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America's Barbarian Heart: Exploring Space, Genre and Social Criticism in Dave Eggers's *Heroes of the Frontier*

[Fictional characters] are people whose secret lives are visible or might be visible: we are people whose secret lives are invisible. And that is why novels, even when they are about wicked people, can solace us; they suggest a more comprehensible and thus a more manageable human race, they give us the illusion of perspicacity and of power.
E.M. Foster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1985: 64).

A deliberate playing with generic expectations combined with (more or less explicit) social criticism is a recurring feature in Dave Eggers's literary production. For instance, in *You Shall Know Your Velocity!* (2004), Eggers plays with the distinction between fiction and nonfiction while mildly condemning Americans' ways of spending money; *The Circle* (2013) blends realist fiction with science fiction to criticize hi-tech corporations (e.g. Google or Facebook).¹ In *Heroes of the Frontier* (2016), Eggers is similarly interested in mixing elements of different generic frameworks and in eliciting an audience-response towards social issues: he blends elements of travel writing, realist fiction, and the fantastic to create an allegoric narrative about a journey towards (the utopia of) a new frontier.

Space

According to Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth E. Foote, and Maoz Azaryahu, the “tour structure” as “a description of space from the point of view of a moving, embodied observer who visits locations in a temporal sequence,” when practiced on the macrolevel of the general organization of the text, becomes “the thematic foundation of a type of plot.” And this does not happen only in travel writing, but “whenever a story follows the travels of a solitary hero.” *Heroes of the Frontier* follows its “solitary heroes” Josie and her two children, Ana and Paul (ages 5 and 8), on their trip to Alaska in a recent summer of wildfires. The “vacation” is not well organized. On the contrary, it comes from an impulsive choice of leaving everything behind: with no phone and cash only, Josie and her children fly to Alaska, a state that “was at once the same country but another country, was almost Russia, was almost oblivion” (Eggers 4). What makes Josie leave is a series of losses and traumatic events: the selling of her dental practice after a patient sues her for a failed diagnosis, the impending marriage of the father of her children, and the recent death in Afghanistan of one of her patients, a young boy whom she thinks she had encouraged to join the army. The trip to Alaska thus serves a metaphorical purpose: her departure defines the beginning of their journey and the beginning of Josie’s self-transformation. She will project all of her expectations onto the surrounding landscape, and Alaska will become the place where she can “be reborn in a land of mountains and light” (27).

Traveling often entails a metaphorical journey, wherein characters often embark on personal journeys of self-transformation.² As Bill Ashcroft remarks,

Almost all journeys are begun in hope. While they may not begin with the expectation of arriving at utopia, the impetus of travel is essentially utopian because it is driven by hopeful expectation in one form or another. It might be hope to discover the entirely new, to find the exotic, to find some example of the ideal, or, in tourism for instance, it may be driven by the hope to discover what we already know through reading. No matter what the nature of the journey or the destination, travel is propelled by desire, the desire for discovery, for the place or the experience that can throw one’s present situation into relief. (249)

While Josie's reason for traveling is indeed to find relief, quite predictably the journey through Alaska will allow her and the children to become *heroic*. Exemplary is the episode in which Josie is driving through roads left deserted by wildfires. She has to pull over because of a flat tire, and a group of inmates stops to help her. When the protagonists are eventually able to leave again and Josie realizes that she was alone with a group of (male) inmates in the middle of nowhere with wildfires spreading all around them, the narrator (through free indirect discourse) lets the readers know that "She was free and her children were safe. She felt powerful, capable, again *heroic*" (276, emphasis added). When the narrative moves towards a resolution, this sense of achievement offered by the journey becomes even more explicit. Josie and the children are now living in an abandoned ranger's residence, a log cabin in a forsaken tourist site, a well-preserved silver-mine park now closed. After days spent in the sort of real-Alaskan experience she was looking for, Josie realizes that, "All along she had been looking for courage and purity in the people of Alaska. She had not thought that she could simply – not simply, no, but still – create such people" (308). Their real trip will be over when the metaphorical one, Josie and the children's self-transformation in "heroes of the frontier," is complete.

