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# Re-Imagining America: Twenty-First Century Disaster And Salvation In Contemporary Fiction

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REIMAGINING AMERICA: TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY DISASTER AND  
SALVATION IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
University of Mississippi

by

MARY ELLEN GRAY

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores four contemporary novels set in the American South and analyzes the understandings of American pasts, perceptions of current social and political crises, and projections of possible future paths they contain. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* tell stories of disasters the natures of which reflect prominent anxieties concerning the twenty-first century position of the United States as a global power. The total destruction leaving behind an unrecognizable nation that McCarthy imagines in his post-apocalyptic novel suggests the viewpoint that the degree to which the U.S. is indicted in the use of unethical practices and faulty ideologies must lead to an absolute dissolution of what the nation has stood for and a severing of community bonds. In *Salvage the Bones*, Ward portrays a less mysterious disaster in which recovery is possible, providing a conflicting perspective that the U.S. can and must rehabilitate a national identity from its troublesome past and problematic current circumstances. Dave Eggers' nonfiction book *Zeitoun*, which follows the travails of a Syrian-American unjustly imprisoned in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, exposes some of the reasons behind the occurrence of human rights violations in contemporary America, suggesting particularly that only the rights of certain individuals conforming to a narrative of American identity are recognized as fully human within the American imaginary. Finally, DBC Pierre's black comedy *Vernon God Little* traces the darkly humorous tale of a small Texas town's wildly inappropriate response to a school shooting

to explore the factors that allow both violent crime and brutal punishment to continue their ravages on American society.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this project is to explore four recent works whose stories involve the U.S. South – Cormac McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* (2006), Jesmyn Ward’s story about a fictional family weathering Hurricane Katrina on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, *Salvage the Bones* (2011), Dave Eggers’ nonfiction account of a Syrian-American business owner wrongfully imprisoned during the same storm, *Zeitoun* (2010), and Australian writer DBC Pierre’s dark satire of American culture in a small Texas town, *Vernon God Little* (2003). It is my goal to discover what these books, connected by their positioning of various elements of the American South at the forefront of the twenty-first century and their unflinching gaze into the darkest chapters of that time, can reveal about the troubles, challenges, and dilemmas, as well as possibilities and opportunities, faced by contemporary America. Each of the representative pieces of literature contains the story of individuals struggling for (literal or figurative) survival in a landscape haunted by specifically twenty-first century American horrors – the ethical quandaries of a decreasingly powerful empire in the age of global capitalism, the ravages of Hurricane Katrina and the continuing social injustices and inequalities the storm reveals, and the survival of harmful mythologies that permit into existence both rogue and institutionalized acts of violence. Though the journeys and outcomes of these American protagonists vary, their stories all make use of the South, with its unique cultural saga, to trace the roots of contemporary American problems back into the nation’s troubled

history of often obfuscated oppression, inequality, and exploitation that are best preserved in this region. The authors of these disparate stories all express hope, though frequently cautionary, that there is a possibility of coming to terms with the demons that plague the nation and of moving forward towards a future in which the wrongs of the present can perhaps be set right.

The first chapter, “The U.S. South and the Breakdown of Imperialist Ideology in *The Road* and *Salvage the Bones*”, considers the two books that most interestingly parallel each other, telling stories of disasters that desolate the Southeast and the families that stand against them. In this chapter I use the novels to look directly at the state of the American nation as a nation - politically, economically, and socially. I interpret the disasters that overwhelm the action of these stories – one an ominous but amorphous and purely invented total catastrophe and one a literary representation of Hurricane Katrina – as reflective of the very real crises that threaten the country due to its involvement with global imperialism. I consider these two novels alongside a general sociological and cultural anthropological sketch of the condition of twenty-first century America, particularly in relationship to the nation’s continued global power, its encroaching vulnerability, and its increasingly unstable image of itself.

In creating this sketch, I have used as guides two recent articles that portray in detail the country’s current political situation. The first is sociologist William Robinson’s 2007 article “Beyond the Theory of Imperialism: Global Capitalism and the Transnational State.” Robinson argues that the U.S. and the rest of the world “have entered a qualitatively new transnational stage in the ongoing evolution of world capitalism,” which is characterized by “the rise of truly transnational capital and the



integration of every country into a new global production and financial system” (7-8). In contrast to earlier forms of global imperialism, in which individual nation-states were the discrete agents, the U.S. now participates in a system of global capitalism that is primarily transnational and has resulted in “the appearance of novel relations of power and inequality in global society.” (7-8) This shift in global relations of power contributes significantly to the weakening of American imperialist ideology in that it lays bare the sometimes concealed connection between the expression of political power and the motivation of economic control. As Robinson explains, “we are witness to new forms of global capitalist domination, whereby intervention is intended to create conditions favorable to the penetration of transnational capital and the renewed integration of the intervened region into the global system” (19). The new transnational imperialism, in which nation-states cooperate to gain control of global capital, both makes traditional American viewpoints on imperialism less defensible and threatens the nation’s position as an ultimate world power. Robinson explains why this is: “the US state has attempted to play a leadership role on behalf of transnational capitalist interests. That it is increasingly unable to do so points not to heightened national rivalry but to the impossibility of the task at hand given a spiraling crisis of global capitalism” (20). This crisis of global capitalism, explained more thoroughly in the chapter, centers primarily on the weakening of the international economy, the problems of using military force to maintain political control, and the increasing counter-hegemonic attacks against Western (and primarily U.S.) leadership and authority.

Cultural anthropologist Bruce Knauft’s 2007 essay “Provincializing America: Imperialism, Capitalism, and Counterhegemony in the Twenty-first Century” paints a

more detailed picture of those threats to American cultural and political control, both internal and external. Knauft explains the traditional American avoidance of explicitly labeling itself an empire: “to call the United States an empire is tantamount to questioning its self-identified values of liberty, freedom, and self-determination.” However, “referring to the United States as one nation-state among many foregrounds its self-perceived republicanism and support of self-determination” (782). Such a theory also provides a platform for the nation to imagine itself as a world leader. Imperialism as it has historically functioned has allowed Americans to sidestep the contradiction suggested by its efforts at international control and its ideals of self-rule. However, like Robinson, Knauft notes the increasing difficulty of maintaining the image of the benevolent empire in the age of the new, transnational imperialism, in which powerful nation-states like the U.S. collude with each other to harvest the world’s resources rather than righteously competing for power as equals and offering protection to those nations perceived as weaker. Knauft also notes how this new system of global capital accumulation has changed the way the U.S. wields power internationally and the ways in which the rest of the world can challenge the exercise of that power. He argues that, in the contemporary world, “absence of formal American control over the political sovereignty of other countries is consistent with capitalist neoimperialism, . . . transnational organizations and the neoliberal development industry” (784) In other words, American power currently relies on an elaborate capitalist schema, rather than direct territorial control. This reality represents a new weakness for the nation, which has traditionally sought to enforce its power through means developed primarily to secure territory, particularly military intervention, leaving it vulnerable to attacks against its global leadership that are aimed at

loosening America's grip culturally or economically rather than territorially.

In addition to the foregrounding provided by Knauff and Robinson, I have paid attention to the scholarship of literary critics Jennifer Greeson and Harilaos Stecopoulos. The work of these two authors establishes the historical significance of the South and its literature to America's understanding of itself as a nation and justification of its imperialistic behavior throughout time. In *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature*, Greeson argues that, stretching back into colonial times, the slave-owning South provided a model of the imperialistic exploitation of foreign people and resources but also an image of bad, or corrupted imperialism, a foil against which the rest of the nation could develop an ideal of benevolent and paternalistic imperialistic endeavors that would allow it to pursue exploitative aims globally under the guise of protecting American-style freedom and democracy. In *Reconstructing the World: Southern Fictions and U.S. Imperialisms, 1898-1976*, Stecopoulos brings this theory of the South's role in sustaining an American imperialist mythology into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, arguing that the South, marginalized and foreign within the nation itself following the Civil War, continued to serve as a rationale for often exploitative U.S. action abroad.

I argue that *The Road* and *Salvage the Bones* both present worldviews that draw the conclusions suggested by Knauff's and Robinson's analyses of the present American moment. The fictional Americas that McCarthy and Ward create – one post-apocalyptic and one post-Katrina – embody the double bind that brings them to the brink of disaster: the growing suspicion that “America” as it is traditionally defined, according to ideals of freedom and equality, might be deeply flawed ideologically, and the encroaching fear of

the consequences of a politically and economically weakened nation. Both novels address this social crisis metaphorically, but McCarthy and Ward represent disparate philosophical approaches to the struggle for an American identity and the contemplation of the nation's possible futures amidst this core dilemma.

