

Therapeutic Reading:  
Self-Reflection and Social Awareness in  
Contemporary American Literature

by

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## Abstract

This dissertation examines the social function of literature for *Oprah's Book Club (OBC)* in comparison to how Dave Eggers's imagined audience approaches his fiction and nonfiction. By comparing these two groups of ideal readers, this project explores how certain reading communities understand reading and authorship to relate to therapeutic culture, self-transformation, social awareness, and, in some cases, social engagement. Understanding "therapy" broadly to mean the effort to transform oneself in response to emotional or physical distress, this project builds on scholarship which argues therapy sits at the heart of many contemporary approaches to literature. When reading therapeutically, literature is a tool used to understand the self in relation to others and in response to current events. Reading selections of work by Jonathan Franzen and Dave Eggers as well as engaging with episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *OBC* discussions, this project explores how *OBC* and Eggers encourage their ideal audiences to improve themselves therapeutically by reading in similar but distinct ways. *OBC* and Eggers similarly direct their ideal audiences to transform themselves while reading by identifying with a work's author or characters. Likewise, they similarly believe literature holds the potential to inspire social awareness and a sense of social responsibility for their respective literary communities. For *OBC*, however, readers benefit from books by connecting literary works to their authors's biographies to identify with however an author seems to improve him- or herself by writing. In contrast,

Eggers's writing encourages its ideal readers to reject the importance of Eggers's biography to his work in favor of identifying with his narrators and protagonists as discrete people separate from Eggers. By identifying with Eggers's characters rather than with Eggers himself, Eggers's texts encourage his imagined audience to understand his characters' problems as their own, pushing his ideal readers to improve themselves by becoming more empathetic, socially aware people. In comparing these two literary communities, this project explains how *OBC*'s and Eggers's approaches to literature share a belief in literature's self- and socially transformative potentials despite encouraging readers to improve themselves while reading by identifying with different aspects of literary work.

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## Introduction

This dissertation examines the social function of literature for certain imagined groups of middle class readers, exploring how readers understand reading and authorship to relate to therapeutic culture, self-transformation, social awareness, and, in some cases, social engagement. How does literature perform a therapeutic function for readers? How do readers understand literature to function for authors? What role, if any, does narrative play in helping readers to digest their experiences, or to understand the experiences of others? Is literature a useful tool for responding to current events or social anxieties? The following project speaks to these questions, presenting two approaches to reading concerned with self-improving therapy which suggest what circumstances might enable literature to influence social awareness.

Therapy sits at the heart of many contemporary approaches to literature. “Contemporary fiction offers emotional gratifications by dramatizing desires, anxieties, losses, and hopes, which readers experience as intensely personal,” Timothy Aubry writes (2). Literature designed to speak to “the personal and the psychological” asserts what Aubry calls a “common therapeutic vocabulary” for many readers which informs how they interpret narratives in relation to themselves as well as in relation to society at large (2). When reading therapeutically, literature is a tool used to understand the self in relation to others and in response to current events. As anthropologists Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman write, “trauma has become a major signifier of our age” (xi). As a

result, therapy has emerged as a dominant social interest. Bearing in mind therapy's cultural prevalence, this project seeks to define what therapeutic reading looks like for particular reading audiences, and what therapeutic reading's different personal and social effects might be depending on how readers identify with a literary work. In addition, I intend to explore if and how therapeutic interests influence recent acts of authorship.

For the purposes of this study, I understand therapy broadly to mean the effort to transform oneself in response to emotional or physical distress. This transformation typically occurs by reflecting on the self in discussion with or in relation to another person or group of people. I historicize therapy in the context of postwar era efforts to respond to soldiers' trauma: as historian Ellen Herman explains, modern understandings of therapy extend from institutional efforts in the postwar period to respond to the needs of traumatized soldiers returning from service. To meet the needs of traumatized soldiers, institutional structures were established to help depressed or distressed individuals by placing them in dialogue with therapeutic experts. As institutional therapy was normalized, therapeutic methods emphasized by psychological study, for example introspection and self-improvement, were positioned as popular practices employed by the American public, coloring how many people perceived the world. It "no longer suffices to think of psychology as merely one category of expertise among others," Herman writes. "Psychology in our time is a veritable worldview" (4). As psychology developed into a "worldview" applied outside of institutional therapy, psychology and its interests in therapeutic methods



manifested increasingly in popular culture, especially on talk television and in self-help literature.

Although I recognize that many different reading communities exist which encourage their members to achieve particular therapeutic goals by reading, for the sake of focus I base my argument on what I view as two overlapping groups: *Oprah's Book Club (OBC)*, inaugurated in 1996 by Oprah Winfrey, and Dave Eggers's imagined readership, an ideal audience I argue Eggers has increasingly tailored his writing for throughout his career since 2000. I believe *OBC* and Eggers similarly direct their ideal audiences to transform themselves while reading by identifying with a work's author or characters. To varying degrees, I also believe *OBC*'s book selections and Eggers's writing similarly hold the potential to inspire social awareness and a sense of social responsibility for their respective literary communities. For *OBC*, readers benefit from books by connecting literary works to their authors's biographies to identify with however an author seems to improve him- or herself by writing; in contrast, Eggers's writing encourages its ideal readers to reject the importance of Eggers's biography to his work in favor of identifying with his narrators and protagonists as discrete people separate from Eggers. By identifying with Eggers's characters rather than with Eggers himself, Eggers's texts encourage his imagined audience to understand his characters' problems as their own, pushing his ideal readers to improve themselves by becoming more empathetic, socially aware people. In comparing these two literary communities, I aim to show how *OBC*'s and Eggers's approaches to literature share a belief in literature's self- and socially

transformative potentials despite encouraging readers to improve themselves while reading by identifying with different aspects of literary work.

Inaugurated in 1996 as a subprogram featured during regularly broadcast episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *OBC* finds Winfrey and her audience reading literature to improve themselves. As Kathleen Rooney writes in *Reading With Oprah*, Winfrey encourages her audience to focus “on how their own lives could be understood and improved in the process” of reading books, just as they can be improved by considering the experiences of Winfrey’s non-literary guests on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (24). From 1996 to its cancellation in 2010, *OBC* passed through four distinct periods, each concerned with different combinations of genres.<sup>1</sup> Especially during its first and final periods, *OBC* episodes regularly featured the authors of its selected works. During *OBC* discussions, Winfrey and her audience address authors both as authorities on their work and as therapeutic subjects whose writing accounts for their personal experiences. To encourage its audience to view *OBC* texts as therapeutic, I argue *OBC* discussions tend to link the narratives of its selections to the lives of their authors, emphasizing an author’s life in relation to his or her book to humanize literature, making it more relatable for readers. In doing so, I believe *OBC* asserts a pedagogy of reading based upon drawing connections between the details of a text and the details of its author’s life. I argue *OBC*’s approach to literature is both

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<sup>1</sup> Although *OBC*’s final season as part of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* aired in 2010, following Winfrey’s departure from *CBS* she founded *Oprah’s Book Club 2.0* in 2012 as a joint project led by *OWN: The Oprah Winfrey Network* and *O: The Oprah Magazine*. While *OBC 2.0* continues much of the work initiated by *OBC*, its embrace of digital media like e-books and social media platforms and its different accessibility compared to *OBC*’s syndication on broadcast TV exceed the focus of this study.

controversial and influential. In my view, Jonathan Franzen's extended relationship with *OBC* reflects both the controversy and influence of *OBC*'s approach: stretching from *OBC*'s cancelled reading of Franzen's 2001 novel, *The Corrections*, to Franzen's discussion with *OBC* about his 2010 novel, *Freedom*, I present Franzen's distaste for how and what *OBC* reads as evidence of the literary establishment's resistance to *OBC*'s methods, and I view *Freedom*'s apparent appeals to *OBC*'s interests as proof of Winfrey's power of influence not only on readers, but also on authorship.

In my mind, *OBC*'s approach to reading is important given its cultural ubiquity: perhaps the largest popular reading community in recent history, *OBC*'s influence and reach remains unprecedented in many ways. "*Oprah's Book Club* was an instant success," Janet Harris and Elwood Watson write of *OBC*'s launch in 1996. It transformed "a bevy of writers -- ranging from well-established authors such as Toni Morrison to previously obscure ones such as Janet Fitch -- into cultural and financial success stories" (23). With "46 million U.S. viewers a week and airing in 134 countries, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* [commanded] the top-rated talk show spot for each of its twenty-one seasons" (Peck 3); writing in 2008, Janice Peck asserts that *OBC* "made every selection a bestseller" and that "Winfrey has been credited with resuscitating the publishing industry, remaking the landscape of American fiction, and even saving the written word" (3). If Winfrey and *OBC* are responsible for "remaking" American fiction, as Peck suggests, what does literature look like during and after *OBC*? How did *OBC* reshape readers' expectations for literature?

I focus on *OBC* because I feel that Winfrey's approach to books is key to understanding how literature functions for many contemporary middle class readers. The first half of my project investigates *OBC* to see how it frames its book selections for its ideal audience, placing an emphasis on the biography of a work's author to encourage readers to understand literature, especially fiction, as autobiographical. In doing so, I argue, *OBC* urges readers to see authorship as a form of self-therapy. By pushing its members to view authorship as therapeutic for writers, I suggest *OBC* encourages its ideal audience members to see literature as therapeutic for themselves, directing readers to identify with how an author transforms him- or herself by writing. The therapeutic lessons an author learns about him- or herself by writing are available to readers, *OBC* suggests. Believing in the author's wisdom given his or her ability to use literature to document his or her self-transformation, Winfrey "repeatedly urges readers to 'stay with' the author and trust her" (qtd. in Farr 12-13). *OBC* understands authors to transform themselves by confronting personal or social problems with their writing, and as such Winfrey and her ideal audience see literary texts as sites of wisdom capable of teaching readers how to transform themselves by reading.

Although *OBC* encourages its ideal members to focus predominantly on themselves in relation to authors, I believe its selections frequently hold the potential to inspire some amount of awareness about social issues. Malin Pereira writes that *OBC* selections regularly "expose the difficulties that many Americans have accessing the middle-class security that constitutes the realization of the

American Dream” of social equality, personal prosperity, and security (191). *OBC* discussions betray a “nascent awareness” of social issues impeding personal success and social equality, Pereira claims, an awareness “exemplified by eruptions of audience members, book club participants, and the authors themselves” during book club discussions (192). While much scholarship on *OBC* is critical of how Winfrey and her audience work to “individualize what should be understood as social issues” (Shattuc 11), encouraging *OBC* members to improve themselves in relation to authors rather than in relation to society at large, nonetheless I believe *OBC* holds the potential to push its audience to acknowledge social issues which challenge their worldview. Scholars are correct to note the limitations of *OBC*’s approach to reading, and they are right to identify the narrow focus of much therapeutic thinking. The emphasis therapeutic groups like *OBC* place on themselves risks undermining the potential for literature to raise readers’ awareness of social issues. As Eva Illouz writes, “Oprah Winfrey has a predilection for documenting the pain that derives from the difficulty of being a self and of entertaining a relation with others” rather than “for documenting the pain that derives from the relation between institutions and individuals” (102).<sup>2</sup> Still, as Pereira claims, I assert that *OBC* selections regularly confront *OBC* members with the fact that certain people are unable to improve themselves, or that certain events have tragic wide reaching effects, and that

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<sup>2</sup> For further critiques of therapeutic culture, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and *OBC*, see: Tim Aubry, *Reading as Therapy* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011); Eva Illouz, *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003); Wendy Kaminer, *I’m Dysfunctional, You’re Dysfunctional* (New York: Vintage, 1993); Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (New York: Harper, 1966); Elayne Rapping, *The Culture of Recovery* (Boston: Beacon, 1996); and Dana Cloud, *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998).

equality, success, and security are unachievable aspirations for many segments of society. Even if its members do not often internalize lessons about social issues, the proximity of social issues to *OBC*'s interests indicates that therapeutic self-improvement and social awareness raising need not necessarily be mutually exclusive functions of reading.

The second half of my project presents Eggers's fiction and nonfiction as critically and commercially successful examples of writing seemingly inspired by *OBC*'s interests. I argue Eggers's writing builds on *OBC*'s approach to literature by placing an emphasis on social awareness to encourage Eggers's ideal audience to transform themselves while reading by becoming conscious of the effects of current events and social issues. Like *OBC*, I believe Eggers accepts that reading books can be a transformative act. However, while *OBC* views reading largely as a means to self-improvement in relation only to a text's author rather than as an awareness raising tool to address social concerns broadly, I believe Eggers urges his ideal readers to develop an increased awareness of others and a desire to respond to specific social issues by learning about themselves in relation to his work's protagonists, who are typically affected in some way by specific social events. Eggers pushes his ideal readers variously to relate with narrators based on real people who are affected by real world social issues or to see themselves in fictional protagonists affected by actual current events. In doing so, he aims to implicate his ideal readers in the experience of social issues. Where *OBC*'s approach to literature works to transform a reader in relation to an author for the reader's individual benefit, and as such any

knowledge a reader gains about the world while reading is relevant only to their individual improvement, Eggers connects self-transformation to awareness about and engagement with widespread social issues. For Eggers, awareness of and engagement with social problems is therapeutic. His texts extend *OBC's* belief that reading is a means to transform the self to include the idea that therapy is a social act which succeeds through intimate identification with and understanding of others, especially in relation to specific social issues.

Throughout his career to date, Eggers has authored a range of nonfiction and fiction books. Published in 2000, his first book, the memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, describes Eggers's effort to confront his emotions about his parents' deaths from cancer when he was a young man. After tiring of autobiography, his work consistently addresses global and domestic social issues. For example, published in 2006, Eggers's novel *What is the What* is the fictionalized "autobiography" of a Sudanese man, Valentino Achak Deng, written by Eggers after years of close collaboration with Deng. Likewise, published in 2009, Eggers's nonfiction book *Zeitoun* describes a Syrian-American man's experience of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, documenting Abdulrahman Zeitoun's time during the storm and his illegal incarceration in the weeks after its passing. Much of Eggers's fiction similarly responds to current events and social anxieties: the 2004 short story "Another" speaks to anxieties about terrorism and racial bias in the media, for instance, while the 2012 novel *A Hologram for the King* describes the psychological effects of the 2008 global economic recession. Each of Eggers's texts encourages his ideal readers to relate intimately with his

characters to learn about the social issues affecting them. By learning about these social issues, Eggers suggests, his readers can transform themselves into better, more socially aware people, making them happier and healthier as a result.

Therapeutic improvement occurs for Eggers's ideal readers when his audience understands themselves in relation to how social issues affect Eggers's narrators and protagonists. Importantly, Eggers obscures his own voice and biographical influence on his texts when presenting his characters to his audience. Rather than viewing the author as a person with total authority over his or her work, as *OBC* does, Eggers sees authorship more as an editorial act which emphasizes other people's experiences in place of the author's own to establish a link based on empathy and understanding between a text's characters and its readers. His work's transformative function for readers relies on his ideal audience's willingness to increase their social awareness of other people and of current events by accepting the experiences of Eggers's narrators and protagonists as their own. By emphasizing this intimate bond between Eggers's characters and his imagined audience, I offer Eggers's writing and his readership as evidence of an emerging literary community engaged with reading as self-improving therapy which also views literature as a viable platform for encouraging awareness about and, ideally, response to specific social issues.

As I have suggested, key to Eggers's successful emphasis on a variety of contemporary global and domestic concerns is his effort to obscure biographical connections between his life and his writing. Speaking in 2004 with *The A.V.*



*Club*, an online arts and culture magazine, Eggers states he is finished with autobiography: "I'll never write any more on that," he says. "There are short stories, maybe a novel, in my head that go back to the idea of the family in a way, but writing autobiographically, I can't get around the fact that it brings out a different kind of writer, a different kind of passion." When asked specifically if his fiction is autobiographical, designed in some way to respond to his personal issues, Eggers is blunt: "No," he says. Aside from *Heartbreaking Work*, Eggers claims the emotions and worldview of his characters "are foreign to me." Years later, speaking with *The Guardian* in 2013, Eggers states that "writing fiction is far more liberating" for him than writing nonfiction. "Research," he says, "and trying to tell a story that might have an impact" are what he values most. Using research to speak to issues he is himself only peripherally aware of, Eggers's narratives obscure his personal biography to encourage his ideal readers to see themselves in his characters. He urges his imagined audience members to understand his characters' experiences of contemporary social issues as their own to improve themselves by becoming more aware of and engaged with current events.

My study develops in the following way: after offering a brief history of therapeutic culture, tracing its rise in the postwar era to its adoption by mainstream media and talk television, Chapter One details how *OBC*'s approach to literature is rooted in readers' reflection on and identification with authors. I argue that *OBC* positions authors as therapeutic subjects themselves. I explain how literary texts are reframed by *OBC* readers as autobiographical statements

made by authors which can be used to explain how authors respond to traumatizing or emotionally distressing events. By reflecting on connections between the content of literary texts and the lives of their authors, *OBC* encourages its ideal members to draw positive, self-improving conclusions from books. Throughout the chapter, I detail what sorts of books are chosen for *OBC*, and how Winfrey and her audience discuss *OBC* texts, tracing *OBC*'s selections across what I see as four loosely defined periods, each showing an interest in different genres. Ultimately, I outline *OBC*'s role in popularizing a specific approach to literature for modern readers focused on connecting authors biographically to their work, presenting authors' relationships with their writing as therapeutic models for readers to consider when reflecting on themselves. If literature has a therapeutic impact on authors, *OBC*'s reading method suggests, ideally it can have a similar therapeutic impact on readers. By explaining how *OBC* encourages readers to connect authors biographically to their work, I link *OBC* and many of its selections to a growing cultural desire for literature to offer readers some degree of psychological transformation or therapeutic improvement.

Following Jonathan Franzen's extended relationship with Oprah Winfrey from his cancelled 2001 appearance on *OBC* discussing his novel, *The Corrections*, to his successful *OBC* discussion of his 2010 novel, *Freedom*, Chapter Two outlines Franzen's gradual embrace of *OBC*'s approach to literature. Explaining how Franzen initially rejected *OBC* out of anxiety over its tendency to connect authors biographically to their work while disregarding the

potential for texts to communicate for themselves separate from their authors' experiences, I detail differences between *The Corrections* and *Freedom* to suggest *OBC*'s influence on authorship, showing how Franzen and his text actively encourage reader efforts to link *Freedom*'s content to Franzen's life. With *Freedom*, I indicate how *OBC*'s approach to literature comes to define Franzen's work, suggesting that *OBC*'s interests have infiltrated not only contemporary reading habits, but approaches to authorship as well.

Chapter Three examines examples of Eggers's writing which is best described as nonfiction, contrasting Eggers's memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, with his novel *What is the What* and his work as an editor on the oral history series *Voice of Witness*. Much like my explication of *OBC*'s approach to reading in Chapter One, my purpose with Chapter Three is to define how Eggers hopes his ideal readers engage with his writing. As his career has progressed, I argue, Eggers increasingly divorces his narratives from his personal biography to emphasize the testimonial stories of others, understanding testimony to be any effort to describe and account for first-hand experience, especially in relation to experiences of trauma or mental distress. When he uses his literature to document the testimonies of others, Eggers pushes his imagined audience to improve themselves by relating with and confronting social issues affecting other people. In doing so, I argue, Eggers's nonfiction rejects the interpretive model developed by *OBC* while nonetheless asserting an interest in his imagined audience's transformation and improvement, an interest which recalls *OBC*'s belief in the therapeutic function of literature.

Finally, Chapter Four explores Eggers's fiction, explaining how he models his protagonists off of his imagined audience to push his ideal readers to improve themselves by confronting social issues affecting their lives. Reading Eggers's novel *You Shall Know Our Velocity!*, his short story "Another," his novel *A Hologram for the King*, and his novel *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And The Prophets, Do They Live Forever?*, I explain how the protagonists of Eggers's fiction reflect his imagined audience, who he sees as "well-meaning" but socially uninformed middle class Americans (Eggers and Doran 24). By modeling his protagonists off of his imagined audience and by explaining how his protagonists are affected by a range of social problems, I argue Eggers encourages his ideal readers to confront how social issues like terrorism, poverty, unemployment, and police brutality affect their own lives, urging them to transform themselves into healthier, empathetic, more socially aware people. By encouraging his readers to see themselves in his protagonists, Eggers suggests his ideal audience might benefit from shaping their own responses to social issues off of his protagonists' actions.

For *OBC*, reading, like writing, is first and foremost a means to self-improvement. Literature can raise one's awareness about and empathy for others, but its primary function is to improve its author and, by extension, its reader. A text's capacity to instruct its readers is limited by its author's experiences. In contrast, for all intents and purposes, Eggers sees his fictional protagonists as the same as his imagined audience. His readers and his characters share the same worldview and they come from similar backgrounds.

Like *OBC*'s approach to books, Eggers's writing means to benefit his ideal readers. It means to transform his audience into better, healthier, more engaged people. Unlike *OBC*, it does so by actively encouraging his audience to improve themselves by learning about and even responding to specific social issues.

"The quintessential therapeutic gesture," Timothy Aubry writes, "offered by novels and self-help books alike, to insist that you are not alone in your hidden pain, equates the cathartic recognition of shared suffering with its triumphant cure. Such a tantalizing utopian formula will inevitably produce not only solace and hope but also disappointment" (207). The therapy offered by therapeutic narratives is always insufficient for readers, Aubry suggests, because the catharsis of recognizing one's own problems in the problems of others does not qualify as responding to or dismantling one's issues. Identification with others does not constitute healing. The failure to look beyond recognizing the self in others is what limits the therapeutic potential of *OBC*'s interpretive approach to books. For *OBC*, readers see themselves in authors, who transform themselves by writing. As such, readers believe they can transform themselves by reading. *OBC* does not push its ideal audience members to confront the social issues which necessitate their therapeutic improvement. Importantly, however, many *OBC* texts hold the potential to encourage such confrontation. Seizing on this aspect of *OBC*'s selections, I believe Eggers's nonfiction and fiction constitutes a popular author writing for a specific imagined readership whose texts encourage his audience's self-improvement while explicitly addressing contemporary social concerns.

I see Eggers's writing as evidence of literature invested in the therapeutic potential of reading which looks to address the "disappointment" produced by popular therapeutic reading practices by basing its readers' transformation on their awareness of specific social issues. In the end, I offer a range of authors who, like Eggers, seem to engage with therapeutic reading while encouraging understanding of and solidarity with pressing social concerns. Although I can not claim Eggers is responsible for inspiring a model for socially conscious therapeutic literature, nonetheless I see his ongoing success as evidence that authors are exploring the possibility that such writing can exist. As such, I conclude by cataloguing authors whose work resembles Eggers's in various ways, suggesting a growing body of socially conscious literature which encourages and benefits from therapeutic reading tactics.

## Chapter One:

### Popularizing Therapeutic Reading and Writing With *Oprah's Book Club*

Speaking in 2007 with Oprah Winfrey during the first televised interview of his career, Cormac McCarthy asserts that as an author, “you spend a lot of time thinking about a book. You probably shouldn’t be talking about it, you should be feeling it.” Winfrey is shocked by McCarthy’s words: “Oh, really?!” she exclaims. Her response is unsurprising: books, for Winfrey, are social objects. Throughout *Oprah's Book Club (OBC)*, Winfrey and her audience view stories ideally as lessons shared between authors and readers, tools for readers to improve themselves with by learning from the self-reflection they believe authors perform when writing. For *OBC*, talking about books is central to establishing such a relationship between authors and readers.

Despite Winfrey’s surprise at his comment, McCarthy’s understanding of literature recalls Winfrey’s in some important ways: as an author, McCarthy says, “usually you don’t know where a book comes from, it’s just there, some kind of an itch that you can’t quite scratch [until the text is finished].” Writing, for McCarthy, allows him to challenge his own feelings; it grants him a unique feeling of satisfaction. For Winfrey, as for McCarthy, literature is a means for authors to address their personal feelings through writing, especially feelings the author might not be consciously aware of. Discussing McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic novel, *The Road*, Winfrey asks McCarthy: “Is this a love story to your son?”

McCarthy reflects for a moment, seemingly uncertain and embarrassed. “I suppose it is,” he concedes, blushing earnestly, as if he is unclear exactly what *The Road*’s relationship is to his own feelings about his personal life. Viewing literature as an author’s effort to address his or her (frequently subconscious) feelings through narrative, Winfrey sees an author’s relationship with his or her writing as a guide offered by authors to readers for readers to use to enlighten themselves by developing an intimate understanding of an author’s psychology as it pertains to his or her work. In other words, Winfrey believes literature is therapeutic for authors, and as such she understands reading ideally to be therapeutic for readers. Just as literature pushes authors to reflect upon themselves therapeutically to dissect subconscious feelings, Winfrey believes literature ideally helps readers to improve themselves by encouraging them to emulate the therapeutic introspection they understand authors to perform with their work.

As it does for Winfrey and *OBC*, popular interest in therapy and self-improvement significantly drives how contemporary authors and readers approach literature. Depending on a combination of “sensibilities and expectations” readers and authors bring to texts as much as on any intrinsic qualities of a work (Aubry 10), therapeutic logic has emerged increasingly as a dominant interpretive model for literature, prizing the “subjective interior” as “the site of greatest importance, interest, complexity, depth, and fulfillment in the world” (Aubry 17). According to Timothy Aubry, therapeutic culture presents “individual happiness as the fundamental goal of life;” it prioritizes “the private or



the personal over the public or the social” (17). The self is central to therapeutic culture, fundamental to its advocates’ worldview and at the core of their responses to social events, determining how and what a person identifies with.

This chapter suggests how a focus on “the personal over the public or the social” colors literary culture, where narratives hold the potential to offer readers perspective on the interior lives of authors and their characters in addition to perspective on the self. While traditionally therapeutic culture’s fixation on the self encourages introspection either in isolation from others or in dialogue with a trained expert, literature holds the potential to encourage readers to identify with other people’s subject positions before reflecting on themselves. As such, I wonder what ramifications therapeutic interests have for different approaches to literature, especially for readers who use narratives to observe another person’s self-reflection and therapy, as *OBC* readers do when they connect authors biographically to their work. Focusing on *OBC*, the most popular recent therapeutic reading group, I question how identifying with the experiences of authors holds the potential to inspire self-improvement and social awareness for readers attuned to therapeutic logic.

I aim to show how Oprah Winfrey, perhaps the loudest advocate for self-therapy in contemporary American popular culture, uses *OBC* to develop an approach to literature rooted in readers’ reflection on and identification with authors. I argue that *OBC* positions authors as therapeutic subjects themselves. As such, literary texts are reframed by *OBC* readers as autobiographical statements made by authors which can be used to explain how authors respond

to traumatizing or emotionally distressing events in their lives. By reflecting on connections between the content of literary texts and the lives of their authors, *OBC* encourages its ideal members to draw positive, self-improving conclusions from books. Books, for *OBC*, suggest how a person might improve him- or herself by variously emulating or avoiding the attitudes and actions an author describes in his or her work.

For Winfrey and her audience, therapy constitutes the drive to improve one's self through self-reflection, typically following exposure to or dialogue with a traumatized or emotionally distressed person or group of people. In many respects, Winfrey and her audience accept the *American Psychological Association's (APA)* definition for therapy, which sees therapy as a process which helps "people of all ages live happier, healthier, and more productive lives" using a variety of therapeutic approaches, including "cognitive-behavioral, interpersonal and psychodynamic, among others, that help people work through their problems" ([www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)). Specifically, Winfrey's approach to therapy lines up closely with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), which the *APA* defines as a "treatment that attempts to change feelings and behaviors by changing the way a client thinks about or perceives significant life experiences" ([www.apa.org/research/action/glossary.aspx?tab=3](http://www.apa.org/research/action/glossary.aspx?tab=3)). CBT directs its practitioners to practice mindfulness to identify themselves in relation to an experience or problem, helping them to respond to distressing events in whatever way serves them and their lives best. Developed initially as a treatment for depression, CBT is commonly used to address a variety of mental disorders, including mood, anxiety,

personality, addiction, dependence, and psychosis. Significantly, CBT can be practiced successfully in private as well as within the framework of a larger community, much like the reflection and therapeutic improvement I understand Winfrey to foster amongst her audience.

Winfrey and her audience understand self-improvement to be a process of psychological or physical transformation through which a person confronts and ideally resolves an emotional or physical deficiency using therapy. They accept identification to be the process by which a person recognizes parallels between their own experiences and the experiences of another person or group of people. For *The Oprah Winfrey Show's* audience, and by extension for *OBC*, therapeutic self-improvement and enlightenment are achieved by reflecting on the lives of Winfrey's guests to identify with their resolve to heal themselves in the wake of emotional or physical distress. *OBC's* emphasis on authors, I argue, extends to literature *The Oprah Winfrey Show's* approach to therapy, encouraging readers to relate with authors to improve themselves by identifying with however an author "responds" to his or her problems by writing.

Since *OBC's* success is inarguable and Winfrey's dominance of daytime mass media was unparalleled at the peak of her popularity, it is important to grapple with Winfrey's reign over popular and literary culture to understand the influence of how her audience reflects on the lives of authors to learn about themselves. Throughout this chapter, I strive to explore key questions about *OBC's* cultural influence, such as: How does *The Oprah Winfrey Show* fit within the history of therapy in popular culture? How do *OBC* readings resemble *The*

*Oprah Winfrey Show* interviews, extending Winfrey's interpretive logic to the realm of literary analysis? If self-improvement for Winfrey and her audience constitutes reflecting on the experiences and self-therapy of another person, what does a typical *OBC* reading look like?

Chapter One documents and defines *OBC*'s interpretive approach to literature to demonstrate how its members connect authors biographically to their work to assert the therapeutic benefits of literature. I suggest how *OBC*'s ideal members extract some amount of therapeutic benefit from reading by identifying with authors, especially with how authors seem to improve themselves by writing. Before exploring *OBC*'s fixation on authors' biographical connections to their work, however, I offer context for therapy's rise to ubiquity in popular culture, especially following its adoption by mainstream television figures like Winfrey and her interlocutors. Linking modern understandings of therapy and psychology to the postwar period, I track their rise in popular culture through television talk shows, leading to the syndication of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 1986 and later to the inauguration of *OBC* in 1996.

This accomplished, I outline *OBC*'s interpretive approach to literature in relation to how *The Oprah Winfrey Show* engages with and learns from the biographical details of its non-literary guests. Offering a significant example of Winfrey framing her guests' experiences to render them relatable and therapeutically beneficial for her audience, I suggest Winfrey's interview model works to implicate herself and her audience in her guests' experiences. In doing so, she asks her audience to consider how they might feel if they were to

experience what her guests do. By encouraging her guests to reflect on another person's experiences, she positions her audience to improve themselves as more socially aware people, situating her interview model in the realm of feminist consciousness-raising.

Next, I detail how *OBC*'s efforts to link authors biographically to their work renders literature relatable and therapeutically beneficial for *OBC* readers. Offering a range of examples of *OBC* responses to its selections, including James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Paradise*, and Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall On Your Knees*, among others, I observe how *OBC* impels its members to draw connections between the biographical details of a text's author and the content of his or her narrative. In doing so, I suggest, *OBC* reframes literature as an approximation of an author's experiences or feelings. Narratives qualify as therapeutic introspection performed by authors for *OBC* readers rather than as creative work meaningfully divorced from authors' lives.

Bearing this in mind, I detail what sorts of books are chosen for *OBC*, and how Winfrey and her audience discuss *OBC* texts, tracing *OBC*'s selections across what I see as four loosely defined periods, each showing an interest in different genres. Running from 1996 to 2002, the first period finds *OBC* reading mainly contemporary fiction; from 2002 to 2005, the second period focuses mainly on canonical 19th and 20th century fiction; from 2006 to 2007, *OBC*'s third period turns to memoir and nonfiction; finally, from 2007 to 2010, the fourth period features a mixture of recently published social realist novels, traditional self-help nonfiction, and more canonical works by Gabriel García Márquez and

Charles Dickens. For the purposes of brevity, Chapter One focuses principally on *OBC*'s first and third periods, examining reader responses to a variety of books read during *OBC*'s first period and detailing *OBC*'s vexed embrace of nonfiction in its third period; I explore *OBC*'s fourth period in more detail in Chapter Two.

Ultimately, I outline *OBC*'s role in popularizing an approach to literature for modern readers and writers which focuses on connecting authors biographically to their texts to present authors' relationships with their work as therapeutic models for readers to consider when reflecting on themselves. If writing has a therapeutic impact on authors, *OBC*'s reading method suggests, ideally literature can have a similarly therapeutic impact on readers. By explaining how *OBC* encourages readers to connect authors biographically to their work, I link *OBC* and many of its selections with a growing cultural desire for literature to offer readers some degree of psychological transformation or therapeutic improvement.

### **Contextualizing Therapy**

To understand why certain readers and writers view literature as therapy, it is necessary first to establish some context for therapeutic media culture. Key to the development of contemporary self-help and therapeutic logic in American culture was the popular embrace of psychology in the postwar years. As thousands of traumatized soldiers repatriated to the United States in the 1940s, sometimes after years battling abroad, the specter of the second World War

colored all aspects of society. In an effort to develop treatments for a war shocked culture, psychological and therapeutic logic, the terms of which were tailored in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by Sigmund Freud and his interlocutors, manifested in a variety of cultural and infrastructural capacities.

Spread in no small part by an accelerating media culture, psychological terms came to define the ways individuals in the postwar era conceived of themselves in relation both to traumatizing memories of war as well as to each other. Writing in *The Romance of American Psychology*, Ellen Herman explains how this turn to psychology occurred, a history which I will outline briefly here to demonstrate the degree to which psychology was established as a primary perspective on the contemporary world for a mass public. As Herman explains:

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, psychology's development as an academic discipline had been circumscribed for important historical reasons and experts continued to follow the upward trajectory of professionalization throughout the postwar era. After 1945, however, they clearly outgrew these bounds. What is most intriguing about psychology in recent decades -- and what demands a fresh perspective on its historical evolution and social importance -- is that it has flowed freely beyond customary professional domains. (4)

Although, as Herman says, psychology predates the postwar as an academic discipline, its modern formulation as a generalized means to understand the world only came to be following World War II. The reason for psychology's

popular dissemination in the postwar years is its spread beyond the confines of the academy: a direct correlation exists between the spread of psychology and the rise of trades focused on therapy and self-help, for example psychiatry, clinical psychology, and social work, trades which placed psychological experts in a variety of public-facing positions, enabling the practice of psychological and therapeutic methods by a large, non-academic population (Herman 5). Interest in psychology embedded therapeutic logic in large segments of the public, to the point that “psychology sometimes appeared as a social or natural science, sometimes as a source of moral, cultural, and political values that could address the meaning of human identity and existence, matters that were traditionally the exclusive province of religion or philosophy” (Herman 5). The result of psychology’s popular embrace by the mainstream, according to Herman, is that “psychological experts have been a critical force in the recent convergence between private and public domains, cultural and political concerns. Joining the comprehension and change of self to the comprehension and change of society was their most enduring legacy” (12).

