

## Floods, fortresses and cabin fever: worlding “Domeland” security in Dave Eggers’ *Zeitoun* and *The Circle*

Article (Accepted Version)

Masterson, John (2016) Floods, fortresses and cabin fever: worlding “Domeland” security in Dave Eggers’ *Zeitoun* and *The Circle*. *American Literary History*, 28 (4). pp. 721-739. ISSN 0896-7148

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## **Floods, Fortresses and Cabin Fever: Worlding “Domeland” Security in Dave Eggers’**

### *Zeitoun and The Circle*

**John Masterson**

*Security has become one of neoliberalism’s signature growth industries, exemplified by the international boom in gated communities, as walls have spread like kudzu, and the marketplace in barriers has literally soared, from Los Angeles to Sao Paolo. . . . Ironically, as neoliberal policy makers have pushed to bring down barriers to “free trade,” those same policies have resulted in the erection of ever higher barriers segregating inordinate wealth from inordinate poverty. . . . The wall . . . materializes temporal as well as spatial denial through a literal concretizing of our of sight out of mind.*

Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*

*[The] notion of the world itself as a sovereign entitlement of the United States must be given up, lost, and mourned. . . . From the subsequent experience of loss and fragility, however, the possibility of making different kinds of ties emerges.*

Judith Butler, *Prearious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*

As Rob Nixon maintains, there is a defining tension at the heart of issues from Homeland Security to ecological degradation, from the transnational displacements of people to the circuits of global capitalism. Such regulation/deregulation dialectics are figuratively represented by walls, barriers, and gated communities on one hand, and liquidity, breached defenses, and open doors on the other. To show how these epochal debates play out across Dave Eggers’s oeuvre, I will concentrate mainly on two texts; *Zeitoun*, his 2010 journalistic

account of the experiences of Syrian-born Abdulrahman Zeitoun and his family during and after Hurricane Katrina, and his 2013 novel *The Circle*, which imagines a near future in thrall to the titular Circle, which refers both to a corporate behemoth (such as Facebook, Google, and Apple mold) and metaphysical ideal. By foregrounding what I take to be the politics, as well as poetics, of Eggers's deployment of the peculiarly generative tropes of water and walls, I propose that he supplements and, at times, reorients the kinds of security debates central to this special issue. As a counterpoint to what Nixon calls "superpower parochialism," Eggers frames these tropes in strikingly transnational terms (34). I therefore read his work in the immediate post-9/11 shadow of Judith Butler's *Prekarious Life*. In both reportage and fiction, Eggers bids those susceptible to what I term "Domeland" security soundbites to have emerged in recent times to "world" their sense of international entanglements, then and now, more fully. Water, in the form of those literal and figurative floods so central to both texts, and walls, in the guise of fortresses, capture the writer's broader interest in how peculiarly twenty-first century visions of an increasingly securitized world might be refined. By attending to the form/content relationship in *Zeitoun* first, I explore how and why it foreshadows such debates as reimagined in *The Circle*.

### **1. Down in the Flood: Cosmopolitics and Cataclysm in *Zeitoun***

Eggers's novel, *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?* (2014), centers on Thomas, an outlier with a thoroughly eschatological worldview: "I shouldn't have been left to live among the rest of society. There were so many days I looked at it all and wanted it wiped away, wanted it on fire" (45). Thomas's purging fire motif corresponds with the apocalyptic strains that run throughout Eggers's work. From the formally playful *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) to the literary ventriloquism of *What is the What* (2006) through adaptations of *Where the Wild Things Are* (2009) and *A Hologram for*

*the King* (2012), personal and political end times dominate Eggers's oeuvre. This is also signalled towards the close of *The Circle*: "To have gotten so close to apocalypse—it rattled [Mae] still" (489). The significance of Eggers's apocalypticism, however, should be weighed in relation to equally pivotal security and globalization discourses. These are apparent in the absurd transnational zigzagging of *You Shall Know Our Velocity* (2002), as well as the short stories of *How We Are Hungry* (2004).<sup>1</sup>

As Rita Floyd maintains in "Whither Environmental Security Studies?" there is "a need to explore more rigorously the complex relationship among environmental change, security and disaster" (291). This eschatologically inflected triumvirate also informs Eggers's post-Katrina intervention: "[Zeitoun] thought of the animals. . . . Only birds would survive this sort of apocalypse" (105). Crucial as it is to consider *Zeitoun* in relation to the voluminous scholarship on the cataclysm and its aftermath, I suggest it assumes additional burdens of significance when read in still more recent contexts. From the millions of internally and internationally displaced persons to the equally spectacular images of ISIS attacks that have rocked Bamako, Beirut, and Paris, the crucible through which many of today's most pressing security questions are concentrated is Syria. If the failed state is now thought of as an apocalyptic incubator, producing all-consuming fires of internecine conflict, as well as "floods" of refugees, Eggers's reliance on alternative tropes of liquidity throughout *Zeitoun* leads us to historicize more transnationally entangled routes and roots.