Although the action of *The Road* inhabits a hypothetical time and space and initially seems detached from the specific challenges of twenty-first century America, I argue that its imagined apocalypse is compelled by very real and particularly American problems and anxieties. The totality of the disaster that strikes the novel's fictional America, the way its effects as well as its ambiguous markers in place and time blur uncomfortably into both the recent and distant history of the nation, and the way it obliterates any identifiable politicized spaces suggest the viewpoint that the nation's deep history of exploitation and involvement with imperialistic endeavors have set it on a path toward an all-consuming self-destruction. The landscape through which the novel's heroes make their difficult journey resembles a museum of American history, with all its eras coexisting and all equally lifeless, with a particular emphasis on the moments in the nation's past that propelled crucial developments in its practice of imperialism. The novel's setting in the Southeast, where institutionalized slavery once sat at the heart of the country's economic vitality, reinforces the link between this exploitative national foundation and the disaster that overwhelms the America of the novel. In the post-apocalyptic world, remnants of the slave-owning South exist alongside mementos of the industrial nineteenth century, which marked the nation's entry into global imperialism, and the familiar hallmarks of twentieth and twenty-first century capitalism. Significantly, the novel's lack of chronology makes it difficult to establish a timeline separating the

various historical time periods and the culminating disaster into discrete and sequential events, thereby incorporating them all into one multi-faceted moment.

As significant as the unique qualities of the apocalypse McCarthy imagines are the world it leaves behind and its inhabitants' struggles to survive in it. The father and son at the heart of the story embark on an uncertain journey in which they are blinded and crippled by the extreme isolation and anonymity that characterize the post-apocalyptic America as a political and social space. They trace a dubious path forward using a map depicting places that have lost all meaning and live in constant fear of the shadowy others with whom they compete for the limited resources of this traumatized world. The loss of a connection to any meaningful politicized space mirrors a contemporary loss of faith in the nation and what it stands for. This inability to identify with a place – with the ideological comfort and pragmatic protection that such an identification can offer – has furthermore made it difficult for the heroes of the story to imagine themselves as belonging to a community of people. Although the novel offers hope for the future for its young protagonist, its conclusion, in which the father cannot survive and the nation's history is laid out along the land like a corpse, suggests that future success will depend upon the abandonment of old connections and traditions.

*Salvage the Bones* tells a different kind of disaster story, its greater attachment to the America we know suggesting a greater commitment or more pressing need to preserve a connection to American history, with all its traumas, and for contemporary Americans to extract an identity from what has gone before. This story is told from the perspective of teenage Esch Batiste, who belongs to an African American family living on the outskirts of town on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, a family whose children have felt

the weight of the nation's historical disenfranchisement and exploitation of racial minorities and the poor. The motherless Esch, who finds herself pregnant by an indifferent father at fifteen, lives with her siblings in near poverty and struggles to find recognition and acceptance within a community. Her America, like that of McCarthy's characters, faces a disaster of its own making, a collapse caused by its society's serious internal weaknesses. However, Ward does not imagine an all-devastating disaster as the inevitable culmination of a flawed historical path. The disaster that her heroine faces is partial, cleansing, and productive as well as destructive. For the fictional Americans in *Salvage the Bones*, to perceive the contemporary predicament as leading inexorably to a disaster that completely wipes the slate clean and requires an entirely new beginning would be to abandon the victims of the nation's history and their long struggle for belonging. Ward's story expresses, instead, an argument for a rehabilitation, rather than total reimagining, of American identity through the nature of the disaster that enters the world of her novel and the actions and fates of her protagonists.

The disaster in *The Road* is futuristic and mysterious, while the threat in *Salvage the Bones* is very real, well-known, and even given an actual name: Katrina. This named disaster complements the complex system of signifiers in which the Batistes live and try to situate themselves amidst the names of privileged towns and backwoods districts, of the mythical figures and legends that form the backbone of their world's ideologies and belief systems – names that incorporate or dismiss, that enclose and separate, that often have multiple possible meanings, and, most importantly, names that tell stories. In contrast to the nameless void in which McCarthy's characters live, the Batistes inhabit a world characterized by a profusion of meaningful identifiers, for places and for

communities of people. It is important that the disaster this world faces is also named, because, just as with all the other elements in this American landscape, the storm, through its capacity to be named and known, forces a confrontation with its inescapable realities, and through that confrontation, the possibility of coming to terms with those realities. Like the other names in the novel, the name of the storm tells the story of what it is, how it came to be, and what it can become. The disaster of Katrina, which incorporates the elements of global exploitation of resources that contributed to the hurricane and the horrific aftermath, is the product of the society it affects. Therefore, when this society comes face to face with the storm, it must ultimately encounter itself. In the novel this encounter literally and figuratively washes away the more damning aspects of the unjust community that has ensnared the Batiste children while leaving them to rebuild that community in a way that allows a place for them.

To solidify my argument about the power of the disaster in *Salvage the Bones* to bring the nation to a tumultuous but potentially healing confrontation with itself, I have read the novel alongside two essays that explore the ways in which Hurricane Katrina performed that function. In the 2006 article, “ ‘People from that Part of the World’: The Politics of Dislocation,” cultural anthropologist Henry Jenkins uses as a springboard for an argument on the connections between the hurricane and the state of the nation President Bush’s 2005 comment in the wake of the hurricane: “. . . there’s going to be a construction boom *down there*. We want *people from that part of the world* being prepared to take on those jobs” (470). Jenkins, a native Southerner, reflects that “ in a region that once tried to secede from the United States and has ever since seen itself locked in a seemingly endless struggle to regain equal status within the country, the term

‘that part of the world’ provoked bitter memories” (470). He argues that both Bush’s perception of the Gulf Coast as a separate and undesirable region and his view of the hurricane-ravaged area as a site of capitalistic exploitation serve as an example of the way that the government response to Katrina brought attention to the flaws in national practices and ideologies. In his 2009 article “ ‘We Know This Place’: Neoliberal Racial Regimes and the Katrina Circumstance,” sociologist Jordan Camp points out that, when the hurricane hit New Orleans, “instead of a determination of how best to meet the basic survival needs of communities most affected by the storm, a power struggle emerged between federal politicians and those at the state level” and that this power struggle demonstrated “continuity with traditional practices of ‘benign neglect’ of the Black poor and working class” (698). The excessive military presence in the city, the focus on protecting property before people, and the unreasonable measures taken against looters and anyone who seemed suspicious reinforced the problems of a nation, and demonstrated how this particular twenty-first century crisis draws attention to the nation’s failure to care for or recognize all of its citizens.

The first chapter explores some of the large-scale political and ideological quandaries the nation faces due to its position in the global capitalist network. The second chapter, “The Construction of the Human in Dave Eggers’ *Zeitoun*,” takes a closer look at the same defining event of the American twenty-first century that is the focus of *Salvage the Bones*, Hurricane Katrina, through the lens of Eggers’ nonfiction account of the travails of Abdulrahman Zeitoun, a New Orleans businessman who is unjustly arrested and unlawfully detained in a makeshift prison during and after the storm. It is the project of this chapter to explore the question that makes Katrina such a troubling and game-



changing event in recent history: the question of where, within the nation's history and traditions, or its contemporary circumstances and attitudes, are the origins of the human rights abuses that took place in New Orleans and the country's inability to recognize all of its people as equal?

I have used as a guide Joseph Slaughter's 2007 book *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* – a work part literary and part sociological – to explore what *Zeitoun* reveals about the issue at the heart of the human rights question: the matter of how a society constructs a concept of what “human” means, what the qualifications and conditions are by which a person is recognized as a person. Slaughter argues that, in the West, legal systems work in tandem with literature to produce a unique and variable definition of personhood. Slaughter notes that, “ours is at once the Age of Human Rights and the Age of Human Rights Abuse” and that “the banalization of human rights means that violations are often committed in the Orwellian name of human rights themselves, cloaked in the palliative rhetoric of humanitarian intervention” (2). He seeks to explore this paradox by examining “the legibility of human rights . . . the literary, political, and juridical effects of transcribing into international legal conventions what the ancient Greeks regarded as unwritten laws” (3). Slaughter's project is based upon Hannah Arendt's observation that “human rights are, in practice if not in principle, not the natural rights of humans *qua* humans, but the positive rights of citizens” (12) Slaughter argues that literary narratives like those of the *Bildungsroman* genre develop a concept of the human within a particular society that cannot really be divorced from a concept of the ideal citizen within that society.

I argue that *Zeitoun*, while nonfiction and not a true example of a *Bildungsroman*, still works as a piece of contemporary American literature that constructs a narrative defining a particularly twenty-first century American concept of “human,” a concept that draws heavily from traditional American ideals and values. I interpret the book also as an effort to expose the reality of the American government’s frequent failure to care for all of its people and to understand the reasoning behind this flaw by accessing the truth of what happened to one of the government’s victims, Zeitoun. However, in this mission, Eggers encounters what may be a core problem in criticizing contemporary America’s failure due to the weaknesses of its capitalistic nature and its flawed mythologies, since the elements of the nation that he intends to condemn are also the weapons that he uses in his attack. In order to express the injustice of the capitalistic and patriarchal system that fails to recognize the basic rights of all the people within its borders, Eggers creates a narrative that defends the personhood and rights of one of those who was not treated as a person during the chaos of the storm. However, because concepts of personhood are culturally defined, he can only achieve his goal by demonstrating Zeitoun’s humanity according to the specific models of twenty-first century America, models that are deeply indebted to the capitalistic and patriarchal system that Eggers criticizes.

