the commercial expansion across the globe, as theorized in landmark studies by Fredric Jameson and David Harvey.⁷ However, as a cultural paradigm which purports to describe contemporary culture, it is now widely regarded as fatally compromised by – in the words of Amy Elias and Christian Moraru – its ‘ties to late socio-aesthetic modernity, market globalization, and the society of spectacle, simulation, and empty pastiche’⁸ and by its function as a totalizing, blanket paradigm. Moreover, as a number of recent studies have

shown, with their treatment of a remarkably numerous and wide-ranging group of US novelists, there would seem to be sufficient evidence of a significant shift not just in the newly global conditions which go to make up the contemporary novel, but in its outlook and subject matter, to validate a transnational flavour as a definitive characteristic of the contemporary novel after postmodernism.⁹

Eggers's *What is the What* and *Zeitoun* most obviously typify this transnational turn. The former is about a child refugee, Valentino Achak Deng, who flees his country as a result of the Second Sudanese Civil War and eventually immigrates to the United States as part of the Lost Boys of Sudan Program, while the latter tells of a Syrian immigrant, Abdulrahman Zeitoun, who chose to stay and help people in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, only to be arrested by the US National Guard under suspicion of terrorism, presumably because of his possession of large sums of money and detailed maps of the city. As both narratives hinge on the literal passage from one nation to another, they thus invite comparison of national differences as well as emphasizing the inherently transnational quality of the United States. More precisely, though, the hybrid identities of their eponymous protagonists facilitate the re-imagining of national and postnational identities as a consequence of the kind of contemporary global conditions which give rise to the kind of refugee and migrant crises they detail, and the role of the United States in dealing with these.

In this essay, as a complement to these established critical lines of enquiry, I want to examine four of Eggers's most recent novels, *Hologram for the King* (2012), *The Circle* (2013), and especially *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?* (2014), and *Heroes of the Frontier* (2016). These novels would seem to mark a distinctive shift in Eggers's work away both from the explicitly transnational outlook of *What is the What* and by *Zeitoun*, and also from the more postmodernist (that is, metafictional, paratextual, self-deconstructive, ironic) works which began his career, *A Heartbreaking Work*

of *Staggering Genius* and *You Shall Know Our Velocity*. They constitute a distinctive ‘American turn’ in Eggers’s work in that rather than telling the story of individuals of ‘hyphenated identity’ (to use Boxall’s reclamation of Theodore Roosevelt’s derogatory phrase)¹⁰ in a way which highlights the role of the United States in a broader global culture, they focus on the stories of individual Americans in a transnational context. This shift of emphasis nevertheless offers a complementary transnational perspective.

While American locations and characters feature in each of Eggers’s earlier major works, they cannot be said to be ‘about’ America in the same way as these recent novels. One enthusiastic reviewer called *Heroes of the Frontier* ‘an unlikely state of the nation novel, cleansing the spirit and lifting the heart’.¹¹ In fact, these novels are *all* ‘unlikely state of the nation novels’, in that they are preoccupied by – or ‘grapple with’, to use the phrase chosen by his editor, Jennifer Jackson¹² – what it means to be American in the twenty-first century but resist the grandeur of earlier US state-of-the-nation novels like Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral* (1997) or Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997), as well as suggesting that, in the twenty-first century, the distinctively American cannot be separated from the global. In fact the novels seem to go out of their way to present ordinary, that is, typical, characters: all are average, educated, middle-class professionals, and in fact ‘unhyphenated’ Americans. Alan (*Hologram for the King*) is a businessman, Mae (*The Circle*) a recent graduate, Thomas (*Your Fathers*) an unemployed college drop-out, Josie (*Heroes of the Frontier*) a dentist. Their ordinariness is suggested directly at certain points, such as when Alan catches his reflection in the glass of the next-door balcony and thinks: ‘He looked like an average man. When shaved and dressed, he passed for legitimate’.¹³

What is perhaps even more immediately striking about the novels of this recent ‘quartet’¹⁴ to those who have kept track of Eggers’s output is that by and large they eschew the metafictional techniques (authorial intrusions, double-voiced narration, deconstructive