Therapeutic logic draws a connection between self-help and social concerns: as Herman says, it encourages a “convergence between private and public domains.” The self-reflection practiced by therapeutic subjects ideally shows people how social concerns affect them both personally and as members of wider communities. In this sense, psychology and therapy are means to understand how different aspects of society influence mental health, and vice versa. As Herman writes, the rise of psychology during World War II saw large



groups of social engineers and behavioral scientists working to shape “model” citizens free from negative habits and biases. In the postwar years, “social engineering was not a slur but a mission proudly embraced by experts active in the civil rights movement as well as by those involved in the Cold War military” (12); efforts to understand and model behavior through therapy extended from views that mental health is “the basis for democracy” (12). By this logic, to pursue a healthy psychology is to be a model citizen.

In many respects, the public was uniquely prepared in the postwar period to embrace the introspective therapy at the core of psychology: World War II and its resultant traumas -- battle; the Holocaust; ongoing rivalries between global superpowers -- were the source of extreme anxiety not only for soldiers returning from war, but also for society at large. As Herman says, “the events of midcentury drew urgent attention to a shadowy psychological underside, difficult to fathom and teeming with raw and unpredictable passions, as the likely controlling factor in human behavior” (7). During the postwar years, memories of the trauma of war influenced day-to-day behavior; likewise, as the explicit violence of the Second World War became an implicit threat during the Cold War, anxieties of Cold War culture and identity politics asserted their influence on social activity. Psychology and associated therapeutic practices like self-reflection and self-improvement offered the public a means to confront distress about the postwar and Cold War

eras; by suggesting the ways personal experience is colored by environmental factors like war, popular psychology normalized widespread social distress.<sup>1</sup>

Speeding therapy's ascent as a popular ideology was its acceptance by popular culture, an embrace that occurred across multiple media formats, especially print, radio, and television, which is perpetuated to this day by figures like Oprah Winfrey. Following its role in "normalizing" the mental troubles of soldiers returning from World War II as well as the social anxieties of the general public during the postwar era (Dollard and Miller 5), psychology served as one of the primary drives for policy making in the Cold War: beginning with the National Mental Health Act, passed in 1946, a clear correlation developed between psychology and public policy. Psychology and therapy emerged as dominant interests for the government and for the mass public alike. As Herman writes, the "psychological work initiated during World War II thrived under the auspices of Cold War in the 1950s and flowed easily into domestic policy areas, such as the War on Poverty in the 1960s" (Herman 13). Just as psychology and the underlying logic of self-help came to inform public policy, so too did they inform social dissent. Psychology's influence is traceable in discourses surrounding sexual and racial civil rights work: Martin Luther King's assertion of blacks' self-affirmation,<sup>2</sup> and feminists' famous declaration that "the personal is political" echo

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<sup>1</sup> "Psychotherapy," John Dollard and Neal E. Miller write in *Personality and Psychotherapy: An Analysis in Terms of Learning, Thinking, and Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1950), "is the process by which *normality* is created" (5). In this sense, the widespread adoption of psychology and therapy determine what is "normal," including anxiety and distress about global issues.

<sup>2</sup> King, Martin Luther. "Where Do We Go From Here?" 11th Annual SCLC Convention. Atlanta, GA. 16 August 1967.

the emphases on subjectivity and personal experience central to psychological and therapeutic logic.<sup>3</sup> As the logic of psychology was increasingly entrenched in the thinking driving public policy and social activism, its influence (and its implicit emphasis on therapy) naturally manifested in the discourses of popular culture.

### **Mass Media Therapy**

Discourse about psychology in postwar and Cold War era popular culture circulated primarily within self-help literature and media, accelerating with the rise of television and so with the arrival of Oprah Winfrey's show in 1986. Talk television served as one of the primary forums for therapeutic discussion in popular culture, though this is not to say all talk shows rely on psychology or on Winfrey's format for their popularity. On the contrary, early talk shows largely placed emphasis on broad discussions of politics and culture. It was not until the emergence of afternoon talk shows that the turn to personal psychology and therapy occurred, and therapy only emerged as a common focus for afternoon talk television following years of more general pop culture and celebrity commentary.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jill Morawski's "Toward the Unimagined: Feminism and Epistemology in Psychology" details the overlap between psychology and feminist activism further, as does Ellen Herman's "Being and Doing: Humanistic Psychology and the Spirit of the 1960s."

<sup>4</sup> The afternoon talk show came into its own as a forum for tabloid-style discussion of celebrities and "low-brow" subjects. Practitioners of this style of talk TV include Winfrey's influential predecessor Phil Donahue and his interlocutors Joe Pyne and Les Crane, as well as her more sensationalist contemporaries in the 1980s and early 1990s, especially "trash" copycats of Winfrey's style like Jerry Springer, Morton Downey Jr., Jenny Jones, Ricki Lake, among others.

In its early examples, controversy sat at the core of afternoon talk shows, even for Winfrey. Talk show hosts embraced controversial domestic issues in addition to celebrity life in an effort to drive ratings. As Horace Newcomb says in his introduction to *Television Talk*, an account of talk television's development:

The topics and issues that began to appear on programs hosted by Geraldo Rivera, and later Oprah Winfrey, and even the more cautious and polite Phil Donahue, were somehow 'inappropriate' for 'public' exposure. And when 'things went too far,' on some shows, these prominent personalities themselves, these familiar and successful guides to visible conversation, agreed to adjust their tone and approach. They would become, once again, 'more serious,' more engaged in 'education' and in the 'informative' aspects of television talk. Or they would quit the business altogether. (x)

Lower-income family disputes featuring displays of verbal and physical violence were not uncommon on afternoon television throughout the 1980s, especially on programs like *The Jerry Springer Show*. After detouring through an emphasis on controversy, Winfrey and some of her peers agreed to return to the "informative" approach to talk TV pioneered in the 1950s by figures like Edward Murrow. In assuming an informative format, education and more serious psychological analysis became the focus of afternoon talk shows, setting the stage for talk TV's imagined audience of middle class housewives to learn about and to improve themselves by identifying with the experiences of others.

Winfrey was at the vanguard of talk TV's reformation, her popularity driven in no small part by her therapy-minded approach to interviews. Winfrey's interview method differs from that of her contemporaries insofar as her interviews actively undo any perceived distance between Winfrey, her guests, and her audience.<sup>5</sup> She employs a self-referential approach to discussing her subjects' experiences, working to articulate overlap between her interviewee's experiences and her own. All the while, she encourages her audience to practice the same self-reflective process of identification with her guest that she performs.

For example, during a 2004 episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* documenting the experiences of abused women, Winfrey interviewed Pam, Cathy, and Amy Hendrix, sisters alleging they were molested nearly daily by their father, Ted Hendrix. Throughout the interview, Winfrey listens attentively to the sisters' accounts of their trauma before projecting herself and her audience onto their experiences. Encouraging the sisters to forgive their father for his actions, Winfrey asserts that "the best definition of forgiveness I ever heard is giving up the hope that the past could be any different. I love that definition," she says, "because it doesn't mean that you then have to accept the person back into your

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<sup>5</sup> Jane M. Shattuc writes that following the turn to therapy, "the usual daytime talk show is structured in this fashion: its first quarter identifies the problem; in the second quarter the audience begins to confront guests' inconsistencies as the host plays moderator; in the third and fourth quarters the therapist becomes engaged, but often audience members point out the lack of logic in or the irrationality of a belief system and begin to offer their solutions even before the therapist (if present) enters the talk arena" (Shattuc 117). Daytime talk shows turn the audience into the therapist, providing a forum for the public to consider the experience of a subject and to prescribe a solution regardless of expertise. Winfrey is by no means alone in adopting this format: in particular, Phil Donahue practiced a popular version of this show structure. Winfrey differentiates herself from her peers, however, by enabling her audience not only to analyze a subject's trauma, but also to empathize with the subject and ideally to understand the underlying social forces causing the trauma; her show constitutes a "venue where women of different races and classes attempt to claim power" (Shattuc 122).

life. Forgiveness does not mean I now want to have you over for dinner. It doesn't mean I want to associate with you. It just means I will no longer be tied to the past" (*The Oprah Winfrey Show* October 21, 2004). While Winfrey accepts the Hendrix sisters' particular experience of trauma as uniquely theirs, she responds to their descriptions of suffering by presenting their trauma to her audience as a universal lesson in forgiveness which the Hendrix sisters, Winfrey, and her audience can all relate to and engage with according to the circumstances of their own lives. Winfrey's comments are generalized, divorced from the specifics of the Hendrix sisters' trauma. In rendering particular experiences of trauma relatable in general ways, Winfrey impels herself and her audience to consider how they might respond to similar trauma themselves. In the case of the Hendrix sisters' abuse, she presents forgiveness as a challenge for her guests, herself, and her audience to consider: in suggesting the Hendrix sisters should forgive their father, Winfrey urges her audience to question what they might do if they found themselves in the Hendrix sisters' place.

In posing this challenge to her audience, Winfrey's interview rhetoric serves an implicit awareness-raising function for her audience. By exploring another person's trauma, she encourages her audience to learn about the world and their place within it.<sup>6</sup> By identifying personally with her subjects and their experiences, and by encouraging her audience to do the same, Winfrey works

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<sup>6</sup> Countless examples exist of Winfrey seizing upon her guests' traumatized experience to enable her audience to learn about themselves in relation to various social injustices. Two celebrated examples include: Winfrey's 2010 interviews with child abuse victims Gregg Milligan ("Raped By His Mother." *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Chicago: Harpo Productions, 2010) and celebrity Tyler Perry ("Interview With Tyler Perry." *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Chicago: Harpo Productions, 2010).

against the standard of tabloid style of talk television, which tends to sensationalize a single person or group of people. She instead establishes solidarity between herself, her guests, and her audience. Rather than exploiting the experiences of her guests strictly for entertainment, Winfrey's reflective interview style works to construct a sense of community rooted in shared experience. Emphasizing shared experience through reflection on and identification with a person or event, Winfrey establishes the basis for her show's therapeutic method, with her interviews offering herself, her guests, and her ideal audience a means to gain a greater sense of social understanding by identifying vicariously with another person's experiences.

In the context of therapeutic culture, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* strips the need for experts from the therapeutic process, and in doing so it proliferates a reflective ideology based on identification with others which encourages Winfrey's audience to question how an event or relationship affects them personally, ideally aiding them in their efforts to improve themselves in myriad ways. The introspective turn at the heart of Winfrey's therapeutic process directs her audience to consider all events in relation to themselves. As such, discussions of social phenomena like racism and inequality, topics of frequent focus for Winfrey and her audience, impel Winfrey's audience to consider their own lives in comparison to subjective experiences which are alien to them, effectively encouraging their understanding of and empathy for the lives of others.

On a base level, *The Oprah Winfrey Show's* emphasis on community reflection on and identification with the experiences of others draws clear inspiration from feminist consciousness-raising.<sup>7</sup> Outlined in Kathie Sarachild's contribution to the program for "Radical Feminist Consciousness-Raising" presented at the First National Women's Liberation Conference in Chicago, 1968, then expanded and later published in the 1975 anthology *Feminist Revolution* as "Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon," consciousness-raising has a long heritage in late 20th century feminism. Consciousness-raising, according to Sarachild's initial formation of it, constitutes reflecting through study on "the whole gamut of women's lives, starting with the full reality of one's own" (145). It embraces introspection in relation to any and all experience to develop greater understanding of one's place in the world and of social relations (and injustices) in general. In this sense, Winfrey's worldview encourages a sort of consciousness-raising function for its practitioners: a person's reflection on and identification with another's experience encourages increased understanding of and, ideally, active response to the events of that person's life. Unlike consciousness-raising, however, Winfrey does not see the political in all aspects of the self; rather, she sees the self and the political as distinct but mutually influential entities. Reflection on and identification with the experiences of others encourages Winfrey and her audience ideally to gain a raised awareness of the politics surrounding an experience, but contrary to second wave feminists like

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<sup>7</sup> Franny Nudelman explores the connection between feminist consciousness-raising and *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in some detail in her essay, "Beyond the Talking Cure: Listening to Female Testimony on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*."



Sarachild, Winfrey and her audience do not always extend their raised social awareness to any sort of political application, even if such an application is often available to them should they choose to pursue it.

Winfrey and her audience practice awareness raising more than they do consciousness-raising: they are concerned with the personal and they are often conscious of the political, but their worldview does not implicitly connect the two. Winfrey's response to the Hendrix sisters' abuse reflects this, indicating an increased awareness of the experience of domestic abuse while deflating a politicized response to abusive behavior to perform instead a generalized examination of forgiveness. In this sense, the Hendrix sisters' appearance on *OBC* serves as an ideal example of both the strengths and weaknesses of Winfrey's approach to therapeutic identification, demonstrating how *The Oprah Winfrey Show* simultaneously raises its audience's awareness of diverse, difficult experiences while threatening to undermine the specificity -- and thus the political capital -- of a person's individual response to that experience by universalizing the event to apply equally to all.

### **Supplementing People with Books**

Considering Winfrey's effort to frame her non-literary guests in ways which make their lives relatable to her audience, as she does with the Hendrix sisters, it is unsurprising that Winfrey and her producers are interested in using literature as a subject for analysis: literature can be interpreted and extrapolated upon

however a reader sees fit. Events described in books can be manipulated to suit Winfrey's audience's interests without worrying about trivializing the lives of actual victims, something Winfrey risks when she generalizes the experiences of people like the Hendrix sisters by framing them and their trauma as pedagogical tools for her audience to learn from to improve themselves with. With this in mind, beginning in 1996, Winfrey extended her focus beyond *The Oprah Winfrey Show's* guests to include various media forms. Manifesting as *OBC*, literature was the first significant product of Winfrey's expansion.<sup>8</sup>

Encouraging the same introspection and effort to identify with the experiences of others that sits at the core of *The Oprah Winfrey Show's* engagement with its guests, the gradual evolution of *OBC's* literary interests throughout its existence indicates to me that the book club's directors -- be they Winfrey, her producers, consultants, or some combination of the three -- design the book club to encourage its members to improve themselves therapeutically by identifying with and learning from an eclectic mix of writing. Throughout its initial fourteen year run, I see *OBC* as featuring four distinct periods: from 1996 to 2002, *OBC's* first period features a mix of mostly contemporary fiction fitting broadly within the sentimental tradition. The book club's first period lays the groundwork for its general approach to reading, the logic of which largely carries across its existence. From April 2002 to June 2003 the book club went on a thirteen-month hiatus, which I see as a clear response to critiques about the book

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<sup>8</sup> Winfrey's other significant brand expansions include *O: The Oprah Magazine*, published first in 2000, and *The Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN)*, a Canadian television channel focusing on women's lifestyle content launched in September, 1999.

club's standards for literature, the specifics of which I outline in Chapter Two's account of Winfrey's relationship with Jonathan Franzen. Returning from its hiatus in June 2003, *OBC's* second period features commonly canonized fiction like work by John Steinbeck, Leo Tolstoy, and William Faulkner. Beginning in September 2005 with James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* and carrying through its reading of Elie Wiesel's *Night* in January 2006 and Sidney Poitier's *The Measure of a Man: A Spiritual Autobiography* in January 2007, *OBC's* third period explores nonfiction memoir. My reading of Winfrey's heated dispute with James Frey concludes this chapter, suggesting why fiction serves *OBC's* efforts to reflect on and relate with the experiences of others better than nonfiction does. Finally, stretching from March 2007 to its finish in December 2010, *OBC's* fourth period concludes the book club's syndicated run on broadcast television with a mix of canonized and contemporary fiction; examples of work read during the book club's final period include Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* and Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*.

Across each of its periods, *OBC* asserts an awareness raising potential for literature by placing books and their authors at the center of Winfrey's dialogue with her audience. *OBC* embraces literature as something to be discussed, something to learn from as a group. It recognizes and embraces literature's social nature and its general importance to community education. As Cecilia Konchar Farr writes in her book length study of *OBC*, *Reading Oprah: How Oprah's Book Club Changed the Way America Reads*, "Oprah gave the novel back its talking life" (2). *OBC* returned literature to the center of community

discussion, at least in the context of *The Oprah Winfrey Show's* millions-strong audience.<sup>9</sup>

Granting Winfrey and her audience clear views of characters' experiences and filtering those experiences through the context of authors' lives, literature encourages *OBC's* ideal members to reflect on themselves in relation to books' authors and their characters to discover how social concerns effect people both individually and as members of wider communities. As literary critic Sarah Robbins explains, with *OBC*, Winfrey's "management of nationwide reading patterns expanded from a focus on sharing sympathetic personal responses to the teaching of culturally significant lessons" (228). *OBC* affirms literature's role as an awareness-raising tool, using creative work as the starting point to reflect on a variety of social issues.<sup>10</sup>

To offer more detail on *OBC's* evolution: beginning with Jacquelyn Mitchard's *The Deep End of the Ocean* on September 16, 1996, the first run of Winfrey's book club stretched until April 2002; the final novel read before Winfrey placed the club on hiatus was Toni Morrison's *Sula*. After a thirteen-month break, Winfrey announced the book club would return with John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*. Excluding four Toni Morrison novels -- *Song of Solomon* (*OBC's* second selection, in October 1996), *Paradise* (January 1998), *The Bluest Eye* (April

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<sup>9</sup> Describing Winfrey's media empire for *Fortune* magazine, Patricia Sellers writes in "The Business of Being Oprah" that Winfrey's daily audience in 2002 -- the "peak of her power" -- averaged 22 million viewers in the US alone.

<sup>10</sup> Social issues of great interest to *OBC* include, but are not limited to: blackness, women's rights, equality, addiction, faith, and family. Each *OBC* book examines some variety of these themes, typically by relating the experiences of the work's characters in some way to biographical details of its author.

2000), and *Sula* (April 2002) -- *OBC*'s selections featured narratives fitting broadly within the sentimental tradition, literature whose chief characteristic Jane Tompkins argues "is that it is written by, for, and about women" (123); more, *OBC*'s early years were dominated by "decisively sentimentalized, feminized approaches" (Robbins 228) to reading recalling *The Oprah Winfrey Show*'s concern with reflecting on and identifying with the experiences of others to improve oneself. In this sense, *OBC* is, as I have suggested, an obvious extension of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*'s format, projecting Winfrey's interests onto creative work in clear, straightforward ways by substituting non-literary human guests with authors and their writing. *OBC* discussions during its first period were largely unconcerned with close textual analysis or other traditionally "academic" reading tactics; for *OBC*, literary value differs from academic standards, privileging a book's emotional affect, capacity to entertain, and ability to enlighten more than a work's aesthetic or historical importance.

After a brief hiatus from April 2002 to June 2003, *OBC* returned featuring a more eclectic selection of both fiction and nonfiction texts from a variety of genres and eras. Many selections during this period draw from existing canons of "great" and/or "serious" literature widely discussed and/or celebrated by academics: prominent selections include John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* (June 2003), Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (January 2004), Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (May 2004), William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Light in August* (June 2005). Despite reading culturally significant texts embraced by the academy, whether positively or negatively,

*OBC*'s approach to these books remained consistently on contextualizing the texts in relation to their authors' biographies and historical social or cultural details which may have influenced each work's authorship. For example, *OBC*'s online paratext for *Anna Karenina* carefully links the novel to broadly relatable events in Tolstoy's life, reflecting the general tenor of *OBC*'s approach to literary "classics" by working constantly to humanize Tolstoy and to situate his biography at the heart of *OBC*'s understanding of his work: Oprah.com claims that *Anna Karenina* was "penned while Tolstoy was wrestling with a religious crisis that nearly destroyed him;" it states that "on nearly every one of its more than 800 pages is a sliver of Tolstoy's philosophy of life;" the novel's descriptions of romance are connected to "the author's relationship with his wife Sofia Behrs."

The website explains:

Tolstoy had seen young people passionately in love, as he and his wife once were, whose marriages, like his own, ended in disaster; he had seen his own sister's life ruined by her husband's many affairs. These family tragedies challenged young Tolstoy's dreams of family happiness so much that when he began writing *Anna Karenina*, as he later explained, he was absorbed in trying to understand the idea of the family. (*Oprah.com*)

Although Tolstoy was (obviously) unavailable to speak directly to *OBC*'s audience like more contemporary authors do when *OBC* features their work, nonetheless *OBC* conflates Tolstoy's fiction with his biography to render him and his literary work more relatable for *OBC* readers, helping Winfrey's audience to reflect upon

and to identify personally with the novel's descriptions of family life. As such, reflection on and identification with the experiences of authors remains at the heart of *OBC's* approach even to classic literature.

Following *OBC's* focus on commonly canonized authors, the book club's interests shifted briefly to autobiography and memoir in 2005. This phase of the book club found Winfrey endorsing, among others, Sidney Poitier's autobiography *The Measure of a Man: A Spiritual Autobiography* and, most prominently, James Frey's controversial *A Million Little Pieces*. Ironically, unlike its engagement with fiction, *OBC's* forays into nonfiction fail to inspire positive identification between *OBC's* audience and authors of nonfiction work. Much of this failing stems from *OBC's* vexed engagement with Frey's addiction memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, a book featured on *OBC* and supported by Winfrey before the veracity of its narrative was publicly undermined, effectively disgracing Frey and embarrassing Winfrey for defending him.

For context: in September 2005, Winfrey announced *A Million Little Pieces* as *OBC's* next selection for discussion. The book was received rapturously by Winfrey and her audience. During *OBC's* televised discussion of the text, Winfrey and her audience talk about the details of Frey's book in terms of their factuality, marveling at Frey's strength throughout the narrative. Winfrey and her audience are shocked by Frey's description of undergoing various surgeries without painkillers because he suggests they are banned by drug treatment centers. They are mesmerized by his clear, impulsive language: "Can't stop. Have to stop. Can't stop. Pain. Gutter. Priest. Fuck God. Her. Fuck her. Pipe. Torch. Bottle.

Can't stop" (158). For Winfrey and her audience, Frey's unadorned style reads like a brutally honest reflection of the experience of addiction, and their effort to identify with the text thrives as a result. As Winfrey announces in an interview with Nan Talese, senior vice president of Doubleday Books, publisher of *A Million Little Pieces*: "I read the manuscript as memoir" (*The Oprah Winfrey Show* 26 Jan. 2006). Winfrey accepts Frey's narrative as fact, and experiences it affectively as such. The nonfiction status of Frey's text is key to Winfrey's interpretation of it. As she says to Frey and Talese during the January 26, 2006 episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, "one of the reasons why we're all so taken with the book is because it feels and reads so sensationally that you can't believe that all of this happened to one person." *A Million Little Pieces* inspires self-reflection for Winfrey and her audience because it is so unbelievable, and it is so unbelievable to them because they understand its claims to be true. When the text's truthfulness is undermined, *A Million Little Pieces* is rendered didactically useless for *OBC*.

Shortly after Winfrey's embrace of *A Million Little Pieces*, the details of Frey's supposedly "true" story were brought under scrutiny and found to be inaccurately portrayed. For example: the publishers earnestly categorize the text as "memoir/literature" and a pull-quote from the *San Francisco Chronicle* on back cover declares it "could well be seen as the final word on the topic" of addiction. Although Frey's novel is presented as nonfiction, certain events he describes were revealed to be entirely fabricated in an article published in January 2006 by *The Smoking Gun*. Upon discovering this, Winfrey took unique offense with



Frey's book, publicly naming Frey's book "dishonest" and Frey himself a "liar."

The revelation that Frey's book is not entirely honest shakes Winfrey's faith in literature, undermining her and her audience's efforts to improve themselves by identifying with books and their authors. In the months and years following Frey's exposure as a fraud, Frey makes three appearances on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* as Winfrey works through her understanding of the event, but after January 2006, the month that Frey's dishonesty was exposed, *OBC* did not read another book for a full year.

Nonfiction struggles both to benefit *OBC* readers therapeutically and to serve an awareness raising function for Winfrey and her audience due to *OBC* members' tendency to blur fact and fiction when reading: *OBC*'s ideal readers strive to see themselves in the authors and characters of the narratives they read, casting fiction affectively as "real" by linking fictional events to the lives of their authors. Superficially, nonfiction ought to benefit from such an approach to reading: readers do need not to make interpretive leaps to see a nonfiction narrative's events as "true" since the underlying logic of nonfiction suggests some version of a text's events actually happened. When a nonfiction work's claim to truth is undermined, however, *OBC*'s effort to relate affectively with the text is compromised. *OBC*'s readers can not see themselves in a lie; they must understand a "true" connection to exist between authors and their texts to improve themselves by relating with an author's struggles. When the events of *A Million Little Pieces* are proven to be exaggerated, any lessons about addiction Winfrey and her audience might have learned from Frey's narrative are

compromised, byproducts of Frey's dishonesty and opportunism rather than insights to an addict's experience.

Winfrey and her audience are drawn to authors' biographies when *OBC* engages with fiction, but, since they accept that fiction is always on some level imaginary, they accept that every detail of a work of fiction might not match perfectly with the details of its author's life. Since *A Million Little Pieces* presents itself as nonfiction, Winfrey and her audience are incapable of distancing the specifics of Frey's text from the specifics of his life because Frey claims to have lived the experiences his book describes. As nonfiction, *OBC* accepts the details of Frey's text as true without considering the inherently constructed nature of autobiographical storytelling. The disconnect which eventually emerges between the "truth" of Frey's life and the content of his book overwhelms Winfrey's and her audience's efforts to glean meaningful knowledge about addiction and depression from Frey's text.

Narratologist Lars-Christer Hydén writes that "one of the most salient ways to construct or create autobiographical memories is through storytelling," and when the "facts" of a memory are unavailable to the author, he or she draws from "past experiences of certain events and of previous tellings of a story" (238). By nature a creative effort rooted in imagination, storytelling sits at the core of autobiography. When "truth" is unavailable to authors writing autobiographically, they embellish upon their memories to suit their narrative's purposes. Accordingly, autobiography is less an historically accurate recounting of an author's experiences and more a constellation of an author's memories mixed

with fictionalized descriptions of events leading to the act of authorship. By the time an author organizes his or her memories into a coherent narrative, the details of their text inevitably differ from the “facts” of their experience. *OBC*’s response to Frey’s “dishonest” narrative indicates Winfrey’s and her audience’s failure to recognize the fallibility of autobiographical narrative. Considering this failing, nonfiction risks undermining *OBC*’s capacity to identify meaningfully with a text, potentially compromising literature’s awareness-raising function for Winfrey and her audience by rendering a text’s events unbelievable and thus impossible to extract self-improving lessons from.

Given *OBC*’s unwillingness to consider the fallibility of autobiographical storytelling, *A Million Little Pieces*’s narrative inconsistencies undermine Winfrey’s and her audience’s efforts to use the text to reflect upon themselves in relation to Frey’s experience of addiction. *OBC* can not relate with Frey in good faith, and as such any insights his text provides to the experience addiction are inaccessible to Winfrey and her audience. Since some of the details of Frey’s life are false, all details of his text are potentially compromised for *OBC*’s awareness raising purposes. Winfrey and her audience can not identify themselves with Frey or with any part of his text since any part of his text could potentially be what they see as a lie.

Although *OBC* can and frequently does view fictional characters as real, with readers responding affectively to descriptions of fictional experiences, a narrative once considered true then exposed as false does not complement reading practices aiming to improve or transform readers by educating them

about unfamiliar experiences. Winfrey and her audience focus on specific details in Frey's text in their efforts to identify with his experience: they marvel at his ability to undergo dental surgery without novocain, for instance, and they mourn his girlfriend Lilly's death from drugs. It is irrelevant to the addict's experience whether or not Frey received painkillers during a root canal, yet such detail is exactly what dominates *OBC's* focus on Frey's narrative, especially once his "dishonesty" is exposed. *OBC's* concern with the "facts" of Frey's narrative overwhelms his text's capacity to raise awareness about social concerns which exceed the specifics of his singular experience.

After the "truth" about Frey's narrative comes to light, *OBC's* engagement with *A Million Little Pieces* diverges from its typical approach to its selections, with Winfrey and her audience focusing on Frey's authorial ethics as opposed to trying to identify him meaningfully with the experiences his book describes. Instead of using Frey's text and its "dishonest" portrayal of certain events as an opportunity to learn about the psychological effects of addiction and mental illness, Winfrey and her audience gloss over the social issues raised by *A Million Little Pieces* in favor of lampooning Frey, the "dishonest" author, as a self-consumed villain. *OBC* fails to read memoirs as anything other than absolute truth, and in doing so it undermines its ability to identify meaningfully with narrative nonfiction.

Following its troubled attempt to read nonfiction, *OBC* returned to fiction in 2007, reading contemporary authors like Cormac McCarthy and Ken Follett, among others. Much like during its first period, Winfrey and her audience discuss

McCarthy's *The Road* and Follett's *The Pillars of the Earth* with the authors in on-air interviews structurally similar to those featured in the book club's first six years; McCarthy's comments at the opening of this chapter are drawn from his 2007 *OBC* appearance. *OBC* maintained this model for the remainder of its run on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. In 2010, *OBC* ran its last season on a non-subscription cable television channel (*CBS*), granting equal focus to the contemporary work of Jonathan Franzen (*Freedom*) and the more canonical writing of Charles Dickens (*Great Expectations*; *A Tale of Two Cities*).

### **Directing OBC**

While many of *OBC*'s early selections qualify as "pleasure reading," a designation Cecilia Konchar Farr uses to describe work by authors whose "prose is clear, its plot a forward-moving chronology, its characters mainly recognizable and fairly likeable, though delightfully complex" (11), *OBC*'s emphasis on enlightenment indicates the book club's ambitions exceed its members' enjoyment. Although it is on some level interested in its members' pleasure, *OBC* is also concerned with challenging readers. Winfrey's repeated emphasis on Toni Morrison's work is perhaps the clearest evidence of her desire to push her audience towards complex writing.<sup>11</sup>

*OBC*'s grappling with Morrison's complex examinations of racial and sexual politics suggests the club's fascination with issues which exceed its

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<sup>11</sup> *OBC* read Morrison's *Song of Solomon* in 1996; *Paradise* in 1998; *The Bluest Eye* in 2002; and *Sula* in 2002.

members' personal experiences. Indeed, introducing *Song of Solomon* during the October 18, 1996 episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Winfrey asserts Morrison and her work "will make you feel and think," two of *OBC's* central tenets for literary value. Later, on a 2002 *OBC* episode discussing *Sula*, Morrison declares her work outlines for readers "how you negotiate your life with other people." These ambitions for literature -- to make readers feel, to make them think, to make them reconsider their social behavior -- sit at the heart of *OBC's* interpretive efforts, even if the club's discussions frequently fail to explore these concepts in meaningful ways. Beyond their engagement with Morrison's work, these ideas inform how Winfrey and her audience approach each of *OBC's* various selections: for example, discussing *Anna Karenina*, celebrity guest Megan Mullally echoes Morrison's understanding of how literature should function for readers, stating the book is "a little intimidating, but it's worth it, and because of that it's rich and it really does give you a full sense of human nature that's universal." Just as *Sula* means to push readers to reconsider their social relations, *Anna Karenina* is "worth it" because it teaches the reader about herself and about the world. Given its prominence in the book club, Morrison's work and philosophy determine how literature functions for Winfrey and her audience, offering a guide which remains applicable throughout the book club's various evolutions.

Despite Winfrey repeatedly insisting that she reads principally for enjoyment and thus that her book club has no cultural agenda aside from encouraging her audience to find a joy in books similar to her own, the paratext

that the book club constructs around each of its chosen titles encourages Winfrey's followers to interpret book club selections according to the information she presents on-air and through the book club's extensive online community. As I suggest with my discussion of how *Oprah.com* frames Tolstoy in relation to *Anna Karenina*, Winfrey and her staff curate information about the book club's selections and their authors, offering audiences detailed context and reading questions to direct their engagement with *OBC* texts. Frequently, this paratext is assembled to suit the introspective therapeutic logic fostered by Winfrey and her producers, encouraging readers to seize on links between texts and their authors. Although Winfrey recommends a wide variety of literature across a number of genres, a unifying pedagogy emerges across her selections as a result of the paratexts she and her producers assemble for each book club text. Rooted principally in therapeutic reflection on and identification with a text's author and the events his or her narrative describe, this pedagogy underlies the approach Winfrey and her audience employ when reading book club titles.

To observe the textual traits Winfrey emphasizes across book club selections, I surveyed a variety of *OBC* episodes discussing texts from each of its periods. Doing so revealed various recurring questions that Winfrey asks of each book she suggests to her audience. Winfrey's analytic method is driven by four major concerns: historical context and how the narrative events of novels reflect biographical details of authors' lives; literary genre; character development, especially in regards to how a text's characters reflect the work's author; and finally, how the creative genius of the author presupposes the reader's questions

about a text, solidifying the author's relationship with his or her work as one of total intellectual control. All the while, Winfrey spins each of these concerns to serve a self-improving, transformative purpose for her target audience by raising its awareness of and empathy for a range of social issues. As Kathleen Rooney writes in *Reading with Oprah: The Book Club that Changed America*, *OBC* selections grapple consistently with "such hard hitting, real-life issues as slavery, childbirth, abuse, death, disease, and divorce" (91).