Both Eggers’ choice of protagonist for the book and his artistic decisions in creating the narrative craft a literary image of the twenty-first century human that conforms to the traditionally American ideal of the self-made man. As the hero of the story, Zeitoun stands out from other characters on the periphery of the story who also suffered at the hands of an unfair government. Of the potential candidates for protagonist of such an account that are visible in the book, Zeitoun is by far the most family-oriented

and financially successful, suggesting that these qualities are important to the story of mistreatment Eggers wants to tell. Furthermore, whereas *Zeitoun* is most notable for what happens to him during the storm, the book itself is structured as a biography, a format that allows it to tell the life story necessary to establish in *Zeitoun* the qualities of entrepreneurship, independence, and patriarchal responsiveness that are crucial in making him a sympathetic character in our cultural environment.

*Zeitoun* is, in part, problematic because of its need to contain its hero within a specific model of humanness. However, this chapter references two recent essays that also examine human rights in contemporary literature to question more deeply the possible implications of the way this book approaches the dilemma. In “Referring to the Human in Contemporary Human Rights Literature” (2012), Mitchum Huehls explores how Dave Eggers approaches the problem of having to choose between conforming to a “catachrestic” concept of “human” or having no identity at all in his previous novel *What is the What*. In this novel, African refugee Deng rebels against the example of a man he meets wandering in the desert who “has decided that he is safer inhabiting this universal absence” and being no one than adopting an identity that could be used to oppress him. Deng decides instead to seek an identity by coming to the U.S., where “his humanity, in effect, becomes a blank slate for inscribing, erasing, and reinscribing himself in perpetual, catachrestic self-production” (Huehls 14). In this interpretation, the restraining molds of humanness that a nation imposes offer a way for an individual to step from nothing into something. They may be molds that demand conformity, but they offer the possibility of conforming to anyone. However, Huehls warns also that inhabiting such catachrestic identities comes with some risk: “while grounding the human in absence may

free individuals to produce and reproduce themselves, it also frees hegemonic discourse to deploy ‘master words’ that produce and reproduce selves as well” (14).

In “Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction” (2011), Ramón Saldívar introduces the concept of a new kind of novel which he calls “historical fantasy,” represented by Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Saldívar argues that, “in the twenty-first century, the relationship between race and social justice, race and identity, and indeed, race and history” has given rise to “a new ‘imaginary’ for thinking about the nature of a just society and the role of race in its construction” (574). The novels he refers to as “historical fantasies,” are, simply enough, works that contain narratives which incorporate elements of both strict historical realism and fantasy that enable them to express the “desire for the wholesale transformation of American history” (592). While *Zeitoun* does not initially seem to fit into such a category, lacking as it does any elements of literary fantasy, it does perform the same kind of task as the novels on which Saldívar focuses: to “transform” history, to put dreams of how our society should be alongside frank depictions of how it is. *Zeitoun*, through the idealistic portrayal of its protagonist and the horrors of what happen to him, interweaves a realistic depiction of what happened to one man in New Orleans with an ideological dream of the democracy that should not have allowed it to happen. Also, although the issue of race is arguably not Eggers’ primary concern (nor mine), his book also resonates with Saldívar’s argument about the role of the twenty-first century novel in engaging with a society that has formed within a framework of institutionalized racism, since it tells the story of the entrance of a Middle Easterner into what used to be a story focuses primarily on black and white characters.

My third chapter focuses on Australian author DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little*, a grisly satire telling the story of teenage Vernon Little, who is railroaded by the justice system and the corrupted agendas of the townspeople in a small, fictitious Texas town after his best friend, a gay Mexican teen, commits a mass shooting at their high school. In this darkly comedic vision, Vernon, after escaping briefly to Mexico, finds himself a participant in a Death Row reality show before his last minute rescue. Like *Zeitoun*, *Vernon God Little* takes up the issue of the wrongful criminalization of an innocent person, exploring the qualities that would allow such a thing to happen in (an exaggerated and distorted version of) our country. Whereas *Zeitoun* reveals a lot about what allows a person to be a person in the contemporary nation, the wildly inappropriate responses of characters in *Vernon God Little* to events in their community speaks volumes about the deeply flawed ways that they seek to understand their world and act within it. The poignancy of the story despite its dark humor derives from the way the characters' profound confusion and powerfully misguided perspectives lead them to construct a world in which violence and oppression continue unchecked and are often made to assist the preservation of a self-serving and palliative American existence. *Vernon God Little* is especially appropriate as the conclusion to this project because of the way its characters inhabit a literal and figurative borderland, the successful navigation of which holds great meaning for the future direction of the country. In particular, the novel's central character Vernon straddles, is ensnared by, and sometimes transcends the boundaries between competing paradigms, between freedom and entrapment, between the fantasies of pop culture and the dark realities of American life, and, finally, between the geographical and political spaces of the United States and Mexico.

In the novel, Vernon becomes the victim of his society's flawed approach to dealing with the violence that erupts in their community, an approach structured on the role of sexuality and its dubious connection to truth in modern society. According to Foucault's observations in *The History of Sexuality*, increasing knowledge of the body and human sexuality in the West paralleled a "fundamental resistance" that "blocked the development of a rationally formed discourse concerning human sex, its correlations, and its effects" (55). In place of a rational discourse, society formulated a paradigm perceiving sex, the truth of individuals, and the maladies of society as interconnected and perceiving the process of confession as the infallible methodology for accessing these related social truths. It is this paradigm, running counter to a worldview with a more logical perception of human bodies and sexuality, in which Vernon is initially caught. The society of Martirio, Texas uses this and other dominant, illogical paradigms, or "powerdimes," as Vernon calls them, to obscure reality and maintain the balance of power.

The various manifestations of the confession to which he is subjected, which form the truth-seeking apparatus of his society, escape confrontation with the underlying realities of the violent crime that spurs the action of the novel, instead blaming this violence on the deviant sexuality of two schoolboys. Vernon's ordeal with the prison system and his near execution then demonstrate the way that the practice of what Foucault terms "bio-politics" leads to a system that does not always ensure liberty and in which institutionalized evils such as legal executions are preserved. Foucault argues that, in the modern world, "the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death" (138). In this way, and in the name of protecting

the population from one labeled as deviant and dangerous, the power structures in Vernon's world justify similar human rights abuses to those that afflict Zeitoun.

Just as Vernon must struggle against a justice system that frequently chooses the wrong paradigm to use in its search for the truth of crime and violence, he and his fellow townspeople shift uneasily between a somber vision of the stark realities of their lives and the rose-tinted but misguided view of the world that pop culture offers. The well known work of Adorno and Horkheimer in "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" provides a useful framework for understanding how the residents of Martirio, Texas have a view of reality that is heavily influenced by mass culture. This influential essay's observation that, in modern society, "the whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry" and "real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies" certainly holds true for the Martirians, who have bought into the commercialized narratives and agendas of movies and television.

Vernon Little's misadventures make him, in many ways, a twenty-first century Huckleberry Finn, and like his literary predecessor, Vernon has successes and failures in his efforts to break free from the various binds of his society. Vernon and his friend, Jesus, the much-persecuted perpetrator of the school shooting, are the novel's sole sympathetic characters, and they both walk a tightrope between hope and dismay in their navigation of the lines between right and wrong, lost and found, symbolizing the nation's negotiation of the liminal space in which it finds itself. Like the America of *The Road* and *Salvage the Bones*, the country in *Vernon God Little* is poised between disaster and redemption. In *Huckleberry Finn*, the divides to be crossed were between black and white, law and lawlessness; in the twenty-first century, the border we are faced with,

*Vernon* suggests, is between American fantasy and global reality. However, the novel expresses reserved optimism about the ease of crossing this boundary. In the novel, this divide is represented by the disparity between pressing realities and illusory belief systems, but also by the physical border separating the U.S. from Mexico. In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1999), Gloria Anzaldúa explains how this boundary is especially appropriate as a symbol of the disconnection between privileged, insular American culture and the painful circumstances that exist beyond the protective boundaries of such American fantasy: “The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (25). Anzaldúa describes the border as “an open wound” created where two parts of the world fail to merge seamlessly and furthermore explains that this wound is kept open in part by the fact that it forms a division that works in the favor of the privileged side. She argues that “borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*” (25). In the novel, because they provide an insulating function, the various borders that Vernon and Jesus encounter prove resistant. Ultimately, Vernon is able to transgress some of them – he frees himself from prison and forces his community to confront the reality of his innocence. However, he remains in Texas, a part of the same flawed system, and Jesus remains beyond redemption, his actions finding no meaningful impact and the reasons behind them never fully understood by the town. Jesus is an emissary of the other side of the borders in this book – both because of his Mexican origin and his entrenchment in the darker elements of life in Martirio – and Vernon, despite the love he feels for his friend, is not quite able to reach him. The novel ends in only a partial victory, with Vernon rescued, and in some ways, enlightened, but also pulled back into the damaged social



fabric of his American town, and with Jesus lost in the oblivion of worlds that such a town still largely refuses to acknowledge.