appendices, etc.) which characterize his first three book-length works, and opt instead for a realist mode of writing. Realism, the form Georg Lukács argued best captures the ‘organic quality [of a life] which is the aim of biography’,¹⁵ might be seen as an alternative to the biographical modes Eggers had previously favoured in sustaining the focus on the course of a single individual’s life. It also has the appeal of allowing Eggers to remove obvious traces of himself from his work – a perhaps surprising but consistent ambition throughout his career (e.g. as evidenced by the remarkable ventriloquial conceit deployed in *What is the What*, through which Eggers chose to ‘write in Val’s voice’ because it enabled him to ‘disappear completely’).¹⁶ Traditional unobtrusive realist narration has always been accompanied by the ethical purpose of allowing characters ‘freedom’ from obvious authorial direction and judgement. This aim seems to be behind the avoidance of self-reflexivity in three of the four novels in question here. The exception is *Your Fathers*, which is an example of the American mini-tradition of the novel in dialogue (with previous examples including William Gaddis’s *J R* [1975] and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Sunset Limited* [2006]) and which consequently does draw attention to its form. But this is neither the postmodern nor post-postmodern-ethical self-reflexivity identified in Eggers’s earlier novels, and the appeal of its ‘constrained’ mode, Eggers has said, is that it facilitated a kind of authorial withdrawal in requiring him to find ‘ways to give direction and background [...] without ever leaving the dialogue itself’.¹⁷

Eggers’s focus on ordinary Americans caught up in typical situations does not quite engineer a Lukácsian ‘typicality’ (the reduced social canvas of his work compared to nineteenth-century historical novels does not lend itself to an analysis of Lukácsian totality) but it does produce a kind of realism which subtly interrogates the notion of typicality in the context of a global culture, and the challenge of capturing what might be typical about America or Americans – a notoriously and definitively *untypical* population. In their clarity and commitment to directly depicting everyday globalized contemporary life, these four

novels point to another way Eggers exemplifies the prevailing modes and values of contemporary fiction after postmodernism: a renewed imperative amongst contemporary writers to ensure the novel *responds* to contemporary local and global conditions or specific historical events, encouraging empathy and stimulating debate, inviting readers to experience the emotions and existential self-questioning they depict in their narratives.

‘These sorts of men’: Making Reality Credible in *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?*

The idea of contemporary fiction writing America brings to mind Philip Roth’s essay from nearly sixty years ago, ‘Writing American Fiction’, with its famous complaint that ‘the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his [*sic*] hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality’.¹⁸ Roth’s real concern in the essay is not, as the standard reading would have it, with how impoverished a form fiction becomes in the face of increasingly outlandish and spectacular reality: a world of violence, political scandal, social conflict, nationalism, riots, and apartheid, etc., all represented via media technology that, in its ability to entertain and immerse its viewers, rivalled the novel. It is with how ‘the serious writer’ has failed to find an appropriate strategy or form for dealing with the reality of the social and historical world. Roth accuses his contemporaries of failing to respond to the ‘distressing communal predicament’¹⁹ they find themselves in because they have been unwilling or unable to approach reality directly. They have tended instead to ‘lose heart’ and turn either ‘to the construction of wholly imaginary worlds’ as in the case of Saul Bellow’s *Henderson the Rain King*, or ‘to a celebration of the self’, as in novels by the now largely-forgotten writer Herbert Gold,²⁰ both solutions beset by the writer’s failure to attend properly to ‘what is *outside* himself [*sic*] – as subject’.²¹ Roth’s

analysis predates the extraordinary flourishing of US metafiction which began later in the 1960s, and is thus very much a despatch from another era, from a writer working as unwittingly at the cusp of postmodernism as Eggers is writing self-consciously in its wake. However, its principal argument – that writers must find a way of ‘dealing with’ reality that does not involve simply competing with the extreme situations presented daily in the media nor abdicating the responsibility to do so through the creation of imaginary worlds and introspective, indulgent exercises in style or form – nevertheless sets out some parameters of contemporary fiction which still apply in Eggers’s ‘quartet’.

To explain this I shall turn first to *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?* because its outlier status in the quartet helps clarify how these others move beyond the terms of Roth’s analysis as well as making clear Eggers’s ambitions in all four. Unlike the other three novels in the quartet – and in fact more than any other Eggers work except *Zeitoun*, with its depiction of Hurricane Katrina, this novel takes an extreme event, the kind we encounter via the media, and tries to make it ‘credible’. *Your Fathers* is the story of a 34-year-old man, Thomas, who, over the course of a single week, kidnaps seven people, keeping them incarcerated in separate buildings in a disused military base on California’s Monterey coast, and interrogates them: an astronaut, a congressman, one of his former teachers, his mother, a policeman, a Director of Patient Access at the local hospital, and a girl on the beach walking her dog whom Thomas thinks – deludedly – destiny has decreed will become his life partner. His aim is to ‘stop time and ask questions’,²² to call to account the ones who have let him and his nation down, the leaders and the authority figures, as well as finding out more about a tragic event he has always suspected was also a police cover-up: the death of Don Banh, a half-Vietnamese boy he was at school with, who ended up cornered in his own backyard by twelve policemen and shot dead when he brandished a knife.