Instances of these concerns abound in *OBC* selections. For example, Toni Morrison's *Paradise* challenges *OBC* readers to consider racial and sexual inequality using obtuse, complex narrative tactics recalling work by William Faulkner. When introducing *Paradise* as the next *OBC* selection on January 16, 1998, Winfrey emphasized the weight of the book's style and the significance of the issues it raises, declaring "this is not like a fast-food read. It's not like a take-out read. When you finish this book, you will know that have really accomplished something because it is a great journey." *Paradise* teaches its readers by challenging their understanding of the world. It obfuscates meaning through complex narrative strategies, relying on shifting, unreliable narrators as well as frequent jumps in time and setting to comment on race and sexuality. *OBC* pushes its members to understand the social issues *Paradise* explores by encouraging them to reflect on Morrison's self-stated intentions as they work to decipher her text's meaning. Winfrey and Morrison present Morrison "the author" as an intellectual ideal for *OBC* readers; Morrison's position relative to her work is



the ideal position for *OBC* readers to occupy themselves to learn best from her writing.

*Paradise* notwithstanding, narrative complexity is not a prerequisite for *OBC* selections to engage with topical social concerns. Aside from Morrison's work, most *OBC* selections feature more straightforward narratives which fit broadly within the sentimental and bildungsroman traditions. Still, like Morrison's books, each of its selections emphasize social issues relevant in some way to Winfrey and her audience, encouraging them to consider narrative events always in relation to a work's author before relating the narrative to themselves. For example: drawing from her own experiences as a child in Germany during World War II, in addition to its discussion of disability, mental illness, and abuse, Ursula Hegi's *Stones from the River* grapples with the effects of war on personal and national identity, reflecting Hegi's effort to reconcile the Holocaust with her own German heritage. Tellingly, discussion questions meant to direct *OBC* readers' engagement with Hegi's text ask prominently: "why did Hegi choose a dwarf as her protagonist? How do the other characters respond to Trudy's 'otherness?' How do you?" Central to *OBC*'s engagement with the text is an effort to understand otherness and to dissect one's response to it, all in relation to Hegi's motivations for writing the book as she did. Meanwhile, Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* engages with domestic abuse and queerness, both of which MacDonald has personal experience with. When Winfrey asks MacDonald during their on-air discussion of *Fall on Your Knees* what, "as the author of it, what was [her] idea for us as the reader," MacDonald replies: "to feel like it was your own

story.” *Fall on Your Knees* means to make the reader *feel* the experiences it describes, to make them truly understand the social issues driving its narrative. Likewise, Janet Fitch’s *White Oleander* documents child abuse, poverty, and addiction; when Winfrey interviewed Fitch, Fitch asserted “the existence of a collective unconscious” made accessible through literature. “We’re all connected,” she says, and literature is the vehicle for understanding that connection.

As these examples suggest, each of *OBC*’s selections examine some variation of domestic, racial, and sexual conflict or abuse, encouraging readers to learn about how such conflicts are experienced by asking why an author chose to describe a particular experience and how that description impacts the reader’s understanding of their personal relationship with the issues a narrative describes. Drawing attention to a range of social concerns through *OBC* selections and their discussion, Winfrey calls for her audience to use literature to improve themselves by developing an understanding of and empathy for the experiences described by authors in books, ideally raising her audience’s identification with those who live such experiences daily. All this to say: Winfrey frames literature as an awareness-raising tool for *OBC* members, with each *OBC* selection serving as a potential vehicle for her audience’s education about a range of social concerns.

## Charting *OBC*'s Influence

In *Reading Oprah*, Cecilia Konchar Farr outlines the influence *OBC* has had on how its participants interpret literature. Unlike many scholars of Winfrey's work uncomfortable with Winfrey's cultural influence, especially critics employing more sociological methodology like Janice Peck and Jim Collins, Farr views Winfrey's project sympathetically. Instead of emphasizing the academic and cultural shortcomings scholars often identify in *OBC*'s approach to books, including an overemphasis on the author as central to a literary work's meaning, Farr celebrates *OBC* for on the ways it brings literature to a wide audience. She explores how readers deploy Winfrey's therapeutic worldview to develop a valuable interpretive approach to literature rooted distinctly in therapeutic logic, ideally helping *OBC* members to position themselves better in the world.

In my mind, aside from generally encouraging literacy, *OBC*'s effort to push its ideal members to gain a deeper understanding of themselves in relation to the world by reading sits among the book club's greatest aspirations. While *OBC* failed to capitalize on this potential throughout much of its lifespan, nonetheless its book choices and discussions gesture towards its interest in education and social awareness, undeniably admirable aspirations for any reading group. Reflecting what I argue to be *OBC*'s most significant cultural influence, Farr accepts "Oprah's role as a teacher" (x), using literature to inform her audience about myriad social issues. Farr's work is valuable in that it considers Winfrey seriously as an educator, training readers to read for "*more*

*than* emotional-laden identification” and also for “*more than* intellection” (x). *OBC* teaches its ideal readers to use books to identify themselves in the experiences of others, and at the same time it encourages readers to reflect upon their emotions to understand their feelings more broadly in literary and cultural contexts.

*OBC* encourages reflective reading, directing its participants to consider descriptions of the (frequently traumatized) experiences of literary characters as reflections of their authors who readers understand in relation to themselves. In doing so, *OBC* aims for literature to serve an awareness-raising function for readers, making them more conscious of social issues affecting people they may otherwise ignore or are unaware of. This approach to literature extends directly from *The Oprah Winfrey Show*'s approach to its guests: as Franny Nudelman argues in “Beyond the Talking Cure: Listening to Female Testimony on The Oprah Winfrey Show,” “the problems aired on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* are hardly insignificant” (302); Winfrey’s show gives voice to victims of various stripes, addressing “sexual harassment in the workplace, domestic violence, judicial bias against single mothers” (302), and other racial and gender issues.

The practice of reflecting on the experiences of others to improve oneself as an empathetic person manifests equally on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and on *OBC*. Think, for instance, of the Hendrix sisters’ account of their abuse in relation to Winfrey’s effort to expand their experience beyond its specific details to make their abuse relevant not only to the Hendrix family but also to herself and her viewers. Where *The Oprah Winfrey Show* sees Winfrey shape her guests’

experiences to make them universally applicable to herself and her audience, encouraging her viewers to consider how they might behave if they were in a particular situation, *OBC* encourages a similar amount of freedom of interpretation amongst its members. Describing *OBC* book discussions, Farr writes that Winfrey “doesn’t direct [her audience] how to read, she puts them on stage and lets them model diverse, idiosyncratic reading practices themselves” (105). Although *OBC*’s interest in author biography, character experience and development, and genre establish the general interpretive approach *OBC* readers take when reading, Winfrey does not overtly direct her audience’s interpretations of *OBC* selections during formal book discussions held during broadcast episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Rather, after suggesting reading questions to inform how her audience might approach *OBC* selections, Winfrey embeds a sense of agency in her audience by ceding much of the progression of *OBC* discussions to her audience members, allowing them to explore each text’s relationship to themselves in dialogue with Winfrey, the book’s author, and other book club members.

Winfrey does not overtly impose therapeutic logic on her audience’s engagement with *OBC* selections. On the contrary, she encourages readers to consider authors and their texts in relation to themselves, and in doing so she positions literature as a means for her audience to gain understanding about themselves in relation to the world. Consider selections from the reading questions “assigned” to direct *OBC* readings of Toni Morrison’s *Sula*: *OBC* asks readers, “How did this book touch your life?” and “Can you relate to it on any

level?” and “What did you learn from this book?” At all times *OBC* encourages readers to reflect on themselves in relation to a book’s narrative and/or author, and in doing so it prompts self-awareness and (ideally) self-improvement amongst its members.

*OBC*’s effort to prompt reader reflection manifests clearly in audience responses to *Sula*. For example, consider audience member L’Tanya’s response to the novel: “The Peace women,” L’Tanya says, “Eva, Hannah and Sula, demonstrate what freedom means. In ways that seem unconventional, evil and downright primal, these characters define, structure, and create a sense of self-identity and community on their own terms.” L’Tanya identifies no clear therapeutic application for Morrison’s novel in relation to herself; she does not suggest the novel leads her to address any specific traumatic event in her own past. Still, L’Tanya asserts the ways *Sula* helps her to understand concepts of freedom, self-identity, and community. For L’Tanya, *Sula* indicates how social relations influence a person’s sense of self as well as their position in their community. By encouraging these realizations, *Sula* positions L’Tanya to live more constructively within her community, helping her to reflect on herself in relation to others to see how her behavior impacts her self and her community at large. Later in the same episode, *OBC* member Evelyn echoes L’Tanya’s revelations about social relations when she addresses Morrison, telling her: “I love you for allowing me to be able to read something that helps me identify who I am. And identify relationships.” As it does for L’Tanya, *Sula* makes clear to Evelyn a sense of self and an understanding of her community previously hidden

to her. By virtue of *OBC*'s emphasis on self-reflection in relation to a work and its author, *Sula* teaches both L'Tanya and Evelyn about themselves and how they fit in relation to the people around them. Importantly, both women see Morrison as personally responsible for their enlightenment.

As L'Tanya's and Evelyn's responses to *Sula* suggest, *OBC* readers are free to interpret texts however they please, but the principle focus of *OBC* discussions remains rooted in the realm of self- and community improvement through awareness-raising about social issues. According to Winfrey's therapeutic worldview, reading functions first and foremost as a means to serve the self. By leaving her audience open to read according to their own knowledge and interests, Winfrey encourages her audience to consider popular literature in relation to themselves, allowing them to feel like they reach their own conclusions about a text rather than having a conclusion drawn for them didactically by Winfrey or her guests.<sup>12</sup> Winfrey's therapeutic focus on the self helps her ideal audience to read with an eye for how narratives reflect themselves regardless of their actual lived experience. *OBC*'s focus on the self encourages introspection performed in relation to another person's (or character's) experience, and it is this dialectical approach to narrative which enables reading to serve a socially conscious, awareness raising function for Winfrey and her audience: *OBC*'s ideal readers reflect upon and learn about the experiences of others to reflect upon

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<sup>12</sup> Despite the agency apparent in reader responses to *OBC* texts, a large body of criticism exists arguing the shortcomings of Winfrey and her audience's therapeutic logic and self-reflective thinking. Examples of scholars and journalists critical of Winfrey's book club and its approach to reading include, but is not limited to: Jim Collins; Eva Illouz; Daniel Mendelsohn; Wendy Kaminer; and Eva Moskowitz.

and learn about themselves, and in doing so they ideally understand others and respond to their needs more empathetically.

Literature, for *OBC*, documents experience, and in doing so it offers readers a means to learn about themselves in relation to others. Often *OBC* asks its members directly to reflect on these relationships: consider, for example, when *OBC* reads Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. *OBC* asks its members directly "how does racial self-loathing corrode the lives of Pecola and her parents, Cholly and Pauline Breedlove? How does racial self-hatred manifest itself in characters like Maureen Peal, Geraldine, and Soaphead Church?" It pushes readers to question "what role does social class play in the novel?" It challenges its members to ponder the idea that "while advances in civil rights and racial attitudes have been made in the intervening years [since the novel's publication in 1970], it is arguable that many of the core issues so vividly evoked in the novel remain. What evidence is there that racial self-hatred continues to ruin lives? What present-day cultural factors could contribute to tragedies like Pecola's?" *OBC* encourages its members to address subject positions and experiences which are inaccessible to themselves or which they are disinclined to inhabit. In doing so, it leads its ideal members to learn not only about themselves, but also to gain a deeper appreciation for how they exist in relation to others. As Winfrey says following *OBC* reader responses to Christina Schwartz's *Drowning Ruth*, the book club's November 2000 selection, "it is remarkable . . . how a work of fiction can touch and, really, begin to help to heal the lives of readers in ways that a lot of self-help books and therapy and



conversations cannot.” For *OBC*, fiction can “heal” readers. It can help readers to improve themselves in a way they deem measurable by offering perspective on readers’ own lives in relation to the experiences of others.

Responding to *OBC* readers discussing *Paradise*, Toni Morrison says her novel exists to make “things that you cannot sort of fathom become instantly recognizable and knowable” (qtd. in Farr 48). Reading Morrison’s novels, and reading fiction in general, ideally leads *OBC* members to an understanding of the previously unknown. More than anything, this search for understanding sits at the heart of *OBC*’s approach to books. Writing about *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, sociologist Eva Illouz argues that Winfrey’s show functions as “a performance of values, symbols, ideas, fantasies, and fears central to American culture” (79); Winfrey’s and her audience’s analyses of trauma deploys American ideals -- its values, its symbols, its fears -- as means to identify with and to internalize the experiences of others. *OBC* extends this effort to the realm of literature, and especially fiction, encouraging its members to reflect upon the experiences of others to learn about the social issues which surround them. In this sense, *OBC* serves an awareness raising function for its ideal members, teaching them about social realities they are otherwise not positioned or disposed to experience.

## Chapter Two: Charting *OBC's* Influence on Authorship

When, on September 17, 1996, Oprah Winfrey inaugurated her soon-to-be-famous book club, she declared “this is one of my all time favorite moments I’m having on television.” Reading, for Winfrey, is important, and she is thrilled to lead her audience to books. “When I was growing up, books were my friend,” Winfrey says. “When I didn’t have friends, I had books.” Books are a means to educate oneself, Winfrey believes. “Books open windows to the world for all of us,” she asserts. “I want to get the whole country reading again! Those of you who haven’t been reading: I think that books are important!” Winfrey sees reading as a path to personal improvement; it is a tool to facilitate the therapeutic process. Her guideline for therapeutic reading? Relate with books intimately. Consider books’ characters, their content, and their authors in relation to one’s own life. Doing so, Winfrey suggests, allows literature to open “the world” to readers, granting readers a deeper understanding of themselves in relation to others.

At its core, Winfrey’s interest in identifying with literature and its creators extends clearly from the therapeutic narratives explored on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. *The Oprah Winfrey Show* works to bring subjects in need of private counsel to the public forum of television where they share their narratives with Winfrey and her audience. As Eva Illouz writes, “the litany of problems that normally fills the professionals’ private offices and is confined to their technical

expertise now invades our screens” (82). In appearing on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Winfrey’s guests use her show and its resources as a place to share and to resolve personal problems typically rooted in some form of trauma. In doing so, Winfrey’s ideal audience both in the studio and at home find themselves responding to Winfrey’s subjects as a professional therapist would: they observe and participate in the therapeutic analysis of Winfrey’s guests. At the same time, Winfrey generalizes her guests’ trauma, enabling herself and her ideal audience to reflect on how they might behave if they were to find themselves in a similar situation. Recall, for example, Winfrey’s discussion of forgiveness in response to the Hendrix sisters’ sexual abuse detailed in Chapter One. When this same logic applies to books, Winfrey’s call for her audience to identify with a work’s content in relation to its author enables literature, specifically fiction, to encourage her and her ideal audience to practice the same processes of identification and introspection that they use when considering *The Oprah Winfrey Show*’s non-literary guests.

Winfrey uses her guests’ experiences to construct a conflict/resolution dialectic around which she shapes the narrative arcs of her episodes. Illouz notes that such narratives include, among many others: “the failed self”; “the assaulted self”; “broken relationships”; “misfortunes caused by blind fate”; and “social problems” (83). With her book club, Winfrey extends her show’s focus on the resolution of these sorts of narratives to include works of literature, finding literary

examples of the familiar narratives she and her audience typically encounter through her guests to analyze as *OBC* subjects.<sup>1</sup>

As Kathleen Rooney writes in *Reading With Oprah*, Winfrey encourages her ideal audience to focus “on how their own lives could be understood and improved in the process” of reading these books, just as they can be improved by considering the experiences of Winfrey’s guests (24). To enable its ideal audience’s ability to identify with *OBC* texts, *OBC* discussions tend to link the narratives of its selections to the lives of each text’s author, emphasizing the author’s life in relation to his or her book to humanize literature, making it more relatable for readers. In doing so, *OBC* asserts a pedagogy of reading based upon drawing connections between the details of a text and the details of its author’s life. For example, *OBC*’s analysis of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* finds Winfrey and her ideal audience working to read McCarthy’s novel in the context of his private relationship with his son; similarly, *OBC*’s cancelled reading of Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* and later its successful analysis of *Freedom* find Winfrey and her audience attempting to link Franzen’s midwestern heritage and celebrity status to the actions of his novels’ characters.<sup>2</sup> In connecting fictional events to authors’ actual lives, *OBC* strives to bridge literary texts with

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of *OBC* selections with narratives similar to those of guests traditionally featured on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* include: Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall On Your Knees*; James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*; Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*; William Faulkner’s *The Sound and The Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Light in August*; and Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* and *Freedom*.

<sup>2</sup> See: “Oprah’s Exclusive Interview with Cormac McCarthy.” *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Chicago: Harpo Productions, 2005; Franzen, Jonathan. “Meet Me in St. Louis.” *How to be Alone*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2002. 258-274; Winfrey, Oprah. “Interview with Jonathan Franzen.” *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Chicago: Harpo Productions, 2010.

real people, its analysis of literature accepting fictional narrative as an autobiographical account of an author's experiences, however metaphorical.

Given its popularity, especially at its peak in the early 2000s, I argue *OBC's* assumption that fiction is always on some level autobiographical holds the potential to color literature's production and reception for many contemporary authors and readers, consciously and unconsciously influencing how readers and writers approach literary work. To explain the ways *OBC* projects its assumptions onto the literature it reads as well as how its assumptions can color the act of authorship, much of this chapter focuses on Winfrey's and *OBC's* extended engagement with Jonathan Franzen. Franzen's experience with *OBC* is more protracted than that of any author aside from Toni Morrison, and his is inarguably among the most openly vexed, second only to that of James Frey.

Franzen's engagement with Winfrey began with Winfrey's announcement of *The Corrections* as *OBC's* September 2001 selection, an announcement he followed quickly with derisive comments about *OBC's* book choices. After Franzen's comments, Winfrey declared Franzen would not participate in *Oprah's Book Club*, and that *OBC* would not read his work. In the months and years to follow, Franzen reflected on his experience with Winfrey in a series of nonfiction essays detailing his anxiety that Winfrey and *OBC* would draw biographical connections between *The Corrections* and his life. In September 2010, Franzen returned to Winfrey and *OBC* upon the publication of his next novel, *Freedom*, a work which I believe reflects Franzen's embrace of *OBC's* biography-based approach to literature. I suggest that Franzen's stylistic shift from the narrative

experimentation of his first novels to a concern with readability and social realism in his later works constitutes a self-reflexive nuancing of his understanding of how literature operates for mainstream readers like Winfrey's ideal audience, especially given the ways he embraces links between *Freedom* and his own biography during discussions of the novel. In doing so, this chapter traces Franzen's rejection, reconsideration, and eventual embrace of Winfrey's and *OBC*'s approach to books.

Beginning with Winfrey's declaration in 2001 that *The Corrections* would feature as the next *OBC* selection, I read *The Corrections* to detail its appeal for *OBC* readers, outlining the ways its themes and content benefit *OBC*'s interest in author biography as well as its ideal members' desire to improve themselves and their understanding of others by identifying with a text's author in relation to the experiences of his or her characters. This accomplished, I examine Franzen's refusal to submit to *OBC*'s interpretation of *The Corrections* as an autobiographical statement. Detailed at length in his nonfiction essays exploring his relationship with Winfrey, his relationship with his own writing, and his conception of literary value in general, I view Franzen's anxiety towards *OBC* as a product of his self-image as a "serious" author whose work stands apart from "lowbrow" approaches to literature like *OBC*'s, whose approach he sees as overly concerned with the cult of the author and not concerned enough with literature for literature's sake.

Tracing Franzen's shift in appreciation for readers like *OBC*'s members across the essays he published in the aftermath of his disagreement with

Winfrey, I establish Franzen's anxiety about literature's relationship with its author versus a text's respect for its readers as a problem which he solves for himself by engaging with Winfrey and *OBC*. Specifically, I present Franzen's authorship of *Freedom* as the process which resolves his anxiety about *The Corrections'* embrace by a popular readership like *OBC*. *Freedom's* characters and structure make obvious appeals to *OBC's* concern with connecting a text to the biographical details of its author; as such, its content benefits *OBC* members' interest in identifying a work's author with the events and characters described in his or her narrative.

The product of extensive introspection following Franzen's anxiety about Winfrey and *OBC* embracing him and his work, I believe *Freedom* stands as the ideal example of *OBC's* influence on literary production, an influence I explore more broadly in Chapters Three and Four. As Franzen says in a 2010 interview with Dave Haslam, he wrote *Freedom* because he "wanted to write a book that would free [him] in some way," reflecting *OBC's* emphasis on transformation and self-improvement through literature. *Freedom* helps Franzen to liberate himself from his past; the novel abstractly frees him "in some way" from the person he was before authoring it. To this end, I indicate the ways *OBC's* approach to literature seems to influence Franzen's authorship of *Freedom*, and in the process I show how the values which define Franzen's text come to mirror those of Winfrey's book club, all despite Franzen's initial protestations that *OBC* members read too narrowly according to an author's biography without thinking critically about whether or not the details of an author's life are "relevant" to the

narrative under analysis. I claim that *Freedom* extends the turn towards mainstream readers Franzen begins with *The Corrections* by embracing *OBC*'s interests with its marketing and narrative content. With *Freedom*, I indicate how *OBC*'s belief that books offer readers a means to improve themselves by identifying with authors comes to define Franzen's work, suggesting how *OBC*'s interests have infiltrated not only contemporary reading habits, but approaches to authorship as well.

### ***OBC* and Its Detractors**

Faulting *OBC* as much for its ubiquity as for its introspective logic, critiques of Winfrey's book club serve as an interesting point of entry to discuss the popular influence of *OBC*'s approach to literature. Winfrey's detractors are regularly critical of the book club due more to its popularity than for flaws in its pedagogy. Examples of the language commonly used to criticize *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *OBC* include riffs on descriptors like "trite," "maudlin," and, overwhelmingly, "middlebrow," all of which appear frequently in scholarly and popular criticism of Winfrey's show, of *OBC* selections, and of the literary analysis performed by Winfrey and her ideal audience during *The Oprah Winfrey Show*



episodes devoted to the book club.<sup>3</sup> It is significant that each descriptor gestures to the ubiquity of the book club's conclusions: in particular, descriptors amounting to "trite" suggest a redundancy to the book club's literary interests and interpretations; "middlebrow," meanwhile, characterizes the book club's approach to reading as un-ambitiously middle-class and mainstream, somewhere above the "lowbrow" fascinations of pulp and genre work but not near the high cultural halls of the canon or of the academy. Although this language often means to degrade the book club, it inadvertently points to the mainstream adoption of Winfrey's therapeutic perspective by highlighting the universality of its conclusions while enumerating the breadth of the book club's appeal by identifying its distinctly populist logic.

Beginning in 2001, Jonathan Franzen's extended dispute with Winfrey serves as perhaps the loudest example of non-academic criticism of Winfrey and her therapeutic project. Following Winfrey's statement that *OBC* would read Franzen's novel *The Corrections* for its next discussion, Franzen spoke critically of Winfrey's literary project using many of her skeptics' principle attacks. While Franzen's critique of Winfrey is directed at *OBC* and his participation in how it assesses literature, his comments nonetheless reflect a deep seated skepticism towards Winfrey's cultural work in general. Unsurprisingly, Franzen's criticism of

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<sup>3</sup> For instance: Jonathan Yardley writes for *The Washington Post* that his one time watching *The Oprah Winfrey Show* he nearly gagged on all the treacle and psychobabble" ("The Story of O." *The Washington Post*. 5 November 2001); in an essay titled "Twenty-five Reasons Why It's All Over" (*The End of Cinema As We Know It*. Ed. Jon Lewis. New York: NYU Press, 2001) Wheeler Winston Dixon writes that "Oprah Winfrey's 'Book Club' deals solely in the most maudlin, simplistic narratives in which loss and adversity are inevitably countered by triumph and hope" (361); meanwhile, even if it is not often used with negative connotation and including my own work, "middlebrow" abounds in academic scholarship discussing Winfrey, her audience, and even *OBC* authors (among other examples, see: Aubry, Illouz, Collins, Farr, Radway).

Winfrey deploys much of the derisive language commonly used to diminish the book club: according to Franzen, Winfrey's book picks are "one dimensional;" her selections are so "schmaltzy" he "cringes" at them. Beyond reflecting popular critical opinion of Winfrey's therapeutic logic and of the book club, Franzen's critique of *OBC* is especially fruitful for scholarly analysis given his ultimate reconciliation with Winfrey, a settlement which sees Winfrey's therapeutic logic manifest in Franzen's literary interests despite his previous rejection of her and her imagined audience's worldview.

To offer further detail, in September, 2001, Winfrey named Franzen's *The Corrections* the newest selection for her massively influential book club, an unsurprising choice for *OBC* considering the novel's focus on domestic struggles and redemption. Upon *The Corrections'* announced inclusion in the book club, Franzen responded critically to Winfrey in an interview with Powell's Books. When reacting to his interviewer's proclamation that "thousands of people won't read [*The Corrections*] for no other reason than the fact that Oprah recommended it," Franzen said: "the problem in this case is some of Oprah's picks. She's picked some good books, but she's picked enough schmaltzy, one dimensional ones that I cringe, myself." As one of the most prominent public figures in modern American literature, Franzen's words caused controversy with Winfrey despite his assertion that he finds her "really smart and she's really

fighting the good fight. And she's an easy target."<sup>4</sup> Voicing nothing new about Winfrey or *OBC*, Franzen's comments reinforce existing opinions of the book club, viewing it through a binary evaluative lens obsessed with high and low cultural divisions.

Franzen's comments about *OBC* picks are not without precedent: as Kathleen Rooney writes in *Reading with Oprah*, mainstream critics have worked to paint *OBC* selections as "little more than sentimental, sensitive, smarmy, schmaltzy, and just about any other similarly derogatory s-adjectives you can think of" (72). Prominent among such critics is Susan Wise Bauer, whose article "Oprah's Misery Index" negatively characterizes the sentimental nature of *OBC* endorsed books. *OBC* books are, Bauer argues, efforts "to find meaning in suffering" (qtd. in Rooney 72), but they fail to explore big ideas in meaningful ways. As Rooney says, Bauer's criticism of *OBC* is that "*OBC* picks in particular and 'women's lit' in general tend to function without logic or reason, hearkening back to disquietingly archaic notions of women as emotional creatures upon whom appeals to ideas are lost" (72). Writing specifically of Bauer's assessment of *OBC* titles, Rooney argues that "by pigeonholing the works as just for women, [Bauer] attendantly classifies them as being second-rate, and certainly not serious" (72). Regardless of Franzen's efforts to soften his criticism of *OBC* by praising Winfrey and her intentions, the language of his remarks echoes Bauer's

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<sup>4</sup> Although *OBC* certainly expanded its popular reach -- in an October 29, 2001 article documenting Franzen's disagreement with Winfrey, *The New York Times* reported that Franzen's publisher, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, moved "to print an additional 500,000 copies" of *The Corrections* following *OBC*'s endorsement of the book -- the novel was already critically acclaimed and a sales success prior to *OBC*'s embrace of it, recipient the 2001 National Book Award and a bestseller.

sexist assessment of *OBC* selections and of women's literature more generally, indicating his adherence to gendered cultural divisions between "highbrow" masculine art and women's "lowbrow" domestic interests.

Although Franzen's criticism of Winfrey's book club is brief, his interview with Powell's Books reflects his anxiety about compromising what he understands to be his artistic integrity: Franzen labels himself a "sell-out" who has been "co-opted" by institutions like *OBC*, even if he feels his concern about involving himself with popular tastemakers like Winfrey "makes for a pathetic spectacle" ("Interview with *Powells.com*"). Readers and journalists (correctly) interpreted Franzen's words as suggesting he draws distinction between readers of literary fiction and readers of popular fiction and that "literary" readers are the only audience he deems worthy of his novels. The idea that Winfrey's populism compromises an artist's integrity, perhaps due to her "one-dimensional" focus on the self, sits at the heart of popular skepticism towards Winfrey and her imagined audience, as well as towards *OBC* more generally.

Unsurprisingly, many readers of Franzen's interview with Powell's found his words offensive, leading to what Lev Grossman, *TIME* magazine's literary editor, named "allegations of elitism" from a number of media outlets in his 2010 profile of Franzen. Shortly after Franzen's interview with Powell's went public, Winfrey famously rescinded his invitation to appear on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Although Franzen's nonfiction writing has focused much attention on examining his cancelled 2001 meeting with Winfrey and her audience, Winfrey made little

effort to address her disagreement with Franzen publicly until she invited him back to the book club in 2010 to discuss *Freedom*.<sup>5</sup>

More than echoing existing common criticisms of Winfrey and *OBC*, Franzen's relationship with Winfrey is interesting because of its extended nature: their involvement with one another did not cease after Franzen's initial critique of the book club. Rather, as I will show in the coming discussion, Franzen's nonfiction and fiction in the years following his 2001 comments about *OBC* indicates the extent to which he was affected by and drawn towards Winfrey's book club and its emphasis on identifying with books by connecting authors biographically to their work. Franzen's involvement with and critique of Winfrey and *OBC* is fascinating when considered in relation to work accomplished by scholars like Ted Striphas, Mark McGurl, Jim Collins, and James English, critics examining how cultural institutions and cultural producers mutually influence one another. Placed in the context of these sociological studies of literature, it

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<sup>5</sup> Despite Winfrey's extended silence regarding Franzen in the years following their disagreement over *The Corrections*, just as *OBC* pushed Franzen to reassess how he evaluates literary value, starting in 2002 Winfrey's actions regarding the book club indicate that, in addition the wider cultural reflection performed after 9/11, Franzen's comments about her reading selections similarly exerted some amount of influence over her and the *OBC* project: not long after *The Corrections*'s aborted book club discussion in the fall of 2001, *OBC* read three books in seven months (Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*; Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall On Your Knees*; and Toni Morrison's *Sula*) before entering a 14 month hiatus. That the book club's first incarnation ends with *Sula* is unsurprising: as I detail in Chapter One, Morrison's approach to literature is central to Winfrey's and *OBC*'s own. More, Morrison's work is widely celebrated by the academy, gesturing towards *OBC*'s emphasis on older, more canonical 19th and 20th century literature upon its return in 2003, work which largely exceeds critiques of the sort Winfrey and *OBC* faced from Franzen and other similarly minded critics. To this end, between *OBC*'s return in June 2003 until its brief embrace of memoir and nonfiction starting in September 2005, a period I understand loosely as *OBC*'s second period, the book club read: John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*; Alan Paton's *Cry, The Beloved Country*; Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*; Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*; Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*; and William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Light in August*. Bearing in mind Winfrey's critics' comments about her taste in books, it is difficult to view this turn to "classics" as anything but a direct response to their critiques.

becomes clear that Franzen's extended controversy with *OBC* frames the development of his writing from his first novels' experiments in postmodernity to his more recent attempts at contemporary social realism. Put differently, *OBC* appears to influence Franzen's approach to authorship given the ways its interests increasingly seem to direct the style and content of his work.

### **Shifting Opinions, Shifting Style**

Although *The Corrections* was authored prior to Franzen's relationship with Winfrey, it exposes his growing interest in domestic issues and redemption, concepts central to many *OBC* selections. In some respects, *The Corrections* continues to refine many of the experimental stylistic practices Franzen explores in his first two novels, *Strong Motion* and *The Twenty-Seventh City*. In other ways, the novel's emphasis on the domestic sphere marks Franzen's movement away from the postmodern style of his early work, hinting at his growing interest in fiction designed to appeal to readers with relatable narratives and characters, touchstones of many of the texts *OBC* uses to facilitate introspection on and identification with the experiences of authors.

Structurally, *The Corrections* performs Franzen's oscillation between experimentalism and affective, accessible writing: split into seven sections and presented in a non-linear sequence, the intersecting plot lines of *The Corrections*'s principal characters gesture to Franzen's past aspiration to write postmodern systems novels in the vein of Don DeLillo's or Thomas Pynchon's,

“writers who attempted to replicate the systems understanding of the world rather than the crude mechanistic model of cause and effect that we find in a traditional novel” (Burn 75). At the same time, Franzen’s focus on relatable characters and the domestic sphere indicates his attempt to build a narrative sympathetic to his readers’ (therapeutic, introspective) interests. Unlike work by DeLillo or Pynchon and different from Franzen’s own early novels, *The Corrections* focuses less on the escalating absurdity of its characters’ lives as they are affected by macro-social systems, as is common in encyclopedic, experimental postmodern fiction, to focus more on pedestrian scenarios detailing personal and domestic tension, a key tenet of many *OBC* selections.

In a telling scene occurring early in *The Corrections*, Franzen appears to include his creative shift away from experimentalism in the novel’s narrative when, in a desperate bid to prolong his tryst with his socialite girlfriend, Julia Vrais, Chip Lambert, one of the novel’s protagonists, plunders his book collection to sell his library for spending money:

He purged the Marxists from his bookshelves . . . Jürgen Habermas’s *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, which he’d found too difficult to read, let alone annotate, was in mint condition . . . But Jürgen Habermas didn’t have Julia’s long, cool, pear-tree limbs, Theodor Adorno didn’t have Julia’s grapy smell of lecherous pliability, Fred Jameson didn’t have Julia’s artful tongue . . . [he] sold his feminists, his formalists, his structuralist, his poststructuralists, his Freudians, and his queers . . . he plied his

Foucault and Greenblatt and hooks and Poovey into shopping bags and sold them all. (*The Corrections* 92)

Writing in his 2008 book-length study on Franzen, *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*, Stephen J. Burn claims that “instead of providing an index of the hidden depths and the surprisingly various passions of a character, Chip’s books make it easy to see one type of writing Franzen thinks should be rejected” (92). Burn correctly links Chip’s list to the type of writing Franzen “thinks should be rejected,” marking Franzen’s turn to a more relatable narrative aesthetic. By razing a wide survey of literary and cultural theory from his library, Chip’s actions reflect Franzen’s desire to write pleasurable, consumable literature. By stripping his style of explicit theoretical pretensions, Franzen opens *The Corrections* to affect non-academic readers, allowing its narrative to encourage the introspective, identification-based reading practiced by mainstream audiences like *OBC*.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the novel, Alfred and Enid Lambert live in St. Jude, a fictional midwestern town. The bulk of the narrative’s drama revolves loosely around the mental decline of Alfred as his dementia worsens while each of his children --

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<sup>6</sup> In an essay titled “On Autobiographical Fiction,” Franzen seems to encourage Burn’s argument that Chip’s book sale constitutes an autobiographical purging of Franzen’s aspirations as a “status” author writing for cultural capital rather than to entertain readers (see: “Mr. Difficult”). In the essay, Franzen explains that his autobiography exists in Chip Lambert’s shame: parts of Chip’s narrative function as a means for Franzen to grapple with his own shame, to work through his shame without letting it overwhelm him or his intentions as an author. If Franzen views pieces of Chip’s narrative as deliberately autobiographical, is it unreasonable to assume other parts of Chip’s story are similarly reflective of Franzen, whether by design or consequence? Franzen writes: “In the last days of my marriage, I’d had a brief relationship with a young woman I’d met when I was teaching. She wasn’t a student and had never been my student, and she was much sweeter and more patient than the girl Chip Lambert gets involved with. But it was a very awkward and unsatisfactory relationship, a relationship that I now literally *writhed with shame* to think about, and for some reason it seemed necessary to incorporate it into Chip’s story” (136).