By privileging Abdulrahman Zeitoun's travels from Syria and travails in the US, which culminate in his incarceration, Eggers illustrates his protagonist's conflicted relationship with Americans, particularly in a post-9/11 (in)security environment. Zeitoun's feelings are likened to "that of a disappointed parent. He was so content in this country, so impressed with and loving of its opportunities, but then why, sometimes, did Americans fall short of their best selves?" (47). Consciously or not, Eggers echoes Barack Obama's observation in *The Audacity*

*of Hope* (69), a clarion call as dependent on discourses of Homeland Security in the aftermaths of both 9/11 and Katrina as George W. Bush, whose comparison between the storm and the War on Terror is cited in *Zeitoun* (198-99). When probing how security and globalization issues are played with to the point of unraveling in Eggers's text, a central question it poses is who, and what, constitutes the American best self post-Katrina? For Valorie Thomas,

The simple telling of the Zeitoun family's experiences not only exposes the fallacy of a colorblind national identity in the US, but reveals the ways in which "Homeland Security," post-racial racism, and cataclysm operate as tightly interwoven, webbed narratives, each virally exploiting the crisis produced by the other. (279)

Eggers stages these debates throughout, deploying Abdulrahman's wife Linda, an American-born convert to Islam, as a key referent. Through her, he destabilizes hegemonic notions of Islam as dogmatic and static, foregrounding its privileging of tolerance and doubt (77). Linda thus enables Eggers to blur lines between self and other, the US and the Middle East, putatively "first" and "third" worlds in the service of his overarching critique. Given recent debates about the need to fortify Domeland rather than Homeland Security, *Zeitoun's* scrambling of national and transnational identities and discourses is salutary. As Thomas points out, Eggers's reservoir of literal and figurative tropes drives this decentering, with the more fluid aspects of the text's form inflecting its content: "*Zeitoun* joins Syria and New Orleans through waterscapes, observing the qualities of human lives that are contingent on water, the fluidity with which terrestrial order can be suddenly inverted" (272). As I argue below, these watery speculations foreshadow those alternative experiments in "worlding" that characterize *The Circle*.

*Zeitoun* is peppered with revealing instances where the dialectics of a neoliberal order of things are dramatized. These include Eggers's strategic decisions to frame Abdulrahman using the pioneer discourse hailed by Mark Twain, who provides one of the book's epigraphs. Staying behind in the immediate aftermath of Katrina to watch over his investments, like any

good American dreamer, Zeitoun stumbles across an abandoned canoe. While it ultimately facilitates his humanitarian efforts, its initial significance is existential, as well as symbolic shelter from the storm: “Something about the canoe had intrigued him. . . . It seemed to speak of exploration, of escape” (83). Following Zeitoun’s Noahesque reflection on the extent of destruction, Eggers intensifies his exploration of the performativity of US selfhood by anticipating those preoccupations with measuring and mapping that will dominate *The Circle*: “[Standing] on the roof of his drowned home, Zeitoun felt something like inspiration. He imagined floating, alone, through the streets of his city. In a way, this was a new world, uncharted. He could be an explorer. He could see things first” (104-5). This conceptual triumvirate (world, exploration, and sight) demonstrates the Butlerian essence of Eggers’s experiment throughout.

When considering how *Zeitoun* is bookended—beginning with a sense of transnational US citizenry only to close with Abdulrahman being brutally reminded of his status as other in an epoch of increased security threats—this Adamic, quasi-colonial scaffolding is discursively charged. As Billy Sothern argues, Zeitoun’s rescue efforts showed “the best of American resourcefulness and generosity,” while his subsequent detention saw him “buried under an equally American mountain of prejudice and discrimination” (87). In terms of *Zeitoun*’s mechanics, Eggers’s celebratory framework raises questions about the level of editorial intervention in a manner that recalls *What is the What* and the politics of its “linguistic blackface,” to borrow Yogita Goyal’s provocative formulation (58). For my purposes, however, *Zeitoun*’s textual frame also dramatizes the fraught, invariably precarious relationships between the kinds of worlding discourses that have always fascinated Eggers as he explores the possibilities of what Nixon calls “a transnational ethics of place” (243). By invoking and deflating tropes of the pioneer through the Arab American citizen set against a biopolitically inflected backdrop, Eggers scrambles divisions between old (Syria) and new

(US) worlds. As Thomas once more maintains, the urgent call to acknowledge relationships rather than insurmountable schisms emerges, literally and figuratively, from waterscapes: “Eggers positions Zeitoun’s decision to conduct rescues after Katrina as being anchored in/by the *milieux de mémoire* of his oceanic initiation to community-belonging in Syria . . . [Zeitoun] is ‘fixed’ in the transnational diasporic space and time of water” (277). The pertinent questions posed by *Zeitoun* therefore correspond with Henry A. Giroux’s discussion of Katrina in terms of those precarious lives “now considered disposable—that is, simply collateral damage in the construction of a neoliberal order” (11). According to Butler, we need to hear “beyond what we are able to hear” by “being open to narration that decenters us from our supremacy” if we are to fathom the historical present (18). With some of the same critical urgency, I see Eggers wrestling with, and thereby challenging us to wrestle with, the following question: how might writing oblige us to bring alternative modes of being in, as well as seeing, the world differently?