Despite her impetus towards utopia, however, Josie is unable to avoid what John Urry calls "tourist gaze" (1990). Jonathan Culler wrote that "the tourist is interested in everything as a sign of itself," so that tourists "are fanning out in search of signs of Frenchness, typical Italian behavior, exemplary Oriental scenes, typical American thruways, traditional English pubs" (127). This idea brought Urry to argue that the tourist gaze "is constructed through signs, and tourism involves the collection of signs" (3). The "tourist gaze," Urry argues, "is directed to features of landscape and townscape which separate them off from everyday experience" (Urry 3). While Josie is looking for a place of "magic and clarity" (5), what she sees is reported as nothing extraordinary: "hundreds of homes for sale" (5) and "a parking lot, a wigwag, a sign telling passerby that the wife [is] free" (36). The quest for "authenticity" that, according to Dean MacCannell, is embodied by all tourists as they all "desire this deeper involvement with society and culture to some degree; it is a basic component of their

motivation to travel” (101), is here disappointed by the lack of “mountains and light” Josie had expected to find.³ Her expectations, moreover, are directed not only to find extra-ordinary places but also extraordinary people, such as the heroes that will oppose the “cowards” (5) she was dealing with back home.

The novel begins with many authentic geographical details: Josie and the children land in Anchorage, they move to The Kenai Peninsula, to Seward, passing through Resurrection Bay, Homer, Kachemak Bay. The use of a geographical real setting, as Malcah Effron has argued, serves “as a means of establishing a realistic story” (331). To imagine a storyworld, readers rely upon what Marie-Laure Ryan calls the principle of minimal departure: “a principle that urges readers to build their mental representations of fictional worlds on the basis of their life experience and knowledge of the world, as long as this knowledge is not contradicted by the text” (Ryan 1991 qtd. in Ryan et al.). When a novel contains real-world locations, readers will use what they already know about those places to build the storyworld, e.g. “readers will imagine Italy as sunny, England as foggy and industrialized” (Ryan et al.). In *Heroes of the Frontier*, I argue, this building is paired with the tourist-protagonist’s own look for signs of what she imagines Alaska to be. In other words, as readers are invited to search for signs of “real” Alaskans, typical Alaskan behavior, or traditional Alaskan locations, they are cued to bring their own tourist gaze to the construction of the novel’s storyworld – a tourist gaze that blends with Josie’s own (tourist) gaze.

From the novel’s opening, the narrator establishes an opposition with the “signs” of new experience as opposed to everyday experience:

There is proud happiness, happiness born of doing good work in the light of day, years of worthwhile labor, and afterward being tired, and content, and surrounded by family and friends, bathed in satisfaction and ready for a deserved rest – sleep or death, it would not matter.

Then there is the happiness of one’s personal slum. The happiness of being alone, and tipsy on red wine, in the passenger seat of an ancient recreational vehicle parked somewhere in Alaska’s deep south, staring into a scribble of black trees, afraid to go to sleep for fear that at any moment someone will get

past the toy lock on the RV door and murder you and your two small children sleeping above. (Eggers 3)

The narrative, focalized through Josie, is indeed full of memories of her life before the trip and often alternates the road trip in Alaska with recollections of her past suburban life as an American everywoman, probably the one who would find happiness in “years of worthwhile labor ... surrounded by family and friends.” If narrative space can be largely defined as “the space and the places providing the physical environment in which the characters of a narrative live and move” (Buchholz and Jahn 2005), it is thus interesting to note how, on the one hand, the journey through Alaska is functional to the progression of the narrative: the places Josie and the children move to, the RV parks, the diners on the road, the little towns, the wildfires that force them to move every so often until the climactic finding of the cabin in the woods that allows the three protagonists to “become some kind of frontier family” (300-1). On the other hand, Eggers frequently alternates the spatial frames belonging to the narration’s present time and the spatial frames of Josie’s past, from the years of her childhood to those spent in college, and later to her settling in a non-specified Midwestern town.