I. THE U.S SOUTH AND THE BREAKDOWN OF IMPERIALIST IDEOLOGY IN  
*THE ROAD AND SALVAGE THE BONES*

In this chapter, I will examine how two works of contemporary Southern literature make legible the ideological and practical quandaries faced by the nation today as it negotiates its position as a superpower within an increasingly complex system of global capitalism. My argument will build upon the work of scholars such as Harilaos Stecopoulos and Jennifer Greeson, who have offered influential insights into the role of the U.S. South in the imaginings, practices, and guiding ideals of the developing nation. While these critics have focused on how concepts of the deviant American South bolstered images of a benevolent American empire in previous eras, I aim to explore how the literary South of the twenty-first century contributes to a growing consciousness of the deep flaws in our national philosophies and actions and the state of crisis in which our modern-day empire finds itself. For this purpose, I will focus on two novels by Southern authors published in the first years of the new century: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, published in 2006 and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, published in 2011. One imagines a post-apocalyptic America in which the imperial practices of both the nation's near and distant history appear implicated. The other tells the story of a young Mississippi girl whom the country seems to have failed caught up in the ravages of Hurricane Katrina, one event that played a pivotal role in bringing the problems of twenty-first century America to the attention of the global media. Both novels paint

pictures of contemporary America that are often complex and paradoxical and reveal a core dilemma that is essentially two-fold: a consciousness of a deep disparity between long-established American ideals and the reality of American practices, as well as a fear that the country's power – which might be ideologically untenable – is in fact threatened. These two novels furthermore reveal that the South, with its famously haunted history and its connections to current events, finds itself at the center of this paradox.

Before moving on to a more in-depth look at the novels, it is necessary to set the stage by reviewing recent Southern literary criticism that is the backdrop to my own argument and outlining in greater detail some of the key aspects of the complicated state of twenty-first century America and global imperialism. Those scholars who have traced the role of the South in the developing nation have primarily proposed that what that nation was developing into (at least in its own imagination) was a particular kind of empire, one not intent upon the exercise of power per se but rather the protection of American ideals of liberty and self-determination. The South, as otherized region, therefore served the vital purpose of reconciling the powerful entity that the United States was becoming in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the ideals of self-government and freedom from tyranny it was meant to represent. Greeson focuses on the early American period, when the nation was first developing an independent political identity. She notes that early Americans saw white Southerners as corrupt and deviant and viewed slavery as “a means toward satisfying the perverse and degenerate desires of the masters of the plantation South” (78). The South, with its slave-driven economy, provided both a model for politically and economically advantageous exploitation of vulnerable populations (the African slaves) and a foil against which the nation could

imagine itself to have noble intentions (the degenerate slaveholders, who fit the bill of traditional, tyrannical imperialists, as opposed to the ideal of Americans who wielded power only to preserve peace and freedom). Stecopoulos studies the articulation of this benign empire during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the nation was beginning to play a role on the world stage. He argues that the American South has long been figured as “less a normative part of the republic than a colonial region that stood apart from the imagined community” and this alien region has served, since the earliest years of the nation, as an American subaltern, an inferior political entity that can be used as a counterpoint to and justification for a paternalistic American identity, an empire that does not have to see itself as an empire (1-2).

In modern times, however, that image of America is becoming increasingly difficult to believe in for a variety of complex reasons. In the post-Cold War era, in which the interaction of nations does not follow the same models of imperialism as the time period on which Stecopoulos focuses, the means by which a superpower like the United States interacts with the rest of the world, exercises control, and pursues its interests have developed in ways that have produced the two central anxieties that plague the U.S. today: an awareness that the nation does not live up to its ideals and a practical concern about the problems that might accompany a decline in American power. Cultural anthropologist Bruce Knauft describes an immediately post-Cold War era in which “the connection between global capitalism and nation-state sovereignty has become the geopolitical analogue to the relationship ascribed by Marx to capitalism, free markets, and free labor” (784). The concept of the independent nation-state, so valued by the founding fathers in the country’s infancy, became especially important to the image of a

righteous and benevolent empire once the United States attained genuine superpower status. In the nation-state system, “emphasis on freedom and liberty structures differential enrichment and obfuscates relations of dominance and inequality both between countries and within them” (Knauff 784). Such a system makes it possible to believe simultaneously in an empire that imposes its will on external peoples and a nation that values self-rule above all.

However, as sociologist William Robinson explains, “the system of nation-states as discrete interacting units – the inter-state system – is no longer . . . the primary institutional framework that shapes social and class forces and political dynamics” (8). He suggests rather that twenty-first century nations engage in global capitalism through participation in “a new transnational capitalist class (TCC), a class grounded in new global markets and circuits of accumulation, rather than national markets and circuits” (8). The new transnational state of global capitalism puts the lie to certain myths of American benevolence and noble intentions. In this system of international dynamics, asserting power is not a matter of territorial expansion or direct rule so much as a control of accumulation processes, a need for political and cultural compliance, and the increasing dependence on military force as a tool for controlling the flow of resources and promoting favorable political conditions. This transnational imperialism leads to what Robinson calls “a spiraling crisis of global capitalism,” with its three basic dimensions:

First is a *crisis of social polarization*. The system cannot meet the needs of a majority of humanity, or even assure minimal social reproduction.

Second is a *structural crisis of overaccumulation*. The system cannot

expand . . . The problem of surplus absorption makes state-driven military spending and the growth of military-industrial complexes an outlet for surplus and gives the current global order a built-in war drive. Third is a *crisis of legitimacy and authority*. The legitimacy of the system has increasingly been called into question . . . and is facing expanded counter-hegemonic challenges. (20)

The crises in which U.S. imperial power is wrapped up make the nation's ideological flaws and incongruities increasingly obvious and give Americans a slew of new and complicated problems involving questions of how to proceed in light of the dysfunctional and morally suspect system in which the U.S. plays such a large part, as well as how to address the threats to the American world advantage on which they still very much rely. Knauft goes into greater detail about how the global imposition of American-based democracy is beginning in fact to “recast or subvert American interests at the same time and sometimes precisely because it opens up markets to capitalism” (788). The American promotion of political self-determination has given rise to the democratically elected or locally supported regimes of Hugo Chávez, Vladimir Putin, and the Liberian warlord Charles Taylor, all of whom established governments that were entirely antithetical to the intended ideal of stable, Westernized democracy. Furthermore, the primarily U.S. led interventions that have opened up Third World nations to global capitalists have given to some oppressive governments (particularly in Saudi Arabia, with its reserves of oil) world power that they otherwise would not have: “as the price of petroleum increases, so does international license for autocracy, anticapitalist nationalism, and disregard for neoliberal rights in oil-rich countries” (Knauft 788-790).

The complex predicaments of global capitalism have then given rise to the need for an increasingly expensive and decreasingly effective global military force, headed by the U.S. Citing unproductive and costly military endeavors from Vietnam to the Middle East, Knauff proposes that America's "Achilles' heel is its inability to combat resistance that is not territorial . . . and not even dependent on military victory for success" (790). The power of the nation, while still secure for the time being, has become somewhat unwieldy and certainly expensive to maintain as insurgencies around the globe require constant attention and worldwide policing. Along with anti-American regimes and armed rebellions, the spread of capitalism has produced counter-hegemonic forces for the U.S. to combat in the form of economic competitors, particularly in Asia. Outside pressures furthermore mingle with domestic problems, "particularly the staggering national debt, fueled by American consumer spending, trade deficits, low rates of domestic saving, and the burgeoning increase of sacrosanct entitlements such as social security and health" (Knauff 792). Twenty-first century Americans therefore face unique challenges to their established lifestyles, values, and worldviews which are tied up in the pressures of current global crises but also the alternate understanding of American histories and motives they suggest.

In Cormac McCarthy's tale of a father and son in the aftermath of a hypothetical total disaster, it is possible to see reflections of the ideological and practical dilemmas of Americans trying to find their way in the twenty-first century world. Read with an eye to the significance of its 2006 publication date and its setting in the ruins of the southeastern United States (one of the very few of the book's orienting details), the novel can serve as a contemplation of the realities and consequences of American imperialism through time

and provide a distillation of contemporary American challenges – particularly, the ineffectiveness of military might to secure power, the problem of oppression disguised as economics, the morality of survival in an increasingly competitive world, the need for better relations among different communities, and the desire for and possibility of reimagining America as a political and social entity.