Given events within and beyond Syria since *Zeitoun’s* publication, the following reflection is particularly suggestive when read in relation to the intensification of optical and hermeneutic allusions as the text develops. Such meditations also anticipate those specular imaginings of *The Circle’s* increasingly networked world:

[Zeitoun’s family in Syria] filled her in. There had been looting, rapes, murders. It was chaos, anarchy . . . in this way she got the media’s funhouse picture of the state of the city via her husband’s relatives halfway around the world. God knows, she thought, what kind of spin the media was putting on things out there.

Twenty-five thousand body bags have been brought to the area, they noted. How can you live in that country? they asked. You need to move back here. Syria is so much safer, they said. (193)

If such interventions play with all too familiar inversions of the neocolonial gaze, Kathy’s attention to the ways Syrian media coverage might be spun offers necessary balance. Her imagined reflection also echoes an earlier allusion. Traveling along New Orleans’ newly formed waterways, Eggers describes how “Zeitoun was just getting accustomed to the new physics of this world” (107). This reference to the immediate locale has metatextual

significance when assessing the slippery significance of “world” in relation to those security discourses that have informed Eggers’s work for the last decade, from *Zeitoun* through *A Hologram for the King*, to *The Circle*, *Your Fathers*, and *Visitants* (2016).

As *Zeitoun* progresses, Eggers’s rhetorical reliance on tropes of wreckage and refraction, as well as ontology and optics, becomes more amplified as Abdulrahman and Kathy are obliged to accept altered senses of self, both individually and in terms of national and transnational affiliations. A striking instance comes in the aftermath of Zeitoun’s release from the version of extraordinary rendition sketched by Thomas (272). Kathy’s description of the links between an increased emphasis on Homeland/Domeland Security, as filtered through a biopolitical and Kafka-esque prism, where basic information as well as access to loved ones is itself securitized, and the concomitant feeling of human insecurity is striking:

Doctors have asked Kathy what she thinks the most traumatic part of the Katrina experience was. . . . It was that moment, being told by the woman on the phone that the hearing’s location was “private information,” that did the most damage.

“I felt cracked open,” she says. . . . “That there could be trials without witnesses, that her government could make people disappear.”

“It broke me.” (329)

Kathy’s intimate imagining of physical and psychological breakage echoes the optical discourses Eggers relies on throughout *Zeitoun*. The fallout from Katrina obliges Zeitoun, his family, and readers to pose searching questions about the politics of seeing, both micro and macro, in a way that once again resonates with Nixon’s epigraphical critique of “out of sight out of mind.” It is crucial, therefore, that the very barometers by which development and identity are gauged, both individually and collectively, concern security—economic, health, food, water, and shelter. Here the “third world” plays its most significant because overdetermined role in the text, as it has in much post-Katrina scholarship. If, as Kathy reflects when watching the news, things are unraveling in a manner that recalls the systemic underdevelopment of places elsewhere on the geopolitical map, might this have the potential



“to shift the intellectual centers of gravity away from . . . [those] in-turned, American exceptionalist tendencies” that Nixon describes (261)?

By focusing on the peculiar dynamics of an Arab American rather than African American family, *Zeitoun* supplements the work done on the taxonomical treatment, as well as media effects and affects, of Katrina’s victims.<sup>2</sup> *Zeitoun*’s reliance on third world paradigms also synthesizes many of its other pressing security concerns. Spatial and conceptual connections are made throughout, for instance, by considering how some of the most iconic images of US sovereign and disciplinary power, previously exported, are brought home in Katrina’s aftermath. This boomerang effect, to recall Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), is powerfully captured in the description of the Guantanamo Bay-style camp to which Zeitoun and his friends are sent:

Chain-link fences, topped by razor wire, had been erected into a long, sixteen-foot-high cage extending about a hundred yards into the lot. . . . Zeitoun was in disbelief. It had been a dizzying series of events—arrested at gunpoint in a home he owned, brought to an impromptu military base built inside a bus station, accused of terrorism, and locked in an outdoor cage. It surpassed the most surreal accounts he’d heard of third-world law enforcement. (228)

If *Zeitoun*’s early sections foreground the entanglements and interdependence of individual and collective stories through the waterscapes privileged by Thomas (“water and mobility, rather than land and fixity, are the foundations of identity” [280]), the latter sections chart a return of the repressed in the form of draconian, supposedly “third-world law enforcement.”