Spatial frames, according to Ryan, Foote, and Azaryahu are “shifting scenes of action, and they may flow into each other,” for instance, “a ‘salon’ frame can turn into a ‘bedroom’ frame as the characters move within a house” (n. pag.). The mode of shifting from Josie’s past life to the present journey is not fluid, but rather abrupt. This means that the construction of the storyworld as a “coherent, unified, ontologically full, and materially existing geographical entity” (ibid.) proceeds through the two constant mergings of the spatial frames belonging to Josie’s previous life and the spatial frames belonging to Josie’s present journey, which reinforces the contrast between routine, commodities, security, stability, jobs, schools, meetings on the one side, and traveling, discovery, spontaneity, danger on the other. The narrative space of *Heroes of the Frontier* is organized symbolically through the dichotomy of home/away-from-home, typical of travel writing, through a constant shift of spatial frames from places belonging to “home” and places belonging to “away from home.”

Space and Genre

As mentioned above, the use of actual geographical names situates the story in a definite spatial setting. Significantly, throughout the progression of the narrative, these references to real-world locations (which serve to establish a realist story, see Effron above), become more blurred with the family simply heading North. Then, these references become fictional – the name of the silver mine, Peterssen, does not refer to a real-world location, nor does the town close to it, Morristown – or less precise, such as the Yukon River. Coincidentally, when the novel loses its referents to real Alaskan places, the narrative takes a fantastic turn and many of the events described lose their “realism.” This happens, for instance, in the ending: Josie, Ana and Paul go hiking, they are surprised by a storm, run through lightning and avalanches, and when they finally manage to find shelter, it turns out to be a fairylike cabin with “balloons, streamers, a table overflowing with juices and sodas, chips, fruit and a glorious chocolate cake under a plastic canopy” (383). Throughout the novel, readers will find a few other “fantastic elements” involving the continued survival of Josie, Ana, and Paul despite the series of obstacles and perils they encounter, e.g. the wildfires, an armed person shooting animals in their proximity (see below), etc.

This situation, when “a limited number of fantastic elements appear within a preponderantly realistic narrative” (Faris 281), is distinctive of the genre called magical realism. However, if the duality of magical realism within postmodernist fiction mainly involved the Western world and ex-colonized cultures, within the emerging post-postmodern poetics of the twenty-first century, the dualities seem to multiply (McHale 184-7). This is why scholars such as Ramon Saldívar started talking about a “postmagical realism” (“Historical Fantasy” 585). Exemplary of the “postmagical realism” is *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) by Junot Díaz, a novel that “builds the doubleness of [a cultural] divide into the very ontological structure of his novel: magic vs. realism, nerd-boy escapism vs. fantastic Dominican reality,” as Brian McHale has argued (185). *Heroes of the Frontier* presents a similar ontological structure – but with the oppositions typical of travel writing, i.e. travel vs. ordinary life, real trip vs.

metaphorical journey, reality vs. utopia. The blending of different genres is not a novelty for Eggers, who has been playing with the fiction/nonfiction distinction since his debut memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000). And, as Julia Kuehn and Paul Smethurst remark, "The form of travel writing has always defied definition and demarcation," or, to use Jonathan Raban's "famous and much-quoted characterization from 'The Journey and the Book'," travel writing is "a notoriously raffish open house where different genres are likely to end up in the same bed" (4).