Your Fathers suggests that contemporary fiction ‘deals with’ social reality by replicating it, by presenting readers with the kind of event they might encounter on broadcast media, via their Twitter or Facebook timelines or on TV news, only by permitting them a more direct insight into the mind and the ‘back story’ of the central character than they would ever get from the news, and guiding them to conclusions which are more elevated than the kind of news media discussion which characterises our age. Eggers is taking on a familiar traumatic event in American society, the young men who become ‘school shooters’, ‘spree killers’, or those who ‘go postal’, taking revenge for what the world has apparently done to them or prevented them from doing. The novel would therefore seem to be working in the same territory Roth explores in ‘Writing American Fiction’ in its determination to make credible an extreme aspect of American reality. It might also seem that its didacticism causes it to fall into a variation of the problem that Roth identifies: foregrounding the novelist’s own motivations. While it is not metafiction (i.e., not designed ironically to undercut its own narrative nor deconstruct its message, nor even the idea of a message, as postmodern fiction might), it is overtly self-reflexive because of how the dialogue form foregrounds the author’s manipulative role. Unlike Gaddis’s vast *J R*, *Your Fathers* is neat and programmatic, dialogic on the surface yet ultimately delivering a monologue. The novel’s formal conceit inevitably draws attention to itself, defamiliarising its very form and drawing attention to the novelist’s motivations and composition, and exposing the systematic quality of its structure: chapters are titled ‘Building 52’, ‘Building 53’, there are seven kidnappings in seven days, etc., while the meetings with the different abductees, taking place one by one, and with obviously emblematic characters, provides the pretext for discussions about social processes in modern America, such as the government, the police, war, health care, politics, and the space programme. The arresting title of the novel – from *Zechariah 1* in the *Bible* – signals that we should think of both Banh (who, in the backyard siege, ‘quoted some line’ from the Bible,

‘[s]omething about missing fathers’²³) and Thomas as ironic prophets, exposing the malaise of modern society.

This is certainly a didactic novel, a book with a message, and this attempt to make American reality ‘credible’ by telling the story behind a typical contemporary event hampers its apparent ambition to invite readers to think for themselves through its status as parable. Referring to the Banh killing, the policeman tells Thomas that, somewhere in America, ‘This kind of thing happens once a week’,²⁴ while Sara, the girl he kidnaps, says that Thomas reminds her ‘of graduate students stuffing their colleagues into crevices, shooting professors, that kind of thing. People like you. Smart but nuts’.²⁵ Its typicality becomes familiarity, however, leading one reviewer to dismiss the novel by pointing out the link to real-life cases, such as one which actually occurred less than one month before the US publication date of Eggers’s novel (on June 17th 2014, when 22-year-old Elliot Rodger killed six people and wounded fourteen before killing himself in Isla Vista in California) and proclaiming: ‘Eggers’ latest novel should sound familiar. Read yesterday’s headlines’.²⁶ Yet despite its setting, its cast of characters, and list of specifically national social injustices (misdirected government expenditure, institutionalized police racism, etc.) the novel resists a reading of its story as purely American. Eggers responded to one interviewer’s assumption that, in *Your Fathers*, ‘Thomas’s concerns are particular to a young American man’ by saying that someone like his protagonist ‘could be found anywhere on the globe. And we see desperate acts from these sorts of men every day’.²⁷

Furthermore there is, almost concealed within the main, geometrically-arranged present-day narrative about Thomas’s kidnappings, the story of the death of a young man of ‘hyphenated identity’, Don Banh, the Vietnamese-American. This means that as much as Thomas’s kidnapping spree is an act of disillusioned vengeance by another vulnerable young man it also amounts to an act of transnational empathy. Banh’s existence at the heart of the

narrative is a reminder that determining ‘typical Americanness’ – or linking ‘these sorts of men’ to a particular nation – is no easy task, and to attempt to do so at least requires the acknowledgement that America is inherently transnational. The parallel narratives of Don and Thomas (who would seem to be about to suffer a similar fate to his former friend once the police inevitably arrive, an event the novel stops short of describing) underline the shared experience of two very different Americans, reminding us how difficult – and how limited in value – it is to represent Americans as a generality.

‘Meaning in Motion’: Nation, Globe and Planet in *Hologram for the King*, *The Circle*, and *Heroes of the Frontier*

Despite its stylistic differences, *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?* resembles the other novels in Eggers’s American quartet in that its narrative oscillates between the singular and the typical and the specific and the general. These works do not repeat *Your Fathers*’s attempt to deal head-on with a typical dramatic contemporary event, yet specific, localized, national experience is presented in these works in way which also ultimately reveals it as a symptom of something transnational. Such a veering between poles is inevitable in global fiction beyond simply the work of Eggers, I would contend, as this mode of writing must continually negotiate the boundary between the twin convictions that the world is global and transnational, but that local difference and specificity must be respected. But in Eggers, certainly, each novel focuses on a representative American individual at a moment in time and space in a way which raises the question of what the typical *is* both in the broad context of global culture and the specific context of America. America is thereby presented both as a specific place but as *itself* typical of a nation in the globalised world.