Such reflections resonate with what Ruth Gordon, in *Hurricane Katrina: America’s Unnatural Disaster*, describes as the “particular cauldron” of race as it “plays out in images of the Third World, the underdeveloped, and the impoverished” (228). Analogous with the breaching of actual levees in *Zeitoun*, the conceptual barriers between what we might imagine to be discrete geopolitical, legal, and even ethical domains are also shown to be porous. While pre-Katrina, Butler’s assertion that “we would be wrong to think that the First World is *here* and the Third World is *there*. . . . These topographies have shifted” still holds (49). This once

again accords with scholarship concerning Guantanamo Bay as a variously “exceptional” zone when it comes to post-9/11 Homeland/Domeland Security policies.<sup>3</sup> Seen in this light, Eggers’s description of Zeitoun’s experiences in detention reveals the extent to which decisions about the security of one’s national identity and affiliation (as a version of feeling at home, supposedly guaranteed by property ownership) rest in the hands of those with the biopolitical power to, as Floyd describes in “Whither Environmental Security Studies?” “desecuritize” subjects (288).

Before examining some of the affiliated securitization concerns of *The Circle*, I focus on a section that distills many of *Zeitoun*’s central themes and rhetorical features. In a prelude to Kathy’s reflections on the traumatic tearing she felt when denied access to her husband, Eggers also has Zeitoun rely on tropes of breakage to represent the battles he faces, both internally and externally. The oscillation between demystifying, and then upbraiding, national and individual identities is marked:

There was something broken in the country . . . but he had begun all this. He had refused to leave the city. He had stayed to guard his property. . . . But then something else had overtaken him, some sense of destiny. Some sense that God had put him there to do His work, to glorify Him with good deeds.

It seemed ridiculous now. How could he have been guilty of such hubris? . . . How could he not have known that staying in New Orleans, a city under something like martial law, would endanger him? . . . He believed that that damned canoe had given him the right to serve as shepherd and savior. . . . He had expected too much. He had hoped too much. (272)

As with Eggers’s American pioneer framing, Zeitoun’s sense of his own security within the paradigms of US exceptionalism is shaken to the core. As the section continues, the counterpoint between Syria (“[t]here were political realities there, then and now, that precluded blind faith” [272]) and the US, previously symbolized by oceanic networks and palimpsestic histories, once more destabilizes the rigid polarities of first and third worlds. The comparison foregrounds increasingly biopolitical classifications of human life and its value in the process:

. . . every piece of [US] machinery—the police, the military, the prisons—that was meant to protect people like him was devouring anyone who got close.

He had long believed that the police acted in the best interests of the citizens they served. That the military was accountable, reasonable, and was kept in check by concentric circles of regulations, laws, common sense, common decency.

But now those hopes could be put to rest.

This country was not unique. (273)

Eggers's decision to supplement this with another oceanic motif, that of "bycatch" (referring to those worthless fish mixed up with the more valuable sardines Zeitoun caught as a boy), carries greater resonance in light of Giroux's reflections on the politics of disposability (273). "Bycatch" also corresponds with Thomas's suggestion that Eggers's comparative silence on the particularity of the African American experience post-Katrina is strategic, perhaps even counterhegemonic: "This disarticulation of race, Blackness, and the law. . . . throws the racialization of Muslims and Arabs into relief at the very moment these populations are being criminalized and reinvented as a racialized threat to national security, making the mechanisms of racial profiling that much more visible" (279). Revisiting *Zeitoun* in light of recent debates within security studies, such as the call in *Ethics and Global Security* to formulate "a specifically *cosmopolitan* ethics," the reader is once more struck by its prescience (Burke, Lee-Koo, and McDonald 2). *Zeitoun*'s attention to the overdetermined failure of those concentric, interlocking circles of state power and security also provides a more than titular link with Eggers's novel. In what follows, I argue that, as with his treatise on Katrina and its aftermath, the reader can only begin to appreciate Eggers's pertinent security concerns by placing *The Circle*'s preoccupations with fortresses and floods, water, walls, and worlds in much longer, more entangled contexts.

## **2. Where Will it End? Dislocating Security in *The Circle***

*The Circle* is an obvious companion to *1984*. Big Brother has been superseded by the seemingly benevolent corporation, "the Circle," premised on the full transparency of its workers, as well as access to and surveillance of the world at large. Reading the novel as a

counterpoint to the security discourses and tropes considered above, however, proves more stimulating. With its focus on protagonist Mae, *The Circle's* conclusion is exemplary in this regard. Having given herself over to the institution as a model because transparent citizen whose every action is monitored and sanctioned by a rapacious global audience networked via social media, Mae reflects on this “world where everyone could know each other truly and wholly, without secrets, without shame and without the need for permission to see or to know, without the selfish hoarding of life” (491). She contrasts the a priori “messiness of humanity” with the Circle’s “new and glorious openness, a world of perpetual light. Completion was imminent, and it would bring peace, and it would bring unity.” While she celebrates the elimination of “those uncertainties that accompanied the world before the Circle,” Mae still comes up against the human body as intractable enigma. At the bedside of her colleague Annie, who has fallen physical and psychological victim to the invasive excesses of the Circle’s drive for full disclosure, Mae tries and fails to read “the screen monitoring the workings of Annie’s mind.” The description continues:

Mae reached out to touch her forehead, marveling at the distance this flesh put between them. What was going on in that head of hers? It was exasperating, really, Mae thought, not knowing. It was an affront, a deprivation, to herself and to the world. . . . They needed to talk about Annie, the thoughts she was thinking. Why shouldn’t they know them? The world deserved nothing less and would not wait. (491)

Given ongoing debates about the NSA, informational disclosure, and social media’s corporate complicities, as exemplars of securitization concerns with access, agency, and accountability, it is clear why *The Circle* has enjoyed commercial and critical success. As the passage indicates, the idea of completion runs throughout, with Eggers negotiating an oft-overdetermined path between utopian and dystopian discourses of full transparency. Of much greater *Zeitoun*-inflected interest is how and why *The Circle's* final paragraphs pivot on the shifting signifier “world.” Once again, Eggers’s reliance on it allows him to explore macro-security concerns (data gathering, permissions, and the notion that full transparency

rhetorically morphs into a guarantor of global peace) through those of micro-insecurity (with individual bodies, failing or otherwise, imagined as territories to be mined, mapped, and measured for the secrets they hold or, more provocatively, withhold).

As is the case throughout *Zeitoun*, the efficacy of Eggers's conclusion can be judged by how successfully he sustains this micro-body politics/macro-body politic dialectic. The novel's final words set up a productive tension between the notion that the Circle's apotheosis as corporate enterprise, metaphysical idea, and lived reality, is completion, whereas the text itself remains gapingly incomplete. That it may be politically expedient to contest or even suspend meaning can also be read in relation to Fabienne Collignon's sense that, echoing some more Katrina-specific scholarship, "security" exists in a conspicuous lineup of key, even epochal terms: "All these words, war, terrorism, defence, security, democracy, demand interrogation . . . but not in terms of a practice that exists in the service of the 'war on terror' . . . [this] must be countenanced by an ethics of reading" (121-22). In what follows, I suggest an ethics for reading *The Circle*.

To return to its final passage—the yoking of questions of the security, as well as sovereignty, of human physiognomy and psychology with the notion that the world refuses to wait reflects the novel's overarching concerns. Additionally, Eggers's fictive play with utopian and dystopian discourses is entangled in much longer political and literary genealogies. What appears to be a future-oriented vision is, therefore, a more historically embedded critique of US imperialism, stretching back to at least the nineteenth century. Such a reading complements Eggers's attempts to offer more transnational contextualization through the figure of Zeitoun. The brave new world that the Circlers imagine becomes another version of a highly circumscribed, hegemonic notion of planetary being, which resonates with Gayatri Spivak's humanities-specific discussion in *Death of a Discipline* (71-102). When read in light of the hubris bemoaned by Zeitoun after his detention, as well as that decried in the Butler epigraph,

we must challenge the “worldliness” of recent global security discourses, as shown by the editors of *Spaces of Security and Insecurity*: “[T]he conditions of contemporary globalization are enabling visions and strategies of security to become ever more expansive. One indication of this came in 2005 when Michael Chertoff spoke of an aspiration to create a ‘world wide security envelope’” (Ingram and Dodds 2).

Eggers pries open this security envelope by privileging tropes of mapping and measuring in a manner that simultaneously corresponds with and departs from the taxonomical security debates staged in *Zeitoun*. If his Katrina text offers one meditation on defining neoliberal contradictions, his novel is driven by associated tensions between the desire to map, measure, and know, as well as the impossibility of such definitive mapping, measuring, and knowing. Eggers’s privileging of cartography and classification therefore encourages us to reframe his preoccupations with security in the form of those gated communities, corporate interests, and “prejudicial failures of geographical imagining” that Nixon foregrounds (258). By reconfiguring many of the issues raised in *Zeitoun*, Eggers also urges us to consider connections between these and associated debates in development studies. One of *The Circle*’s most explicit security concerns, for instance, is the corporate desire to procure and then sell a version of power to global consumers, exploiting networks so extensive and intensive that there appears little or no choice of opting out. The exploratory and expansive vision of the Circle is impressed upon Mae during a workplace tour:

They met a pair of women working on a submersible exploration craft that would make the Marianas Trench mysterious no more. “They’ll map it like Manhattan,” Annie said. . . . They stopped at a table where a trio of young men were looking at a screen . . . displaying 3-D drawings of a new kind of low-cost housing, to be easily adopted throughout the developing world. (18)

This early sketch suggests both the novel’s promise and problems. It anticipates, for instance, the rather heavy-handed exploration of increasing reliance on drone technology, in everything from warfare to environmental activism. More interesting is the approximation of

empirical and expansionist zeal, in the form of mapping enigmatic depths, with the supposed altruism of development discourses. This chimes with Mary Martin and Taylor Owen's reminder that the epistemological roots of human security studies "did not arise originally from the security establishment, but from development" (1). Given the trajectory of so much security scholarship post-9/11, therefore, it remains critical that we heed Butler's call to situate it within much longer, more geopolitically intertwined genealogies. The mapping of unknown space, for example, cannot be divorced from narratives of modernity and progress so instrumental in earlier colonial projects. This observation again accords with Ingram and Dodds's assertion that, "[t]he war on terror and other security projects are unfolding not across some kind of geopolitical tabula rasa but across landscapes that bear the marks of pre-existing and multiple struggles over enduring colonial, Cold War and other geopolitical orders" (7).