In *Heroes of the Frontier*, we are presented with a realist narrative with actual place names that guide readers throughout the protagonists' tour of Alaska; when real-world references go missing, the narrative leans towards the fantastic. As Effron has argued, "the real setting provides an underlying basis of reality to confirm the legitimacy of the events portrayed in the narrative as a description of the society and culture represented in the novel," meaning that "the real setting generates the basis of reality that authenticates the speech" ("Fictional" 333-4). The sudden lack of importance given to these referents as the novel unfolds suggests Eggers's interest in playing with genre expectations. Moreover, the use of fictional place names for the cabin in the woods where Josie and her children settle for a while (Peterssen/Morristown) in an otherwise narrative universe made of referents to actual locations seems to confirm the utopian desire to find the new frontier, a trope that Eggers wants to recreate, as established by the title itself. It is in this undefined place that Josie will finally complete her self-transformation through reaching her utopia, as emerges from this evoking passage:

They lit more candles and brushed their teeth, and Josie read them C. S. Lewis from a copy they found in a bathroom drawer, and in the flickering candlelight, while reading Prince Caspian, Josie felt that they were living a life that had kinship with the heroes of these books. They had only walked two miles through the dark, through a forest and over a ridge to their home in a twice-abandoned mining town, but she felt there was not so great a difference between what she and her children were capable of and what these other protagonists had done. Courage was the beginning, being unafraid, moving ahead, through small hardships, not turning back. Courage was simply a form of moving forward. (333-4)

Space, Genre and Social Criticism

Eggers's interest in travel writing is not accidental. In an essay about travel writing in Eggers's novels, Robert Mousseau argues that "Eggers employs genre tropes to construct narratives which simultaneously educate readers about contemporary social concerns while articulating means of response to the stresses of globalized life" (256). Or, in other words, "Eggers's fiction and non-fiction subverts [sic] genre expectations by employing various genre conventions to enable social commentary" (256). In *Heroes of the Frontier*, he does something similar with travel writing and realist fiction before venturing into postmagical realism: he employs a realist setting and references to real place names in order to establish a sense of authenticity for the novel, authenticity which enables a social commentary about family and parenthood.

In his analysis, Mousseau claims that Eggers, with his writing, aims at raising "his readers' awareness about the world," and therefore "it is unsurprising that he engages with the travel genre – a genre concerned traditionally with describing foreign experience" (257). In *Heroes of the Frontier*, Eggers on the one hand explores the logic of travel writing, a genre that, according to Mary Baine Campbell, in recent decades has engaged with political awareness (qtd. in Mousseau 258). On the other hand, he employs features of the emerging genre of postmagical realism, a genre in which writers "engage in critical dialogue with postmodern aesthetics and ransack the resources of genre history, mixing genres and mashing them up" (Saldívar "Second" 4-6 qtd. in McHale 185). In addition, these writers "express, sometimes in a veiled or displaced ways, a *utopian* impulse toward social justice, the aspiration for a better world" (McHale 185, emphasis added).

In *Heroes of the Frontier*, Eggers engages in both the mixing of genres and this urge towards a utopian space, here embodied by the wilderness of Alaska and traveling as purpose, as the narrator comments towards the epilogue of the journey: "without movement there is no struggle, and without struggle there is no purpose, and without purpose there is nothing at all. She wanted to tell every mother, every father: There is meaning in motion" (Eggers 363). In this way, Josie's journey becomes an allegory for every contemporary American, of which she embodies

the many contradictions. She is escaping from a hollow life in suburban Ohio, but she travels expecting Alaska to be a place of wilderness. She subsequently cannot avoid the tourist gaze while “looking for courage and purity in the people of Alaska” (Eggers 308), nor acting like a tourist (the first place where they stop is a zoo). Moreover, her perceptions of locals are often oversimplified, as in the description of Sam, her step-sister who lives in Homer: “Sam was an Alaskan now, and that meant, Josie was sure, a plainspoken and linear existence centered around work and trees and sky, and this kind of disposition was what Josie craved in others and herself” (Eggers 6).