Each of the protagonists in the other three novels is seeking direction in a life made meaningless by the demands of a globalized work environment. Alan is trying secure the IT contract for the gigantic new Saudi Arabian city, King Abdullah's Economic City. Mae is given the opportunity to work at the sinister social media conglomerate The Circle. Josie has given away her dental practice and is fleeing from Ohio to Alaska with her two children in tow. But at points in each novel there are ironic references to the inapplicability of American hardiness and pioneering spirit to lives made comfortable and secure as a result of decades of national stability and affluence. During a painful procedure to remove a benign growth from his neck by a surgeon, Alan recalls a story his mother would tell him to remind him of how he has benefited from the 'bounty of suburban life' about a distant relative who had witnessed her husband and her children murdered by Native Americans before she herself was abducted.²⁸ In *The Circle* Mae's confident and successful friend Annie is horrified to discover that her ancestors were slave-owners. The narrative in *Heroes of the Frontier* is punctuated by moments when Josie's son Paul reads aloud to her passages from a feature called 'Trails Grown Dim' in some copies of *Old West* magazine which have been left in their battered rented RV. These mini-narratives about hardship, loss, and death create a comic and ironic parallel between the settlers of the past and Josie's decision to swap Ohio for Alaska.

Such references to the specificity of American national mythology are accompanied, however, by a conviction that contemporary America can only be conceived of in terms of the wider globalised heterogeneity of the world in the twenty-first century. Alan's role, to broker a deal between his US company and a Saudi state so immensely rich from oil money that it can build an entire, gleaming, hi-tech city from scratch in the desert, is typical of the kind of job that Americans of his 'type' do as a result of globalisation. In a discussion with a fellow passenger on a plane, a picture is drawn of how America too, once idealist, pioneering,

and singularly powerful in the second half of the twentieth century, has become subsumed by the patterns of globalisation. His neighbour says to him, 'It was good for a while, right? [...] What was it, thirty years or so? Maybe twenty, twenty-two? But it was over, without a doubt it was, and now we had to be ready to join western Europe in an era of tourism and shopkeeping'.²⁹

This provides further explanation behind Eggers's unwillingness to debate how 'American' his novels are. In the same interview as he refuses to narrow the typicality of the story in *Your Fathers* to just the United States, Eggers also insisted that *The Circle* 'is—intends to be—a globally minded book, in the sense that the concerns it addresses profoundly affect everyone's life, across the globe, even though these companies are generally based in California'.³⁰ He maintained that he wants '[i]deally' to include 'universal things in all of my books', and that what he 'resist[s] [...] is writing a book that takes place in one neighborhood or a single community'.³¹ This may be puzzling, for *The Circle* patently does not resist this, providing a rich depiction of an easily recognisable Silicon Valley-type community – part secluded cult hideaway, part forward-looking hi-tech campus, a place which, Mae feels, is quintessentially American. Nevertheless, in the age of neo-liberalism, where multinational corporations are more powerful and influential than nation states, a company like Eggers's Circle is as typical of global developments as US ones. *The Circle* functions as a warning about the powerlessness, indeed the irrelevance, of physical national boundaries in the face of the power to relentlessly control private and public existence wielded by the most aggressively globalist IT companies –real-life counterparts of The Circle such as Google, Amazon and Facebook. *The Circle* thereby inverts *Hologram for the King*'s American-abroad story about the part played by the United States in a broader global economy in focusing on the consequence of globalized economics on American soil.

Eggers's 'global-mindedness', then, combines an interest in a specifically American world, with a distinctively globalised one, of which the United States is a representative example, with a specifically American one. His fiction reminds us that the two things cannot be separated from one another, for the specific is always typical in a globalised world. But what is notable about these four novels is that while globalisation in a context for their individual stories, they stop short of mounting a full-blown critique of globalisation. The explicit introduction of the context of globalization early in *Hologram for the King* in Alan's meeting on the airplane, as he discusses with his neighbour various topics, such as the pioneer of US globalised trade Jack Welch, how the Chinese are 'making sneakers in Nigeria', and how low wages in Asia and Africa have killed manufacturing on American soil, does not develop into a critique of globalized economics as we might expect it to, nor lead to a climax to the narrative (as it might in an eco-thriller). It merely establishes the backdrop for Alan's personal sense of disillusionment and eventual fulfilment. Ultimately the story is about a moment of personal connection he shares with Dr Zahra Hakem, a Saudi surgeon. *Hologram for the King* turns out to be a touching transnational love story.