Given the globalized concerns that characterize Eggers's work, it too "bears the marks" of earlier struggles and geopolitical disorders. One of *The Circle's* touchstones, therefore, is the center/periphery model, in which the developmental solutions to "third world problems" are hatched not on the ground but in satellite spaces where the "haves" still prescribe, and thereby secure, the appropriate solutions for the "have-nots." This tendency becomes, for Nixon, a version of an "America-knows-best developmental ideology" (254). As he does by juxtaposing American dreamer as savior archetypes, as well as the Guantanamo-style incarceration of Arab Americans in the figure of Zeitoun, Eggers explores the unraveling of such overdetermined dualisms. If the flood is put to literal and figurative use with regards to Katrina, it is also complemented in this novel. Crucially, Mae's wonder at the Circle's deterritorialized power is captured in oceanic terms. As the narrative progresses, these motifs assume greater burdens of significance. Such imagistic reliance supplements *Zeitoun*, inviting more explicit connections with the increasing prominence of liquidity, whether through the lens of hypermodernity and/as virtual reality, or that of commerce and capital.

TruYou, one of many innovations imagined by the Circle's self-styled "Wise Men," crystallizes these securitized concerns:

Though some sites were resistant at first . . . the TruYou wave was tidal and crushed all meaningful opposition. . . those who wanted or needed to track the movements of consumers online had found their Valhalla: the actual buying habits of actual people were now eminently mappable and measurable, and the marketing to those actual people could be done with surgical precision. (21-22)

TruYou's impact is imagined in familiarly apocalyptic terms; its tidal surges inviting links with Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, for example, as well as *Zeitoun*. These stock motifs suggestively shift across Eggers's novel. In the above, for instance, the rhetoric of surgical precision is transposed from a discourse of "heavy security" (military strikes, drone warfare, collateral damage caused by the technological advances of supposedly postmodern conflict) to one that, on the surface at least, appears much softer: that of late, if not too late capitalism. Here targets on a screen are consumers rather than enemy combatants, with the chilling suggestion that they are neutralized in similarly devastating ways. Yet again, "measuring and mapping" are foregrounded, as is the once imperial, now neoliberal tenet that territorial boundaries are no barriers at all. Readers are once more invited to consider how far securing this hegemonic vision, which depends upon the entanglements of commerce, consumerism, conflict, and potential catastrophe, is reliant upon the destabilization, perhaps even the destruction of sovereign security. Eggers exposes the tensions in this vision by showing how it can only come into being if the conceptual levees separating first and third worlds are reinforced with even greater vigilance, if not (slow) violence. These concerns are once more concentrated through Mae.

When it comes to drawing a conceptual line between the half-life of her pre-Circle days and her luminous present, "Mae knew that she never wanted to work—never wanted to be—anywhere else." Everywhere beyond the Circle "seemed like some chaotic mess in the developing world. . . . all was noise and struggle, failure and filth. But here, all had been



perfected” (30). As with *Zeitoun*, the reliance on a third world discourse that conflates “noise and struggle” with the absence of certain securities (such as health, wealth, and infrastructure) speaks to Nixon’s ideological challenge to “breach the walls that concretize our planetary delusion that we can segregate secure communities from insecure ones long term, and separate out orderly societies from those abandoned to destitution and climate chaos” (267). Read in the context of *Slow Violence*, such meditations, which become more pronounced throughout *The Circle*, also invite another reading of Eggers’s title. As Zygmunt Bauman points out, “Goran Rosenberg . . . coined the concept of the ‘warm circle’ . . . to grasp the same kind of naïve immersion in human togetherness – once perhaps a common human condition, but nowadays available, increasingly, only in dreams” (10). If the corporate reality, as well as the institutional ideal of the Circle fluctuates between dream and nightmare throughout, such oscillation becomes more interesting in relation to Eggers’s novel when Bauman supplements Rosenberg:

Rather than . . . a “warm circle” where they can lay down their arms and stop fighting, the *really* existing community will feel like a besieged fortress being continuously bombarded by (often invisible) enemies . . . ramparts and turrets will be the places where the seekers of communal warmth, homeliness and tranquillity will have to spend most of their time. (14-15)