In “Maps of the World in Its Becoming: Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” Ashley Kunsu argues that “McCarthy here surrenders his mythologizing of the past, envisioning instead a post-apocalyptic future,” providing in the novel “a vision of *after*: after the world has come to disaster, after any tangible social order has been destroyed” (57). The categorizing term “post-apocalyptic” leads us to view the novel from the perspective that it represents a future, possible, but as yet unreal world emerging from a known point in our own world. However, it is important to pay attention to some of the unusual qualities of McCarthy’s representation of the post-apocalypse. One is that, as Richard Gray notes in “Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis,” “the ‘event’ that has reduced the US . . . to this deathly state remains resolutely unexplained . . . this might be the world after a nuclear holocaust or it might not be” (137). All we are told about this event itself is that it involved “a long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (52). McCarthy’s descriptions of the world left behind do not do much to clarify the cause of the disaster. The father and son heroes journey through a dead, burnt world characterized by “dust and ash everywhere,” “dead fields,” “trees in their ordered rows gnarled and black” (7, 90-91). They travel through abandoned cities and houses, past corpses in various ghastly states, but usually the victims of other apocalypse survivors. The details of the calamity



are not revealed, but the descriptions do make it a bit difficult to imagine whatever happened as a discrete, future historical event. For one thing, the destruction the protagonists encounter is total and uniform. Whatever happened seems to have happened in the same way and to the same degree everywhere.

In order to make sense of that, it is important to take into account the other strange element of this post-apocalyptic tale – the way McCarthy historicizes the pre-apocalyptic world of the novel. Just as it is impossible to tell exactly *what* happened to this fictionalized America, it is impossible to pinpoint exactly *when* it happened. Markers of time in the novel are, if possible, even blurrier than markers of place. Other than our knowledge that the apocalypse has not come to pass, there is nothing to date the novel's events in the future. The world of *The Road* is, however, identifiable as the America we know, albeit an America come unmoored from its linear history. In a hypothetical world where linear history no longer has meaning, some of the novel's scenes call to mind the late twentieth or twenty-first centuries. At one point, the protagonists come across “a supermarket,” with “a few old cars in the trashstrewn parking lot” and “two softdrink machines” from which the father scavenges a Coca-Cola that, after the end of the world, still has a “slight fizz coming from the can” (22-23). However, the road also takes them onto other scenes that echo America's more distant past, such as the day they “crossed the river by a narrow iron bridge and entered an old mill town” or the evening they wander through a mausoleum-like house with “High ceilings. An imported chandelier,” a dining room with a “long Empire table in the center” and “a log cabin” in the back (204-208). Various historical periods co-exist and blur into the supposedly future disaster which itself reflects the history that precedes it, suggesting that the novel is less a vision

of “after” than a vision of now, with all of the histories and possible futures the present moment contains.

The strangely anachronous landscape of McCarthy’s America and the ambiguous qualities of his vision of the apocalypse are not random. They seem deliberately to chronicle a rather grim procession of American capitalism and imperialism in order to historicize the crises of the present. Almost without exception, every deserted locale the heroes come across memorializes a moment in American history that was crucial in the development of modern global capitalism. The South through which they wander is the ground zero of the contemporary catastrophe, but it is a catastrophe that started here a long time ago, in a place like the first of the series of unfamiliar houses they enter in search of food and vital supplies. This is “a once grand house . . . tall and stately with white doric columns across the front” and a wide porch where “chattel slaves had once trod . . . bearing food and drink on silver trays” (105-106). The father insists they must enter the house to look for food, but “the boy hung on to his hand. He was terrified” (107). Although the house seems to be nothing more than a shrine to the distant past, the boy’s fears come horribly to life when the two discover in a chamber beneath the floorboards “naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands,” one of them “a man with his legs gone to the hips and the stumps of them blackened and burnt” (110). Here the specter of the slaves “bearing food and drink on silver trays” gives way poignantly to the sudden reality of people kept in a basement and butchered alive in stages, the exploitation of human beings that formed the basis of the country’s early economy come full circle into the literal cannibalism with which the survivors of the apocalypse terrorize each other. This scene connects what we know of the history of the

South to imagined horrors of the future, but the disaster that is both center and periphery in the novel also links the legacy of the South with very modern horrors. The event that devastated the land is reminiscent of the nuclear warfare the contemporary world fears, but it also echoes the total warfare of Sherman's March and the destruction of the Civil War. Unlike what might be expected from nuclear attack, the destruction seems to be uniform over a large area, and the land appears burned. The man and boy observe "trees dead and black but still full enough to hold the snow" (95). They move through a scorched landscape that seems both terrifyingly alien and strangely familiar.

The desolate path of the father and the son also carries suggestions of how the long-vanished system of slavery may have dissolved into future networks of imperialism. In "Emancipation and Empire: Reconstructing the Worldwide Web of Cotton Production in the Age of the American Civil War," Sven Beckert explains that "what seem at first contradictory developments – emancipation and a new imperialism – were instead two grand movements within the same vast system" (1428). Beckert argues that the end of the Civil War in fact spurred the development of a "worldwide web of cotton production" in which the United States became "the world's second most important cotton manufacturer in a growing "political economy of continental industrialization" (1432). From this historical perspective, it is interesting to contemplate scenes such as the one in which the father has left his child sleeping and "stood looking at the road below. The bare ironcolored wood and the fields beyond. The corrugate shapes of old harrowtroughs still faintly visible. Cotton perhaps" (195) Some time after leaving the old plantation house, the father has a vision of his surroundings that blurs together agrarian and industrial America, where the woods look like iron and the ghost of cotton lingers, these nineteenth

century moments still painfully present in the post-apocalyptic landscape. Furthermore, throughout their long journey, the man and the boy frequently cross overgrown train tracks, rusty railroad bridges, and several mills. These landmarks, symbols of the accumulation and transportation of capital out of the once-slaveowning South, trace the path of America's journey into the global capitalist system and associate it with the devastation and inhumanity of the post-apocalypse.

This path clearly culminates, however, in the commodification and trade of oil. Among the first places the father and son visit is "a roadside gas station," the first of many. The gas stations line the side of the road McCarthy's heroes travel and The Road that has led their world into absolute disaster. At this first station, the father finds "the odor of gas was only a rumor, faint and stale," suggesting its value is in part illusory (6). However, oil, in multiple forms, pops up again and again, as much a character as the two heroes and with a more carefully delineated identity. Its various manifestations – in the form of a diesel truck in the ownership of a gang of "roadrats," the oil company roadmap by which the heroes trace their path, the abandoned diesel train that they explore – connects the story of oil to the system of routes and bridges associated with the transit of older commodities and reinforces the way that these capitalist histories are all connected along the same road, part of the same story (42, 63-64, 178). The ruins of the gas station share with the ruins of the plantation house the strangeness that "the windows were oddly intact" (105). McCarthy's narrative provides a unique window into American history, a clarity of vision that gives a sightline between the old horror of slavery and the new horrors brought about by a dependence on oil.

Along with this window into the nation's history, the novel portrays a world in which its still-American heroes must try to understand and imagine a way forward in their difficult circumstances, circumstances that, despite the science-fiction surroundings, are actually quite familiar. McCarthy's characters are in a constantly perilous position in which survival is a matter of defense, the ability to control resources, and the more abstract need to come to terms with themselves as both agents and potential victims in this hazardous new world. One issue on which father and son have conflicting views is the necessity and efficacy of violence. In one episode, the two watch from their side-of-the-road hiding place as a group of armed men approach in a truck. From his position, the father "could just see the top of the truck moving along the road. Men standing in the stakebed, some of them holding rifles" as "black diesel smoke coiled through the woods" (61-62). The group resembles an organized military convoy – they have taken the strategy of stalking the waste land with ammunition and a gas-guzzling truck. However, it becomes clear that they are suffocating under their own weight. They rely on increasingly rare resources, they are beset by sickness, their truck is on the verge of breaking down, and the scout who greets the father and son wears a belt on which "holes marked the progress of his emaciation" (63). When the father and the man from the truck have a standoff, the stranger ends up dead, and the heroes are not significantly better off, with "the boy clutching his forehead, covered with gore and mute as a stone" (66). The one who has attached himself to a post-apocalyptic semblance of military power does not ultimately come out on top, and the result is meaningless trauma and violence for all involved. The man's actions and the boy's despondent reactions in situations where violence may or may not be called for are repeated throughout their journey, and the two

of them have several conversations about how to respond to the possible threats posed by the shadowy others on the road. During one such talk, the father tells the boy as a general statement on their condition: “We are on the lookout,” and, to his son’s protests that there might exist possible allies to be found, “I don’t think we’re likely to meet any good guys on the road,” with the added advice that “you should always be on the lookout. If trouble comes when you least expect it then maybe the thing to do is always expect it” (151).

Tension over how to assert control over the threatening others boils over when the father and son fall victim to a thief, a lone traveler who seizes an opportunity to make off with their cart. The father catches up with the man, and, overcome with rage and fear, he takes back their own cart and also the meager possessions the man has, which amount to “his vile rags” and “the rotting pieces of leather” strapped to his feet” (257). They leave the thief “raw and naked, filthy, starving” and only at the son’s pleading does the father return the man’s clothing (257). In this scene, both the father’s fear and the brutality of his actions are palpable, encapsulating an extreme instance of the painful contradiction of American feeling at the present moment. The father’s desire to protect his own is entirely sympathetic, but the son, who is less confident throughout the novel of their position as the only agents of goodness, challenges the father’s strategy of constant vigilance, violence, and obsessive control of resources. The issues raised in the encounter with the thief reverberate throughout the heroes’ journey, including the suspicion that economic systems are in practice tools for oppression, the growing need for better relationships, and the call for a reimagining of American identity.