The presence of globalization as always there but in the background, to ensure the stories of their protagonists remains central, means that perhaps a more useful term for their outlook is *planetary* rather than global. A suggestive distinction between the global and the planetary has recently been made by Amy Elias and Christian Moraru, building on insights by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.³² They contend that where the global cannot shake off connotations of 'economic, political, and technical administration' the planetary shifts the focus onto a (re)turn to ethical interconnectedness which they term 'relationality'. By this model any category of the global novel (and this is indeed consistent with Adam Kirsch's definition of this genre)³³ denotes fiction which is both produced as a result of globalised practices in publishing and transmission, and also contains a critique of or a focus on the

effects of globalization (economic, political, etc.). Planetary fiction, by contrast, places the emphasis on ‘new models of transnationality, internationality, or multinationality’, and ‘our moment [...] measuring time, space, and culture [...] on the planet at large’.³⁴ As Elias and Moraru insist, focusing on the planet means an emphasis not simply on human practices and their effects the world over, but on the position of the human being on a planet which, by definition, turns and changes. Planetaryity is thus a de-territorializing perspective on the global, opening up spaces and crossings between places and people at various points in the globe.

Eggers’s novels explore planetaryity more implicitly even than they confront globalisation. They do not concentrate specifically on ecological issues, such as climate change. Yet in their concern with the experience of typical human beings in a globalised world, their emphasis is on the significance of a broader ‘relationality’, or (in Elias’s and Moraru’s terms) human beings ‘coming together, or “worlding”’.³⁵ Underpinning each of the stories in *Hologram for the King*, *The Circle*, and *Heroes of the Frontier* is faith in the importance of a community of human beings learning about, respecting and loving one another – being connected in a more traditional sense than via technology. This ethical imperative most clearly drives *Heroes of the Frontier*. This novel is the part of the quartet which, even more so than *The Circle*, is geared up to providing a detailed portrait of a specific region of the United States: Alaska. The peculiarities of Alaska – its scenery, its remoteness, its local names and customs – are detailed evocatively throughout, and from the defamiliarizing perspective of an outsider, Josie. This sense of regional singularity is strengthened by the fact that Alaska is such an *untypical* part of the United States, both geographically and culturally (though it would be difficult to designate any place as typical in so vast and diverse a nation as the US). *Heroes of the Frontier* is another Eggers’s story of movement, one of the recurring narrative tropes of his fiction as whole. His characters travel

restlessly, internationally, as in *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, *What is the What* and *Hologram for the King*. Josie's travels may only be within the United States, but her literal exploration of Alaska parallels her own attempt to decide what she should do next. The questions she is asking herself (who is she? why has her marriage failed? what should she do next?) are the standard everyday existential crises of average suburbanites not just in America but across the globe.

Josie's perpetual mobility underscores the novel's comparison – which is picked up from the three previous novels – between contemporary Americans and their forebears. In an echo of Alan's reflections on the incompatibility of heroism and suburbia, Josie wonders, when arriving in Alaska, 'So where were the heroes? All she knew where she had come from were cowards'.³⁶ Throughout the story she and her children travel restlessly to different part of Alaska, staying with new friends, sleeping in their RV, squatting in an unoccupied cabin, in a way that calls to mind two key American myths of mobility and escape. The first is, of course, the Western. While the comparison is treated ironically, as we have seen, at a deeper level, the refrain of tales from 'Trails Grown Dim' points to a meaningful continuity between Americans in the nineteenth century and Americans in the twenty-first, a history of people upping sticks and moving on, often as a result of domestic hardship, just as Josie has done. The second foundational myth is *Walden*. This is not referenced directly in the novel, but the role in the story played by a cabin in the woods, and the fact that Josie's escape is a journey of independence and spiritual discovery inevitably brings Thoreau to mind. Her escapade involves removing herself and her children from their twenty-first century comforts in order to live a simpler life. Settling in the borrowed cabin, her children begin to sleep better, to no longer fear the dark, to perform happily regular chores such as washing their clothes, until she has the sense that 'they were immeasurably better now than they were in Ohio'.³⁷ She arrives at an epiphanic recognition about what she has achieved as a parent: 'All along she

had been looking for courage and purity in the people of Alaska. She had not thought that she could simply – not simply, no, but still – create such people’.³⁸