The social criticism is mainly focused on how Josie/Americans are supposed to raise children. Part of Josie’s urge to travel comes from the desire to escape an ordinary life also because she does not feel aligned with a certain idea of parenting, as if Eggers were trying to retrieve that idea of moving across the country that has been so central to American identity, but that may now be lost in today’s ideal of family, home, and stability. Josie’s opinions about parenthood, expressed through free indirect discourse, are filled with didacticism:

Raising children was not about perfecting them or preparing them for job placement. What a hollow goal! Twenty-two years of struggle for what – your child sits inside at an Ikea table staring into a screen while outside the sky changes, the sun rises and falls, hawks float like zeppelins. This was the common criminal pursuit of all contemporary humankind. (Eggers 192)

Or, “once there were four one-hour school activities a year that a parent was expected to attend” (50). Now, Josie complains, there are so many “middle-mandatory” events every parent in her children’s school seems to be able to attend while she, a working mother, is not: “But these other parents and their judging eyes: When do they work?” (51), she asks.

It must also be noted that this educational intent does not emerge only through the use of generic tropes, but also because the novel deploys a reliable non-character narration. With reliable non-character narration, as James Phelan argues, “the implied author typically uses the narrator as her surrogate within the storyworld, investing the narrator’s commentary

with her full authority. Consequently, we often equate the narrator's voice with the implied author's voice" (53). The use of an omniscient narrator in Eggers's novel, thus, shouldn't be overlooked. Paul Dawson has recently suggested that omniscience is the "exemplary voice" of the post-postmodern (68). This claim stems from the idea that there is, in contemporary fiction, an "anxiety over the cultural relevance of fiction," and contemporary omniscient narration is a way for novelists to reconfigure "the authority of the novelist in the public sphere" (Dawson 69). Dawson's suggestion, applied to Eggers's use of omniscience, is not too far from Mousseau's idea of social commentary throughout Eggers's fictional and nonfictional works. In fact, according to Dawson, employing omniscience in contemporary fiction entails a specific authorial choice because it allows a narratorial commentary, i.e. narrative statements that function as invocations of the author's extra-fictional statements, although sometimes this narratorial commentary could be criticized as "inartistic authorial intrusion" (Dawson 15).

To conclude, through Josie, an American everywoman, Eggers is able to comment and to elicit the readers' mimetic and thematic responses on urgent social issues for most Americans, such as the proper education for children, but also the problem of weapons.⁴ The latter emerges after a "postmagical" day spent at an archery field together with a family who lives in a "wooden shed atop a pickup truck" (Eggers 200). The father, armed, spends the evening shooting animals. After they part, the narrator comments:

Had she really stayed the afternoon with these people, with the father shooting guns fifty yards away? What did she know about them? Nothing. Somehow she had to trust that they would use their bullets on targets, not on her family, that nonsensical trust seeming to be the core of life in America. She thought of her own stupidity. She laughed at her own surprise at finding people like this here, in rural Alaska. What was she expecting? She had fled the polite, muted violence of her life in Ohio, only to drive her family into the country's barbarian heart. We are not civilized people, she realized. All questions about national character and motivations and aggression could be answered when we acknowledged this elemental truth. (Eggers 204-5)

And this idea, that America has a barbarian heart, finds a continuum (to follow Dawson's idea that these narrative statements function as invocations of the author's extra-fictional statements) in the following extra-fictional statements:

Part of the book is examining who we are as Americans. I think we are a really interesting race. I don't think we are completely civilized. I think we accept a level of violence on a daily basis that is astounding to much of the rest of the world. And every so often we are woken out of our state of amnesia. In so many ways we are capable of great things, and we live in a supposedly industrialized, civilized place, but we have an element of the frontier barbarism that's still in our blood and we accept it. (Eggers and Simon)

In some ways, I was hoping with *Heroes of the Frontier* to examine the American psyche, and our connection – if there still is one – between our pioneer past. Josie and her kids don't seem to have anything in common with the heroes of the frontier of the past, but then again, maybe they do. Maybe there's something in the blood – barbarian blood, I think – that connects an American dentist with the explorers, thieves, cowboys, settlers, winners and losers in American history. (*Dallas Morning News* n. pag.)

If in *You Shall Know Your Velocity* and *A Hologram for the King* (2012), as Mousseau argues, "Eggers's writing employs the logic of travel writing and *bildungsroman* to facilitate its readers' consciousness of and response to contemporary global concerns" (258), in *Heroes of the Frontier* his concerns are mostly limited to contemporary America. Through his narratorial commentary, he invites readers to ask, can Josie/Americans find their utopia despite her/their inherited barbarism? Are Josie, Ana, and Paul/Americans truly able to be reborn? Is the myth of the frontier still alive in the twenty-first century?