Gary, Chip, and Denise -- pursue different careers on the east coast to varyingly disastrous results, their eventual failures bringing each child home to St. Jude for Christmas. Chip and Denise both lose their jobs due to sexual indiscretions: Chip, a former professor, has an affair with one of his students; Denise, a talented chef, has an affair with both her boss and his wife. Meanwhile, Gary, for all outward appearances a successful banker, suffers from depression and alcoholism. Each of the Lambert's problems are domestic enough: adultery, depression, addiction, and dementia are all reasonably common issues faced by modern American families. Furthermore, each Lambert child feels strongly disaffected from their hometown of St. Jude as a result of Alfred's and Enid's life choices, a common, almost cliché narrative. Gary's biggest worry and a primary cause of his depression is his fear of living life exactly like his parents; at the same time, Chip and Denise offer stories about how recognizing resemblances between themselves and Alfred and Enid motivates their drive to "escape" from the midwest. *The Corrections* is riddled with common feelings like alienation from family. Bearing all of this in mind, it is clear that *The Corrections* aspires to focus on average American affairs as opposed to the more conspiratorial, ironic, and willfully postmodern content of Franzen's early fiction, making the text more readily relatable for many readers and reflecting the general interests of middlebrow reading audiences like *OBC*.

Still, despite its apparent efforts to appeal to readers by describing common domestic problems, each of *The Corrections*'s overlapping sections reveals narrative traces of the systems novelists Franzen admires and emulates

in his early work, commenting on macro-social issues like capitalist corruption, aging, and the health care industry. That *The Corrections* reflects the ambition of postmodern systems novels while focusing on the individual experiences of its characters is not irreconcilable, however. After all, the systems novel and the social realist novel are, by definition, quite similar: where the systems novel uses narrative to critique society from a macro-perspective, the *OED* explains that social realism uses “the realistic depiction of contemporary (esp. working-class) life as a means of social or political comment” (*OED*). Like systems novels, social realism paints a broad portrait of contemporary society as a means to facilitate socio-cultural commentary. It is unsurprising when a number of elaborate private and public conspiracies appear in *The Corrections* since such conspiracies are at home in both experimental fiction and in social realism. The difference between the two genres manifests in the ways a text explores the social issues it engages with, whether in an abstracted, ironic way or with a character driven psychological study. Since *The Corrections* focuses on its characters’ individual experiences of large scale social concerns, tracing their emotional responses and personal development in relation to macro-issues, the novel identifies itself within the social realist and sentimental traditions, opening its narrative to affect its ideal audience emotionally, a response crucial to its appeal to largely sentimental readers like Winfrey and her audience.

To offer an example of how *The Corrections* examines the effects of a macro-social issue on a single character, Chip spends much of the novel participating in an investment fraud scheme with Gitanas Misevičius, the corrupt

deputy prime minister of Lithuania and husband of Chip's ex-girlfriend, Julia Vrais. Describing how the investment scheme works, Gitanas explains he created a satiric Web page "to publicize the plight of small debtor nations." The page offers:

DEMOCRACY FOR PROFIT: BUY A PIECE OF EUROPEAN HISTORY and had seeded links and references in American news groups and chat rooms for investors . . . Gitanas's Web site promised that, as soon as the Free Market Party Company had bought enough votes to win a national election, its foreign investors would not only become "equity shareholders" in Lithuania Incorporated (a "for-profit nation state") but would also be rewarded, in proportion to the size of their investment, with personalized memorials to their "heroic contribution" to the "market liberation" of the country. (128)

Recalling that systems novels work to observe ideology in an attempt to comment sarcastically on the structures of marco-systems like Western capitalism, Chip's involvement in investment fraud sits comfortably with the sort of plot elements commonly found in experimental, postmodern fiction like Pynchon's and DeLillo's. Progressing with an increasing tone of irony, Chip's narrative escalates until he finds himself literally running from a Lithuanian military coup, trapped at the Vilnius airport with a "tank in the middle of the runway" (458), a scenario that would not feel out of place in the sarcastic, absurdist worlds of *Gravity's Rainbow* or *White Noise*. Interestingly, unlike

Pynchon or DeLillo, rather than pushing its narrative to further degrees of absurdity using increasingly surreal plot devices meant to escalate the novel's commentary on capitalist exchange economics, *The Corrections's* broad focus quickly shrinks from its macro-perspective to the more intimate scale of the Lambert family reuniting in St. Jude once Chip returns from Lithuania. In downscaling its scope to a single family's experience, the novel's commentary on global culture and exchange economics refocuses from the large scale of Chip's experience in Lithuania to the realistic ways Chip's capitalist ambitions impact his life and his family on a domestic level: Chip owes money to Denise, damaging his relationship with her; Chip lies to his parents about his various career developments, glossing over his numerous failures; Denise accuses Chip of failing to "take responsibility" for his parents in the way she and Gary do (502); Gary and Denise have no faith in Chip, always doubting whether or not he will hold to his word by arriving in St. Jude on time for Christmas (540). By focusing on the Lamberts' interpersonal relationships, Franzen uses Chip to examine how Chip's involvement in global capitalist culture impacts his life in a localized, domestic way, exploring themes typical to the systems novel in the context of private family drama. In returning the novel's examination of broad social functions like capitalism to the context of a single family, Franzen's depiction of contemporary society becomes utterly relatable to his readers rather than potentially alienating, rendering his study of macro-social systems appealing to introspective middlebrow readers like *OBC's* members.

## Franzen's Oprah Anxiety

Considering *The Corrections*'s thematic and aesthetic appeals to *OBC*'s interests, it is unsurprising that Winfrey gravitated towards Franzen and his work. Franzen details his concern with *OBC*'s interest in him and his work in his essay "Meet Me in St. Louis." In the essay, Franzen elaborates on the anxieties he felt about guesting on Winfrey's show, driving him to speak against Winfrey and *OBC* in ways which led Winfrey to cancel the book club's discussion of *The Corrections*. Published first in the December 24, 2001 issue of *The New Yorker* then included later in his 2002 essay collection, *How to Be Alone*, "Meet Me in St. Louis" details Franzen's experience with Winfrey's producers, outlining the trip Franzen made to St. Louis to shoot "B-roll filler footage to intercut with A-roll footage" of him speaking during the planned interview segment of his *Oprah Winfrey Show* appearance. The essay describes how Winfrey's film crew placed Franzen in various semi-scripted scenarios in what Franzen interprets as an attempt to associate him with the environments of his childhood regardless of his current interests or opinion, offering the most candid comment Franzen has made to date on what he perceives to be Winfrey's literary project in comparison to his own. Understanding this contrast on Franzen's terms emphasizes how Franzen sees himself and his work as distinct entities, explaining why he views himself as a poor fit for *OBC*'s efforts to draw links between his biography and his literary work.

“Meet Me in St. Louis” begins with Franzen describing his staged return to St. Louis for *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, explaining how even his drive on the highway heading towards the city was intricately directed by Winfrey’s producers. Franzen writes that Winfrey’s television producer and his cameraman instructed Franzen to move “across the Mississippi River toward St. Louis and what, approximately, [he] should be feeling” as he did so (*HTBA* 258). Every aspect of how Franzen would appear on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* was determined by Winfrey’s producers. As such, he believes his identity on the show would have been false, an inauthentic representation of who he is. Franzen emphasizes his discomfort by explaining that he has felt disconnected from St. Louis for years, his childhood memories of his parents’ home failing to align with the reality of the space since before his mother’s death. Commenting on the “truthfulness” of memory, Franzen elaborates on his former neighbor Glenn Patton’s observation that “the reality I had known no longer existed.” He writes:

This was a lesson I’d absorbed long before my mother died. Visiting her home, I’d been disappointed again and again by the thinness, the unvividness, of rooms that in my memory were steeped in almost magical significance. And now, I thought, I had even less cause to go seeking the past in that house. If my mother wasn’t going to come walking up the driveway . . . then the scene in the Pattons’ windows didn’t interest me. (*HTBA* 266)

Franzen makes clear to the reader that his feelings of distance from St. Louis existed prior to his parents’ deaths. Even when Franzen still had family ties to the

region he was conscious of the fact that his memories of the space did not reflect its contemporary “reality” for him. Franzen’s purpose with “Meet Me in St. Louis” is not to criticize the methods which Winfrey’s producers use to link him to the place of his youth so much as it is to highlight the fact that there is no “real” connection between Franzen’s midwestern roots and his published work. Franzen’s midwestern past exists in his memory, but it is not reflective of his then-current approach to authorship. Since he claims his memory of St. Louis and the reality of his ties to the city have not intersected for many years, he feels that the connections Winfrey’s producers attempted draw between him, his recent literary work, and his past would mislead Winfrey’s audience and, by extension, his readership.

Based on these sentiments and like Winfrey and her audience, Franzen seems to place great importance on truth. His problem with Winfrey’s producers appears to be that he feels the image they wish to project of him is dishonest. Franzen recognizes the distance between his memories and the reality of the present. His guarded interaction with Winfrey’s producers suggests he desires to keep his memories for himself while preserving the narrative of *The Corrections* for what it is: a fiction. Of course, Franzen is happy to present his past on his own terms. Since his conflict with Winfrey, Franzen has published three collections of essays and memoirs detailing his life: *How to Be Alone* (2002); *The Discomfort Zone* (2006); and *Farther Away* (2012). When he flirts with granting control of his public image to others, however, as he does with Winfrey’s producers, Franzen refuses to concede the “reality” of his memories to the narrative of Winfrey’s

show by allowing her producers to draw superficial connection between his biography and his fiction.

As I will show in my discussion of *Freedom*, Franzen's growing willingness to cede control of his biography is in part what indicates his embrace of *OBC*'s logic. In 2001, however, he remained a proponent of the idea that good literature is capable of speaking for itself in isolation from the facts of its author's life. Since *OBC* encourages its audience members to improve themselves by relating authors biographically to their work, Franzen's discomfort with *OBC* is unsurprising. Winfrey encourages her audience to engage with texts according to their authors' biographies, and as such her reading pedagogy is fundamentally at odds with Franzen's. As he outlines in his 1996 essay "Perchance to Dream," Franzen is fascinated with how and why readers engage with literature. He believes good fiction is intrinsically capable of clear "communication and self-expression" (50). Proclaiming that "to speak extranovelistically in an age of personalities" (50) does literature a disservice, it is evident that Franzen believes, at least in "Perchance to Dream", that "extranovelistic" paratext like authorial biography "betrays" fiction's capacity to define itself according to its content and style. Franzen's comments indicate he believes reading according to information external from a work of fiction implies "a lack of faith" in a text's inherent ability to communicate for itself.

Considering Franzen's faith in fiction's capacity to communicate for itself, it is important to note the irony of Franzen launching a more extensive book tour for *The Corrections* than he did for either of his previous works, culminating in



Winfrey's book club invitation and the 2002 National Book Award. When Franzen's extended media endorsement of *The Corrections* is coupled with Winfrey's attempts to read his work according to his biography, the marketing of *The Corrections* threatens to contradict Franzen's stated understanding of how authors ought to exist in relation to their texts, foreshadowing his drift towards embracing the biographical interests of Winfrey and her audience as well as his inclusion of clear therapeutic logic in *Freedom's* narrative resolution, both of which I detail in the coming pages.

### **Franzen vs. Winfrey: The Aftermath**

After a period of reflection following his cancelled appearance on *OBC*, Franzen's nonfiction essays trace his reconsideration of literary quality, suggesting a coming to terms with popular approaches to reading like Winfrey's and her ideal audience's. Specifically, Franzen's 2002 essay "Mr. Difficult: William Gaddis and the Problem of Hard-to-Read Books" finds him self-reflexively exploring his creative development from an author of postmodern literature influenced heavily by writers like Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, and Don DeLillo to an author concerned more with readability and his readers' capacity to engage personally with his texts, tenets central to *OBC's* interests.

"Mr. Difficult" helps to explain why Franzen did not care to be known as an "Oprah author:" the essay's discussion of the social status of writers in America highlights how preoccupied Franzen is with longstanding debates of "high"

culture versus “low” culture. In the essay, he claims contemporary writers fall into one of two camps: “status” writers and “contract” writers, each analogous to “high” and “low” culture. According to Franzen, “status” writers write for the sake of the artistry of the form; readers read such writers for the cultural capital which comes from association with their work. Stephen J. Burn summarizes the distinction Franzen draws between “status” and “contract” authors, explaining that a “writer who subscribes to the status model creates his novels with indifference for the reader’s pleasure, striving instead to fashion a work of historically important art. A writer following the contract model, by contrast, considers a novel to represent ‘a compact between the writer and the reader’ where the writer primarily strives to create ‘a pleasurable experience’ for his reader” (48). As Franzen’s argument unfolds in “Mr. Difficult,” it becomes clear that he views himself as having once aspired to fit within the “status” camp but that he feels now literature does itself a disservice if it fails to connect with readers as only texts dedicated to the “contract” model can. In edging towards the readability and “pleasurable” nature of “contract” writing, Franzen’s style appeals to *OBC*’s attraction to strong characters, affective plotting, and a text’s general “enjoyability.”

The opening of “Mr. Difficult” is noteworthy for three significant reasons: first, it implies that Franzen’s shift from a “status” author to a “contract” author hinges on “a comedy about a family crisis,” *The Corrections*. Like “Meet Me in St. Louis,” “Mr. Difficult” finds Franzen dwelling on his encounter with Winfrey, suggesting his extensive reassessment of how he qualifies literature extends

from his vexed interaction with Winfrey and her imagined audience. Second, Franzen situates “Mr. Difficult” within the dialogue surrounding the “impolitic remarks” he made in his interview with Powell’s Books about the “schmaltz” Winfrey selects for inclusion in her book club. “Mr. Difficult” sees Franzen reconsidering the language used to describe literature by reassessing how literature functions for readers first and foremost. In doing so, the essay finds him inadvertently reconsidering the value of *OBC* and its general approach to literature. Third, Franzen echoes comments made in “Perchance to Dream” by connecting his previously stated faith in fiction’s capacity to communicate for itself with the negative attitude he directed towards Winfrey’s book club. The essay reworks his position on how author biography functions in relation to a text’s content. In this sense, “Mr. Difficult” importantly documents Franzen’s self-reflexive reassessment of literary value, marking a major step towards his embrace of *OBC*’s literary interests with *Freedom*.

After working through an extended description of his struggle to read “serious” postmodern authors like William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, and Don DeLillo, Franzen uses “Mr. Difficult” to confess he prefers writers he finds more traditionally “readable” like Dickens, Conrad, and Brontë. Franzen acknowledges that the latter writers are considered no less “serious” by readers than the mentioned postmodernists who define their seriousness through stylistic complexity. He explains that his writerly aspirations shifted upon this realization, refocusing his style to reflect the writers he derives enjoyment from reading as opposed to a sense of increased cultural capital. As Franzen puts it, “to serve the

reader a fruitcake that you wouldn't eat yourself, to build the reader an uncomfortable house you wouldn't want to live in: this violates what seems to me the categorical imperative for any fiction writer. This is the ultimate breach of the Contract" ("Mr. Difficult").

Throughout "Mr. Difficult," Franzen outlines his realization that serious fiction does not always need to be *difficult* fiction. As such, he uses the essay to explain that he feels he owes it to his readers to write something he himself finds appealing to consume. Ironically, by appealing to his literary and social interests Franzen links his text with his biography, the same connection Winfrey's reading of *The Corrections* attempts to draw. In crafting his novels to resemble the sort of writing he finds appealing, Franzen's work assumes a decidedly self-reflective function for him. "Contract" writing helps Franzen to understand himself better in relation to his imagined audience. Authorship becomes less a slavish process through which he aspires towards "importance" and more a means for him to create a link between himself and his audience which benefits both parties equally, offering Franzen a sense of creative satisfaction while granting his readers a deeper understanding of themselves in relation both to Franzen and to the various scenarios his narratives describe.

### **Embracing *OBC***

Considering how preoccupied with *OBC* Franzen seems in "Meet Me in St. Louis" and "Mr. Difficult," it is unsurprising that in 2010 he accepted a second

invitation from Winfrey to appear on *OBC* to discuss *Freedom*. Reflecting the introspection detailed in his nonfiction writing and as Kathleen Rooney observes, Franzen's decision to return to Winfrey with *Freedom* indicates his "fear of being misjudged" for having "seemed to misjudge Winfrey and her club" (66). Eager to share his reassessed qualifications for literature and how readers engage with it, Franzen accepts Winfrey's and her ideal audience's biographical reading tactics by engaging directly with them and their questions to discuss his then-new novel. Unsurprisingly, the bulk of Winfrey's interview with Franzen finds Winfrey and her audience asking him about how his personal experiences manifest in his narrative. Paired with the subtle narrative differences between *Freedom* and *The Corrections*, I believe Franzen's appeals to his biography when addressing questions about *Freedom*'s characters indicate the extent to which he embraces *OBC*'s logic both in *Freedom*'s narrative and in its paratext, illustrating the ways Franzen's work seems increasingly tailored since his troubled 2001 encounter with Winfrey to appeal to approaches to reading like *OBC*'s.

In many ways, *Freedom* is structured similarly to *The Corrections*: it explores macro-social issues through the lens of a single family. Shifting its perspective between the members of the Berglund family, *Freedom* addresses, among other things: liberalism and neoliberalism in the post-9/11 years; environmentalism; the Iraq War; and celebrity culture. Just as the Lamberts splinter away from their midwestern roots to reunite at *The Corrections*'s conclusion, so too do the Berglunds splinter from their midwestern heritage in St. Paul, Minnesota in pursuit of East Coast political and economic

accomplishments. Structurally, the novel resembles *The Corrections* with a narrative jumping between the members of the Berglund family as they pursue their various projects, be it Walter's environmentalist politics in Washington D.C., his wife Patty's affair with his rockstar friend, Richard, or the neoliberal corporate exploits of Walter's and Patty's son, Joey. Each of the characters' pursuits tear the family apart: Walter obsesses over his environmental preservation project and falls in love with Lalitha, his young assistant, to the detriment of his failing marriage with Patty; Patty pursues a destructive affair with Richard, Walter's celebrity friend, culminating in Walter banishing Patty from the Berglund family home; Joey is estranged from both his parents and his midwestern values by his neoliberal politics and his relationship with Jenna, the daughter of the president of "a think tank devoted to advocating the unilateral exercise of American military supremacy" (260-261). However, like *The Corrections*, the characters' involvement in "big" issues -- environmentalism; celebrity; neoliberalism; the military industrial complex -- falls by the wayside as coincidence conspires to bring the Berglunds together: Lalitha dies in a car accident; Patty leaves Richard; Joey abandons his wealth after getting rich through war profiteering. The only drastic structural difference between *Freedom* and *The Corrections* is that *The Corrections* finds resolution in the collapse of the family patriarch while *Freedom* concludes with the reunification of the Berglund family unit after each family member recognizes the fault of his or her ways. In *The Corrections*, the Lambert family patriarch, Alfred, dies so that his family can heal itself; in *Freedom*, figures of temptation -- whether Lalitha, Richard, or Jenna -- are rendered unappealing

or unattainable in ways that make each Berglund confront his or her mistakes, concluding with the creation of a stronger family unit of man, woman, and child than exists at the narrative's start. Where *The Corrections* dismantles the nuclear American family, *Freedom* resurrects it.

During their analysis of *Freedom*, Winfrey and her audience seem especially interested in Franzen's understanding of his celebrity and how his feelings about fame emerge in the novel's "celebrity" character, Richard Katz. For instance, a reader from the all male "Gower Street Book Club" in Tacoma, Washington, asks: "on page 200 you have [Richard], who is comparing his celebrity rock stardom in the music industry to creating "chiclets" as kind of a statement on artistic integrity. And you're sitting here as a celebrity author on a show like Oprah; I'm just wondering how you balance your own artistic integrity." Trained to interpret literature according to the biographical experiences of its author before considering a text in relation to themselves, *OBC* readers consider *Freedom* first and foremost as an autobiographical statement authored by Franzen. As such, the questions *OBC* readers pose to Franzen about *Freedom* are largely based on the exact connotations he worried Winfrey and her audience would make between his life and *The Corrections*. Still, remembering his mistakes when discussing *The Corrections* in relation to *OBC* and reflecting his embrace of *OBC*'s approach to books, Franzen is careful when answering questions from Winfrey's audience so as to avoid further controversy or accusations of elitism. In this case, Franzen positions Richard's feelings on his celebrity status in relation to his own, explaining:

Richard is profoundly uncomfortable because he is a serious guy in some way, and he is a cool guy, yet particularly after the iPod revolution, the mp3 revolution, you stopped sitting to listen to a record as a record. It became these little bite size songs which you'd download just the way you'd buy a pack of gum and you'd chew it for a week or two weeks or three weeks then you'd get sick of it and you'd throw it out. So he's reacting partly to the technological change and partly to feeling implicated in that micro-commodification of the song -- to use big words.

("Oprah's Book Club: *Freedom*")

Ignoring Franzen's pedantic response -- he seems to relish his apology for using "big words" when addressing Winfrey's audience -- he speaks of Richard's celebrity alienation, a commonly acknowledged symptom of popularity. He explains Richard's experience of fame in affective, relatable terms. At the same time, he makes clear the ways Richard's role in the music industry causes him to worry about the authenticity of his art as something more than a consumable product of pop culture, echoing Franzen's own concerns about *OBC*'s embrace of his work. Although Franzen isolates Richard's celebrity alienation from his own developing celebrity identity, he still identifies parallels between Richard and himself. He continues:

I don't actually feel that way so much about [the] books I do . . . I'm still trying to put full meals out there. I'm not making chewing gum. Sometimes, though, when I'm doing interviews it feels like, yeah,



I'm just putting out the little sweet soundbite. . . It doesn't always feel good. Going back to what I was saying about learning something nine years ago; sometimes you need to do that.

("Interview with Oprah Winfrey")

Making reference to his past troubles with Winfrey, Franzen explains how the lessons he learned about celebrity interactions with the media since *The Corrections* inform Richard's character. At the same time, Franzen emphasizes his position as a creator of serious art: "I'm still trying to put full meals out there," he says. "I'm not making chewing gum." By gratifying reader attempts to link his biography with his fiction while asserting the cultural importance of literature and accepting his role in establishing its seriousness, Franzen locates himself firmly within the logic of Winfrey's book club while maintaining his personal sense of cultural credibility. Franzen both gratifies and challenges *OBC's* tendency to read according to biography by locating himself within Richard while distinguishing himself from the character. Franzen is not "making chewing gum," but like Richard he fears sometimes he is "just putting out the little sweet soundbite." While Richard is not Franzen's alter ego in *Freedom*, Franzen willingly acknowledges himself in Richard's character, effectively condoning biographical interpretation of his novel and, by extension, conceding the novel's therapeutic potential both for Franzen and his audience. After all, if Franzen identifies himself in Richard's struggles, then Richard's struggles hold the potential to enable introspection and transformation for Franzen. As such, according to the logic of Winfrey's show, since Franzen addresses his own problems by authoring

Richard's character, he positions *Freedom* to improve *OBC* readers by developing their understandings of themselves in relation to him and his reflections on celebrity culture.

Given his willingness to discuss *Freedom* in terms of his own biography and considering his past anxieties about doing so with *The Corrections*, it is unsurprising to see Franzen identify one of the top questions he faces from readers as "*Is your fiction autobiographical?*" (*Farther Away* 127). Writing in a 2009 essay titled "On Autobiographical Fiction," Franzen asserts that he is "suspicious of any novelist who would honestly answer no to this question, and yet my strong temptation, when I'm asked it myself, is to answer no" (127). Recalling his position prior to and during his promotion of *The Corrections*, Franzen is quick to insulate himself from the idea that his fiction is autobiographical. He views the idea as somehow "hostile," writing that he may be "projecting that hostility" but that he feels "as if [his] powers of imagination are being challenged" by the concept of autobiographical "fact" finding its way into his creative work (127). Franzen's anxiety about *The Corrections*'s association with *OBC*'s pedagogy reveals itself here as deep seated: he sees interpretation according to biography as a slight against his creative capabilities. He seems almost to suggest an evaluative judgement between high authors of purely creative fiction and more lowly authors working with the crude facts of autobiography. The echoes between this evaluation and the split Franzen draws in "Mr. Difficult" between "status" authors and "contract" authors are obvious: "status" authors are authors of truly creative work, work which stands easily on its

artistic merits; in contrast, “contract” authors appeal to their audience by offering their autobiography as an easy point of interpretive reference for readers. In “Mr. Difficult” as well as in his critical comments about Winfrey, Franzen seems uncomfortable with aspects of his writing which undermine his cultural capital as a creator of “important” literature.

At the same time, in “On Autobiographical Fiction” Franzen recognizes that his fiction is “extremely autobiographical,” claiming that it is his “job as a writer to make it even more so” (128). Franzen argues that a novel is nothing if not “a personal struggle, a direct and total engagement with the author’s story of his or her own life” (129). The alignment of Franzen’s view of literature with *OBC*’s is inescapable here: for both, literature is a means to confront a problem of some sort. Franzen characterizes this problem as a “personal struggle,” be it the act of authorship or a coming to terms with one’s biases, as he does by reflecting on and resolving his disagreement with Winfrey and *OBC*. Meanwhile, as I detail in Chapter One, Winfrey and *OBC* characterize this problem as the reader’s effort to learn about the world and to transform themselves by relating with authors while reading. According to both Franzen’s and Winfrey’s standards, novels are therapeutic in function, agents of transformation for authors and readers alike. If, as Franzen believes, the novel constitutes “a personal struggle” for the author which enables his or her better understanding of themselves, then his and Winfrey’s conceptions of literature overlap in obvious and significant ways. This is made abundantly clear by the evolution of Franzen’s approach to authorship from *The Corrections* to *Freedom*.

As Franzen says in an interview with *New Statesman* during *Freedom's* press tour: it is "hard not to imagine that a character akin to myself, living at the same time, would not also be affected by these things; So what was happening politically, socially, technologically, culturally, did lend itself to the construction of interesting characters" (49). Franzen's understanding of the contemporary world colors his narratives. He states that when writing *Freedom* he viewed "the world in personal terms and [he aimed] for a kind of intimate relationship with the reader. That way, you don't get caught up in the impossible task of trying to wrap your mind around everything--you wrap your mind around what the mind is capable of being wrapped around, and hope everything else fits into that." With *Freedom*, Franzen consciously presents the world and its issues on an understandable scale. He constructs the novel's narrative to be relatable both to himself and to his imagined audience. It is important that his readers sense an "intimate relationship" between him and his characters. He wants the book to affect his readers personally. Reflecting his shift from "status" author to "contract," Franzen's language indicates he made a conscious effort during the writing of *Freedom* to present the novel as approachable, to do more with things "the mind is capable of being wrapped around" as opposed to complexities beyond the reader's -- or, more pointedly, the author's -- capacity.

Given its appeals to approachability and Franzen's open engagement with *OBC*, it is striking that *Freedom's* conclusion sees Walter and Patty -- the novel's principle characters -- perform the exact sort of self-therapy that Winfrey encourages her ideal audience to pursue: Walter lets Patty "see all the vileness

inside him, all the hatreds of two thousand solitary nights, while the two of them were still in touch with the void in which the sum of everything they'd ever said or done, every pain they'd inflicted, every joy they'd shared" (558); after decades of hiding himself from the people around him and suffering mental anguish as a result, Walter exposes himself to the person he loves. Similarly, in seeing Walter for who he truly is, Patty relaxes and thrives. She becomes "as warm a person as her husband was a cold one" during the depths of his depression (559). By addressing their personal problems, the Berglunds recognize their individual shortcomings, overcome their interpersonal conflicts, and end up stronger, more loving individuals.

For *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, suffering unites the audience (Illouz 80). In creating a social group united by the sharing of traumatized experience, Winfrey enables her ideal audience to use one another's stories to "heal" themselves. This drive to "heal" is what makes *Freedom* in particular a fascinating reflection of Winfrey's therapeutic logic: after suffering various poisonous relationships, each of the Berglunds overcome their differences to reunite as a nuclear family. Walter and Patty return to one another after years of separation while Walter and Joey overcome their political and personal differences to start a sustainable coffee business which makes use of their respective entrepreneurial and ideological strengths. Compared to *The Corrections*, in which the death of Alfred and the consequent dissolution of the nuclear family is the only way the Lamberts can "heal" and move forward, *Freedom* carries the positive, if idealistic and fantastical, message that tradition and perseverance are among the most

redemptive qualities of American life. Such a message resonates well with many of the narratives Winfrey and her ideal audience find enduring, including her own biography: a victim of sexual abuse as a child, Winfrey “became famous not *in spite of* having been abused but *because* she was abused and, furthermore, because she publicized that abuse” (Illouz and John 92). For her ideal audience, Winfrey is a source of inspiration because of her own narrative of perseverance in the face of struggle. She transcends the specificity of her sexuality and race by making use of her biography to suit her carefully crafted message of self-help and healing. Acknowledging this, considering how closely *Freedom* fits Winfrey’s model of success through failure, it is unsurprising that Winfrey chooses to return to Franzen despite their past differences. *Freedom* is the ideal example of the underlying messages of *OBC* and of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*: regardless of what Franzen says about his novel, *Freedom*’s narrative embodies Winfrey’s belief that literature offers a therapeutic model to authors and readers in the same way that her non-literary guests offer her ideal audience examples of success and perseverance in the face of struggle.

### **Growing Together with Books**

Franzen’s appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* supporting *Freedom* suggests *Freedom* unites Franzen and Winfrey around a shared interest in literature’s therapeutic potential: after years of reflecting on the ways readers engage with literature, *Freedom* offers a highly readable narrative with an interest

in how individuals heal themselves. *OBC* has worked consistently to construct a pedagogy of reading based on the idea that books are transformative, that reading makes people more aware of themselves while raising their awareness of others; as such, viewing *Freedom*'s description of a troubled family's path to healing as unrelated to, to say nothing of uninfluenced by, Winfrey's project is difficult. For Winfrey, books have long been a path to personal salvation: as Kathleen Rooney notes, "whenever the topic of [*OBC*] arose in an interview, Winfrey had an anecdote about reading's profound and poignant impact on her troubled formative years at ready" (28). Reading for Winfrey is synonymous with escape and emancipation from trauma. While *Freedom*'s characters are not healed through narrative in the way Winfrey's reading model proposes -- they do not heal themselves through the act of introspective reading -- their realistic portrayal and successful self-therapy *in* narrative suggests *Freedom* holds the potential to guide readers to reconciliation in exactly the way Winfrey and *OBC* members hope narrative can. The successful therapy practiced by *Freedom*'s characters might help to heal the novel's readers by proxy. Recalling the therapeutic logic driving *OBC*, *Freedom* offers evidence of a "serious" contemporary author writing "serious" fiction according to the therapeutic model popularized in contemporary literary culture in no small way by Winfrey and her ideal audience.

When Franzen talks publicly of *Freedom*, it is impossible to miss the degree to which he has internalized Winfrey's process of biographical reading and writing as a means to self-improvement. While touring in support of

*Freedom*, he speaks at length about the various “contradictions” he senses in both himself and his writing: “I myself have multiple views of almost any issue and write because of those contradictions in myself and those conflicts in myself and those ambivalences. To me that’s one of the great opportunities that the novel affords; to give full life to irreconcilable contraries and yoke them together as they are yoked together in this unitary body of mine” ([www.davehaslam.com](http://www.davehaslam.com)). Literature allows Franzen to confront his contradictions self-reflexively to redefine himself as a “unitary body,” as a singular whole. Later in the same interview, Franzen explains *Freedom*’s title: “I think the reason I slapped the word on the book proposal I sold three years ago without any clear idea of what kind of book it was going to be is that I wanted to write a book that would free me in some way. And I will say this about the abstract concept of ‘freedom’: it’s possible you are freer if you accept what you are and just get on with being the person you are, rather than if you maintain this kind of uncommitted I’m free-to-be-this, free-to-be-that, faux freedom” ([www.davehaslam.com](http://www.davehaslam.com)). As I say in the introduction to this chapter, *Freedom* helps Franzen to liberate himself from his past. The novel abstractly frees him “in some way” from the person he was before authoring it. Given the degree to which *The Corrections* shaped Franzen’s public identity following its publication and cancelled inclusion on *OBC*, it is reasonable to view *Freedom* as “freeing” Franzen from the ghost of *The Corrections*’s reputation. In effect, *Freedom*’s authorship offers evidence of Franzen working through his “demons” in exactly the way Winfrey encourages her ideal audience to on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. The novel’s authorship is Franzen’s means to self-help.