The singularity of Alaska as a pastoral haven in the contemporary United States enables Josie to achieve a universal relationality, with her children, with people in the same state, with earlier generations of Americans, but also – by implication – with other humans elsewhere in the world. In this respect it is notable how frequently Josie’s meditations involve putting her own experiences in a much broader perspective than her life story, indeed one of planetary scale. The word planet features regularly throughout the novel, used metaphorically, as in Josie’s description of the best parents as those who ‘circle with the predictability of planets’, or when reflecting on environmental crisis: ‘The world is running out of water. [...] We are exceptional, our planet singular in its ability to sustain life. No, there are billions of Earth-like planets, most of them bigger than ours, most of them likely to be far better developed’. Together these references confirm Josie’s understanding of her status as part of a system much bigger than herself. In the exciting climax to the novel – created, significantly, not by any human interaction but by an electrical storm which causes an avalanche – Josie has to guide herself and her children to safety. As they prepare to run, ‘Above, a planet popped like a balloon’.³⁹ Josie has indeed accomplished something heroic after all, something pioneering on a personal level, albeit modest and small-scale compared with the drama of the Western. It is nevertheless the kind of interconnection which approximates the planetary rather than the global. She recognises that although it may have been a mistake to flee to Alaska, people like her – ‘every mother, every father’ – must understand that leaving is an option, a right, and a necessity: ‘without movement there is no struggle, and without struggle there is no purpose, and without purpose there is nothing at all. [...] There is meaning in motion’.⁴⁰ With its protagonist’s epiphany Eggers’s novel reaches a genuinely uplifting, heroic, note.

Crucially, however, this is not the end of *Heroes of the Frontier*. The novel concludes with a single-line chapter which creates an open-endedness which is in keeping with Eggers's ethical approach to the relation between author and reader: 'But then there is tomorrow'.⁴¹ The line suggests that Josie's positive conclusion about their adventure is only temporary. It can plausibly be read as focalised through Josie's consciousness, but could just as easily be taken for a final, solitary but decisive, act of authorial intervention. It shows that the story is not complete with the novel's ending, but that life continues. The planet continues to turn and this has not only spatial consequences but temporary ones too. 'But then there is tomorrow' can be both optimistic or ominous. Life will go on. We have learned by this stage that Josie's husband has tracked her down and is trying to serve her a writ, and so all future possibilities remain open: continued flight, lasting happiness, a return to the mundane struggles of divorce. Which it will be is not suggested by the novel, and the author himself refuses to speculate. Instead -the impression is that Eggers himself has no idea what the outcome will be. He is simply presenting what happens in Josie's world at this moment in time and place and leaving it up to the reader to decide.

'Impressively Typical': Eggers, the Program Era, and Transnational Ethics

Eggers's most recent novels, and their negotiation of the ideas of typical American and typical global or planetary experience, validates Boxall's inclusion of him as part of the 'world community of writers' which typifies fiction in the early part of this century, and who are distinguished by their 'novelistic response to our twenty-first century contemporaneity'.⁴² But their values and style also suggests a connection with another, more specific but still broad-ranging, community to have been identified in modern American writing, the one which comes together under the banner of Mark McGurl's term for the extraordinary

influence of creative writing programs in United States universities on modern and contemporary fiction since their establishment in the 1960s: the Program Era. Like Eggers's treatment of American experience, the Program Era is both singular, as it develops from a range of social and cultural factors peculiar to the United States in the mid- to late-twentieth century (such as the rise of the Creative Writing program, and the American reception of modernist aesthetics), and typical, for it prescribes a set of literary values and techniques which shape writing beyond the confines of the United States and are evident in the international contemporary-fiction community identified by Boxall. McGurl's *The Program Era* is at the same time a study of a distinctively national tradition (there is no other nation about which a similar story of the impact of creative writing tuition could have been told, except perhaps for the United Kingdom, though this story would be shorter and begin much more recently) and one which has a transnational core. Central to McGurl's analysis of the development of program-fiction is its dissemination of the values of what he calls 'high cultural pluralism', a kind of writing which binds 'the high literary values of modernism with a fascination with the experience of cultural difference and the authenticity of the ethnic voice'.⁴³ The distinctively American development of The Program thus reflects the inherently transnational nature of the United States.

In his study McGurl commends the 'impressive typicality' of Philip Roth as a Program-Era writer.⁴⁴ Even though Roth was less integrated in university writing programs than many of his contemporaries, he nevertheless strikes McGurl as entirely representative of what he considers the foundational practice of Program-Era fiction, what he calls 'autopoesis', the reflexive awareness of what it means to be a writer while doing the work of a writer, which shapes the work produced, most obviously though self-reflexive technique.⁴⁵ Eggers is similarly both untypical and yet quite representative of what McGurl calls the third phase of the Program Era, the period from the mid-1970s to the present day, when even

books written outside the academy become absorbed into the ethos of the Program because this ethos has spilled so powerfully outwards. Eggers was not himself schooled in creative writing programs, nor has he taught creative writing regularly in the academy, as many of his contemporaries do. Yet McGurl acknowledges the impact of his ‘impressive cultural entrepreneurship [...] with its literary magazines and publishing ventures and community centers’.⁴⁶ Amy Hungerford has recently developed this insight further, arguing that, more than any other figure, Eggers embodies the expanded notion of ‘the school’ which is part of this third phrase of McGurl’s Program Era, as he ‘schools’, directly or indirectly, a generation of young writers.⁴⁷