The economy of McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic America is capitalism in an extreme form, in which human beings are literally consumed and are, in a gory parody of

capital accumulation, collected and stored in basements and chain gangs. The last remaining Americans justify their economic system with the same flawed philosophy that undergirds pre-apocalyptic capitalism – the belief that self-interest is a sufficient motivation and that the ability to acquire resources constitutes an entitlement to those resources. In the novel, the justice of this system is openly challenged. At multiple points in their journey, the father and son come across examples of people who have taken the capitalist philosophy entirely to heart. In one instance, they arrive at a wall decorated by “a frieze of human heads, all faced alike, dried and caved with their taut grins and shrunken eyes” and then observe from their hiding place “an army in tennis shoes” and notice that “behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women . . . some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illclothed against the cold and fitted in dogcollars” (91-92). It is clear that these situations have resulted from the ultimate neoliberal project, in which economic and political freedom are merely illusory ideals. The leaders of the tennis shoe army have exercised a liberty and an ability to acquire resources in the form of slaves and “war goods” that have resulted in the crises of social polarization and legitimacy Robinson describes. In this new system, some are slavemasters and some are slaves and the political regime is obviously, horribly illegitimate. However, the spectacle that McCarthy’s characters witness is not unprecedented and has its roots firmly in a familiar history of global capitalism. As they lead a chain gang of pregnant women and dogcollared captives, these warlords of the post-apocalyptic waste land wear tennis shoes, a seemingly innocuous detail of contemporary American life that encapsulates how signs of cultural prosperity can also be shorthand for systems of exploitation and

oppression. The grisly display of shrunken heads furthermore echoes *Heart of Darkness*, in which the first outreaches of global capitalism inspire Mr. Kurtz to start collecting heads on sticks, a grim warning from the literary past surfacing here in an image of the possible future.

Scenes like this one challenge the legitimacy of twenty-first century neoliberalism and reflect the growing fear that Robinson and Knauff observe that the system of controlling global markets in which the U.S. is so deeply involved is perhaps harmful and ethically unjustifiable. However, the novel also reflects fears and concerns surrounding the possible collapse of such a system. McCarthy's heroes recognize the profound evil represented by the hyper-capitalist gangs and have made a decision not to participate in the extremes of this post-world economy. After watching the pass of the tennis shoe army, the boy seeks reassurance from his father that "we wouldnt ever eat anybody, would we?" The man comforts him: "No of course not . . . No matter what" (128). The two of them will not resort to cannibalism at any cost, but the issue of involvement in an unjust system is not so easily and perfectly resolved. Every step of the way, the heroes still rely absolutely on the oil that is so thoroughly implicated in the downfall of their society. Its continuing necessity for survival is symbolized by a "tattered oilcompany roadmap" which they use as a primary tool for navigation. The map "had once been taped together but now it was just sorted into leaves and numbered with crayons in the corners for their assembly" (42). This map is old, disintegrating and disjointed, but it is all the heroes have to guide them. They are still trapped against their will on a path they know they cannot continue to travel indefinitely and locked in a struggle for dominance that revolves around the control of resources.



The battle for survival the father and son fight is practical but also philosophical. They must mount an unimaginable effort to stay alive day to day that puts them in a fictional realm beyond common experience. However, around the edges of that fight is a different struggle to salvage an identity from the wreckage of a collapsing world order that mirrors the ideological dilemma of contemporary America. In “Maps of the World in Its Becoming,” Kunska notes that the world of the novel is a space without names, that “the proper place names of the pre-apocalyptic world have become obsolete. The world of *The Road* lacks organized governments, religions, and economies . . . and thus is bereft of those classifications that would help to place the characters in the physical sense” (63). However, she does not see this namelessness as meaninglessness but rather suggests that “the nature of the meaning has changed” calling for “a refiguring of meaning in the language of the new, post-apocalyptic world” (63). She asks: “For what matter is the distinction between Tennessee and Georgia, or . . . between Tennessee and Timbuktu, in a world devoid of the social structures that give meaning and function to the distinctions?” (63) For Kunska, the removal of names is cleansing, paving the way for new systems of meaning. The question she poses also reveals the importance of named spaces to the functioning of imperialism, which relies on the ability to distinguish center from periphery and one political entity from another. She references the discussion that father and son have over the states that are depicted on their oil company map. When his son asks why the lines on the map are called state roads, the father replies that “they used to belong to the states. What used to be called the states” (McCarthy 43) This process of dividing up the physical space of the United States has been historically important to the country’s political operation. Such critical distinctions in the development of domestic

imperialism such as North/South and state/federal have been founded upon the ability to name one place Tennessee and another Georgia. This hierarchical place naming within the nation translates into broader concepts of the world that separate Tennessee from Timbuktu. These separations are crucial for the concentration of power in certain political entities and the spread of that power through hegemony. However, as Knauff and Robinson observe, in a system of global capitalism that is increasingly transnational and decreasingly based on a top-down power structure, the distinction of politicized spaces is becoming less meaningful than it previously was.

For McCarthy's protagonists as well as contemporary Americans, the loss of named spaces presents both challenges and opportunities. The deterritorialized America they face offers the tenuous hope of building a better world, but it is frightening for the reason that every world's places and inhabitants need names and maps, and, even among leveled cities and landscapes burnt to the ground, these identifiers must always come from somewhere. If they reject as forever lost the names of the world that ended in total disaster, from where do the father and son draw an identity? The two voyagers frequently confront the quandary of being unable to identify with a particular space. They journey through a series of houses in a fruitless search for a recognizable home. As the father with his son enters one lonely room in such a house, "they came upon themselves in a mirror and he almost raised the pistol. It's us, Papa, the boy whispered. It's us" (132). The alienation they feel from these once familiar places causes a parallel sense of alienation from themselves. This phenomenon is perhaps most acute when the two travelers visit the ruins of the father's childhood home. In the dining room where the father remembers "this is where we used to have Christmas when I was a boy," they find

“the floor buckled from the rainwater . . . the bones of a small animal dismembered and placed in a pile” (26) The father nurses at first a hesitant nostalgia, but the boy is overcome by a sense of dread, and the two of them leave, with the father admitting: “We shouldn’t have come” (27). The disaster that had its origins in these now-devastated places has severed a crucial bond between the characters and their land. Without that bond, they are lost, without a sense of direction and without the ability to connect with others.

This painful disconnection is reflected in the matter of the mysterious “other little boy” the son sees during their journey. From the porch of one anonymous house, he catches a glimpse of “a boy, about his age, wrapped in an out-sized wool coat with the sleeves turned back” (84). The son is desperate to recover this other child, ecstatic to find another like himself and concerned that the little boy “doesn’t have anybody to take care of him” (85). To his pleas, the father responds, “There’s no one to see. Do you want to die? Is that what you want?” (85) Just after this episode, the father sits with the oil company map “studying the twisted matrix of routes in red and black with his finger at the junction where he thought they might be. As if he’d see their small selves crouching there” (86). The father tries unsuccessfully to locate them amid the names of places ruined by the imperialism the oil company map represents and turns away from the possibility of bonding with another, who promises to be innocuous and similar to them. Unable to identify himself with a geography, the father is unable to identify with the other inhabitants of this nameless space. Although the father’s lonely dilemma might seem entirely foreign, it is an interior conflict that also threatens contemporary American ideology. The loosening of the bond between Americans and a nation whose guiding philosophies are decreasingly compelling creates a problem with the functioning of

communities, since the ability to identify with a politicized space is intrinsically tied to the ability to identify with communities of people.

For the father and son of *The Road*, as well as for their nonfictional American counterparts, part of the problem of a world in which “America” has lost much of its meaning is the lack of connection to any larger community. Robinson and Knauff describe a twenty-first century world characterized by the prominence of transnational power and an antagonism between the United States and the rest of the world, in the form of military aggression and counter-hegemonic movements. In such a world, Americans are isolated and left without positive bonds to a global community. The same is true in the novel, albeit in a somewhat different way. McCarthy describes the disaster that has befallen what used to be America, but his protagonists have no idea what has happened to the world beyond. With travel limited and communications nonexistent, the world of the novel’s heroes has been reduced to the land that is immediately within sight. They journey doggedly towards the shore, as though seeking some connection with other possible lands, but when they finally arrive, it is not a hopeful scene. They find “a gray beach” where the waves sound “like the desolation of some alien sea breaking on the shores of a world unheard of” (215). This initial description fails to find a connection with either another place (the “alien sea”) or their own (the “world unheard of”). Washed up in the shallows, they find a sailboat, which, like the houses they have visited on land, seems to hail from another time. Drawing near, the father “could make out the worn gilt lettering. Pájaro de Esperanza. Tenerife” (223). The connection they find here with the outside world seems old and speaks of the mutual mission of exploitation that has characterized the relationship between America and its European partners in imperialism.