*Freedom* sits well with the narrative of Franzen's and Winfrey's interactions with one another: by successfully meeting to discuss *Freedom* in the context of *OBC*, Franzen and Winfrey "get on" with being the people they are, moving beyond their disagreement over *The Corrections* by allowing their social and literary projects to overlap. Through *OBC*, Franzen and Winfrey present *Freedom* collectively as a "serious" literary document which exists in some capacity because of their past conflict with one another. Its authorship puts the therapeutic process into action, and its narrative is organized to benefit *OBC*'s interest in self-help. For Franzen, *Freedom* is a social satire of the 21st-century American middle-class carrying the decidedly American message of hope and redemption, the authorship of which helped him to resolve his conflict with Winfrey; for Winfrey, the novel offers a guide for *OBC*'s ideal readers to recognize their own shortcomings in the pursuit of happiness, modeling their own self-reflexivity off of the novel's characters'. The novel's characters and Franzen himself each provide readers with examples of successful self-help, transformation, and healing, the pillars of *OBC*'s literary interests. Remembering Franzen's evolution from a writer of systems novels to one of social realism and read in the context of his relationship with Winfrey's book club, *Freedom* is evidence of Franzen and Winfrey recognizing the merits of each other's visions for the novel. Consequently, *Freedom* unites Franzen's interest in "serious" literature with Winfrey's therapeutic approach to reading, serving as an example of how therapeutic culture propagates itself through the authorship of popular literature.

## Chapter Three: Framing Literature as Testimony

In his foreword to David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, Dave Eggers details his conception of how, ultimately, literary texts function therapeutically for readers and writers. Recalling Winfrey's and *OBC*'s belief that readers improve themselves by engaging with books, Eggers writes that after finishing *Infinite Jest* "you are a better person" (xiv). He says:

It's insane, but also hard to deny. Your brain is stronger because it's been given a monthlong workout, and more importantly, your heart is sturdier, for there has scarcely been written a more moving account of desperation, depression, addiction, general stasis and yearning, or the obsession with human expectations, with artistic and athletic and intellectual possibility (xiv).

For Eggers, reading *Infinite Jest*, and reading in general, makes you "a better person." Where Winfrey and *OBC* profess that "books open windows to the world for all of us," helping readers to understand themselves better, Eggers believes the act of reading is an act of self-improvement. Reading is educational. It raises awareness of social issues, and in doing so it works to increase empathy for the experiences of others. In Eggers's words, "your heart is sturdier" after finishing a good book.

Winfrey and Eggers share the belief that books can improve readers: "books are important" for Winfrey, tools which encourage readers to connect

authors biographically to their work to raise readers' awareness about whatever issues or themes a text touches upon. Unlike *OBC's* belief that authors always speak to their own experiences with their work, as Eggers's career has progressed he increasingly sees himself as separate from the experiences he describes in his literature. Contrary to *OBC's* approach to reading, Eggers argues that experiences described in a literary work are not always the experiences of the work's author. "It's useful to tell you the author is a normal person," Eggers says in reference to Wallace (xv). Like *OBC*, Eggers sees reading as emotionally strengthening for readers because it provides them with an opportunity to learn about a range of social issues and the people they affect, but he understands this strengthening to occur separate from the relationship between authors and their imagined audiences. Although obvious overlap exists between *OBC's* and Eggers's views that literature is transformative for readers, they each encourage their ideal audiences to approach literature in distinct ways. *OBC* and Eggers both see reading as transformative for readers, and both view narrative as viable means to raise awareness about social issues and marginalized experience, but where *OBC* works to connect authors biographically to their texts, Eggers obscures his autobiographical influence on his work to maximize his writing's impact on his ideal readers. The purpose of this chapter is to identify and articulate this distinction.

Remember *OBC's* assumption that all literature is on some level autobiographical: stemming from a generalized interest in literature's therapeutic function for authors and readers, *OBC's* ideal members search texts for their

authors' biographical details, and they identify meaningfully with literature by comparing and contrasting their own experiences with those of a work's author and characters. This process of identification is what opens literature to serve a transformative therapeutic function for *OBC* readers. In contrast, as his career has progressed, Eggers's nonfiction increasingly divorces his narrators from his personal biography to emphasize the testimonial nature of storytelling, understanding testimony to be any effort to describe and account for first-hand experience, especially in relation to trauma or mental distress. For Eggers, testimonial speech allows speakers to share themselves directly with an audience in a way which encourages the audience "to bond with the narrator in a common struggle" (Felman and Laub xvii). When he uses testimonial speech to communicate with his readers, Eggers works to minimize his autobiographical influence on his narratives, diminishing his position relative to his texts in favor of his testimonial narrators. As such, Eggers's writing rejects *OBC*'s efforts to connect texts biographically with their authors while still asserting an interest in self-improvement and transformation similar to the interests of Winfrey and her audience.

Storytelling allows speakers to testify to their lives and their history. Often, testimonial stories focus on the life of the speaker but encapsulate the experiences of many: as James Dawes says, with storytelling "one victim can speak for many victims" (198). Testimonial storytelling works to educate others about oneself, or about one's community. By emphasizing the testimonial speech of others, Eggers makes clear that his ideal reader is not meant to conflate

Eggers's life experience with his narratives' content. Rather, as I will demonstrate in the coming pages, Eggers means for testimonial speech to establish an intimate bond between his narrators and his ideal readers separate from his own relationship with his audience, marking the bond he aspires to forge between his readers and his texts as distinct from the one *OBC* encourages between authors and readers. Eggers's ideal reader is meant to accept a narrator's testimony at his or her word whereas *OBC* readers work to make associative leaps to connect an author with his or her text. For Eggers, testimonial storytelling is a speech act shared directly between a speaker and his or her audience. Rather than viewing the author as a person with total authority over his or her text, as *OBC* does, Eggers sees authorship more as an editorial act which emphasizes other people's experiences in place of the author's own to establish a link between narrators and readers based on empathy and understanding.

As Tim Aubry writes, "the urge to feel part of a global humanity, unified by shared psychological suffering, though capable of promoting narcissism and eclipsing attention to tragic inequities, can also under certain conditions enable cross-cultural identification and compassion, which can in turn provide the basis for salutary acts of amelioration" (31). I aim to present Eggers's focus on testimony as distinct from Winfrey's literary approach while recognizing how Eggers's writing remains grounded in the same logic of empathy, self-, and social-improvement that drives *OBC* readers. In doing so, I mean to present Eggers's work as an example of therapeutic literature distinct from but overlapping with *OBC*'s literary interests. Where *OBC* positions literature as a

therapeutic transaction brokered between authors and readers, I suggest Eggers's emphasis on the testimonial speech of others minimizes his voice in relation to his text. In doing so, Eggers's work gestures towards a model for literature concerned with inspiring readers to identify with victims' testimonies and to reflect on traumatized or mentally distressed experiences as distinct from the experiences of a text's author, pushing his imagined audience to transform themselves into socially aware, empathetic people while offering victims some sense of amelioration.

Reading his work intertextually to see how his emphasis on testimony evolves in stages throughout his career-to-date, I view Eggers's writing as evidence that Eggers, a major figure in the contemporary American literary scene, follows *OBC*'s example by asking his ideal audience to practice a specific approach to reading based on the belief that literature can be transformative and therapeutic, a means to improve the self as a citizen of the world. Where *OBC* aims to teach readers about the world by urging them to connect authors biographically to their work, however, Eggers's emphasis on the testimony of others extends the focus of his writing beyond his personal life to recognize the lives of others, positioning his texts to speak to a range of global social events with which he has little firsthand experience. Even when the testimonial voice is fictionalized in Eggers's work, it means to approximate lived experience to raise awareness about global social issues. On a surface level, Eggers shares the desire to raise awareness about social issues with *OBC*: recall *OBC*'s drive to raise its readers' awareness of black experience and womanhood while reading

Toni Morrison's *Sula*, for example. Unlike *OBC*'s analysis of *Sula*, however, comparatively little interpretive work is required of Eggers's readers to learn about the social issues his narrators speak to. Since his narrators have first-hand experience with the social issues they describe while Eggers's does not, Eggers's ideal reader is meant to accept his characters' testimonies as true rather than as allegories for Eggers's biography.

To facilitate this relationship between his narrators and his readers, Eggers significantly distances himself from his protagonists. He consciously undermines efforts to link his narrators' testimonies to his own life. By placing testimonial storytelling at the center of his work and by distancing himself from the testimonies found in his narratives, Eggers asks his ideal readers to respond to his work differently than Winfrey asks her audience to respond to books with *OBC*: where *OBC* readers maintain some amount of personal distance from the texts they read, always situating themselves in relation to a work's author or basing their interpretation on some amount of aesthetic appreciation or academic-style analysis, Eggers asks only that his readers engage with his subjects from a position of empathy. Bearing all of this in mind, I argue Eggers's writing frequently relies on testimony regardless of whether it classifies as fiction, nonfiction, memoir, or otherwise. Explaining how testimony functions for victims, Shoshan Felman and Dori Laub see testimony as "bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of

reference” (5). Regardless of genre or classification, Eggers’s narratives constitute a person testifying to his or her (often traumatized) experiences. By emphasizing other people’s voices in place of his own, Eggers’s writing works to disseminate testimonial stories without assuming knowledge of or authority over victims’ experiences.

Inspired by anthropologists Didier Fassin’s and Richard Rechtman’s view that 9/11 was a critical moment for contemporary therapeutic culture, after 9/11 I believe a subtle cultural shift occurred as a result of trauma becoming more widely discussed by the public and in mass media. I see this shift manifest both in Eggers’s work and in *OBC*’s approach to books. I begin my analysis of Eggers’s work by reading his memoir and first noteworthy book, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, published in 2000. I consider *Heartbreaking Work* for the ways it confronts and embraces many of the concepts which drive *OBC*: as a memoir, *Heartbreaking Work* is acutely and explicitly interested in Eggers’s biographical proximity to his text; it describes Eggers’s private experience of trauma; and it generalizes his private trauma to render his experience relatable and affective for his readers. After briefly referring to *OBC* to explain the ways Winfrey adapted the book club’s approach to literature after 9/11, moving its focus away from contemporary fiction to favor nonfiction and canonized literature, I identify how Eggers’s work shifts from the introspective style seen in *Heartbreaking Work* to appeal to growing reader interest in social trauma, placing an increased emphasis on testimonies to traumatizing or mentally distressing current events distinct from Eggers’s own life experiences.



Using literature as a platform to feature other people's voices in place of his own, I argue that Eggers's writing increasingly presents other people's testimonies to trauma and mental distress as the primary point of identification between his imagined audience and his work. I claim that Eggers hopes these testimonies to trauma and distress make a strong impression on his ideal audience, a specific imagined reader who Eggers characterizes as "well meaning" but generally uninformed about the world, characteristics he uses to describe himself as a young man (Eggers and Doran 24). In addition to *Heartbreaking Work*, for the purposes of this chapter I focus on Eggers's 2006 novel *What is the What* and selections from the oral history series *Voice of Witness (VoW)* to explore how and why Eggers's narratives feature other people's testimonies in place of his own.

After reading *Heartbreaking Work*, I turn to examples of testimony featured in *Voice of Witness* volumes, an on-going series co-founded in 2004 by Eggers with physician Lola Vollen focusing on human rights issues. I read excerpts of accounts featured in two *Voice of Witness* volumes, *Out of Exile* and *Voices from the Storm*, with direct ties to Eggers's narrative writing to trace the ways Eggers's work as a documentarian nuances his understanding of testimony to social justice issues. I explore the effects of this influence on Eggers's narratives in specific detail in Chapter Four, demonstrating how the lessons Eggers learns about victimhood from his involvement with *Voice of Witness* help him to craft convincing protagonists affected by real world issues whose narration disarms and affects Eggers's ideal readers similarly to the stories of real world victims.

Following my examination of *Voice of Witness*, I present Eggers's genre blending novel *What is the What*, published in 2006, as the most significant example of Eggers's narrative focus on the testimonies of victimized others. I read the novel's account of Valentino Achak Deng, a Sudanese refugee living in America, as the ideal form of the testimonial template Eggers follows for much of his narrative nonfiction. Arguing the text undermines distinctions between fiction and nonfiction to discourage efforts to identify Eggers's voice in Deng's testimony, I indicate how *What is the What* establishes an intimate bond between Eggers's ideal reader and Deng-as-narrator, a bond that opens the text to function therapeutically for both Deng and its imagined audience, at least insofar as it offers both a means to personal transformation. In establishing this bond, I suggest *What is the What* means to raise its ideal reader's awareness of and feeling of urgency toward the social issues the text explores.

In her book length study of Eggers, *One Man Zeitgeist*, Caroline Hamilton claims that "if the writing Eggers produces and publishes can be said to have a message, it is that literature is a recuperative medium. The sharing implicit in storytelling makes it an act of hope and optimism" (95). Literature is "recuperative" for Eggers; put differently, literature is *therapeutic* for Eggers. In Eggers's view, storytelling is restorative, and reading is emotionally and intellectually strengthening. With this chapter, my purpose is to explore what storytelling means to Eggers and how his understanding of storytelling has shifted as his career has progressed. Exploring how and why Eggers uses

testimony in his writing, I intend to establish how he understands stories to function for authors, for readers, for victims, and for the uninformed.

### **Diverging Approaches after 9/11**

Examining mass media reporting tactics and the reproduction of 9/11 imagery in popular culture as evidence of a social acceptance of trauma as a “generalized social phenomenon” (3), anthropologists Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman argue that “trauma has become the major signifier of our age” (xi). Fassin and Rechtman argue a renewed cultural emphasis on trauma and its therapy has blossomed in popular contemporary American discourse, a symptom of rising acceptance of trauma and mental illness as social realities. Nowhere is this more evident than in responses to 9/11’s effect on American culture. As Fassin and Rechtman put it, “faced with the violence of the facts, or even that of the television images of them, it seems so natural to invoke the notion of trauma that society’s response of providing therapy appears to signal progress, both in our knowledge of the reality lived by those directly or indirectly exposed to the events and in the care offered by society and its representatives” (3). Catalyzing around 9/11 in the contemporary popular imaginary, therapeutic culture has assumed an increasingly prominent social role for Americans in the years since the Pentagon and World Trade Center attacks. Using Fassin and Rechtman’s language, trauma today “is not confined to the psychiatric vocabulary; it is

embedded in everyday usage. It has, in fact, created a new language of the event" (6).

In theory, a rising cultural emphasis on trauma and therapy positions *OBC* and Eggers well to assert the positive benefits of viewing literature as a therapeutic tool. It is interesting, then, to note the ways that shifting perceptions of trauma in the wake of 9/11 seem to color *OBC*'s and Eggers's respective approaches to literature. Before 9/11, *OBC* and Eggers similarly encouraged their audiences to connect narrative directly to an author's life to gain a broader understanding of trauma or mental distress through reading. Following 9/11, a divergence occurred in their approaches to understanding trauma using literature. Instead of emphasizing a living author's biography to interpret literature as a therapeutic response to his or her on-going experiences, as *OBC* did for much of its first period and as I argue Eggers's does in *Heartbreaking Work*, *OBC* shifted its focus to canonized literature isolated by history from contemporary social issues while Eggers worked to feature testimonial accounts of other people's experiences of current social issues rather than continuing to use his writing to document his own reactions to personal and social events.

After finishing its scheduled 2001/2002 season in April, 2002 -- a season which, coincidentally, was set to feature Franzen's *The Corrections* in October -- *OBC* entered a 13 month hiatus. Upon its return in June, 2003, *OBC* refocused its attention on widely canonized literature, much of which features a strong spiritual bent. During this period, *OBC* championed work like John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* and Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Where previously *OBC*

confronted contemporary experiences of trauma and mental distress through recently published literature, after 9/11 it chose instead to historicize trauma, generally maintaining distance from the most pressing issues of the present. Although historical study and canonical reading is valuable, after 9/11 *OBC* somewhat undermined its ability to read literature in response to contemporary social issues by focusing on the past.

Prior to 9/11, Eggers established his fixation on trauma and testimony with the publication of his memoir in 2000, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. In many respects, *Heartbreaking Work* is a traditional memoir detailing Eggers's experience of traditionally defined trauma: broadly documenting Eggers's coming-to-terms with the deaths of his parents from different cancers within one month of each other when he was in his early 20s, the narrative describes Eggers's private life in close detail and its focus remains narrowly on Eggers's interior perspective on his experience. As a memoir, *Heartbreaking Work* reads as Eggers's most direct appeal to approaches to reading like *OBC*'s, specifically its fascination with author biography. As I argue in the coming pages, however, despite *Heartbreaking Work*'s significant appeals to *OBC*-style approaches to reading, its testimonial tone prefigures Eggers's interest in using storytelling to give voice to other people's experiences.

*Heartbreaking Work* is Eggers's testimony to how his parents' deaths influenced his life. In authoring it, I believe, Eggers largely exorcises his biography from his identity as an author, opening him to use literature to share the testimonies of others. As literary critic Caroline Hamilton says, "Eggers's

memoir reveals that self-knowledge is felt to be deepest when one is recognized by *others* for what one is” (34). With *Heartbreaking Work*, Eggers writes to gain public recognition of his experiences. Once this is accomplished, he offers his position as an author to others to testify to their trauma and emotional distress.

“I’m trying to get your stupid fucking attention,” the book’s final paragraph reads, both desperate and manic. “I’ve been trying to show you this, just been trying to show you this -- What the fuck does it take to show you motherfuckers, what does it fucking take what do you want how much do you want because I am willing I’ll stand before you and I’ll raise my arms and give you my chest and throat and wait, and I’ve been so old for so long, for you, for you” (437).

*Heartbreaking Work* is desperate to make use of Eggers’s experience. Eggers’s narrator is wild for his trauma to be recognized by others, for others to feel empathy for him. He has been “so old for so long,” he says. His trauma has aged him. It has robbed him of his youth. *Heartbreaking Work* demands that its reader sees the trauma described in the book as uniquely Eggers’s. The narrator makes clear that some of the text’s details are embellished -- “pretend its fiction,” the acknowledgements declare -- but the urgency and anger with which the text frequently scans seem designed to affect readers and to encourage them to respond to the text in explicit relation to Eggers. To read *Heartbreaking Work* is to bear witness to Eggers’s life.

Despite its principle focus on Eggers’s private experience of the deaths of his parents, *Heartbreaking Work* gestures towards Eggers’s interest in literature which accounts for the experiences of others, prefiguring his efforts to

raise the profile of other people's stories with his narratives. Nowhere is this more clear than in the book's epigraph. After its title page and copyright detail, *Heartbreaking Work* opens with text proclaiming: "first of all: I am tired. I am true of heart! And also: You are tired. You are true of heart!"<sup>1</sup> Presenting Eggers's and his audience's experiences as similarly "tired" and "true," *Heartbreaking Work's* epigraph hints at Eggers's future emphasis on the testimony of others by recognizing the value of accounting for all people's experiences. Although *Heartbreaking Work* presents Eggers's experience as unique and demanding of recognition, the epigraph indicates Eggers's recognition that his experience is no more or less valuable than anyone else's. Even given its dominant focus on Eggers's personal life, *Heartbreaking Work* reflects Eggers's empathy for the experiences of others.

In contrast to *Heartbreaking Work*, Eggers's writing after 9/11 exhibits an increased emphasis on other people's testimonies to trauma stemming from diverse social issues. Specifically, his work frequently describes the effects of contemporary events in a testimonial style, featuring the voice of a traumatized or mentally distressed narrator whose identity is distinct from Eggers's. Capitalizing on the belief that public interest in and empathy for trauma and victims' testimonies is such that "the victim's word can no longer be doubted" (Fassin and

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<sup>1</sup> Significantly, *Heartbreaking Work's* copyright detail features an aside from Eggers declaring the text's simultaneous status as both fiction and nonfiction, echoing *OBC's* concern with genre aired during Winfrey's dispute with James Frey. Of *Heartbreaking Work*, Eggers asserts "this is a work of fiction, only in that in many cases, the author could not remember the exact words said by certain people, and exact descriptions of certain things, so had to fill in gaps as best he could. Otherwise, all characters and incidents and dialogue are real, are not products of the author's imagination, because at the time of this writing, the author had no imagination whatsoever for those sorts of things, and could not conceive of *making up* a story or characters."

Rechtman 29), testimony, for Eggers, becomes the primary means to describe, to respond to, and to raise awareness of traumatizing and emotionally distressing social issues.

As narrative, Eggers's embrace of testimony is tied up in E. Ann Kaplan's concept of "quiet trauma," second hand trauma experienced by people involved indirectly with a traumatic event, usually as a result of media depictions of traumatizing social events mediated through speech, text, photography, or film. Obviously, mediated descriptions of trauma differ significantly from the visceral encounters felt by an event's direct victims. Nonetheless, Eggers's work exhibits the belief that literary representations of trauma have the potential to implicate readers in the experience of a traumatic event by exposing them to some degree of an event's psychological violence, especially literature which strives to honor victims by celebrating testimonial speech. Uniting a mass audience with victims in appreciation for the experience of physical or emotional violence, testimony encourages understanding of, and ideally response to, traumatizing events. As Kaplan says, the "vicarious experience of trauma can be pro-social" (21), especially insofar as "quiet trauma" attunes the public to the experience of suffering. By exposing readers to trauma using victims' testimonies, Eggers exhibits a belief that spectators of trauma and its effects can develop some understanding of and empathy for traumatizing or distressing events, however constrained their understanding the event may be compared to its firsthand victims.



As I will show in the coming pages, Eggers's descriptions of trauma and mental distress are particularly interested in exposing his ideal readers to "quiet trauma," and his use of testimonial storytelling frames this exposure in the context of dialogue between victimized speakers -- his narrators -- and his imagined audience. Unlike *Heartbreaking Work* and at odds with *OBC's* approach to books, Eggers's authorial voice grows increasingly obscure in his work authored since 9/11. Where *OBC* bases literature's capacity to educate readers about trauma and mental distress on the lives of authors who may or may not be victims of the traumas their narratives describe, since 9/11 Eggers frames his work's presentation of trauma around the victim's voice rather than around his own identity. Rather than asking his readers to make interpretive leaps to link violent or distressing images or scenarios to an author who may or may not justify the connection, as *OBC's* biography-based interpretive approach sometimes does, Eggers substitutes his own voice with the testimonial speech of others to present traumatized experiences distinct from his own. In doing so, he implicates himself in the process of learning about trauma, a gesture which makes his representations of trauma feel honest and empathetic to his ideal audience.

### **A Testimonial Model**

Similar to *OBC's* rationale for identifying with books through the lens of their authors' biographies, one of Eggers's central motivations for embracing

testimony is its self-improving, transformative benefit for speakers as well as for their ideal audience. Writing in his introduction to *The Autobiographer's Handbook*, a guide for memoir writing published in 2008 by *826 National*, a non-profit organization focused on literary education founded in 2002 by Eggers and educator Nínive Clements Calegari, Eggers asserts the value of testimony when he advises aspiring writers that, "as painful as it can be to revisit certain episodes from your past, the process of remembering those periods, and making sense of them and their meaning, and then shaping and reconstructing them -- it can be not just therapeutic, it can be absolutely epiphanic" (8). By Eggers's estimation, autobiographical (testimonial) storytelling forces authors to return to certain formative moments from their pasts. This process inevitably leads authors to confront traumatizing events, and to process those events in such a way as to make them fit within a narrative. Presenting these events to an audience in a testimonial voice implicates the audience in authors' past experiences: recollection is "epiphanic" for testimonial speakers insofar as storytelling helps them to confront past experiences of trauma; similarly, testimony enlightens its imagined audience, raising awareness of and empathy for how and why trauma occurs. As Michelle Peek says, by testifying to their past, speaker/authors implicate their audience as "imaginative, retrospective witness" to their lives, pushing their audience to transform themselves in the wake of their newfound knowledge about trauma and the distressed experiences of others.

The *Voice of Witness* oral history series, for which Eggers serves as series editor in collaboration with educator Mimi Lok and human rights activist

Lola Vollen, asserts Eggers's dedication to testimonial storytelling, giving dozens of victims a platform to share their stories with a large audience of sympathetic readers. Founded as a non-profit organization in 2004 before publishing its first anthology of victims' testimonies in 2005, *VoW* works "to illuminate human rights crises by humanizing the victims. Using oral history as a foundation, the series explores social justice issues through the stories of the men and women who experience them" (*Out of Exile*). Bearing in mind *VoW*'s mission statement, it is interesting to note the ways *VoW* complements and nuances Eggers's narrative use of testimony, offering him examples of testimony against which he models his own characters' speech, his work's understanding of and respect for victims' experiences lending his narrators an air of authenticity.

Documenting oral history to communicate victims' testimonies, *Voice of Witness* builds upon Eggers's narrative work by exhibiting the real-world stories of people who lived through many of the social issues Eggers examines in his novels and short fiction. For example, *VoW* volume *Out of Exile*, published in 2008, catalogues the testimonies of multiple "abducted and displaced people of Sudan" to complement Eggers's description in *What is the What* of Valentino Achak Deng's experiences as a "Lost Boy" during the Second Sudanese Civil War leading to his eventual resettlement as a refugee in the United States. Similarly, the 2006 *VoW* volume *Voices From the Storm* predates Eggers's nonfiction book *Zeitoun*, published in 2009, an account of Syrian-American Abdulrahman Zeitoun's experience of Hurricane Katrina and his wrongful imprisonment in its immediate aftermath. *Storm* contextualizes *Zeitoun*'s

narrative by documenting the experiences of many people during and after Katrina in addition to those of Abdulrahman and his family. Although the series includes a number of volumes which do not line up directly with the subject matter of Eggers's narrative work -- series topics encompass a range of global and domestic human rights issues, including undocumented immigrants living in America, the treatment of inmates in American prisons, the Israel/Palestine conflict, and labor abuses in global economies -- nonetheless *Voice of Witness's* consistent focus on exposing injustice and confronting trauma through storytelling sits well with Eggers's dedication to the educating and healing potentials of testimonial narrative, concepts at the core of much of his most high profile creative work.

In many respects, *Voice of Witness* overtly complements Eggers's embrace of testimonial narrative as well as the ideology and ethics of his work: like the majority of Eggers's narrative work, *VoW's* principal focus is on encouraging readers to bear witness to the lives of victims. While Eggers's narratives typically focus on a single person's experience of an event, however, *VoW* presents readers with multiple testimonial accounts. As Eggers and Deng detail in the foreword to *Out of Exile*, "giving voice to the victims of the civil wars in Sudan was the very reason that the *Voice of Witness* was conceived" (1). *Out of Exile* specifically, and *Voice of Witness* in general, "was conceived as a forum where victims of gross human rights abuses could tell their stories not in brief sound bites, but from beginning to end, encompassing the full scope of their humanity" (2). For Eggers and Deng, *Voice of Witness* exists as a means to

honor the “humanity” of victims. “We wanted to make sure that a reader knew the narrators not just as victims or statistics, but as fully human,” Eggers and Deng write. *Voice of Witness* pushes back against history based exclusively in hard facts and statistics; it documents history and its traumas as lived events, encouraging readers to discover a shared sense of humanity between themselves and *VoW* narrators which directs them to identify with and to understand broadly how and why injustice and trauma occurs. “In this way a reader has a far better chance at empathy,” Eggers and Deng posit. They believe that by presenting history as testimony, readers are “more likely to be outraged when the narrators’ basic rights are trampled upon” (2). Unlike literary narratives, which feature narrators whose voices enmesh with an author’s literary techniques, *VoW* presents testimony as transcribed speech shared between a speaker and his or her imagined audience. Although *VoW* editors shape the testimonies included in *VoW* volumes, choosing which parts of a person’s story to feature before mediating victims’ stories through translation whenever necessary, *VoW*’s focus remains always on the testimonial speaker. The editor is entirely hidden from the reader; *VoW* texts do not scan as literary narrative for readers so much as they are documents of speech, missives shared by speakers with their imagined audience. As a result, testimonial speech works to implicate *VoW*’s audience in the events its speakers describe; the audience is made to witness the speaker’s experiences, and in doing so ideally the audience feels compelled to respond to the speaker’s needs in some way.

## Learning from Testimony

Rather than presenting a tidy therapeutic arc for each of its featured narratives, *Voice of Witness* volumes work to consider suffering accurately as ongoing and unresolved in most cases, and often its testimonial subjects approach narrative skeptically. *Voice of Witness* stories question what narrative documentation of social injustice accomplishes. In doing so, *VoW* importantly complicates the value of testimony for Eggers, a complication I believe benefits his writing greatly.

Unlike the majority of Eggers's work, much of which features a clearly progressive narrative arc climaxing in its characters' optimistic look towards the future, *VoW* offers varied testimonial accounts of trauma and struggle. For example, *Heartbreaking Work* concludes with Eggers's narrator on the verge of catharsis, ready to extend his catharsis to his imagined audience: "do it, do it, you motherfuckers, do it," he demands (437); "Don't you know that I am connected to you? Don't you know that I'm trying to pump blood to you, that this is for you" (436), he asks. Eggers's narrative work frequently functions to benefit his ideal readers. Whatever therapeutic resolution his narrators experience Eggers typically extends to his imagined audience. In contrast, for *VoW*, trauma and struggle regularly remain bleakly ongoing and unresolved. As such, *VoW* consciously calls into question the value of testimony. For example, Craig Walzer, *Out of Exile's* editor, writes in his introduction to *Exile* that for all of the knowledge circulating about the injustices occurring in Sudan -- news reports of fighting;

images of starving children; official condemnation by the United Nations; a “multibillion dollar humanitarian aid industry slowing the [region’s] burn” (11) -- still “we do not take forceful action to change the existing order” of the region (11). Although Walzer does not specify what “forceful action” he imagines to be an adequate response to the conflict in Sudan, his introduction and the stories contained in *Out of Exile* reflect *VoW*’s effort to present Sudan and philanthropic responses to ongoing violence in the country from a variety of angles. *Out of Exile*’s subjects celebrate global responses to violence and displacement in Sudan as much as they challenge the value of philanthropy performed in aid of the region’s people. The book asks key questions about Sudan: what do global responses to conflict in the country accomplish? Is it possible for the West to react adequately and productively to the region’s violence? In posing these questions, *Out of Exile* portrays philanthropic responses to social issues realistically, recognizing it is not enough for the mass public to empathize with the suffering of others. Rather, the book, and the *Voice of Witness* project as a whole, demands that always more must be done to fight global injustice. For all of the power Eggers and his peers believe to be inherent in storytelling, documentation of suffering only accomplishes so much when responding to atrocity. As Walzer says at the conclusion of his introduction to *Out of Exile*: “to what end comes this project undertaken with the best of intentions? The answer still eludes me” (14).

The stories contained in *Out of Exile* are, from Walzer’s view, unified by “a living memory of violence” (10). The same stands for each *Voice of Witness*

volume, and Eggers seems to embrace a similar logic in his narrative work by tailoring his writing to offer other people's testimonies to ongoing contemporary social issues. Walzer writes that *Out of Exile* is organized according to a "tragic common thread," wherein each of the subjects sharing their experiences "has been forced, by violence or the threat of violence, by ideological oppression, or by extreme economic injustice to leave his or her home" (10-11). Echoing Eggers's emphasis on the power and importance of storytelling, Walzer says these people's stories are crucial for the way society documents history. They are "the living testimony to their young country's sorry bond of violence" while at the same time their stories direct the public towards "rebuilding and reconciliation" (11). *Out of Exile* specifically and *Voice of Witness* more broadly catalogue the experiences of actual people in the hope that their stories might serve as educating tools to raise awareness about global social concerns and to encourage positive social change.

Many of the testimonies featured in *Out of Exile* echo the stories shared by Deng in *What is the What*. For example, Abuk Bak Macham's contribution, "The Only Word I Heard Was 'Abeeda.' That Means Slave," speaks to Macham's experience of being forcibly removed from her hometown as a child to live as a slave before successfully escaping, reuniting with her family, and immigrating to America. Macham's story recalls Deng's in many ways: both she and Deng are forcibly removed from their home towns by Arab soldiers; both successfully reunite with their families; and both successfully immigrate to America as refugees. Differences exist between their stories, of course: Deng finds himself



wandering as a “Lost Boy” before ultimately arriving at an Ethiopian refugee camp where he rediscovers his mother and eventually immigrates to America; meanwhile, Macham is sold into slavery after her abduction and is raped and impregnated by her owner before her eventual escape to Egypt, where she meets repeatedly with the United Nations before choosing to move to America because “America paid for your ticket” and Australia did not (53). Despite the differences between their stories -- significantly, Macham experiences typically gendered violence like rape -- their accounts are more similar than they are different. *What is the What* ends with Deng engaged with the American Dream of personal success and upward mobility: “I will reach upward,” he says. “I will attempt to do better” (533). Macham’s narrative likewise concludes with a positive outlook: “I like my job [in Buffalo],” she says. “We have a very nice house. When you work in America, it’s very good. When you work hard, you can pay your rent and get anything you need” (56). Despite the difficulties of immigrating, difficulties Deng details similarly in *What is the What*, Macham appreciates her new home in America. She values the opportunities America provides her and her family. One day she vows to return to Sudan, but “not until it’s all quiet” (OOE 57), just as Deng vows “to return home” only after he completes college (WITW 534). In the meantime, like Deng, Macham promises to supplement existing narratives and media representations of the Sudanese conflict with her story: “I’ve started speaking to my son Majak about my story,” she says. Her contribution to *Voice of Witness* indicates that in addition to speaking to her son about Sudan, she has similarly started speaking publicly about her life. In this sense, Macham’s

narrative functions according to Eggers's philosophy that storytelling is inherently valuable: in speaking her story, Macham confronts the violence of her past to educate the public about an ongoing global social issue, working to exorcise her trauma and the trauma of people affected by the Sudanese civil war by making a global audience conscious of an on-going (and too frequently recurring) social concern.

While a number of *Out of Exile's* stories mirror the narrative arc of *What is the What, Voice of Witness* asserts its thematic complexity as a project distinct from Eggers's narrative work by including the stories of people whose experiences remain less reconciled than those of subjects like Deng or Macham. Achol Mayuol's testimony "I Waited Fifteen Years to Be Free" especially asserts *Out of Exile's* dedication to the unfinished, unreconciled nature of its subjects' experiences compared to the similarly unresolved but overall more optimistic account of Deng's life seen in *What is the What*, the narrative nature of which shapes Deng's experiences to emphasize his therapeutic arc to render his testimony more affecting and inspiring for readers.