Eggers might therefore be regarded as both the product of and a disseminator of the values of the Program Era. We might develop a case that his writing throughout bears the hallmarks of Program-Era values and techniques, with *What is the What* clearly an example of ‘high cultural pluralism’, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* as not late postmodernism but an exercise in autopoiesis, and *Your Fathers* the kind of Program-endorsed creative writing exercise designed to trigger debate about a particular topic. But most typical of the Program Era in Eggers seems to me the way his writing – like that of Roth, as different as it is in terms of historical location, ethnic identity, and favoured styles and subject matter – exemplifies the ‘response-mode’ in contemporary writing. Both Eggers and Roth, impressively typical exceptions to the rule, assume, in different ways, that the duty of contemporary fiction is to respond to reality, to detail what is typical of the age, whether this is extreme (as in the examples in Roth’s essay or *Your Fathers*) or a state of being (Eggers’s other three American novels). What is clear from a comparison between the two writers, and in particular the time of Roth’s ‘Writing American Fiction’ and Eggers’s quartet of ‘American’ novels, is the fact that contemporary fiction has in the intervening years become global, and the role of US fiction in this shift has had much to do, somewhat

ironically, with the specifically American development of the Program. Where Roth's definition of 'American reality' *is* something peculiar to the United States (because he observes a profound change in his country due to an increase in extreme behaviour and the media fascination with it), Eggers regards it as symptomatic of broader global conditions.

But both writers assume that the fictional response must be presided over by a properly committed writer. While Roth sketches out a portrait of this figure, referring to positive examples (Salinger and Bellow) and negative ones (Gold), Eggers himself seems to typify the kind of professional writer this figure has evolved into in the twenty-first century: one who is aware of himself as rooted in the social world, performing a social function he reflects on continually, and producing a socially committed kind of fiction. The awareness of the message of his fiction Eggers reveals in interviews, its capacity to respond to broader social issues, underlines the impression that his political awareness and activism are not supplements to his career as a writer of fiction and biography but part of the same socially-engaged mission. This mission has been shaped by Eggers's status as a global author and his sensitivity to transnational relationality, factors that make him, for all the diversity of his work, a writer as typical as he is singular.

One final point, or note of caution, is to acknowledge that the high-point of globally-minded Western writing, which Eggers's fiction exemplifies, coincides with the moment at which global politics is witnessing a turn inwards, *away* from global or planetary concerns. In the same years as literary fiction is shaped by a transnational or planetary turn (as evidenced by the appearance of studies between 2013 and 2015 which cite a vast range of evidential authors and texts),⁴⁸ politics in the United States, and also in the UK and in Europe, sees a fomenting of the conditions that would in 2016 result in a decisive turn away from neoliberalism and towards the assertion and redefinition of national identity. The publication of a warm-hearted, expansive, 'planetary' novel like *Heroes of the Frontier* in this very year

seems completely out of kilter with the contemporaneous nationalist socio-political climate. Indeed the overall tenor of literary fiction now seems at odds with a political world dominated by an aggressive nationalism, which places the emphasis on economic isolationism, closing borders and controlling immigration. To account for this disjunction between literary practice and politics, to decide whether (for example) it is do with the persistence of the deep connection between literary (as opposed to popular) fiction and liberalism, even neoliberalism, and the role played by the US Program in this, is a task far beyond the scope of this paper. But the fact that social reality and literary fiction are in some ways now worlds away from each other adds an extra vitality to the transnational ethics which are so central to Dave Eggers's recent interrogations of what it means to be an American in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

¹ Caroline D. Hamilton, *One-Man Zeitgeist: Dave Eggers, Publishing and Publicity* (London: Continuum, 2010).

See also Sarah Brouillette, 'Paratextuality and Economic Disavowal in Dave Eggers's *You Shall Know Our Velocity*', *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture*, 3.2 (2003).

<http://reconstruction.eserver.org/issues/032/brouillette.htm>; and Amy Hungerford, 'McSweeney's and the School of Life', *Contemporary Literature*, 53:4 (Winter, 2012), pp. 646-680.

² Michelle Peek, 'Humanitarian Narrative and Posthumanist Critique: Dave Eggers's *What is the What*', *Biography* 35: 1 (2012), pp. 115-136; Thomas, Valorie, "'Dust to Cleanse Themselves": A Survivor's Ethos: Diasporic Disidentifications in *Zeitoun*', *Biography* 35:2 (2012), pp. 271-285.

³ Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 111, p. 116. See also: Liesbeth Korthals Altes, 'Sincerity, Reliability and Other Ironies – Notes on Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*', in Gunther Martens and Elke D'hoker (eds.) *Narrative Unreliability in the Twentieth-Century First-Person Novel* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), pp. 107-128; Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction', in David Hering (ed.), *Consider David Foster*

Wallace: *Critical Essays* (Los Angeles, CA / Austin, TX: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 131-46; James Clements, 'Trust Your Makers of Things!: The Metafictional Pact in Dave Eggers's *You Shall Know Our Velocity*', *Critique* 56 (2015), pp. 121-137.