Bauman allows us to reflect how, in order to secure the Circle’s flood-like power, it is necessary that both spatial and ideological fortresses are put in place. Yet, as readers of *Zeitoun* will note, these physical and psychological fortifications are often more perilous than certain dogmas might have led us to believe. This precarity resonates with important distinctions between proactive and reactive senses of “home” and how these impact broader security debates. As Setha Low explains, “[a] useful metaphor [for home] is a fort or a castle where the interior living quarters represent safety and protection—the proactive aspects of home—whereas reactive aspects are symbolized by the high wall, the drawbridge gate, and the moat, militaristic elements built to defend the life within” (qtd. in Sorkin 233-34). Echoing *Zeitoun*, therefore, Eggers’s rhetorical interplay between flooding and fortification throughout *The Circle* opens

up security debates in relation to the “messy intimacy” of the world as lived, breathed, and fought over. Even more important in this passage is the sense that, for all the pallid rhetoric of a global village brought closer together, the expansionist zeal so intoxicating to Mae is framed in increasingly reductive terms. The real logic of securitization is revealed as being more akin to those “fundamentalisms” the company, as an analogue of the Domeland security nation explored throughout *Zeitoun*, claims to oppose.

Read in this light, the following citation distills many of *The Circle*'s enduring concerns with what Butler diagnoses as “a radical desire for security” (39):

[Mae had] had enough of the *chaos* of her family. . . . On campus there was *no friction*. She didn't need to explain herself, *or the future of the world, to the Circlers*, who implicitly understood her *and the planet* and the way it had to be and soon would be.

Increasingly, she found it difficult to be off-campus anyway. There were *homeless people*, and there were the attendant and assaulting smells, and there were machines that didn't work, and floors and seats that had not been cleaned, and there was, everywhere, the chaos of an orderless world. The Circle was helping to improve it . . . but in the meantime, *it was increasingly troubling* to be amid the madness outside the gates of the Circle.

Walking through San Francisco, or Oakland, or San Jose, or any city, really, seemed *more and more like a Third World experience*, with unnecessary filth, and unnecessary strife and unnecessary errors and inefficiencies—on any city block, a thousand problems correctible through simple enough algorithms and the application of available technology and willing members of the digital community. (370-71, my italics)

Recalling *Zeitoun*, the spatial representations of this passage dovetail with the suggested critique of expansionist power. Offering an alternative version of the ivory tower, Eggers uses the campus as a fortified chronotope against the maddening swarm of human life beyond. The pronounced contraction of space then finds itself in contested relation with a more planetary determination to order the anarchic. Yet again in Eggers, we get the sense that exporting this campus-specific model is the only vision, or version, of a securitized, sane, and sanitized future. Accordingly, Mae's commitment to “the way it had to be and soon would be” reverberates with ominously neoliberal, rather than cosmopolitan, finality.

The quasi-eugenic undertones of this section, with its attention to pungent smells and creeping filth, are also crucial. The idea of a swarming contagion of other bodies to be held at bay, symbolized by clean seats or fortified compounds, is extended into a realm where the borders separating first and third worlds are disconcertingly porous. Eggers's metonymic choices once again complement Butler's sense that "the loss of First World presumption is the loss of a certain horizon of experience, a certain sense of the world as national entitlement" (39). When seen in relation to the concerns of *Zeitoun*, the significance of these issues is amplified. In *The Circle*, the wilderness to be tamed is no longer those Central and Latin American spheres haunting the US political imaginary through the 1970s, 80s and 90s, but rather homeland cities like San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose. This shift can once again be read in the context of Michael Sorkin's survey of post-9/11 security debates, in which external and internal risks intersect. In light of this discussion, his reliance on fortified rhetoric is striking: "A new Fortress America is being built but its bulwarks are not simply directed . . . at a threat that can be physically externalized. The barrier turns inwards as well" (viii).

As Betsy Morais points out in her review of *The Circle*, there are a host of "irksome" qualities to Eggers's novel. Its clunkiness—conceptual, rhetorical, or otherwise—is apparent in some of the citations I have relied on throughout. Like Morais, however, I also find Eggers "capable of landing on point" at striking moments. His enduring fascination with processes of expansion and retraction, regulation and deregulation, at the level of both micro-body politics and the macro-body politic, for example, complements various critiques of the entangled processes of globalized security. The discourse of making the world a better, cleaner, and safer place, for instance, 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" decentered by Butler (39). 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, smelt, and felt experience emerges from the comparatively abstract realms of algorithms and the actions of digital communities. Yet again, emphasizing calculations and solutions divorced from fleshy reality evokes eugenic discourses in a troublingly prescient manner. Indeed, reading this lengthy section reinforces my view that, for all the novel's proleptic energy, it is more enabling to consider how and why *The Circle* replicates *Zeitoun's* Janus-faced approach to explore omnipresent issues of security, threat, and risk. In light of these, I close by focusing on another character, the anachronistic Mercer, in relation to the American cabin as chronotope.