Mayuol's testimony stands in contrast to the idea that narrative works mainly to inspire positive progressive sentiment, as seems to be the case for much of Eggers's literature. Rather than describing a subject who suffers violence before ultimately resolving his or her past to work towards a better future, as is the case in both Deng's and Macham's stories, Mayuol's story resolves less tidily. Mayoul's trauma endures at her narrative's conclusion. Her conflict remains unresolved and on-going despite her confrontation of it through

storytelling. Like Deng, Mayuol was a citizen of Marial Bai at the start of the Sudanese Civil War. When Marial Bai burned, Mayuol was sent to live with her grandmother, where she was abducted and sold into slavery. While living as a slave, Mayuol was stripped of her identity: she and her fellow slaves “were all given Arabic names, and were taught Arabic and the Koran” (350). As she puts it: “I was forced to do away with anything that was of my culture” (350). More than losing her home and her family, Mayuol describes having her entire sense of personhood erased by the war. After ten years, Mayuol says she was sold to a new master, a man the editors name “Akil” after Mayuol finds herself incapable of speaking of him in specifics. She explains that Akil treated her in some ways as a slave, and in others as his wife. “And though life settled into a routine,” she says, “I never felt any love for the man who bought me. I never accepted my situation. Always I dreamt of escape” (353). Eventually, after a chance encounter in town with an estranged uncle, Mayuol was freed and returned to Marial Bai, where she worked to relearn her culture. Despite her liberation, she says she has yet to feel truly free, and that she still faces threats from Akil: “I waited fifteen years to be free and I need to feel free,” she says of her resolve to ignore him.

Although in some ways Mayuol’s story ends similarly to Deng’s and Macham’s, her hardship continues: like Deng and Macham, Mayuol resolves to work hard to support her family, but when she started a business she fell ill. “A problem with my kidneys,” she says (355). Like Deng and Macham, Mayuol aspires to succeed when facing her future. “I want peace for them,” she says of her children. “And opportunity” (355). Unlike Deng and Macham, however,

fortune conspires against Mayuol. Where Deng and Macham view the future optimistically, Mayuol remains uncertain, defeated. She looks toward the future with skepticism: “we will see,” she says realistically of the future, voicing no expectations for what will come, whether positive or negative. This gentle skepticism sets Mayuol’s story apart from that of Deng in particular, whose narrative concludes with him asserting that “I am alive and you are alive so we must fill the air with our words” (*WITW* 535). James Dawes explains *What is the What*’s open-ended conclusion as a symptom of the social justice novel, whose narratives must present readers with an “ending which must not end” due to the ongoing nature of social justice issues and the lack of resolution inherent to victimized experience. For literature describing the human effects of on-going social events, conclusive catharsis risks undermining the reality of events as they are experienced by victims (202). *What is the What* features an “ending which must not end” insofar as Deng continues to struggle, but he resolves to join his imagined audience to “fill the air with [their] words” to work for a better future. In this sense, the novel’s open-ended conclusion is inarguably optimistic. “I believe this day will come,” Deng says (535). He feels a meaningful bond with his reader, and as such a palpable sense of progress seems possible. In contrast, Mayuol’s testimony lacks any such positivist resolve. By acknowledging the real, unromantic struggle many victims continue to face after testifying to their experiences, *Voice of Witness* holds the potential to influence how Eggers understands storytelling to function in relation to trauma or distress.

Exemplifying Dawes's claim that narratives concerned with human rights issues regularly feature endings "which must not end" (202), Eggers often concludes his work in ways which see his characters confront their trauma by resolving to continue to combat whatever injustice does violence against them. The conclusion of Deng's story is of course not his finish; rather it is one ending among many to come. Deng continues to live and to struggle in response to his experiences. After confronting his trauma through narrative, Deng feels invigorated and blessed even as he remains always conscious that America fails to meet the expectations he held for it prior to his arrival. As postcolonial literary critic Eleni Coundouriotis writes, "a refugee dreams of arrival: arrival to a safe place where a future might be possible. The achievement of such arrival is fraught with danger because the end of the journey is inevitably anticlimactic and full of its own challenges" (82). Deng has great expectations for America when he dreams of it at a refugee camp in Ethiopia; his experience in America is necessarily anticlimactic as a result. America is not the idyllic land of opportunity Deng fantasizes about; instead, it is a society complete with its own hardships.

*What is the What* demonstrates America's imperfections by placing Deng in a variety of threatening environments. The novel's first chapter begins with Deng's American home being invaded by thieves, and he regularly faces racism in America. One of Deng's home invaders, a black man, proclaims: "Fucking Nigerian! So stupid!" (9). Still, as I argue above, *What is the What* concludes positively, with Deng viewing the future with anticipation: Deng will continue always to speak, "to fill the air" with his voice. Although this optimistic outlook

suits Eggers's ideal audience well, suggesting they still have time to contribute to Deng's good work in response to the human rights crisis in Sudan, such a positive attitude is not available to every person sharing some version of Deng's refugee experience. Mayuol's story, and *Voice of Witness* in general, works to emphasize this fact.

Even more than *Out of Exile*, *Voices from the Storm* emphasizes the various ways a single traumatizing event, in *Storm's* case, Hurricane Katrina, impacts a wide variety of people, deploying testimonial storytelling to offer readers a broad survey of how an event is experienced by many people simultaneously in distinct but overlapping ways. Like *Exile* does for Sudanese refugees, *Storm* describes injustices and traumas resulting from Katrina experienced by a wider cross-section of New Orleans's population than Eggers addresses with his nonfiction narrative *Zeitoun*. After briefly introducing each contributor's life "before the storm," *Storm's* overall structure mirrors that of *Zeitoun* by documenting Katrina and its aftermath chronologically by day, moving through the days of the storm in order from August 27 to September 4 before shifting to more general descriptions of "the week after" and "weeks after the storm." Like *Zeitoun*, the stories contained in *Storm* outline not only the mass destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina, but more importantly the gross mistreatment and human rights abuses which many of the people of New Orleans faced as a result of the government's response (and lack thereof) to the storm. As volume editors Lola Vollen and Chris Ying say, "in the midst of a terrifying natural disaster, the government responded with lethal apathy, leaving

storm victims to fend for themselves, depriving them of the most basic necessities, and exposing them to dehumanizing conditions” (1). *Storm* reiterates the injustices outlined in *Zeitoun* on a wider scale than Eggers’s text is capable of describing given its specific focus on the Zeitoun family. In addition to documenting Abdulrahman’s weathering of the hurricane and his subsequent imprisonment -- a version of the Zeitouns’ story is included in *Storm*, quoting Abdulrahman directly rather than using Eggers’s approximation of his words -- *VoW* also documents the experiences of others. Among other examples, *Storm* describes how Katrina was experienced by the poor, with contributor Renee Martin speaking to her experience of weathering the storm in the Superdome, where thousands were housed by the national guard despite rising floodwater and without basic utilities or food. Similarly, it outlines how incarcerated convicts weathered the storm, with Dan Bright describing the hurricane from a prisoner’s perspective.

Like *Out of Exile*, *Voices from the Storm* asserts its value to Eggers by offering a multifaceted view of Katrina’s effects on New Orleans’ people, describing the ways Katrina impacted many people simultaneously while offering glimpses of the ways those affected either confronted the trauma of the event or continued to suffer in its aftermath. Similar to *Exile* and Eggers’s work in general, *Storm* depicts Katrina as traumatizing for its victims: Martin’s account of her experience in the Superdome offers a bleak portrait of the event, for instance. At the same time, like Deng and Macham, *Storm* also asserts hope and optimism in spite of hardship. For example, Rhonda Sylvester recalls that certain moments

after Katrina were “the lowest part of my life” (140), but she also remembers encountering extreme kindness from strangers: after successfully leaving New Orleans, Sylvester and her family found themselves in Houston, where they received charitable aid from a Christian family despite knowing no one in the region. “They didn’t even know much about our background,” Sylvester says. “They didn’t know nothing about us. But they accepted us. And that was, I believe, that was love. That was true love” (189). Just as *Exile* and Eggers’s writing document people’s suffering as a means to raise awareness about the human effects of traumatizing events, so too does *Voices from the Storm*. Importantly, *Storm*, like *Exile*, documents critical testimonies as well as optimistic ones. It offers a broad portrait of how Katrina was experienced by its victims. It refuses to undermine the suffering of many of Katrina’s victims by providing testimonies critical of the government’s response to the event in addition to stories with comparatively “happy endings” like Sylvester’s or Zeitoun’s. Readers are encouraged to recognize the suffering of the event’s victims as often as (if not more than) they are made to witness positive reconciliation. *Voice of Witness* supplements and extends the work Eggers accomplishes with his narrative writing by providing readers with multiple victims’ accounts of traumatizing events, the details of their respective testimonies combining to make their respective traumas simultaneously more knowable and urgent for Eggers’s ideal readers.



## Testimonial Narrative

Seeming to draw lessons from the range of testimonies featured by *Voice of Witness*, after 9/11 Eggers's writing increasingly features speakers whose voices and experiences are distinct from his own. Instead of impelling his imagined readers to connect him biographically to his texts to learn from his work in relation to him, as *OBC* asks its ideal audience to do with the authors whose texts they read, Eggers regularly distances himself from his texts by incorporating the voices of people affected directly by social issues which Eggers himself has limited experience with. For Eggers, narrative is a dialogue between the narrator and the reader rather than between the author and the reader. Eggers's texts speak to his narrators' unique experiences rather than reflecting his personal biography. The author's role, for Eggers, is to organize other people's experiences in narrative to communicate their stories effectively to his ideal readership.

Testimonial "storytelling" sits at the heart of Eggers's worldview: he believes that testimony facilitates a new role for the author rooted in identification with and empathy for others, pillars of the compassionate worldview he develops across the majority of his projects. As Eggers writes in his introduction to the *The Autobiographer's Handbook*, he believes "Americans are particularly forgetful (willfully so, many would say) about our roots. And this is a problem" (1). To address this forgetfulness, Eggers impels his readers to tell their own and their families' stories, as well as to pay attention to the stories of others. Beyond

paying tribute to the value of personal history, Eggers sees autobiographical storytelling as a means to honor heritage, and heritage for Eggers is a matter of great importance. Like “most of what we do as humans,” Eggers says, “paramount among all these gifts we give [one another] is the gift of knowledge -- the world’s accumulated facts, truths, and wisdom, from the birth of reason and language until today” (1). As I state in the introduction to this chapter, Eggers suggests storytelling is central to the passing of knowledge. Storytelling helps authors and readers to understand themselves and one another better by educating one another about each others’ histories. In this sense, storytelling for Eggers is a means to education and awareness-raising. Storytelling is testimony shared to educate others about one’s life.

More, in Eggers’s view, storytelling is a means for readers and writers alike to bear witness to the past, to confront trauma and to acknowledge personal accomplishments. Storytelling documents that “*this happened and I lived through this and This is what it felt like, this is how I survived*. When someone puts words on paper, and those words are read days or years later, there is an intimacy that cannot be rivaled in any other medium” (8). Storytelling authenticates the past for Eggers. It makes history a valuable tool for understanding and responding to the modern world, drawing a line from the events of the past to current social issues. For Eggers, storytelling serves as a de facto means to raise awareness not only about history, but also about how and why the world exists as it does today.

As James Dawes writes in his essay “Human Rights, Literature, and Empathy”: “literature promotes empathy” (427). Literature is a means for readers

to understand and to share the experiences of others. By developing an understanding of and empathy for others, literature holds the potential to influence how readers respond to social issues. This interest in empathy and activism carries across Eggers's various social and literary projects. Beyond his role at McSweeney's publishing (the influential independent publishing house Eggers founded in 1998) and outside of his writing, much of which embraces other people's testimonies to trauma and distress to explore pressing global social concerns such as war, immigration, racism, and climate change, Eggers has been centrally involved with a variety of social projects throughout his career-to-date. Prominently, he established the not-for-profit *826 Valencia* and its various satellite spaces across North America to offer literacy tutoring to youths; as detailed above, he co-edits the *Voice of Witness* series; and, extending from *What is the What* and *Zeitoun*, he established the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation (VAD) and the Zeitoun Foundation to make charitable use of his author proceeds from *What is the What* and *Zeitoun*, respectively. The VAD Foundation works "to provide education opportunities for those affected by the conflicts in Sudan" (*What is the What*); now defunct, the Zeitoun Foundation worked "to aid in the rebuilding of New Orleans and to promote respect for human rights in the United States and around the world" (*Zeitoun*).

In her study of *What is the What*, Michelle Peek views Eggers's emphasis on empathy as indicative of Eggers's "enduring belief in and longing for the concept of a universal humanity that connects us across geopolitical and cultural divides" (2). Faith in a universal bond between subjects, a bond often solidified

through the testimonial sharing of experience, sits at the core of *What is the What*, as it does for much of Eggers's other writing and social work. Empathy between readers and Eggers's narrative subjects is crucial to his texts' explorations of trauma. Since Eggers's work strives to connect readers to others' experiences of trauma, it is important that his descriptions of experience are relatable for readers. In testimony, speakers talk honestly to their audience; they lay bare the psychological effects of their experiences to make clear the extent of their trauma or distress. As Fassin and Rechtman say, since the postwar era, testimony has regularly been seen by the public as "offering the ultimate truth about the human condition" (76). By presenting traumatized experience as something shared in faith between a traumatized speaker and his or her audience, the intimacy of testimonial speech aids in the effort to make traumatized experience relatable for readers. As Eggers says in a 2013 interview with *Huck* magazine, identifying meaningfully with the experiences of others makes clear that "there's a lot of threads that matter, that have to interconnect" (28). His writing embraces testimonial speech to facilitate a sense of interconnection.

*What is the What* in particular fits well with Eggers's effort to use testimonial voices distinct from his own to raise his ideal readers' awareness of a set of social concerns. Walking a fine line between fiction and nonfiction not unlike the one Eggers navigates with *Heartbreaking Work*, *What is the What* complicates fiction, autobiography, and biography to document Deng's life and trauma as a Sudanese man who grew up as a child refugee during the Second

Sudanese Civil War. Emphasizing Deng's voice in place of Eggers's own in an effort to raise awareness about ongoing social justice issues related to the Sudanese civil war specifically and immigration more generally, *What is the What* exists as the clearest example of Eggers's revised approach to authorship since focusing on himself throughout *Heartbreaking Work*.

Born of Eggers's anxiety that telling "Valentino's story, in [his own] voice, would be distracting and tonally incorrect" ("It Was Just Boys Walking"), *What is the What* presents itself simultaneously as both fiction and nonfiction. It is both true and contrived, novel and documentary. "I assumed I would simply interview Valentino, straighten the narrative out a bit, ask some follow-up questions, and then assemble the book from his words," Eggers says ("It Was Just Boys Walking"). Initially, Eggers planned to present Deng's testimony as oral history modeled off of his work with *VoW*. Eggers imagined he would "simply be the editor of the book, not its author" ("It Was Just Boys Walking"). As the project progressed, however, Eggers and Deng were forced to reconsider their approach given the limitations imposed on oral history by the nature of memory: "Valentino was six years old when he left his home and began his 800-mile journey to Ethiopia," Eggers says, "and thus his memory of that time was very spotty" ("It Was Just Boys Walking"). Deng's testimony was imperfect, incapable of communicating the urgency and trauma of his experience to interested but uninformed readers. "After that first year of interviews and my first attempt to assemble the resulting narrative," Eggers explains, "what we had from our recording sessions, it was fascinating, but it did not transcend the many human

rights reports and newspaper articles already available around the world” (“It Was Just Boys Walking”). Eggers wanted to help Deng to affect a wide audience. He wanted Deng’s testimony to make a difference, for it to “transcend” the existing narrative about Sudan to galvanize American interest in aiding victims of conflict in the region. As such, Eggers and Deng traveled to Sudan. “He would be the first Lost Boy to return,” Eggers says of their arrival in Marial Bai (“It Was Just Boys Walking”). “I published an account of the trip in journalistic form in *The Believer* magazine,” Eggers says, but the account was imperfect. It failed to communicate Deng’s experience convincingly. “In the book,” Eggers resolved, “I knew I had to disappear completely” (“It Was Just Boys Walking”). Conflicted by his journalistic standards -- “as a journalist,” Eggers says, “I was trained not to put any dialogue between quotation marks unless it was on tape. We had no such thing, and Valentino couldn’t remember who said what at almost any point in his life, and thus the book would be without dialogue” (“It Was Just Boys Walking”) -- Eggers realized he “couldn’t make an interesting nonfiction account of [Deng’s] life” (“It Was Just Boys Walking”). Instead, Eggers decided, “only in a novel could I apply what I had seen in the various regions of southern Sudan to describe the land, the light, the people” (“It Was Just Boys Walking”). Using research to add historical specificity to Deng’s testimony, collaborating with Deng to approximate the content of conversations as accurately as possible, and appealing to his own experiences in Sudan and America to lend authenticity to his description, even though the novel would remain Deng’s “autobiography,” Eggers reworked the text as a work of fiction based on Deng’s life. Eggers is the

text's author, but he works to "disappear" from its content by always emphasizing Deng's testimony and voice in place of his own. Eggers's additions to the text serve only to lend context to Deng's experiences; Eggers does not impose fictional events or artificial logic onto the narrative if they are not already existent in Deng's words.

Given the ways the text presents fiction and nonfiction as equally authentic to its audience, Eggers encourages his ideal readers to elide his role in the book's authorship to privilege Deng's voice absolutely. In doing so, Eggers suggests, his audience is better able to understand and to relate with the events of Deng's life since they are not asked to question the validity of Eggers's narration. As Michelle Peek argues, Deng's fictionalized testimony in the novel "[reformulates] the 'autobiographical pact,'" allowing "Eggers and Deng to implicate the reader in Valentino's story by drawing attention to the *work* of witnessing, of giving testimony to history and trauma, and enjoining the reader to take on the role of imaginative, retrospective witness" (6).

"All of the major events in the book are true," Deng asserts in his preface to the book, yet the text is presented as "a work of fiction" (xiv). Regardless of its author, the text suggests, its narrative is Deng's, not Eggers's. Eggers's pen is simply a conduit for Deng's testimony even if the book's specific language is Eggers's instead of Deng's. Eggers's voice is obscured throughout the narrative in favor of Deng's. "*What is the What* is the soulful account of my life," Deng writes in the preface. "As you read this book, you will learn about me and my beloved people of Sudan" (xiii). Although Eggers traveled to Sudan to research

the book and although he writes for Deng instead of presenting Deng's story as oral history, Eggers obscures his presence in the narrative to allow Deng to testify to his life and to his country for himself. Mediated by Eggers's authorship, the book exists as part of Deng's "struggle to reach out to others through public speaking" (xiii). It means to raise awareness of the history of violence in Sudan, as well as to make readers aware of Sudan's ongoing crisis: as Deng says, "gross human rights violations still continue today in the Darfur region of the country" (xiv). "This book is a form of struggle to strengthen my faith, my hope and my belief in humanity," Deng asserts. *What is the What* is his testimony to his experience, shared honestly in good faith by Eggers's with the book's readers. Echoing Eggers's opinion on the matter, Deng is confident that his testimony, and all testimony, is important: "since you and I exist," he says, "together we can make a difference!" (xv). Eggers's position relative to the narrative is secondary compared to Deng's; *What is the What* is Deng's story, and as such it empowers Deng to hope he and his imagined audience can use the text to "make a difference."

Testimony constructs an intimate bond between Eggers's texts and his ideal readers. By obscuring his own narrative voice with the testimonies of others, Eggers impels his imagined audience to see themselves in the lives of his characters and subjects rather than to filter their understanding of his narratives through him as his works' author. "I covet your eyes, your ears, the collapsible space between us," Eggers's fictional approximation of Deng says at the conclusion of *What is the What* (535). Eggers's emphasis on Deng's voice works



to “collapse” the distance between Deng’s experiences and Eggers’s imagined audience, establishing an intimate bond between Deng and the book’s ideal readers which makes Deng’s experiences more affecting. The book’s ideal readers feel like they know Deng, as if Deng is speaking to them directly rather than through Eggers. As such, they feel like they therapeutically improve themselves by reading, growing more aware of and empathetic towards the crisis in Sudan.

Beginning with *Heartbreaking Work* and continuing in later interviews, Eggers speaks frequently and earnestly about the importance of what he calls “social lattices,” overlapping networks of people who support one another in response to social and private concerns (*Huck* 28). In Eggers’s view, person-to-person contact is of the utmost importance to establish and maintain an effective social lattice, especially in the modern world. Eggers sees great value in global interaction because he did not obtain a passport for himself until he was a fully grown adult, and he recognizes the ways his lack of travel limited his worldview. By establishing a “direct” relationship between his narrators and his ideal readers, Eggers’s writing asserts “the value of real-world, tangible experiences, person-to-person contact” (*Huck* 24). His texts make readers feel like they know his work’s narrators, especially in relation to how they are affected by social issues. His imagined audience understands his narrators personally, and as such they feel empathy for his characters’ struggles. In doing so, I argue, they feel as if they improve themselves by growing more socially aware.

By incorporating a variety of voices in his narratives and by aligning his texts with real world events like those documented in the various *Voice of Witness* volumes, Eggers's literary projects work to present the experience of trauma from multiple perspectives. Speaking to representations of catastrophe in *What is the What*, Eleni Coundouriotis writes that traditionally "catastrophe is registered as an 'aftereffect' and has a scattering effect . . . The narrative arc of the stories of flight suggests we should rethink the framing of refugee experience as the result of a single event of expulsion/displacement in the past and see it instead as a tide of events that we cannot stem without returning to the refugee subject a promise of the future" (84-85). Catastrophe, according to Coundouriotis, is the product of a multitudinous "tide of events." By drawing attention to a variety of testimonial voices describing a range of experiences of and responses to catastrophe, Eggers's work and his associated projects mean to expose what such a tide looks like.

Embracing literature as a platform for testimonial storytelling, Eggers's literary work gives voice to victims to help them to share their experiences, using testimony as a tool to facilitate effective communication of how trauma is experienced and, ideally, why it occurs. In contrast to *OBC*, which encourages its members to connect a narrative's events to the life of its author then to reflect upon themselves in relation to the connections they draw, Eggers deploys testimonial storytelling in his work to distance himself from his writing to emphasize victims' voices instead of his own. He positions literature therapeutically to serve testimonial speakers as well as his imagined readership,

encouraging victims to confront their experiences through speech while ideally impelling readers to transform themselves in response to the testimonies they encounter by reading. By constructing a catalog of various experiences of catastrophe, Eggers's narratives and the *Voice of Witness* series work in tandem to offer evidence of trauma's diffuse nature in contemporary global life. They focus on testimonial speech to do justice to their subjects' experiences and they obscure authorial and editorial roles in storytelling to establish an intimate, affective bond between testimonial speakers and readers. In doing so, Eggers's work ideally helps victims to respond to their trauma through storytelling while pushing his readership to transform themselves in some way by developing an intimate understanding of traumatized experience.

## Chapter Four:

### The Benefits and Limits of Reading Dave Eggers's Fiction

Speaking in a 2007 interview with *The Progressive* magazine, a monthly publication championing “peace, social and economic justice, civil rights, civil liberties, human rights, a preserved environment, and a reinvigorated democracy” ([www.progressive.org](http://www.progressive.org)), Dave Eggers declares, “yes, absolutely,” literature plays a meaningful role in addressing political problems and human rights issues (Eggers and Siegal 37). “We’re in an era when novels can have some pretty massive effects,” he says. “Novels really have the power to engender sympathy and empathy, and give us a sense of humanity. And the novel is more alive than ever” (37). For Eggers, the novel, and fiction in general, is “more alive than ever,” capable of making his ideal reader more conscious of traumatizing or distressing world events impacting their own lives as well as the lives of others. In the sense that literature can push people to make themselves more socially aware and empathetic towards others, Eggers believes literature is, to some extent, transformative.

Remembering that for modern readers self-transformation qualifies as therapy, on the surface it seems like Eggers's view of literature fits with therapeutic approaches to books like *OBC*'s. *OBC* and Eggers similarly encourage their imagined audiences to respond to contemporary issues using literature, pushing readers to positively transform themselves into better, more functional people by drawing from the experiences of authors and characters.

*OBC*'s ideal audience considers texts in relation to the lives of authors who write to free themselves from their personal struggles: recall, for instance, Franzen's claim that with *Freedom* he "wanted to write a book that would free [him] in some way" from the person he was before he authored it. For *OBC*, reading, like writing, is first and foremost a means to self-improvement. Literature can raise one's awareness about and empathy for others, but a text's primary function is to improve its author and, by extension, its reader. In contrast, Eggers's imagined audience approaches literature to understand and to transform themselves in relation to social justice issues, with readers ideally using the increased awareness and empathy they develop from reading to help people in need as much as they help themselves. In particular, Eggers's nonfiction and documentary work describe the experiences of people facing social injustices, as Valentino Achak Deng does in *What is the What*, and as the various testimonies featured in *Voice of Witness* volumes account for. Eggers's narratives push his ideal readers to relate intimately with his protagonists to better understand their struggles, implicating his audience in his characters' resolve to work for a better future. Where *OBC* reads literature primarily to gain a better understanding of how authors transform themselves with their texts, and in doing so how they encourage their readers' self-improvement, Eggers's writing pushes his ideal readers to improve themselves for the benefit of others in addition to themselves.

Frequently, Eggers's nonfiction minimizes his personal voice to feature another person's testimony in place of his own. Recall the ways Eggers's memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, stands as his only

significant example of writing featuring his personal voice at its center. After 9/11, I argue, Eggers's nonfiction increasingly privileges the testimonies of others. Whether with Deng's testimony to his experiences as a child soldier in Sudan, or with the various testimonies featured in the *Voice of Witness* oral history series, Eggers's personal voice has grown increasingly absent from his work and affiliated literary projects. By emphasizing other people's stories and by allowing them to speak their stories using their own voices, I claim, Eggers's nonfiction points towards a narrative model concerned with inspiring readers to relate intimately with victims' testimonies and to reflect on traumatizing or mentally distressing experiences without regard for a mediating author. Eggers's literary approach with such writing is indebted to popular therapeutic logic given its focus on self-transformation for Eggers's narrators as well as for his ideal audience. However, his writing's focus on other people's stories and his emphasis on other people's voices identifies his literature as distinct from therapeutic literary approaches popularized from 1996 to 2010 by reading groups like *OBC*.

Where *OBC* readers respond therapeutically to narrative by connecting the life of a work's author to the details of his or her text regardless of whether or not an author's experiences justify such a connection, as his career has progressed Eggers has worked to obscure his role as his narratives' author. As he does with *What is the What*, Eggers emphasizes his narrators' voices as distinct from his own to encourage an intimate link between his protagonists and his ideal readers. Aside from *Heartbreaking Work*, Eggers renders his voice and his biography largely irrelevant to how his ideal audience engages with his

writing. As he says in a conversation with James Dawes, Eggers minimizes his influence on his narrators' voices in an effort to avoid feeling like his use of their testimonies is "just a theft and that's it" (177). By minimizing the influence of his own voice and biography on his work, Eggers lends his descriptions of traumatizing or distressing events a sense of identity and tragedy which, ideally, impels his imagined audience to transform themselves in ways which respond to the social issues responsible for his narrators' struggles. So, Eggers shares an interest with therapeutic reading groups like *OBC* in that his writing is concerned to some extent with his readers' transformation and self-improvement, but his approach to narrative is fundamentally different than that of *OBC* in that Eggers actively discourages his readers from modeling their transformation off of him or his biography.

Although much of Eggers's nonfiction and documentary writing makes compelling use of other people's testimonies to obscure Eggers's authorial presence in his texts, his narrative fiction makes few appeals to testimony despite the fact that it is regularly concerned with responding therapeutically to contemporary social issues not unlike the ones addressed by his nonfiction work. My purpose with this chapter is to outline Eggers's approach to fiction. Like his nonfiction and documentary texts, I argue that as his career has progressed Eggers's novels and short fiction work increasingly to obscure Eggers's voice from his imagined audience. Eggers's fiction discourages his imagined readers from viewing his work as autobiographical statements designed to improve or transform him in some way in response to his private struggles with whatever

social issues his texts address. Instead, he models his protagonists to speak directly to his readers: frequently, I argue, Eggers has little in common with the specific details of his characters' lives or with their struggles. Instead, his protagonists importantly resemble his imagined audience in significant ways, recalling the "well meaning" but generally uninformed American middle class Eggers says he writes for (Eggers and Doran 24).

Eggers's fiction encourages its ideal readers to transform themselves by presenting them with struggling or distressed protagonists who are, for all intents and purposes, surrogates for Eggers's imagined audience. Just as Eggers's ideal readers are well-meaning but generally uninformed middle class Americans, so too are Eggers's protagonists. With his fictional protagonists, Eggers holds a mirror to his imagined audience to inspire their self-improvement. In each of his works, I argue Eggers places characters modeled off of his imagined audience in hypothetical scenarios designed to encourage his ideal readers to consider their own behavior against the behavior of his protagonists. By offering his protagonists to his ideal readers as reflections of themselves, Eggers aims to expose his imagined audience members to the limitations of their worldview to encourage them to transform themselves into more socially aware, empathetic individuals.

Throughout this chapter, I perform a series of close readings on a selection of Eggers's novels and short fiction to trace the evolution of how Eggers's fiction constructs an intimate bond between his protagonists and his readers rooted in his protagonists reflection of his imagined audience's



worldview. Focusing sequentially on Eggers's 2002 novel *You Shall Know Our Velocity!*, his 2004 short story *Another*, his 2012 novel *A Hologram for the King*, and his 2014 novel *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And The Prophets, Do They Live Forever?*, I aim to track the development of Eggers's protagonists across what I see as his most important works of fiction to date. For each of these texts, I distinguish Eggers from his protagonists to explain how Eggers clearly differentiates his characters' experiences from his own life. By obscuring the influence of his personal life on his fiction as his style develops across each of his texts, I argue Eggers hopes to actively challenge his audience members by encouraging them to accept his protagonists as surrogates for themselves. Once his readers do so, I say, Eggers positions his characters' experiences to trouble his readers' preconceptions about issues like American exceptionalism and terrorism.

Starting with Eggers's first novel, *You Shall Know Our Velocity!*, I outline the ways Eggers's fiction increasingly targets a particular readership with intent to teach specific lessons about specific social issues. *Velocity* describes two friends, Will and Hand, who travel to Africa to give away \$32,000 to impoverished people following the accidental death of their close friend, Jack. To begin with, I confront the fact that the experience of *Velocity*'s emotionally distressed narrator is not entirely unlike Eggers's own: just as Eggers is a white middle class man struggling to come to terms with his parents' deaths from cancer, Will is a white American male distressed by a friend's accidental death in a car accident. Despite this similarity between Eggers and his protagonist, I indicate the ways

*Velocity* establishes Eggers's interest in teaching his audience about social issues by connecting their worldview to that of his characters. I recognize that aspects of Will's history recall Eggers's experiences, potentially encouraging readers to view *Velocity* as an autobiographical statement more in line with *Heartbreaking Work* than as a text written by Eggers for a specific audience whose worldview is distinct from Eggers's own. Still, I view *Velocity* as an important creative development for Eggers in that it gestures towards his interest in establishing an intimate bond between his presumed audience and his protagonists rooted in a shared naiveté and lack of knowledge about the world. Specifically, I argue *Velocity* encourages its ideal readers to transform themselves by relating with Will as he grows increasingly socially conscious, gaining empathy for others while developing an understanding of how to practice philanthropy respectfully. At the same time, I see *Velocity* as significant for the ways it helps to establish who Eggers imagines as his ideal readership: a group of socially uninformed Americans seeking to educate themselves about the world.

Following *Velocity*, I turn to the short story "Another," published in the 2004 short fiction collection *How We Are Hungry*. "Another" details an unnamed narrator's distressed response to encounters with terrorism. Specifically, "Another" offers a first person account of its narrator's mental state in the wake of terrorist acts before outlining how he confronts and dissects his trauma by traveling to the Middle East. I consider the ways "Another" builds on the groundwork laid by *Velocity* to challenge Eggers's imagined readers'

preconceived notions of terrorism and Islam. With a narrator whose worldview resembles that of Eggers's ideal reader and whose life experience is more closely aligned with Eggers's imagined audience than with Eggers's own, I present "Another" as a significant, if under examined, landmark in Eggers's narrative development. I argue "Another" reads as Eggers's direct response to rising cultural anxiety about terrorism in the wake of 9/11. To this end, I identify "Another" as a strong example of Eggers modeling his protagonists off of his imagined audience members to challenge their hypothetical response to contemporary social issues. By embracing Eggers's protagonist as a surrogate for themselves, accepting his feelings and experiences as equivalent to their own, I suggest "Another" means to encourage Eggers's imagined readers to transform their understanding of terrorism and global relations.

Next, I read Eggers's 2012 novel, *A Hologram for the King*, a finalist for the 2012 National Book Award for fiction. Describing the emotional distress of an American businessman, Alan Clay, suffering underemployment and bankruptcy, I argue that *Hologram* tailors Alan to speak to the anxieties of a readership in the midst of the "Great Recession." Alan is a victim of debt, ruined credit, and underemployment, all common concerns for a middle class American readership ravaged by global economic decline. Importantly, Alan's experience of the recession is distinct from Eggers's, who remained gainfully successful throughout the recession as an author, as a publisher, and as a philanthropic entrepreneur. Eggers's experience of the recession is irrelevant to readers for whom the recession constitutes a personal crisis. By presenting Alan as an "everyman"

whose experience of the recession is easily relatable to Eggers's imagined middle class readership, I suggest *Hologram* means to speak directly to its readership to indicate that life goes on in the wake of financial and professional turmoil. Alan's therapeutic improvement serves as evidence for readers that they too can improve themselves in spite of their personal struggles; Alan's status as a surrogate for Eggers's ideal readership communicates this therapeutic message.