⁴ Boxall, *Twenty-First Century Fiction*, p.6.

⁵ Caren Irr, *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century* (Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 19.

⁶ Adam Kirsch, *The Global Novel: Writing the World in the 21st Century* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2017).

⁷ David James, 'Transnational Postmodern and Contemporary Literature', in Yogita Goyal, ed, *The Cambridge Companion to Transnational American Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 122-140, p. 123.

⁸ Amy Elias and Christian Moraru, 'Introduction: The Planetary Condition', in *The Planetary Turn: Relationality and Geoaesthetics in the Twenty-First Century* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2015), p. xi-xxxvii, p. xi

⁹ See Paul Jay, *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Rebecca Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Christian Moraru, *Reading for the Planet: Towards a Geomethodology* (University of Michigan Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Boxall, *Twenty-First Century Fiction*, p. 173.

¹¹ Alex Preston, 'Heroes of the Frontier Review: Dave Eggers Finds Utopia in Alaska', *The Guardian*, 17th July 2016: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/17/heroes-of-the-frontier-dave-eggers-review-utopianism>

¹² Alexandra Alter, 'Dave Eggers Journeys Into Alaska in *Heroes of the Frontier*', *The New York Times* (April 4 2016): <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/05/books/dave-eggers-journeys-into-alaska-in-heroes-of-the-frontier.html>

¹³ Dave Eggers, *A Hologram for the King* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 12.

¹⁴ I use this term very loosely to determine the sequence of four novels on similar themes, while acknowledging that Eggers has not applied this term to them nor even referred to them as a sequence.

¹⁵ Georg Lukács, 'From The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature', in Michael McKeon, ed., *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach* (Baltimore, ML, & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), pp. 185-218, p. 198.

¹⁶ Dave Eggers, 'Interview with Dave Eggers and Valentino Achak Deng'.

<http://www.vadfoundation.org/interview-with-the-creators/>

¹⁷ Dave Eggers, [no interviewer identified] 'A Short Q&A With Dave Eggers About his New Novel *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?*', *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, June 11, 2014.

<https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/a-short-q-a-with-dave-eggers-about-his-new-novel-your-fathers-where-are-they-and-the-prophets-do-they-live-forever>.

¹⁸ Philip Roth, 'Writing American Fiction' [1961, 1965], in Malcolm Bradbury (ed.), *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction* (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 27-43, p. 29.

¹⁹ Roth, 'Writing American Fiction', p. 42

²⁰ Ibid., p. 42.

²¹ Ibid., p. 39.

²² Dave Eggers, *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?* (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 194.

²³ Eggers, *Your Fathers*, p. 161.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 165.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 198-199.

²⁶ Don Oldenburg, 'Disturbed Young Man All Too Familiar in *Fathers*', *USA Today*, June 15, 2014.

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/books/2014/06/15/your-fathers-where-are-they-and-the-prophets-do-they-live-forever/10251431/>

²⁷ Dave Eggers, 'A Short Q&A'. <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/a-short-q-a-with-dave-eggers-about-his-new-novel-your-fathers-where-are-they-and-the-prophets-do-they-live-forever>.

²⁸ Eggers, *Hologram*, p. 270.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 12.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 552.

³¹ Ibid., p. 552.

³² Elias and Moraru, 'Introduction: The Planetary Condition', pp. xi – xxxvii; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

³³ Kirsch, *The Global Novel*.

³⁴ Elias and Moraru, 'Introduction: The Planetary Condition', p. xvii, p. vii.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

³⁶ Dave Eggers, *Heroes of the Frontier* (London: Vintage, 2016), p. 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 150, 126-7, 375.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

⁴² Boxall, *Twenty-First Century Fiction*, p.6.

⁴³ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 32.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁴⁵ I am distinguishing here between 'reflexive', the kind of 'reflex' behaviour (involving continual self-assessment, verification, checking, etc.) associated with 'reflexive modernity', the sociological theory which underpins McGurl's perspective in *The Program Era*, and 'self-reflexivity', the more deliberate practice of referring to oneself associated with aesthetics, e.g. postmodernism.

⁴⁶ McGurl, *The Program Era*, p. 29.

⁴⁷ Hungerford, 'McSweeney's and the School of Life', p. 661.

⁴⁸ Boxall, *Twenty-First Century Fiction* (2013); Irr, *Toward the Geopolitical Novel* (2013), Jay, *Global Matters* (2014), Walkowitz, *Born Translated* (2015), Moraru, *Reading for the Planet* (2015).