Mercer provides a strident critique of the Circle's "Digital Brownshirts" (431). By revising the American Dream as nightmare, he envisions his escape: "I'm moving north, to the densest and most uninteresting forest I can find. I know that your cameras are mapping out these areas as they have mapped the Amazon, Antarctica, the Sahara, etc. But at least I'll have a head start. And when the cameras come, I'll keep going north" (431). For Bailey, one of the Circle's Wise Men, Mercer becomes a test case in relation to the discourse of rights hailed throughout the text. Mercer's decision to withdraw and withhold becomes retrograde, even criminal, in the context of the virtual community's broader right to informational access. Bailey's reappropriation of the cabin myth is striking in this regard: "alone in some cabin," he's obviously "going to get depressed, and work himself into a state of madness and paranoia" (463). The fate Bailey imagines for Mercer suggests the novel's trajectory, shifting from the cabin as loaded metonym in the context of security debates to one where, yet again, an exclusionary vision of the "world" is hailed in the name of unification and community. As Bailey explains to Mae, this "deeply depressed and isolated young man" could not "survive in a world like this, a world moving toward communion and unity" (464).

Mercer's cabin emerges as a peculiarly contemporary version of Thoreau's on Walden Pond. If the latter kept elements of his rapacious world at bay during his social experiment, the

former falls victim to a more all-consuming predator. When read in the light of Mercer's earlier statement, therefore, Bailey's verdict strikes to the heart of Eggers's concerns with necessarily contested notions of the "world" in relation to those contemporary security discourses that shape my reading of these texts: "Did you ever think that perhaps our minds are delicately calibrated between the known and the unknown? . . . You people are creating a world of ever-present daylight, and I think it will burn us alive. There will be no time to reflect, to sleep, to cool" (430-31). Mercer's reference to all-consuming fire anticipates the image from *Your Fathers* cited previously. If it supports an eschatological interpretation of Eggers's work to date, it can also be recuperated for the purposes of those security issues that define both *The Circle* and *Zeitoun*.

Eggers is a peculiarly twenty-first-century publishing phenomenon, producing work and authorial advocacy across multiple genres at a prolific rate. He is therefore a fitting interlocutor of what Nixon calls the "attosecond of our age, with its restless technologies of infinite promise and infinite disappointment" (8). Such speed, instantaneous information, and social media excess is coupled with omnipresent threats, risks, and attacks, both virtual and all too material. Throughout, I have suggested that in spite, perhaps even because of what Goyal calls "Eggers's signature style—half ironic, half sincere, emotionally manipulative," he invites readers to confront enduring questions about the function, along with the responsibility, of a politics of writing as thinking based on the need to reflect and cool down (60-61). This responsibility is even more urgent in an era where perpetual light, noise, and heat threaten to consume us. By allowing readers to consider what alternative histories might open up when we think about waterscapes rather than dividing walls, as well as defending the mutually imbricating relations between words and worlds, Eggers's work enables us to recalibrate some of the defining security questions of our time.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Alikei Varvogli's discussion of *You Shall Know Our Velocity* in *Travel and Dislocation in Contemporary American Fiction* (2012): 74-82. For a perceptive treatment of *You Shall Know Our Velocity* and *How We Are Hungry*, see Sean Bex, "Particularizing the Universal: Dave Eggers Writes Human Rights" in *Journal of Human Rights* (July 2015): 1-19.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Katherine E. Browne, *Standing in the Need: Culture, Comfort, and Home After Katrina* (2015): 158-201, and D'Ann R. Penner and Keith C. Ferdinand, *Overcoming Katrina: African American Voices from the Crescent City and Beyond* (2009): 220-30.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Wesley Kendall, *From Gulag to Guantanamo: Political, Social and Economic Evolutions of Mass Incarceration* (2015): 1-10, 153-83.

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**Pullquote: Echoing *Zeitoun*, therefore, Eggers’s rhetorical interplay between flooding and fortification throughout *The Circle* opens up security debates in relation to the “messy intimacy” of the world as lived, breathed, and fought over.**

**Abstract: This article offers a contrapuntal reading of Dave Eggers’ journalistic account *Zeitoun* and his novel *The Circle*. It considers how and why both are preoccupied with the kinds of (in)security discourses, stretching from Hurricane Katrina through the implosion of Syria and into imagined futures, that have shaped and continue to shape our cultural and geo-political imaginaries. The article argues that *Zeitoun* and *The Circle* develop the transnational commitments of Eggers’s earlier work in particular ways. In so doing, both call upon their readers to challenge the reductive, invariably taxonomical rhetoric associated with the kinds of security questions that proliferate in the aftermath of events such as 9/11 and Katrina. By exploring what Rob Nixon calls a “transnational ethics of place” in these two texts, Eggers interrogates paradigms such as “development,” as well as affiliated ideas of US exceptionalism. In**

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their formally and conceptually distinctive ways, I argue that both *Zeitoun* and *The Circle* ask readers to imagine the possibilities of worlding these discourses in more generative terms. By recalibrating some of the defining security questions of our time, Eggers invites us to conceptualise and engage with them more fully.

**Keywords:** Security, Eggers, global, taxonomy, network