To conclude my study, I read *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And The Prophets, Do They Live Forever?*, Eggers's most recently published novel, for the ways it meaningfully complicates the relationship between Eggers's protagonists and his imagined audience. Presented without any exposition or description, *Your Fathers* details the actions of a mentally unwell man, Thomas, traumatized by the police shooting his unarmed friend. Two years after his friend's murder, Thomas kidnaps a series of seven people who he interrogates about a range of social issues while holding them at an abandoned decommissioned army base. Written in a series of dialogues with unattributed speech between Thomas and his various captives, *Your Fathers* features only its characters' voices. The text features no narrator. On the surface Thomas recalls Eggers's imagined audience: he grew up a member of the suburban middle class; his description of social issues like unemployment, racism, and police violence regularly betray the narrow focus of his worldview. Where in the past Eggers modeled his protagonists off of his imagined audience to inspire his readers' personal transformation or to offer his audience positive reinforcement, as he does with

*Velocity*, "Another," and *Hologram*, Thomas is a homegrown terrorist who abducts seven people. By presenting Thomas both as like Eggers's imagined audience and as a terrorist, *Your Fathers* challenges its ideal readers' preconceptions of what it means not only to be a terrorist, but also what it means to be a member of the American middle class. More so than any of his other work, *Your Fathers* simulates *Voice of Witness*'s model in that it features multiple voices responding to a set of social issues. Similarly, like *VoW*, I argue *Your Fathers* questions the value of storytelling by featuring a deliberately bleak, unsatisfying conclusion which recalls the uncertain ending of *VoW* testimonies like Mayuol's in *Out of Exile*. *Your Fathers* refuses efforts to read its events in a positive therapeutic light. Instead, it enjoins its reader to ask themselves what they accomplish by reading, recalling Craig Walzer's question in the introduction to *Out of Exile*, "to what end comes this project undertaken with the best of intentions?" (14).

By modeling Thomas off of Eggers's imagined readership, by emphasizing speech not explicitly attributed by the text to specific speakers, and by using formal strategies to implicate his ideal readers in the narrative's debates, I argue *Your Fathers* serves as a deliberate challenge to the worldview of Eggers's imagined audience. Eggers presents Thomas as the dark inverse of his imagined readers' best intentions. Rather than encouraging therapeutic transformation through positive reinforcement, as Eggers's earlier works do, *Your Fathers* implicates its readers in deplorable actions. Little optimism exists at the narrative's conclusion. Where in the past, Eggers's work implies that reading about and identifying with his protagonists' struggles will help his ideal readers to

understand current events better, aiding their efforts to address the effects that various social issues have on their lives, *Your Fathers* asks transformation of its audience, but its tone is one of despair rather than one of solidarity. In this sense, I argue *Your Fathers* marks a potential shift for Eggers's career moving forward, one which calls for his readers to consider what they accomplish by reading. In doing so, I believe, Eggers positions his writing to inspire his imagined audience to look beyond reading to transform themselves and the world by pursuing more active social engagement than follows from reading and discussing books.

Eggers's fiction regularly features protagonists modeled off of his imagined audience to address a specific readership didactically about specific social issues. His narratives frequently see his protagonists gain a broadened understanding of themselves as global citizens, and in doing so Eggers indicates to his imagined readers how they might similarly transform themselves into empathetic and socially aware people. James Dawes writes, "stories generate empathy, and empathy generates helping behavior" (430). By confronting his readers with protagonists who function as surrogates for themselves, I believe Eggers positions his fiction to generate empathy and solidarity amongst his imagined audience, feelings which ideally encourage helping behavior. What shape such behavior takes, while significant, is not entirely the point for Eggers. Rather, I suggest Eggers encourages his ideal readers to react to the social issues his writing speaks to, and in doing so he works to implicate them empathetically in the experience of current events. Since Eggers can not control his reader beyond encouraging them to behave in particular ways, his work

concerns itself with inculcating a sense of social responsibility in his ideal readership. As Dawes says, “literary empathy does not point past the reader, it points *to* the reader” (431). My purpose with this chapter is to show how, similar to *OBC*’s approach to books, Eggers’s writing is therapeutic for his imagined audience insofar as it encourages his ideal readers to transform themselves in positive ways, while at the same time I suggest that Eggers’s emphasis on characters who resemble his imagined audience positions his texts to challenge his readers’ worldview in ways which ideally foster a sense of social responsibility.

### **Reflecting an Imagined Reader**

Not long after *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* released to great acclaim (and some criticism) in 2000, in September 2002 Eggers published his first novel, *You Shall Know Our Velocity!*<sup>1</sup> *Velocity* sees its protagonist, Will, detail his emotional distress after the death of a close friend. Financially secure after selling his likeness for an advertisement, Will and his childhood friend, Hand, set out to donate the entirety of Will’s savings -- \$32,000 -- in a week-long trip around the world. Importantly, Will and Hand are depicted as well meaning but globally uneducated citizens of the midwest: “I lived in Chicago, Hand in St.

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<sup>1</sup> Although *Heartbreaking Work* was a 2001 Pulitzer Prize finalist and was a popular success, the book was critically divisive. Writing in *Junk Politics*, Benjamin DeMott summarizes much of the negative response to *Heartbreaking Work*, detailing Eggers’s narrative reliance on irony and the book’s lack of a clear moral center before calling for Eggers to “place himself differently in relation both to his material and his audience” (168).

Louis, though we were both from Milwaukee, or just outside,” Will says. “We were born there, three months apart, and our dads bowled together” (4). Will and Hand are good (if somewhat selfish) people, the narrative suggests, they just have limited experience outside of a particular American context. As such, they struggle to respect others: they “agreed on speeding” during their travels, Hand says at one point, “not sitting and listening” (193). The narrative documents how their travel goes from being self-serving to enlightening; in this sense, it features a therapeutic arc from confusion to understanding, from distress to self-imposed calm. Although Will’s psychology resembles Eggers’s in some ways, limiting the extent to which *Velocity* dissuades Eggers’s ideal readers from viewing the text in relation to Eggers’s biography, nonetheless *Velocity* is significant for the ways it finds Eggers experimenting with the didactic potential of fiction for a particularly defined imagined audience, exploring the limits of Will’s worldview to suggest to his ideal readers how they might improve themselves by reflecting on Will’s behavior.

Speaking to *Huck* magazine in 2013, Eggers details who he imagines his ideal audience to be. “I’m always trying to educate the person I was too,” he says of his literature and social work. “I was just talking to a friend who grew up in the Bay Area and was saying, ‘You don’t understand the bubble we’re in sometimes.’ A lot of people like me in Illinois, or Wisconsin, we’re well-meaning people, but you would be surprised how ‘in the middle of nowhere’ we are in terms of our awareness . . . There’s a lot of people like us and you’ve got to be forgiving of people like that. They have good hearts” (24). In many respects, Eggers’s ideal



reader is who he sees himself as once being: recalling his own lack of mobility as a youth, Eggers confesses “I didn’t have have a passport until I was twenty-six” (22). Like Eggers’s description of himself as a youth and like the sort of person he sees as his ideal reader, Will and Hand are both socially uninformed and inexperienced travelers. As such, *Velocity* encourages Eggers’s imagined audience to recognize themselves in Will and Hand, pushing his ideal readers to learn from Will’s and Hand’s actions to transform themselves into more socially conscious people, much like Will and Hand do throughout the novel’s narrative.

At the same time, just as *Heartbreaking Work* describes Eggers’s response to his parents’ deaths from cancer, emotional distress about death is key to *Velocity*’s narrative. In many respects, *Velocity* reads as a fictional companion to *Heartbreaking Work*: like *Heartbreaking Work* before it, *Velocity* seems to continue Eggers’s efforts to use writing to respond therapeutically to unexpected death. Similarly, key circumstances of Will’s life overlap meaningfully with those of Eggers’s: just as Eggers found himself financially secure following the widespread success of *Heartbreaking Work* in 2000 -- “my first book was too much too quick,” Eggers says in his interview with *The Progressive* (3) -- Will came into money “a year before, in a windfall kind of way” (4). In certain ways, Will seems deliberately designed to call Eggers to mind.

Putting aside circumstantial similarities between Will and Eggers, however, *Velocity* and *Heartbreaking Work* exhibit key tonal differences, encouraging readers to view the two texts differently in relation to themselves. “This was uncalled for,” *Heartbreaking Work* proclaims on its first page. In

contrast to *Heartbreaking Work*'s emphasis on irony, which occasionally finds Eggers discouraging his readers from applying the text's introspection to themselves, *Velocity* earnestly reflects on life and death. *Velocity*'s original hardcover edition bears no image on its cover; rather, its first paragraph is printed in embossed bold in place of a graphic, declaring the book's intention to respond directly to the emotional effects of death by stating that the narrative takes place between "Jack's death" and Will's drowning "in a burning ferry in the cool tannin-tinted Guaviare river, in east-central Colombia, with forty-two locals we hadn't yet met" (1). Describing Will's psychological state and therapeutic improvement during this specific (if loosely defined) period of time, *Velocity* reads as a posthumous account of events in Will's life occurring shortly before his death. The narrative places emphasis on mortality to lend the therapeutic process a sense of urgency and importance. Although irony is widely present in Will's actions throughout the novel, *Velocity* does not prompt its readers to approach its text ironically. Rather, *Velocity* places an emphasis on earnestness. Its narrative describes Will's therapeutic coming-to-terms with who he is (or was) as a person, a therapeutic process that the novel encourages its imagined audience to perform for themselves by drawing attention to Will's mortality at the text's outset.

Jack's death affects Will and Hand profoundly. "We couldn't do fucking anything," Will recalls angrily of Jack's time in the hospital after his accident (277). Rather than closing Will off from the world, his emotional distress over Jack's death increases his capacity for empathy without giving him an outlet for his feelings. "I was feeling everything much too much," he says. "I was being

blindsided by familiar things” (42). In response to his newly developed mania, Will turns outward to help the poor, a social position he has only a loose understanding of. He solicits Hand’s help, and they decide to travel the world to give away Will’s money because it constitutes “doing something.” In travel, Will and Hand feel themselves to be in positive control of their grief. Will’s narration speaks to his manic emotional and physical states: “last year was the strangest I’d ever been involved in,” he says. “It was the most brutal and bizarre. I’d lost Jack and been given more money than I’d ever seen in one place, and I’d been fainting more, falling more” (42). Bearing this in mind, Will views travel and philanthropy as means for him to retake control of his life. Paid \$80,000 for selling his likeness to an advertising campaign, initially Will “felt briefly, mistakenly, powerful . . . But then [he] came back down, crashing” (42). Feeling helpless in the face of death, Will details his effort to empower himself. *Velocity* documents Will’s therapeutic self-improvement, observing how he heals his wounded emotional state by “doing something” for the world.

By modeling Will off of both himself and his imagined audience, Eggers positions *Velocity* to benefit himself and his ideal readers. Will’s distress about Jack’s death helps Eggers to mine his own feelings about his parents, and Will’s earnest effort to enact social change, however localized and insubstantial, offers his imagined audience an example of someone like themselves using travel and philanthropy to improve himself while contributing benevolently to the world. Pushing its ideal readers to recognize themselves in Will, *Velocity* encourages Eggers’s imagined audience to internalize the lessons Will learns about himself

in relation to global culture to transform themselves into more socially conscious, socially active people. As he says to *Huck* magazine, Eggers promises his imagined audience that his literature is “going to walk [them] through” the process of learning about the world (24). Since to some extent Eggers models Will off of his imagined audience, Eggers hopes to prompt his ideal reader to accept Will’s lessons as their own.

Travel allows Will to respond actively to his manic emotional state, offering him a focus for his attention: global poverty. Even if, as I will explain in the coming pages, Will’s and Hand’s approach to philanthropy regularly demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of and disrespect for the people they set out to aid, nonetheless *Velocity* portrays Will and Hand as well-meaning, socially engaged global citizens. Despite Will’s and Hand’s frequently misguided attempts to help others, the novel characterizes their actions positively to assert the therapeutic value of “doing something.”

“The poverty was incongruous,” Will notes while driving through rural Morocco. “It wasn’t clear who owned the farms, or why these crumbled houses stood on these well-kept farms, and why none of the homes had roofs” (178). Just as Jack’s death leaves Will confused -- no one trying to help Jack or his family “knew what they were doing” (275) -- so too does he find poverty incomprehensible and inconsistent. In sensing a link between his experience of Jack’s death and other people’s struggles with poverty, however superficial, Will develops empathy for others.

Will's account of his experiences in Africa suggests travel and philanthropy offer him and Hand means to commune positively with people different from themselves. Through travel and by donating money, Will and Hand confront their emotional distress and address their personal suffering, and in doing so they come to recognize the difficulties faced by other people in a way that allows them to respond with empathy to the struggles of others. In this sense, emotional distress functions in *Velocity* to develop its characters' sense of self-awareness and social responsibility, conflating Will's and Hand's emotional healing in response to Jack's death with their awareness of and empathy for the suffering of others. However clumsy their efforts might be at times, Will's and Hand's emotional distress encourages them to pursue social change through what they come to understand to be empathetic, mutually beneficial relationships with other people. Recall Eggers's emphasis on "person-to-person contact" detailed briefly in Chapter Three: "you don't know anything until you've been there, or until you've met somebody," Eggers says (24). Will's narration exhibits the value Eggers places on "person-to-person contact." His encounters with poverty cause him to understand his own suffering in relation to the struggles of others. By describing his empathetic awakening, Will's narration suggests to Eggers's imagined audience that they might benefit from similarly exposing themselves to global others in the wake of personal hardship.

*Velocity's* primary goal for its imagined readership is to teach the importance of respect during global exchanges. With respect, the novel suggests, international relations can benefit both parties in meaningful ways. To

communicate this lesson, the narrative catalogues instances of Will and Hand failing to complete charitable work as a result of their disrespect for the people they attempt to aid. One of the clearest examples of Will and Hand failing at their charitable efforts occurs during their final attempt to donate money in Marrakesh. With two hours remaining before a flight to Heathrow, Will and Hand feverishly work to give away their remaining \$400 in Moroccan tender. In their rush, they decide that Hand will jump from their moving rental car onto the back of a horse-drawn cart to give its driver their remaining money. Modeled after a Hollywood style spectacle, the narrative makes clear the absurdity of their plan: the crowds around their car “were like extras, paid to drive to and fro” (229); “we’ll get arrested,” Hand protests (230). After Hand decides the stunt is foolish, Will declares he will make the jump in Hand’s place. Describing the lead up to his jump, Will says “the man, at first not paying us any mind, suddenly turned his head and watched us, confused, concerned. We were looking at each other, he and I. I was trying to see a way that I could get myself onto his cart and he seemed to know this. I looked at the back of his cart, and then at him, and at his donkey, then back at him. He didn’t want me jumping on his cart” (230). Will is conflicted about the idea of jumping between moving vehicles to give money: “This was stupid,” he says to himself. “*This would be great if you made it work. Stupid. Completely spectacular!*” (230). Will is aware that the man driving the cart has no interest in a stranger forcing himself into his space, especially while in traffic. Likewise, Will is conscious of how dangerous the stunt is. However, as Will says to himself before his attempt, “We have to follow through every time” (230).

Bearing in mind the emphasis Will's internal monologue places on spectacle, his narration suggests he and Hand must "follow through" with all of their ideas for charity because their charity serves themselves first and foremost. As their Hollywood-style effort to give the cart driver money suggests, in this case charity serves for Will and Hand to make themselves infamous. The fact that their charity intrusively invades the space of its beneficiary is irrelevant to how they understand philanthropic work to function.

It is important that Will's stunt fails. When he gives the driver money the transaction is emotionally unfulfilling for both parties involved. Not all charitable efforts are equal, the scene suggests, and not all philanthropy is successful. As soon as Will jumps to the cart, the scene turns slapstick: "my chin hit the wood," Will says, "and then I saw the quick swirl of the sky then wailed backward and my back struck the pavement and I saw the sun and was still" (231). After failing to execute his stunt, Will recognizes himself as a clown: the cart driver "looked at me like I was a neighborhood child who no one understood but had to be dealt with daily," Will says. He sees himself as "the kid who chased cats and spied on elderly women" (231). Will's narration indicates that his social relations in Morocco remain half-formed; he behaves like a misunderstood child uncertain of his position in the community. At the same time, the slapstick physicality of his fall suggests his failure is both natural and something to laugh at. "You were like a flying squirrel," Hand recalls to Will. "It was cool there for a second . . . But then you didn't get a grip on the cart. You just kind of hit it and bounced off" (234). After their failure to land their stunt, Will and Hand recognize that although their

relationship with Marrakesh locals hinges on their effort to give the locals money, they have yet to develop successful, respectful strategies for their donations. In recognizing this, their failure serves as a lesson for Eggers's ideal readers to internalize before making similar (if less extreme) mistakes of their own while engaging with unfamiliar cultures.

Will's and Hand's attempt to give money to the cart driver fails not only because of their scheme's absurd premise but also because the spectacle of the event makes no effort to respect the integrity of the person set to benefit from their charity: the cart driver. When Will organizes his jump from car to cart, he has yet to understand how to relate with others meaningfully; he knows the cart driver does not want Will jumping on his cart, but Will is more interested in pleasing himself by accomplishing the stunt than he is interested in giving to the cart driver in a respectful way. His education in how to interact respectfully with others to establish positive "person-to-person contact" remains on-going. The spectacle of the stunt is presented to Eggers's ideal readers as all that matters to Will. As such, the text makes clear that Will's exchange with the cart driver is always already failed both as an act of charity and as a social exchange.

After Will embarrasses himself by failing the jump, Hand decides they should give the man the money anyway. "We might as well," he says. Will agrees: "I got the bills from my sock and gave them to Hand, who delivered them to the man. The man shook his head, bewildered, but took the money. He climbed onto his cart and urged his donkey on, before we could change our minds" (232). Although the driver accepts their money, Will's and Hand's charity



remains a social failure because their engagement with the cart driver is centered on themselves. More than performing good work, Will and Hand wish to create a spectacle. When their attempt at spectacle fails, they perform their charity out of shame. The driver takes their money, but he is bewildered by their actions. There is no empathy in the transaction. At no point does the subjectivity of the cart driver enter Will's or Hand's consideration for how to approach their charitable work. They remain ignorant of how charity functions as a mutual relationship between givers and receivers. Above all, *Velocity* aims to show its imagined reader the importance of mutual respect in social exchanges, especially when dealing with unfamiliar cultures.

As Eggers says to *Huck* magazine, "you can't make assumptions about the lives" of people from somewhere different from your home "unless you've met them and really listened and really gone somewhere" (Eggers and Doran 24). Will and Hand have "gone somewhere" by traveling to Morocco, but Will's narration, especially its self-deprecating tone, indicates his awareness that he and Hand fail to really "meet" the people they hope to give money to. As their engagement with the cart driver shows, Will and Hand do not listen to their beneficiaries. Their giving is motivated by assumptions about the cart driver's needs. By refusing to consider the cart driver's agency in their exchange with him, Will and Hand sully their charitable act, making it entirely about themselves rather than about sharing a respectful, mutually beneficial experience with a stranger. Any of the goodwill carried by Will's and Hand's philanthropy is lost on the cart driver as a result of their disrespectful engagement with him. The

slapstick nature of Will's failure to land his jump and the cart driver's bewilderment at their charitable gesture presents the scene simultaneously as satirical and didactic, a lesson for Will, Hand, and Eggers's ideal readers to remember to avoid making similar mistakes in the future.

In contrast to the cart stunt, each of Will's and Hand's successful charitable transactions exhibit some degree of respect for the agency of their beneficiaries. Frequently this respect manifests in the exchange of capital for mundane goods, exchanges which acknowledge the dignity of the person set to benefit from Will's and Hand's patronage. Their charity succeeds when they allow their beneficiary to enter the transaction with them on his or her terms. For instance, after stumbling on a market square finishing its business day in Marrakesh, Will and Hand decide to enter the largest store still open to buy trinkets for large sums of money. "Among the tea sets and chess sets and tiny chests for special things," Will explains, "I looked for and found the smallest, cheapest and least desirable item the store held. It was a keychain anchored to a small white animal, probably a sheep, crudely carved from a smooth milky material looking like lucite. I held it, caressed it. I presented it to Hand, posing as my knowledgeable dealer in precious objects, with a rumble of approval. He came to me and touched it and purred his interest" (197). At first glance, Will seems guilty of practicing the self-conscious irony critics like Benjamin DeMott accuse Eggers and McSweeney's of celebrating: the keychain is the "smallest, cheapest and least desirable item the store held;" it is paradoxically "crude" and "precious." Its uselessness is so "incredible . . . it's almost painful" (197). The store owner

asks for 60DH for the item, “about \$3” (198). After bartering, Will purchases the keychain for 1800DH. “We were insisting on paying him about \$120 for a keychain priced at \$3,” Will explains. “But the man didn’t flinch. He was a titan. He touched a finger to his mouth, either gauging our sanity or pretending to mull our newest offer, and after a long perfect pause . . . again acquiesced. I was having probably the best time I could remember ever having” (198-199). Will and Hand risk offending the shopkeeper by offering to purchase a cheaply made, inexpensive keychain at an incredible mark-up. However, it is important to recognize that they barter with the man before settling on a price; the shopkeeper is a “titan” in control of the transaction. Despite basing their interaction with the shopkeeper around an ironic interest in a valueless item, ultimately Will and Hand engage with the shopkeeper on his terms. Up to this point, most of Will’s and Hand’s previous charitable acts constitute surprising strangers with unsolicited handfuls of cash. By bartering for the keychain, Will and Hand respect the shopkeeper’s integrity as a business man working to provide for himself. The shopkeeper is made a “titan” by the bartering process while Will testifies that he “was having probably the best time [he] could remember ever having.” Despite cultural privilege enabling their exchange with the shopkeeper, Will’s and Hand’s decision to perform their charity according to the rules of the shopkeeper’s business allows their philanthropy to function positively for them and the shopkeeper alike.

By viewing self-interested charitable acts like the cart stunt through a deprecating lens, Will’s narration colors such behavior as absurd. His exchange

with the shopkeeper asserts the importance of mutual respect and understanding during international exchanges. Will's narration increasingly undermines self-interest and irony as reasons to pursue charity, placing more emphasis on his and Hand's mistakes than on their successes. Their charity is just as often the punchline of a joke at his or Hand's expense as it is a positive interaction between them and their beneficiaries. If you are drawn to charity out of self-interest, Will suggests, you are not alone, but the value of such charity is limited. *Velocity* indicates to its ideal readers that charity should respect the people it benefits while teaching charitable benefactors about the people they aim to help.

By reflecting on his and Hand's respect (or lack thereof) for the people of Morocco, Will speaks to the ways the emphasis he and Hand place on personal pleasure disrespects the people they seek to help. When they position their enjoyment over a respect for others, empathy is absent from their charitable exchanges. To this end, Will and Hand start to recognize the disrespectful nature of their charity as their trip progresses. "Is there a country where we haven't been stopped [by the police]?" Hand asks Will. "We've been pulled over four times in five days" (311). "[Charity] is about control," Hand decides (319), a control he and Will wrongly assert over the impoverished by staging spectacles to make themselves look "cool for a second" (234). As their travels draw to a close, Will and Hand begin to acknowledge their charity is unasked for, and in recognizing this they exhibit empathy for others. They realize charity only works benevolently when it is mutually agreed upon by givers and receivers. By respecting the

agency of the people set to benefit from their actions, Will and Hand approach charity as a positive social exchange which benefits both parties equally.

*Velocity* marks Eggers's first effort to model his protagonists off of his imagined audience, using his characters' actions to speak to his ideal readers in relatable terms to teach them lessons about global issues. In *Velocity's* case, Will's and Hand's actions teach Eggers's ideal readers about the therapeutic benefits of empathetic, respectful global socialization and philanthropy. Eggers's biography informs Will's character insofar as Will's emotional state and financial position have precedents in Eggers's experience of his parents' deaths and his early success as an author, but the lessons about empathy and respect embedded in Will's narration distinguish Will from Eggers. After all, Eggers sees himself in some way as having already absorbed the lessons Will learns throughout the novel. *Velocity* uses Will to address its imagined audience, who Eggers understands to be well meaning but socially uninformed. In this sense, *Velocity* indicates Eggers's growing emphasis on narratives which feature protagonists modeled in meaningful ways off of who he sees as his target audience, using his characters' actions to push his ideal readers to transform themselves into more socially aware, empathetic people conscious of the benefits of social engagement.

### **Transforming Characters, Transforming Readers**

Published in 2004, Eggers's short story "Another" further develops his focus on protagonists modeled after his ideal readers who he uses to instruct his audience about what he imagines are gaps or biases in their worldview. Like *Velocity* before it, I believe "Another" encourages Eggers's ideal reader to consider the therapeutic and didactic benefits of global social engagement. The story presents Eggers's imagined audience with what Eggers sees as healthy, potentially progressive attitudes about international exchanges following emotional distress. Unlike *Velocity*, "Another" does so using a character more clearly defined from Eggers than Will is, encouraging Eggers's ideal readers to relate directly with its narrator rather than to interpret the text according to Eggers's biography. To this end, "Another" describes terrorism's effects on the psyche of an unnamed middle class American man. "I'd been a married man, twice," the narrator says. "I'd been a man who turned forty among friends; I'd had pets . . . [and] people working for me" (7). Beyond asserting the narrator's status as a middle aged member of the middle class, details about the narrator's history remain vague throughout "Another." The narrator describes only his actions and his psychological state as they relate to the events of the story. His similarity to Eggers's "well-meaning" but globally uninformed imagined audience is suggested through his biases and actions rather than through any extended explication of his past. Eggers's description of the narrator's biases works to critique the narrator's worldview, helping Eggers's imagined audience to reflect on themselves in relation to the narrator to nuance their own perceptions of the world.

“Another” describes its narrator’s travel to Egypt in response to a series of terrorist acts. From the beginning of the story, the narrator situates his account within an international political context: the first paragraph declares “it was a bad time to be in Cairo, unwise at that juncture, with the poor state of relations between our nation and the entire region, but I did it anyway” (7). In the story’s first sentences, the narrator draws the reader’s attention to the history of strained relations between America and the Middle East: “it was a bad time to be in Cairo.” Although the narrator travels to Egypt “as a courier,” his labour is superficial; the reader never sees him execute his given task. At no point is the narrator’s employment as a courier referenced again by the story. Rather, as far as the reader is aware, his impetus for travel is private, a response to his emotional distress.

Shortly after establishing political context for the narrative, the narrator describes his mental state: “I’d been having trouble thinking, finishing things. Words like *anxiety* and *depression* seemed apt then, in that I wasn’t interested in the things I was usually interested in, and couldn’t finish a glass of milk without deliberation. But I didn’t stop to ruminate or wallow. Diagnosis would have made it all less interesting” (7). By nature of their proximity in the text, “Another” puts global politics and personal mental health into dialogue with one another, compelling Eggers’s ideal readers to consider how the two seemingly independent phenomena might connect.

Early in “Another,” the narrator suggests his depression is the result of a series of acts of public violence in both the Middle East and in America: he

arrives in Egypt “a few weeks after some terrorists had slaughtered seventy tourists at Luxor, and everyone was jittery . . . And I’d just been in New York, on the top of the Empire State Building, a few days after a guy opened fire there, killing one” (8). It is significant that the narrator’s emotional distress stems from the second-hand experience of terrorism, acts of violence whose “quiet trauma” significantly affects the modern American imagination.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, it is important that an act of terrorism in Egypt is presented as comparable to an act of terrorism in the United States: the narrator does not racialize either act, nor does he present one as more expected or upsetting than the other. Rather, international and domestic terrorist acts are rendered equally alarming to him. In this way, “Another” undermines efforts to see terrorist acts as always racially motivated.

At the same time, the narrator establishes his distress as readily relatable for American readers by describing his personal reactions to mediated depictions of violence. By nature of the primacy of terrorism in the American imagination, it is safe to assume that many American readers have confronted images similar to the ones which trouble the narrator by virtue of the extensive media coverage and popular discourse which surround terrorist acts. More often than not this media coverage is racialized in some way, especially in a post-9/11 Western culture in which terrorism and Islamicism are regularly and broadly conflated. Considering the narrator’s emphasis on global politics in relation to his mental health, the relatable cause of the narrator’s emotional distress offers a point of entry to the text for Eggers’s ideal audience, readers who Eggers imagines are

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<sup>2</sup> As detailed in Chapter Three, E. Ann Kaplan defines “quiet trauma” in *Trauma Culture* as second hand trauma experienced by people involved indirectly with a traumatic event.



unfamiliar with the history of America's political relations with the Middle East, or whose understanding of the region derives mainly from racist media depictions of its people. The ubiquitous nature of the site of the narrator's distress -- the mass media -- grants readers generally unaware of global issues or racist media bias access to the narrative's subtle exploration of international politics and race relations. "Another" presents Eggers's ideal audience with basic lessons about media culture and international relations while offering them a safe space to challenge racial biases they might hold as a result of media representations of terrorism.

On arriving in Egypt, the narrator aims to compound his emotional distress by placing himself in compromising situations, presumably out of a sense of guilt for surviving acts of violence performed with few lasting consequences. At first, the tense foreign relations between the US and Egypt appear perfectly suited to the narrator's sense of self-loathing. As the narrator says, "I wasn't consciously following trouble around, but then what the hell was I doing" (8). He finds himself in Egypt "against the advice of [his] government." Despite his claims to the contrary, the narrator seems to pursue trouble actively. He declares that "there were plenty of Egyptians who would love to kill me, I was sure, and I was ready to engage in any way with someone who wanted me dead" (9). It is significant that the narrator presents his expectation for violence in the Middle East objectively despite the clear racist biases informing his actions and outlook: although Egyptians are disinterested in him, eyeing him "vacantly," the narrator feels like "a star, a heathen, an enemy, a nothing" because he is American.

Rather than offering any explicit comment on his international search for violence following acts of terrorism, the narrator's account urges Eggers's imagined readers to juxtapose the narrator's emotional reaction to terrorism with their own. The narrator's expectation for violence in Egypt serves as a point of comparison against which readers not attuned to racism or uninformed about international relations can consider their own reactions to terrorism, leading ideally to a deeper understanding of the ways people respond to traumatizing events while illustrating the impact of media representations of terrorism on Western attitudes about Islamic Others.

Eventually, the narrator's pursuit of violence leads him to hire Heshem, an Egyptian horseman, to guide him to view the Red Pyramid. The narrator states: "I wanted to ride on a horse through the desert. I wanted to see if this man -- slight, with brown teeth, wide-set eyes, a cop moustache -- would try to kill me . . . I was alone and reckless and both passive and quick to fury. It was a beautiful time, everything electric and hideous" (9). In contrast to his general, non-racialized description of terrorist acts, it is important that the narrator paints Heshem as a racial stereotype, suggesting the effects of media bias on the narrator's perception of Egypt. The narrator's description of Heshem recalls Hollywood terrorists, the sort of rote enemies of America seen frequently in media depictions of the Middle East. "Another" subverts racist stereotypes by emphasizing how Heshem outwardly embodies the narrator's assumptions about the Middle East while working to show how Heshem's relationship with the narrator exceeds the narrator's stereotypical expectations. In doing so, the text exposes to Eggers's

imagined reader the degree to which stereotypical assumptions are the product of media images and misguided popular opinions in the West, opinions the narrator suggests are formed in no small part in response to emotional distress.

Initially the narrator draws to Heshem out of a desire for violence, a desire which colors his depressed worldview. Once Heshem's and the narrator's expedition to the pyramids is underway, however, the narrator's horse becomes a site of shared experience between the two men. The physical act of riding a horse through the desert resolves the narrator's expectation for violence in Egypt, leading him to an understanding of Heshem which allows the narrator to address the anxiety and doubt he feels following his distressed response to terrorism.

While Heshem gallops his horse capably through the sand, the narrator struggles. He explains: "I slid to the back of the saddle and pulled myself forward again. I balled the reins into my hand and leaned down, getting closer to the animal's body. But something or everything was wrong. I was being struck from every angle. It was the most violence I'd experienced in years" (10). At first, the horse does violence to the narrator, delivering the trauma he seeks from Egypt and the Middle East. Eventually, however, the narrator begins to emulate Heshem's riding, modelling himself off of Heshem's actions to move better through the desert. "I was watching how the man moved with the horse" (12), the narrator says. After observing Heshem long enough, the narrator declares, "I learned" (12). In enduring the horse's physical rejection of his efforts to control it and in modelling his actions off of Heshem's to master the horse's movement, the

narrator sees that Heshem and he are more alike than they are different. In acknowledging this, the narrator develops an understanding of how to interact constructively with Heshem.<sup>3</sup>

It is unsurprising that Eggers presents shared experience as a means to constructive global interaction and increased social awareness: remember he received his first passport at 26, and in 2004 he remained a 34 year old enamoured with travel. He hopes his narratives appeal to Western readers whose perspective is shaped only by the “middle of nowhere” in which they live. Bearing in mind the limited worldview Eggers expects from his readership, it makes sense that the narrator achieves an increased sense of social perspective upon identifying with Heshem. He declares that he controls his horse out of a need to prove himself to Heshem: “I needed to prove to this Egyptian lunatic that I could ride with him,” he says. He wants to show that he and Heshem were “part of a continuum that went back thousands of years, nothing having changed” (12). By mastering his horse, the narrator feels he and Heshem “were equal out here, that I could keep up and devour it, the agony. That I could be punished, that I expected the punishment and could withstand it, however long he wanted to give it to me” (12). Although the narrator’s comments about proving himself to Heshem scan ironically, considering the narrative’s early focus on mental health it is significant that the narrator’s description returns here to a language of

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<sup>3</sup> Given the fact that the narrator travels to a foreign region to adopt cultural behaviours which reinforce his liberal American worldview, “Another” flirts dangerously with the colonial impulse to “bridge” the West culturally with the Middle East. Any criticism exploring the text from this angle is justified and important, especially since Eggers likely does not intend to reinforce colonial attitudes with his writing. Although I recognize the value of such criticism, for the purposes of brevity and focus, however, I will not explore the issue at this time.

endurance and self-reflection rooted in the logics of trauma and therapy. Recalling the idea that therapy is an effort to transform oneself in the wake of physical or emotional distress, the narrator's suffering on the horse works to therapeutically resolve his distress about American global relations in a world increasingly anxious about terrorist acts. Just as he has "trouble thinking, finishing things" prior to his travel, on his horse the narrator is in "agony." By learning to ride, however, he "devours" his pain. He "withstands" it and is transformed, made "equal" to Heshem. As much as the narrator rides through the desert to prove himself to Heshem, who he defines comedically as an "Egyptian lunatic," he also he wants to locate his and Heshem's shared history to dismantle his anxiety about global difference leading to and stemming from terrorism.