The stranded boat has made its way from one colonized space to another, and it is hard to know whether its promise of hope and escape could be real. Tucked away in a compartment, the father finds a flaregun but admits to the son that “there’s nobody to signal to” (241). However, the father and son both nurture a desire to reconnect with a community of people. Upon the boat the father also discovers “a brass sextant, possibly a hundred years old” with the inscription: “Hezzaninth. London.” In the hellish world he occupies, the sextant “was the first thing he’d seen in a long time that stirred him” (228). Digging beneath the terrors of global imperialism, the father connects briefly with a sense of wonder and a desire to explore the world that binds him to the long-ago London manufacturer who made the instrument and the sailors who used it. The father and son come to the conclusion that the seafarers are certainly long dead, but at this moment, the father voices for the first time a hope that they are not alone. He tells the boy, “there are people and we’ll find them. You’ll see” (244).

At the end of the novel, the heroes both do and do not reconnect with what remains of their ravaged world. After his father’s death, the son is taken in by a small group of people who seem benevolent. Their leader tells the boy: “You can stay here with your papa and die or you can go with me,” and to the child’s question “how do I know you’re one of the good guys?” he responds, “You dont. You’ll have to take a shot” (283). This reunion with a community is hopeful but is built on blind faith, and, just like the sailboat the heroes find, contains within it both the promise of exploration and bonding and the danger of exploitation and oppression that come with the formation and advancement of social groups. The son’s inclusion in this new group is a victory but one that, McCarthy suggests, comes at a cost, since the novel does not allow the father to

survive. Just as the leader of the group tells the boy, this new beginning means leaving behind an attachment to his father. The man has succumbed to illness, but he is also a sacrifice to the new world. The son must abandon his connection to his father and his father's fears in order to seek out badly needed new connections. It is, again, a dilemma that is not unknown to contemporary America, a nation faced with difficult choices and an ever more pressing need to let go of the past in order to move into a better future.

The central conflict for the heroes of *The Road* is finding the way out of a waste land, discovering a new way of living while abandoning spaces and narratives that are no longer viable. The young heroine of *Salvage the Bones* faces a slightly different battle. In their small Gulf Coast town, fifteen-year-old Esch Batiste and her brothers are seeking identities in a twenty-first century America where such a project is far from simple. Like McCarthy's unnamed father and son, the Batiste children struggle for survival in a land afflicted by the ever-intensifying problems of global capitalism, but there are crucial differences in the America they occupy, the disaster that threatens it, and the way they attempt to find themselves in the chaos. Whereas the landscape of *The Road* is empty, the world of *Salvage the Bones* is crowded. McCarthy's post-apocalyptic setting advocates a clean departure from an old America beyond redemption, but as Ward's title suggests, her characters, representatives of a different stratum of the nation, have chosen a different strategy that seeks an American reconciliation and rehabilitation. The Batistes are determined to find a place for themselves even amidst constructions of places and storylines that bolster the imperialist machine and victimize them. Instead of a nameless and absolutely devastating disaster, they face a storm that can be known and understood,

that reveals as well as destroys, suggesting that the breakdown of America's traditionally imperialistic logic, instead of an ending, might be the key to the nation's survival.

Esch and her family live on the margins of society, in fictional Bois Sauvage, Mississippi on a shaky homestead known as "The Pit." As the place names of the novel suggest, their marginality is connected to the land, to its history, and to the communities that have populated it. The very earth they live on is threatening and unstable. Esch explains that her grandfather used to "let the white men he work with dig for clay that they used to lay the foundation for houses" on his property but that he feared "the earth would give under the water, that the pond would spread and gobble up the property and make it a swamp, so he stopped selling earth for money" (14). Their land is collapsing in on itself, and Esch expresses an awareness that exploitative racial relations and a capitalist mentality are to blame. Their town is at the edge of the country and in the shadow of the wealthy and predominantly white St. Catherine, whose "yacht club" and "old white-columned homes" always "made us feel small and dirty and poorer than ever" (252-253). The Batistes are dispossessed geographically but in other ways as well. Esch and her brothers are unable to weave themselves into the social fabric of the community, due in part to the needs that society does not fulfill for them. The children's story is haunted by the absence of the family's matriarch, who died in childbirth, and troubled by the destructive relationships they have with the other residents of their town. The failure of contemporary America to care for all its citizens is largely to blame for these problems.

As a young child, Esch witnesses her mother giving birth to her younger brother, an ordeal that ultimately kills her. To Esch, her mother looks "like an animal on the

slaughter stump” and seems to be “a body that can no longer hold itself together . . . something on the verge of breaking” (221-223). This harrowing scene merges in Esch’s mind with the violent birth of the pit bull’s puppies. Esch sees her mother as a victim, a sacrifice to a world seeking to use her and not offering protection or redemption. Esch is then left “to miss her so badly I have to swallow salt, imagine it running like lemon juice into the fresh cut that is my chest, feel it sting” (222). The loss of the mother is an absence at the center of her world that cannot be escaped but can only be filled, and this critical wrongness extends to Esch’s own prospects for love and motherhood. Esch is brokenhearted over a local boy’s failure to love her and their future child properly. During one of their impersonal sexual encounters, Esch guides Manny’s hands to “the honeydew curve, the swell that is more than swell . . . the budding baby,” but upon realizing her condition, the boy abandons her immediately in a bathroom stall, with “one of Mama’s hair clips hanging from one string of hair before it falls into the toilet, lost in the scummy bowl” (146). Esch is denied a mother but also faces a narrow range of possibilities for herself as a mother and part of a family. She longs for her world to claim her, in the form of Manny’s love and acceptance of their child, in a feeling of rootedness to the land, and in the guidance of a mother. The other Batiste children also face a struggle for belonging in a world where they are extremely marginalized. Brother Skeetah’s life revolves around dog fighting, a violent and shady occupation on the fringes of society that defines most of his relationships and his concept of love, which is embodied in the figure of the pit bull China. He adores the dog, and Esch catches him watching her as though “any minute she might speak, and he’s sure when it will happen, she will reveal all the answers to all the things he has ever wondered about” (46). At the



same time he trains her “to attack and bite and lock on with an old bike tire or a rope” (60). Left without a productive place in the larger community, Skeetah turns to destructive practices and acquires a model of social bonding based on aggression and exploitation.

The marginalized and powerless position of the Batiste family is significant, because it marks them as belonging to a dimension of contemporary America different from that which McCarthy’s characters represent and explains why they experience the same aspects of the twenty-first century nation in different ways and choose alternative paths. They are, to some extent, the victims of global and domestic capitalism, the less fortunate others that the father and son of *The Road* observe but do not become. For Ward’s characters, to abandon or rename a concept of America would be to give up a long fight for their place within it, a fight for justice and recognition. Instead of creating a new world, they seek to make the old world known, and to accomplish this, they rely on an overabundance of names, in contrast to the nameless void of *The Road*. In that novel, as well as in *Salvage the Bones*, named spaces are crucial for the functioning of imperialism but also for the survival of communities. In Esch’s world, every place has a meaningful signifier, denoting the people it belongs to and descriptive of its defining characteristics. The Batistes live in Bois Sauvage, a town whose name designates it as a wild space and whose wildness extends to the community of people who live there. The white community is called St. Catherine, a name that signifies a sacred, special place. The names of the advantaged and disadvantaged communities distinguish them from each other and impose a hierarchy, the separate languages from which they take their names suggesting an impassable barrier between them. For the Batiste family, finding a way into

the center of modern America is an imperfect process of trying to know the names that have been given to them, understand the cultural narratives that are attached, and find suitable identities from the available signifiers.

Esch's world is interwoven with names that define concepts of womanhood. On one level, she is Dewey Dell Bundren. On her class exam over Faulkner's novel, she "made an A because I answered the hardest question right: *Why does the young boy think his mother is a fish?*" (7) Bereft of her own mother, Esch is unhappily pregnant and isolated among a family of men. Trapped in a narrative where motherhood is fatal and progress is frequently illusory, she is left to ponder "what you do when you can't afford an abortion, when you can't have a baby, when nobody wants what is inside you" (102). Her condition as expecting mother has put her into what seems like a doomed position, like Faulkner's characters and like her own mother. On the morning after watching the gory spectacle of China giving birth, she "woke up to hammering," an ominous noise that becomes the soundtrack to the Batiste story. On this morning, it is Skeetah building a kennel for the new-born puppies, some of whom will die and some of whom will be raised as killers. Other times, the hammering signifies the father's work boarding up the house. Like the Bundrens, the Batiste men throw their energy into building coffins and plotting journeys toward dubious destinations, and Esch is along for the ride.