Finally, the novel's didacticism can also be linked with what Effron has recently called a "realism effect," namely "the phenomenon of fictional narratives teaching their audiences (supposed) facts about the actual world" ("Assessing"). Drawing on Roland Barthes's reality effect: "the perception of the situation as an event in extratextual reality" (Effron, "Fictional" 332), the realism effect "describes moments in narrative fictions that lead

the reader to assume that the narrative is not only offering information about the story world but also information about his or her actual world” (Effron, McMurry, Pignagnoli). The use of actual place names reveals Eggers’s intention to create a *realism* effect, i.e. to teach readers supposed facts about their actual world. In other words, the referents of actual place names become instances of perceived nonfictionality, in which readers perceive that the author is giving information which is not only important for the storyworld inhabited by Josie and her children, but for the readers themselves in their actual world. In this way, readers will approach a travel fiction such as *Heroes of the Frontier* by taking the information concerning the real-world locations contained in the narrative as information they can use as if from a non-fiction travel book.

For the message the author is trying to convey, it is not so important that this information is in fact true in the actual world of the readers, but that the readers *perceive* it as true (see Effron 2016). For instance, after visiting the zoo, a tour guide approaches Ana and Paul to show them “a rare thing: a small group of bighorn sheep, cutting a horizontal line across the ridge, east to west” (10). But, as Mary Catherine Martin points out, bighorn sheep do not live in Alaska (n. pag.). Still, most readers unfamiliar with the wildlife of Alaska will take this information as true and use it not only within the construction of the novel’s storyworld, but bring it to their understanding of the actual world. In other words, while the information about the real places mentioned in *Heroes of the Frontier* is taken as true facts, readers are invited to accept this information as if they were reading nonfictional travel writing. But perhaps more important is the suspension of this effect later in the narrative when postmagical elements start to appear. When elements of the fantastic emerge, readers will be less inclined to take Peterssen to be a real-world abandoned silver mine, and the teaching about Alaska will leave room for another form of didacticism, namely a social commentary on contemporary American identity, travel as purpose, parenting in the twenty-first century, and America’s (supposedly) barbarian heart.

As argued above, the travel-writing plot entails an allegoric discourse for contemporary America so that the protagonist’s journey of self-transformation elicits a mimetic response in (American) readers, who are invited to undertake a similar path of renewal. The use of Effron’s realism

effect, that makes readers approach the places described in the novel with a “tourist mind,” further confirms the narrative trajectory. *Heroes of the Frontier* employs generic elements typical of travel writing, such as the tourist gaze, the quest for authenticity and the presence of utopian expectations linked with the idea of discovery. It is from their encounter with categories typical of other genres, such as the fantastic, that Eggers is able to overturn their familiar dynamics and convey the narrative’s social criticism.

Notes

¹ For an analysis of the fiction/nonfiction distinction in *You Shall Know Our Velocity!*, see Pignagnoli 2016; see Pignagnoli 2017 for an analysis of *The Circle* as a post-postmodern surveillance novel.

² Eggers already thematized traveling, and especially traveling as healing, in his first novel, *You Shall Know Your Velocity!* (2004). Here, two friends embark on a one-week trip around the world after the traumatic death of a common friend.

³ See also Ning Wang’s “Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience” (1999).

⁴ According to rhetorical narratology, readers “develop interests and responses of three broad kinds, each related to a particular component of the narrative: mimetic, thematic, and synthetic” (Herman et al. 7). *Heroes of the Frontier* clearly stresses the mimetic and the thematic components, involving readers’ interests respectively “in the characters as possible people and in the narrative world as like our own” and in the ideational function of the characters and in the cultural, ideological philosophical, or ethical issues being addressed by the narrative” (ibid.).

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