The narrator develops some understanding of his and Heshem's shared humanity by "enduring" suffering and improving himself in its wake. If the horse comes to represent American/Egyptian cultural difference, the horse also serves as a therapeutic tool for dismantling that difference. The horse punishes its untrained rider, then rewards education and understanding when its rider copes with his punishment. The act of riding the horse transcends racial and cultural difference. In learning to ride his horse, the social tension between the narrator and Heshem dissolves. On dissolving the tension between himself and Heshem, the narrator's emotional distress seems to lift: "Good outside now," he says to Heshem after their second pyramid visit. "There is another," Heshem says. "I want to go," the narrator replies (15). Where previously the narrator is unable to finish even a glass of milk "without deliberation," his person-to-person contact in

the Middle East facilitates his therapeutic renewal. Presenting social difference as a surmountable problem which assists in the narrator's therapeutic renewal, Eggers frames the narrator's relationship with Heshem as a potentially constructive example for readers generally unfamiliar with the world to consider in light of their own past and future interactions with foreign unknowns, especially following experiences of trauma or periods of emotional distress.

### **Appealing to Readers With Context**

More so than either *Velocity* or "Another," Eggers's 2012 novel *A Hologram for the King* features a protagonist whose experiences seem explicitly modeled off of Eggers's imagined audience rather than off of himself. *Hologram* describes the mental distress of an American man, Alan, who suffers a forced shift in economic position as a result of the 2008 global recession, an experience familiar to middle class Western and American readers coming to the book near the end of the recession upon its publication in 2012. Significantly, *Hologram* describes the social and psychological effects of Alan's economic transition from a privileged member of the white middle class to a position of precarity, a transition Eggers is presently unfamiliar with as a secure member of the American creative class. In this sense, *Hologram* actively undermines efforts to read Alan's distress through the lens of Eggers. Instead, Alan speaks directly to Eggers's imagined middle class readership. In *Hologram*, Alan effectively *is* the reader. Since Eggers's imagined audience is the well-meaning middle class, the

demographic most commonly associated with the recession's effects, Eggers's ideal reader is meant to see Alan and themselves as one and the same. As such, *Hologram* functions to shepherd Eggers's imagined readership through the recession. It indicates that life goes on in spite of economic struggles, and it encourages an embrace of globalism as a viable response to America's declining economic vibrancy, suggesting to Eggers's imagined "well-meaning" but socially uninformed readership how to move forward in the face of financial ruin.

Although Alan is not the victim of any clear violence, nonetheless he suffers mental anguish as a result of his changing social status and financial trouble. He faces no physical harm or cataclysmically traumatizing event, and his shift from wealth and opportunity to bankruptcy and underemployment occurs relatively gradually, but he exhibits a variety of symptoms of distress as a result of his financial and professional struggles. He suffers from chronic insomnia; he develops an alcohol habit; when he does sleep, he recalls past failures which led to his current position. The book's opening paragraphs assert that Alan lacks courage, that he feels unprepared to face the world, that he endures an assortment of physical and emotional ailments. *Hologram* describes Alan's effort to rediscover his personal value in the face of his emotional distress.

The book begins with Alan arriving in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, "virtually broke, nearly unemployed" (4). Upon Alan's arrival in Jeddah, the narrator briefly explains the purpose of Alan's trip: to present a "holographic telecommunications system" to win a major IT contract for the development of King Abdullah Economic City, for which Alan expects to receive a sizable commission that he believes will

“fix everything that ailed him” (Eggers 3-4). As he does in both *Velocity* and “Another,” Eggers quickly establishes the principal social issue at the heart of *Hologram*’s conflict: it aims to explore the human effects of global capitalism and of American business’s shifting position of economic influence. Not insignificantly, Alan’s personal and professional problems stem largely from his failures as an entrepreneur. As the narrator notes, Alan “owed money to many people.” Included among his debts are: “\$18k to a pair of bicycle designers who had built him a prototype for a new bicycle he thought he could manufacture in the Boston area. For this he was called an idiot. He owed money to Jim Wong, who had loaned him \$45k to pay for materials and the first and last on a warehouse lease. He owed another \$65k or so to a half-dozen friends and would-be partners” (5). Buried in debt, Alan’s professional failures have direct implications for his personal life. As the narrator says, “when he realized he could not pay [his daughter] Kit’s tuition, it was too late to apply for any other aid” (ibid.); “he was divorced from Kit’s mother, Ruby. . . . Ruby was an unholy pain in the ass who now lived in California and contributed nothing financially to Kit’s finances” (4-5). Although Alan experiences no physical violence as a result of his entrepreneurial failures, his personal life lies in ruins. Consequently, his economic struggles cause him extreme emotional distress, especially in regards to his relationships with his ex-wife and his daughter.

Bearing in mind Alan’s entrepreneurial failures and his struggles with underemployment, it is fitting that *Hologram* begins with an epigraph from Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, proclaiming “it is not every day that we are



needed” (1). That Eggers draws inspiration from Beckett is unsurprising: in the context of Beckett’s play, the quote sits within a larger monologue in which one of Beckett’s characters decides people have an obligation to help others when needed, a sentiment central to Eggers’s view of how literature functions for readers. Moreover, taken literally, Beckett’s language echoes the feelings of the underemployed middle class during the recession, linking Alan’s struggle to the struggles of Eggers’s imagined audience. Since Eggers’s ideal readers are, to paraphrase Eggers, middle class Americans from the “middle of nowhere,” people from midwestern states like Illinois and Wisconsin whose local economies rely on industries particularly affected by the recession, Alan’s experience of the recession speaks to the experiences of Eggers’s imagined audience. As such, *Hologram* intends to build solidarity between Alan and Eggers’s imagined audience to assert a shared experience of the recession and to suggest in ideal terms how the middle class might rebuild themselves in its wake.

Alan responds earnestly to his uncomfortable financial position by making himself constantly available to King Abdullah even when Abdullah shows little regard for Alan or his team’s time or efforts. For example, upon arriving at the location of his presentation to King Abdullah in King Abdullah Economic City, Alan finds the presentation tent abandoned save for a stage and some folding chairs set on a bed of rugs (55). He and his team are unwanted by Abdullah. The Americans are ill-equipped to accomplish their presentation: they receive no amenities from their host, not even connection to a wi-fi network. Karim al-Ahmad, Alan’s principal business contact in King Abdullah Economic City,

repeatedly cancels his meetings with Alan and his team with no warning, leaving Alan's presentation in perpetual limbo (79). Still, despite Abdullah's less-than-welcoming treatment, the narrator asserts that:

Alan was happy for the work. He needed the work. The eighteen months or so before the call from Ingvall had been humbling. Filing a tax return for \$22,350 in taxable income was an experience he hadn't expected to have at his age. He'd been consulting for seven years, each with dwindling revenue. No one was spending. (11)

As the epigraph from Beckett suggests, *Hologram* goes to great lengths to testify to the psychological value of being needed. The text draws a strong connection between a person's sense of self-worth and the opportunity he or she has to work as a contributing member of society. The United States Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics notes that the national average unemployment rate during the recession was as high as 10% in October 2010, and it remained above 9% for over two years (from April 2009 to September 2011). Meanwhile, at the time of *Hologram*'s publication in June 2012, the national employment rate remained high at 8.2% (2015). As *Hologram*'s narrator notes, "five years ago business had been good:" in 2007 the national unemployment rate sat at a comparatively comfortable 5%. *Hologram* appeals to its ideal readers' memories of the peak years of economic recession by detailing some economic and psychological effects of underemployment, effects which a recession-weary American readership are acutely conscious of. By emphasizing these effects, *Hologram* positions its narrative as a tool to enable Eggers's imagined audience

to develop an understanding of and, ideally, a response to the recession's lingering psychological consequences.

Bearing in mind *Hologram's* emphasis on bankruptcy and underemployment, the optimism at the heart of Alan's narrative is striking. Although King Abdullah strings Alan and his colleagues along by repeatedly delaying their meeting, Alan remains employed for the first time since the start of his economic struggles. Similarly, while in Saudi Arabia, Alan meets and courts Dr. Zahra Hakem, his first love interest since his divorce. Alan receives preventative surgery on a growth on his neck, a source of anxiety and potential economic hardship if neglected. All the while, Alan rediscovers his confidence and sense of self-worth: Ruby, Alan's ex-wife, caused Alan to doubt himself by undermining his sense of humor: she "hated the jokes.—So embarrassing" (Eggers 32). In Saudi Arabia, Alan develops relationships with people who value him for his personality: he makes friends with a taxi driver named Yousef who appreciates him for his comedy. Similarly, Alan's relationship with Zahra reaffirms his confidence in his body after Ruby undermined his value as a lover: when making love with Zahra, Alan "was not disgusting. I don't want to have sex that someone wouldn't watch, Ruby had said. She assumed it would all end at thirty-five. . . . He looked at Zahra again, into her dark eyes that forgave him and brightened when they saw him smile" (Eggers 319). Alan's time in Saudi Arabia offers evidence of healing in the aftermath of personal and professional turmoil. In this way, *Hologram* serves to reassure its ideal readership, reminding them that healing and change do occur. The text aspires to "help" its ideal

readers with its description of Alan's experiences, just as its epigraph sees Beckett's often unneeded characters declaring mankind's obligation to aid others when given the chance.

By detailing the recession's impact on Alan's life, *Hologram* works to build solidarity between Alan and Eggers's imagined audience, many of whom likely suffered similarly from the recession's effects. Alan's efforts to address his personal financial crisis offer readers similarly impacted by the economic downturn evidence that they are not alone. *Hologram* hopes to appeal to readers in the midst of personal struggle who need positive reinforcement. By modeling Alan's perspective and his experiences off of Eggers's imagined audience, Eggers commits Alan's experience of the recession in general ways to *Hologram's* readers. Alan's improvement suggests to Eggers's imagined audience that they too can move beyond the recession's effects. Eggers designs Alan to speak directly to the economically precarious middle class, using Alan's actions and experiences ideally to raise Eggers's ideal readers' understanding of and response to the recession's impact on themselves.

### **When Reading is Not Enough**

Following *Hologram's* optimistic suggestion to its readership that everything will be fine after financial ruin so long as you remain available and hopeful, as Alan does at the novel's conclusion, Eggers's fiction has grown increasingly critical of storytelling as an effective tool for responding to social

issues, reflecting Craig Walzer's skepticism in his introduction to *Out of Exile* about the value of documenting testimony (14). Where previously Eggers's narratives served to encourage his ideal readers to draw particular, optimistic conclusions about the world -- *Velocity* encourages its audience to understand the value of respectful international exchanges, for instance, while *Hologram* works to build solidarity amongst an economically troubled readership -- Eggers's most recent work marks a newly critical edge for his fiction, pushing his readers to challenge the social efficacy of literature while encouraging them to consider the implications of their own social inaction as members of the "well-meaning" but uninformed middle class.

Nowhere is this more clear than in Eggers's 2014 novel, *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And The Prophets, Do They Live Forever?*. Composed entirely of dialogue with no exposition or description unspoken by its characters, *Your Fathers* documents the terrorist actions of Thomas, a disturbed young man, whose close friend, a half Vietnamese man named Don, was shot by police in his backyard. The novel follows Thomas as he kidnaps a series of people he feels might lead him to process Don's death in a way that will help him to make sense of the assorted problems plaguing contemporary America. Touching on hot-button issues including police violence, racism, mental illness, the lingering effects of the economic recession, and austerity, in many respects *Your Fathers* is Eggers's most skeptical and timely novel. It sits in line with Eggers's previous fiction insofar as it continues to emphasize a protagonist modeled off of Eggers's imagined audience -- Thomas is a college educated suburban white male; his

understanding of politics and current events is, by and large, naive -- but it refuses the positivist resolve which underlies so much of Eggers's work.

Structured around dialogues between Thomas and each of his victims, *Your Fathers* offers two perspectives on each of the social issues it addresses, tempering Thomas's critical, skeptical, frequently erratic perspective with his victims' more moderate responses. Thomas's victim selection is eclectic, reflecting his scattered mental state. They include a catalogue of people ranging from high achievers to social degenerates, starting with a NASA astronaut Thomas admired in college before escalating both in scope and in personal relevance to Thomas to include his local congressman, his pedophile sixth grade teacher, his addict mother, a policeman who shot Don, the director of patient access at the hospital Don was sent to after being shot, and a random woman Thomas met on the beach outside his hideout. Each victim offers Thomas -- and, by extension, the reader -- insight to how Thomas is right to be distressed both by his personal circumstances as well as by the state of America in general, while making clear that Thomas's perspective is skewed and that his response is inappropriate. "I know you're confused," Congressman Dickinson says to Thomas at one point. "But in actuality your brain is plain scrambled" (36). Where previously Eggers draws connection between his protagonists and his imagined audience to encourage his ideal readers' transformation into more socially aware people while offering them positive reinforcement after distressing events, *Your Fathers* challenges its imagined audience's worldview by indicating how a domestic terrorist can develop as a result of a well meaning but uninformed

social perspective, especially in extreme circumstances and when dealing with mental illness. Where in the past Eggers's writing gently shepherds his imagined audience's intellectual development, *Your Fathers* urgently impels its ideal readers to change things about society and themselves to avoid creating the circumstances responsible for radicalizing a person like Thomas.

*Your Fathers* emphasizes the perils of basing social action on misinformation or generalizations. Consider, for example, when Thomas rationalizes police violence to Don's shooter: "I'll tell you why you shot him," Thomas says. "Because you were all gathered around him, and you assumed the logical end to that situation is your guns are fired and someone is dead. It doesn't seem right otherwise. Do you agree with that?" (172). Rooted in generalities, Thomas's feelings about police gun violence, however understandable, are extreme and baseless, a gut reaction to his friend's death. In contrast, consider a *Washington Post* article documenting the roughly 1000 individuals killed by police guns in 2015.<sup>4</sup> Published in December 2015, 18 months after *Your Fathers*'s release, The *Post*'s analysis finds that of all the people killed in America by police in 2015, "officers fatally shot at least 243 people with mental health problems;" the article claims that their "analysis found that about 9 in 10 of the mentally troubled people were armed, usually with guns but also with knives and other sharp objects," justifying police violence in the eyes of the law. Significantly, the *Post* points out that their "analysis also found that most [victims] died at the

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<sup>4</sup> Multiple periodicals recently assembled databases similar to the *Post*'s. See also: "The Counted: People killed by the police in the US, recorded with your help." *The Guardian*. 1 June 2015. Web.

hands of police officers who had not been trained to deal with the mentally ill” (“A Year of Reckoning”). As much as Thomas reflects the background and gut opinions of Eggers’s imagined readership, *Your Fathers* encourages its ideal audience to think beyond Thomas’s claims by contrasting Thomas’s argument with the police officer’s responses, which feature details reflecting statistics about police shootings compiled by the *Post*. The reason for Don’s shooting is nuanced for the reader when the officer asserts that Don was armed with “an eight-inch kitchen knife” (159). Likewise, given the frequency with which mentally ill people are shot by police, it is unsurprising that the officer who shot Don characterizes Don to Thomas as a “disturbed man” (142). For all the ways Thomas’s criticism of the police echoes current opinion that police violence is frequently excessive -- as the *Post* says, recent court cases against officers view the police as “out of control” -- *Your Fathers* balances Thomas’s claims with the police officer’s own to make clear that the police officer sees himself as justified, and the text works to make his perspective seem reasonable given the details of the case he provides and considering Thomas’s emotional responses to his answers. “You’re a fucking idiot,” Thomas repeatedly yells at the officer; “I think you killed my friend because you can’t read” (171). Thomas undermines his argument by insulting the police officer, refusing to hear his side of the story. At the same time, Thomas’s perspective is understandably emotional, and his responses echo much popular opinion on police brutality. Rather than relying on moral binaries to critique police violence and responses to it, *Your Fathers* encourages its ideal readers to consider both Thomas’s and the police officer’s perspectives to develop a more



balanced and nuanced understanding of how police violence occurs and what its lingering effects might be.

Significantly, neither Thomas's nor his victims' speech is explicitly attributed at any point in the novel. As a result, their voices are easily confused during extended exchanges. As their voices blur into one, their words feel directed at the reader as much as they seem aimed at one another. For instance, during his interrogation of the police officer, Thomas poses a series of rhetorical questions: "Do you realize what a strange race of people we are?" he asks. "No one else expects to get their way like we do. Do you know the madness that this unleashes upon the world -- that we expect to have our way every time we get some idea in our head? That twelve heavily armed men can surround one man with a steak knife and the outcome is a backyard execution? Does that not indicate to you that we have work to do? That as a people we have improving to do?" (173). The officer has no response for Thomas. The text implies his silence with a dash, the same sign used to introduce all speech throughout the novel. Although the narrative's tendency to pose questions without offering clear answers is a point of contention for many of the book's critics -- writing for *New Statesman*, for instance, Claire Lowdon declares in her review of the novel that "the problem isn't that these questions don't belong in a novel but that in *Your Fathers* there is nothing outside of the questions" -- in providing a dash with no dialogue, the text seems to pose Thomas's questions to its imagined reader, someone engaged equally with both Thomas's perspective and the perspectives of his victims. *Your Fathers* does not aim to offer answers to the questions it

poses. It does not mean to satisfy all people with clean resolutions or optimistic looks towards the future. Rather, it offers readers multiple opposing voices to push its ideal audience to answer questions about important social issues for themselves. *Your Fathers* positions readers to react personally to its speakers' questions; in doing so, it implicates its imagined audience in each of the social issues the text examines, ideally encouraging readers to internalize multiple perspectives on the social problems the novel addresses before developing their own responses from an informed position.

Considering the ways *Your Fathers* offers its audience conflicting perspectives on the issues it addresses while using formal elements to implicate its readers in its discussions, the narrative's conclusion both fits with and sits apart from the message Eggers typically finishes his work with. On the one hand, the novel finishes like much of Eggers's writing by suggesting that personal problems can be resolved in part by hard, meaningful work. Thomas asserts to the congressman that "if you don't have something grand for men like us to be a part of, we will take apart all the little things" (211). Although Thomas obviously occupies a more militant position than Alan does at the end of *Hologram*, or than Deng does at the end of *What is the What*, the gist of his position is the same as theirs: Alan chooses to stay in Saudi Arabia in hopes of finding work "with some other companies who could be very useful" (330); similarly, Deng proclaims we must collectively "fill the air with our words," and that he will "tell stories to people who will listen and to people who don't want to listen, to people who seek me out and to those who run" to spread news of his experiences and of the experiences

of his countrymen (535). Echoing Alan's and Deng's dedication to meaningful work, Thomas wants above all "to be inspired" (211). "What the fuck is wrong with us wanting to be inspired?" he asks the congressman (211). "Don't we deserve some grand human projects that give us some meaning?" (212). Insofar as he wants to do good work to contribute to society, Thomas is like Alan, and he is like Deng. Alan and Deng share their desire to do good work with their readers, and so too does Thomas. Moreover, just as Eggers models his protagonists off of who he believes his audience to be to encourage an intimate relationship to develop between his characters and his ideal readers, Thomas is modeled to reflect Eggers's understanding of the "well-meaning" but uninformed American middle class. Where in the past Eggers's imagined audience is meant to benefit emotionally from relating intimately with Eggers's protagonists, however, the fact that Thomas is a terrorist pushes Eggers's ideal readers to consider why this resemblance might be problematic.

Across each of his texts, Eggers seems to suggest to his ideal readers that meaningful work of any sort functions to resolve social and emotional issues. In this sense, Eggers's writing offers his ideal audience a seemingly simple path to follow to respond to their problems: they must simply do good work. This attitude is of course deeply problematic, indebted to and reflective of neoliberal thinking seemingly at odds with Eggers's liberal worldview. In *Hologram*, for instance, Alan decides to stay in Saudi Arabia for the promise of work because "he had to" (331). Work is Alan's whole identity. It promises him a salve for his personal issues, and it helps him to combat the wider social threats of economic

recession. He “has” to stay because even though he develops positive relationships in Saudi Arabia, work remains the crux of his who is. Since, for all intents and purposes, Alan functions as a surrogate for Eggers’s imagined audience, his obligation to work is presented uncritically to the reader. Work defines Alan just as it defines Eggers’s imagined audience. Even though *Hologram* concludes without confirming whether or not Alan will find work in the Middle East, the text ends with hope to offer its imagined readership positive reinforcement in the face of their own economic struggles. The text’s faith that Alan will find work and that the status quo will stabilize is meant to comfort Eggers’s ideal readers.

In comparison, even though Thomas asserts the value of “inspired” work, *Your Fathers* ends with him declaring that the fact that everyone is safe and nothing will change after his actions “is the saddest thing [he] ever heard” (212). The contrast between *Hologram*’s and *Your Fathers*’s conclusions is stark and unsubtle: while *Hologram* ends with hope, emblematic of much of Eggers’s fiction, *Your Fathers* ends with sadness and pessimism. Thomas aspires to meaningful work, but unlike Alan he does not believe he or his generation will find it. Instead, the police arrive and all of his kidnapping victims are “safe” (212); the status quo prevails, social problems endure, and for Thomas this is a tragedy.

By and large, Eggers’s fiction positively reinforces the status quo by indicating how his protagonists transform themselves into engaged members of society. By modeling his protagonists off of his imagined audience, Eggers encourages his ideal readers to relate intimately with his characters. In doing so,

his work suggests that reading about a character's transformation helps his imagined audience to improve themselves, pushing them to confront their own struggles similarly to how Eggers's characters do. *Your Fathers* complicates this model with its tragic ending, pushing Eggers's readers to question what use, if any, reading is when confronting urgent social problems.

For the first time in his body of work, *Your Fathers* sees Eggers explore his usual themes and interests, but it finds him doing so critically using a variety of perspectives. Where traditionally Eggers's books end positively, uncritically suggesting that identifying and empathizing with the experiences of Eggers's protagonists is enough for Eggers's ideal audience to transform themselves into better, more socially aware people, *Your Fathers* challenges such thinking. Its emphasis on multiple voices underlines the truth that problems endure, and that combatting those problems is an ongoing, likely unending project. Where for Thomas's victims it is a relief that "everyone's safe" at *Your Fathers*'s conclusion, for Thomas this fact is a reason for despair.

Obscuring Eggers's voice from its narrative and implicating its ideal readers in its discussions of social issues, *Your Fathers* catalogues a variety of speakers whose opposing perspectives challenge Eggers's imagined audience to inform themselves about a range of social issues while reflecting on the perils of ignorance and the social efficacy of reading. Like much of Eggers's work, and indeed like many *OBC* selections, *Your Fathers* functions to teach its ideal readers about themselves in relation to a range of social problems. At the same time, *Your Fathers* signals Eggers's most willful expansion (and explosion) of the

belief that literature can inspire positive self- and social improvement by presenting books as insufficient agents of change in and of themselves.

In making clear to his imagined audience that reading, while important, does not constitute meaningful work done in response to social issues, *Your Fathers* indirectly pushes Eggers's ideal readers to look outside literature to pursue and to practice the meaningful work he returns to at the end of each of his texts. In this sense, even at its most critical, Eggers's fiction reinforces the idea that literature can be transformative for readers even as it reflexively critiques the social function of reading. Rather than seeing books as containing answers to personal or social problems that readers resolve by reading, as *OBC* and Eggers's early work similarly seem to do, *Your Fathers* uses multiple perspectives to present narrative writing as an awareness raising tool incapable of executing transformative action on its own. In spite of this, the text's emphasis on education and understanding nonetheless encourages Eggers's ideal readers to transform themselves into more socially engaged citizens after reading the book. The text pushes its imagined audience to acknowledge literature's limited social application, but rather than viewing this as a deficiency of literature, it encourages its readers to look beyond books to change themselves by performing actual social work. In doing so, I believe *Your Fathers* suggests a significant reconsideration of the social function of reading for Eggers specifically and for therapeutic culture more broadly, especially for those who view reading as a meaningful response to or therapy for traumatizing or emotionally distressing current events.

## Wrapping Up

Like Winfrey's declaration in her introduction to *OBC* that "books are important," capable of meaningfully raising readers' self- and social awareness, Dave Eggers values books, but as his career has progressed it is increasingly clear that books are only the gateway to conversations about social issues for Eggers rather than a viable means to respond to social problems. *OBC*'s ideal narratives frequently feature tidy resolutions and positive transformations for characters who readers are encouraged to link to a work's author: think of the reunification of the nuclear family at the end of *Freedom* in relation to Franzen's open embrace of *OBC*'s audience, for example. By offering readers narrative examples of resolution and transformation, and by extending those resolutions in some form to a work's author, *OBC*'s view of literature suggests resolution and transformation awaits its members if they internalize the lessons of a given work.

For Eggers, as for *OBC*, books are transformative insofar as they hold the potential to educate readers, making readers more aware of themselves in relation to the experiences of others. Unlike *OBC*, however, which seems content to see awareness raising through reading as a socially valuable response to issues like sexism and racism, as Eggers's work has progressed it increasingly acknowledges the ways literature's capacity for awareness raising does not qualify implicitly as social engagement and thus that books are not socially transformative unto themselves. For Eggers, literature ideally inspires readers to reflect on themselves in relation to others, but increasingly he encourages his

imagined audience to look beyond themselves and the books they read to pursue real social change.

Modeling his protagonists off of his imagined audience and distancing himself from his characters and their experiences, Eggers impels his ideal readers to see themselves in his protagonists and to feel better about themselves as a result, but at the same time he encourages his imagined audience to recognize that solidarity and emotional wellness are not enough to correct social problems. Instead, drawing from the self-reflexive doubt driving the *Voice of Witness* project, Eggers's most recent writing works to expose the positive, personally transformative benefits of reading while suggesting that literature alone will not inspire meaningful social change, even if literature is written and read with the best of intentions. By embracing this fact while remaining engaged with themes like self-therapy and transformation popularized for modern readers in no small part by *OBC*, Eggers's most recent work signals a potential shift in how popular literature confronts social issues and their psychological effects, indicating a future for popular fiction which aspires to social change while acknowledging the limits of art and literature as socially transformative agents.



## Epilogue

My dissertation ends, as it began, with a series of questions. Is there a growing body of socially conscious literature which appeals to the self-improving logic of therapy, as I believe Eggers's writing does? If, as I have suggested, therapeutic approaches to reading and writing can inspire social awareness, what shape does such literature take outside of Eggers's collected works? What qualities must texts share to qualify both as socially conscious and as therapeutic? At this time, I do not have specific answers to these questions beyond the suggestions I make about Eggers's literature both on its own and in relation to *OBC*. Still, I can not help but consider how much contemporary writing responds to specific cultural anxieties about specific current events and social issues, recalling Eggers's aspiration to encourage his imagined readers to use literature to improve themselves by developing an understanding of recent social issues and the people they effect.

Similar to Eggers's effort to raise his ideal reader's awareness of and empathy for social concerns, be it specific events like the Sudanese civil war or more generalized problems like the difficulties of immigration, the personal and social effects of global economics, psychological reactions to terrorism, or otherwise, a growing body of writing, especially fiction, seems to speak to social issues either to mitigate reader anxieties about social problems or to galvanize readers to respond to specific current events. In my reading, literature fitting loosely into this body of writing includes, but is by no means limited to, fiction like

Ben Lerner's *10:04*, Teju Cole's *Open City*, Adam Haslett's *Union Atlantic*, and James Hynes's *Next*.

Although most of these texts do not make easy bedfellows given their range in popularity, genre, literary archness, and general accessibility, nonetheless I believe each work shares an interest in encouraging reader empathy and solidarity in response to specific social issues. For example, Ben Lerner's *10:04* seems to encourage solidarity between the text's narrator and Lerner's imagined readers in defense against mounting anxiety about global warming. Published in 2014, the novel details the internal monologue of an elite member of the New York creative class modeled vaguely off of Lerner. As the novel progresses, its narrator develops a growing sense of solidarity with his environment and with the people around him as his day to day life is increasingly impacted by super storms caused by global warming. Based in fiction but fusing art and literary criticism with contemplations on personal health, the experience of time, and pressing social concerns like climate change, the book's narration veers wildly in its narrator's effort to describe his psychological state as he lives and works in New York between an "unusually large cyclonic storm" (16) which misses the city and a hurricane, presumably Sandy, which hits it, causing great damage to large sections of Manhattan and its surrounding regions.

Given *10:04*'s esoteric structure and often pedantic style, Lerner's imagined audience likely shares some combination of his interests and anxieties. As such, the narrator's reflections on and discussions about his awareness of and anxiety toward climate change work to echo the thoughts and discussions of

Lerner's ideal reader. The narrator worries about unseasonably warm weather, acutely conscious of the constantly "warming planet" (7); his pupil, Roberto, recalls apocalyptic dreams inspired by distress about global warming (13). Responding to his own anxiety and the anxieties of those around him, the narrator finds solace in the ways he shares his distressed experience: he is "comforted" by his feeling that he and his friend Alex are "less a couple than conjoined" in the face of global warming (8). Likewise, the damaged state of the world bonds the narrator to his student: "Roberto, like me," he says, "tended to figure the global apocalyptically" (14). As the first storm bears down on New York, the narrator notes the ways "the city was becoming one organism" (17).

The novel's conclusion recalls both the final paragraph of *What is the What* and the epigraph of *Heartbreaking Work*. With intimations of Walt Whitman, Lerner's narrator states: "I am with you, and I know how it is" (240), just as Deng celebrates the "collapsible space between" him and his readers in *What is the What* (535), and just as Eggers's narrator declares that he and his audience are similarly "tired" and "true of heart" in *Heartbreaking Work*. Lerner's narrator recalls himself crossing the Brooklyn Bridge after a walk through a devastated lower Manhattan in the aftermath of the second storm. He says: "I will begin to remember our walk in the third person, as if I'd seen it from the Manhattan Bridge" (240). The narrator is not himself when he recalls his experience of the storm: he remembers his walk "in third person." All the while, he is "with" the reader. The reader and the narrator are one and the same at the novel's conclusion; their experiences of the violence of climate change are identical even

if they are distinct people living different lives. The narrator emphasizes the ways the emotional experience of climate change exceeds any one person or community. It is a macro-social event which renders everyone equally helpless to its effects, and the trauma of its experience is shared by all people regardless of age, gender, race, or class. In speaking to the shared experience of climate change, *10:04* works therapeutically for its ideal readers, confronting climate change's psychological effects while providing Lerner's imagined audience with a sense of solidarity with others. As such, I understand Lerner's novel to engage with climate change in ways which benefit therapeutic reading methods, positioning his work adjacent to writing by Eggers and other likeminded authors.

To varying degrees, an effort to encourage awareness, empathy, and solidarity amongst readers in relation to specific social issues carries across each of the texts I list above. For instance: Teju Cole's *Open City* works to explore immigration for an imagined educated audience sympathetic to immigration rights who are potentially uninformed about the specific subjectivity of immigrants. Documenting the thoughts of a young Nigerian doctor as he wanders the streets of New York City, his adopted home in America, *Open City* works to present a nuanced, historicized portrait of immigration seemingly tailored to speak to a highly literate readership who remain uncertain who immigrants are, or how their various histories overlap with America's. The novel exposes the immigrant's experience, encouraging empathy for and understanding of immigrants' struggles to reconcile their heritage with their American lives. By learning about the

subjectivity of immigrants, the novel suggests, readers might become better, more empathetic citizens.

Similarly, Adam Haslett's *Union Atlantic* speaks to mistrust of banks in the wake of the 2008 economic recession, working to humanize the bankers responsible for the sorts of bad investments which led to economic collapse. Exhibiting an interest in educating readers about financial systems not unlike the didactic drive motivating much of Eggers's writing, *Union Atlantic* features asides loosely detailing economic theory to explain why the recession occurred, and it strives to present those responsible for bad investments as reprehensible, but also as flawed, relatable human beings. Haslett uses his narrative to teach his imagined readers about the recent past while encouraging them to understand how and why certain actions led to economic failure, ideally pushing his audience to address the recession's effects on their lives to improve themselves therapeutically in its wake.

Finally, James Hynes's 2010 novel, *Next*, directly recalls Eggers's "Another" by speaking to the psychological effects of terrorism. Awarded the 2011 "Believer Book Award" by *The Believer*, a literary magazine founded by Eggers in 2003, *Next* details the travel of Kevin Quinn, a middle class man from Michigan, who travels from Ann Arbor to Austin on the day of a terror attack perpetrated by a Scottish jihadist sharing Quinn's name. The narrative documents Quinn's growing anxiety stemming from media coverage of the attack. Like Eggers's focus on protagonists modeled off of his "well meaning" but uninformed imagined readership (Eggers and Doran 24), Quinn seems to speak to and for people like

himself, midwestern middle class Americans who are uncertain how to make sense of increasingly frequent acts of terrorism. By urging his imagined audience to confront terrorism's effects on an "average" American man, Hynes encourages his ideal readers to consider their own thoughts in the wake of similar events.

Aside from Hynes's "*Believer* Book Award," I can not say authoritatively that any of these authors are explicitly engaged with Eggers, and as such I do not mean to suggest a definitive connection exists between Eggers and any of these works. Still, I find it striking that a growing body of writing seems engaged with addressing current events and social anxieties to encourage readers' psychological improvement. Further examples abound: Carola Dibbell's 2015 novel, *The Only Ones*, speaks to anxieties about pandemics and technology, its narrator resolving to face the future optimistically to "see what happens, forever" despite the novel's speculative dystopian scenario (354). Jonathan Franzen's 2015 novel, *Purity*, links multiple people's mental illnesses to social problems, putting Franzen's millennial protagonist to work to "do better than her parents" by addressing the multitude of problems which plague society, something the novel earnestly concludes "she might" be able to do (563). In my view, contemporary American literature exhibits a growing resolve to confront social problems in an effort to encourage readers to pursue personal and social improvement. I am uncertain if this resolve is a symptom of *OBC*'s popularization of therapy for contemporary readers and writers, or if it is indicative of a trend which includes Eggers's socially conscious therapeutic narratives. It may be evidence of something else entirely. What is clear to me, however, is that contemporary

literature is increasingly used by authors to speak to current issues in ways which seem to encourage readers to resolve their anxieties about specific social problems by reading. In my future work, I hope to explore whether or not the tendency to resolve anxiety about specific current events using narrative constitutes a trend for contemporary literature, and if it does, I aim to question what the ramifications of such a trend might be.

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