However, although she is thrown into the apocryphal plot of *As I Lay Dying*, its hold over her is only implied and never explicitly named; the correct answer she gives on her exam is not something she offers the reader. The novel acknowledges the constricting presence of this narrative, but Esch neither gives in to nor runs from it. Instead, she looks further back, to older legends, in search of alternative names. She imagines that, when

she has casual sex with her brothers' friends, "for a moment, I was Psyche or Eurydice or Daphne. I was beloved" (16). She repeats the names of these mythical women again and again, trying to make them stick to her. They are the names of women who are in positions of power. However, even these signifiers are not completely unproblematic. They only allow her to define herself against the love of a man, keeping her trapped within the nation's traditional patriarchal structure. When the boys ignore her, she "could be Eurydice walking through the underworld to dissolve, unseen" (28). The romances that mark the goddesses' stories usually bring with them a tragic ending. When she and her friends discover a car crash victim lying beside the road, she is reminded of these old legends and concludes that, "in every one of the Greeks' mythology tales, there is this: a man chasing a woman, or a woman chasing a man. There is never a meeting in the middle. There is only a body in a ditch, and one person walking toward or away from it" (32). Esch is hopeful in her search for the right name, one that would unlock the possibilities of womanhood and motherhood and allow her to take her place in society, but she has not found it yet.

The same is true for her brother Skeetah, who seeks an identity of power through his pit bull, China. He names her excessively and meaningfully, with the words that signify strength in his world. Esch observes him with China before a fight:

He is reciting something, and he is saying it so fast that it sounds like he is singing it. *China White*, he breathes, *my China. Like bleach, China, hitting and turning them red and white, China. Like coca, China . . . make them love you, China, make them need you, China.*" (171)

He repeats the name, as though bestowing it on her again and again will make her the fighter he wants her to be. The name he gives her signifies whiteness, which is synonymous with power, but also violence, and perhaps, a distant nation that is beginning to rival the strength of the country Skeetah both despises and desires. China is a jumble of contradictions – loved for her ability to kill, needed and also feared. For Skeetah, she is a surrogate, through whom he can play the role that he is denied in society. She is his hope and fear for belonging to this nation; she is his hope and fear that there is another rising to dethrone it. Skeetah has a habit of “eating razor blades,” “sliding them between the pink sleeve of his cheek and tongue and back out of his lips” (60). When Esch asks him why he does it, “he grinned and said, *Why should China be the only one with teeth?*” (60) Skeetah sees the dog as a source of power that he longs to harness, but his is ultimately a misguided mission. He attempts to align himself with a white imperial power, but he is still stuck in the Pit, “rubbing China’s head to the beat of the hammer” (111). Skeetah’s relationship with China is part of the fruitless *As I Lay Dying* narrative, keeping him running in circles, imagining that he is getting somewhere in society, while his dog-fighting ring takes him farther and farther from the center.

The Batiste children struggle to get into the heart of their society, but they are still largely trapped at the edge, partly because the mechanisms that keep them oppressed are not clear to them. In *The Road*, the father muses that “perhaps in the world’s destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made,” but the disaster he faces is “the ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be” (McCarthy 274). In *Salvage the Bones*, there is hope that the coming catastrophe can reveal the way that America is made but not in a way that would necessitate its destruction. Two recent articles about the

effects of the hurricane on public perception of the government suggest that the aftermath of the storm was, in some ways, an opportunity to expose and critique the weaknesses of the current social structure. In “ ‘We Know This Place’: Neoliberal Racial Regimes and the Katrina Circumstance,” Jordan Camp argues that the government response to Katrina brought to the light the dysfunction and injustice of the twenty-first century nation. Camp explains that contemporary America operates with “a racial imaginary” that connects “race and crime, through the circulation of discourses of ‘hoodlums,’ ‘looters,’ and ‘refugees.’” This racial imaginary then conceals “the white supremacist and capitalist conditions that produced poverty for the many” and creates “images of besieged whiteness” that “serve as justification for militarism, policing, and mass incarceration . . . to control the production of labor surpluses that are disproportionately people of color” (696). This description of the situation connects the marginalized position of the Batiste children to the major problems facing twenty-first century America explained by Knauft and Robinson and the domestic origins of global imperialism described by Stecopoulos and Greeson.

America’s interaction with minority populations within its own borders still provides a model for the nation’s relationship with the rest of the world, a relationship that is primarily exploitative in nature and characterized by military force. Camp goes on to argue that, when Hurricane Katrina left thousands of Americans dead or without basic necessities along the Gulf Coast, “political debates over control and power received precedence over rescue efforts aimed at protecting human life” and the government response focused on “an effort to calm bourgeois anxieties and provide assurances that ‘law and order’ would be restored” (697-698). Camp’s argument demonstrates how the

nation's capitalistic concerns have severely compromised its ability to care for its own people. Particularly condemning, according to Camp, is President Bush's 2008 meeting with the Mexican president and Canadian prime minister, using the disaster as a platform for plans to "further militarize the privatization regime of the North American Free Trade Agreement" Such a response to a domestic disaster that killed thousands demonstrates "the subordination of New Orleans to the hemispheric security interests of racial capital is linked to a regime of police and prisons that target the poor" (700). Therefore, the circumstances that lead the country to such profound neglect and exploitation of its own people are also tied to the increasingly transnational character of global capitalism and imperialism.

In " 'People from that Part of the World': The Politics of Dislocation," Henry Jenkins further explains how distinguishing between different spaces within the nation is vital to America's participation in global imperialism. The author remembers listening to news of New Orleans in the days following the hurricane and hearing the president announce his intentions " 'to help evacuees be prepared for the jobs that are going to exist in *that part of the world*. Listen, there's going to be a construction boom *down there*. We want *people from that part of the world* being prepared to take on those jobs'" (470). This speech echoes the claims of Greeson and Stecopoulos that the South and its woes continue to serve as a model for economic exploitation of people and resources under the guise of aid and protection. Bush sees the large-scale destruction in New Orleans as a "construction boom," but his reference to Gulf Coast residents as people who belong to a different part of the world clarifies how it is possible for him to think about the disaster this way. Jenkins observes that "Bush's rhetorical dislocation separated the south from

the rest of the country” (472). Jenkins also mentions other ways of naming the South that separate it from the rest of the nation, such as “Jesusland” and “a latter-day Sodom and Gomorrah,” which also function to keep the region and its people in a disadvantaged position.

However, the studies undertaken by Camp and Jenkins (in part because of the existence of these and other publications) cast the hurricane in a revelatory role, with the actions of the government in response to the disaster exposing pervasive dysfunction within the country. The hurricane plays a similar role in *Salvage the Bones*. Esch herself personifies the storm, naming it as a presence she and her family are waiting for. Early in the novel, she observes that “the shower we needed was out in the Gulf, held like a tired, hungry child by the storm forming there” (15). In this interpretation, the hurricane is put into the hopeful role of the mother Esch has lost, one with the power to deliver something badly needed. The nature of the storm lends itself to personification. As Esch’s father remarks, “ ‘it has a name now. Like the worst, she’s a woman. Katrina” (124). Esch, however, does not accept this negative association with the female name. When the storm comes, she notes that “Katrina surprised everyone with her uncompromising strength, her forcefulness . . . she made things happen that had never happened before” (248) Katrina is powerful, but her power is productive and not only destructive. In the novel’s final pages Esch describes the storm as “the murderous mother who cut us to the bone but left us alive . . . She left us a dark Gulf and salt-burned land . . . She left us to salvage” (255). The storm brings Esch the possibilities she has failed to find elsewhere – possibilities for a new and better identity and for a stronger connection to a community. It brings a new sense of ownership over the land and the idea that all is not lost. In the novel, as in the

nation, the storm's ability to create new possibilities comes from its power to expose the wrongfulness of the present situation. The coming of the hurricane reveals to the Batistes the way their society has functioned to keep them disadvantaged and helps them to let go of harmful and oppressive relationships.

The hurricane gives the lie to the careful delineation of spaces in Esch's world, beginning with the Pit. As she and her family shelter in the attic, Esch "can hardly contain the panic I feel when the house tilts, slowly as an unmoored boat" (229). She watches "the water, swirling and gathering and spreading on all sides, brown with an undercurrent of red to it, the clay of the Pit like a cut that won't stop leaking" (230). The sunken place where they have sheltered in the outskirts is washing away, proving to be more fluid than it seems. Journeying into wealthy St. Catherine, they find that parts of it have disappeared: "not ravaged, not rubble, but completely gone" (253). The storm has disproved its distinction as a separate and sacrosanct place. Esch also has revelations about her place within this new community. She spots Manny, the father of her child, amidst the wreckage and sees that he is "still looking at me . . . waiting for a wave, a nod, anything," but Esch turns away from him, seeming to understand finally that this relationship based on male-female pursuit and antagonism will not lend her the role as a woman she seeks (244). Ward's heroine is no longer looking for a restrictive identity in the popular narratives. She fully embodies her own name, Esch, a word related to the ash tree, symbolizing an unmovable connection to the land and signifying status within a community.

After the storm, she acknowledges the baby to her friend Big Henry, who assures her " 'This baby got plenty daddies'" (255). Big Henry suggests that Esch herself is free



from the need for a connection to one man that spelled doom for the Greek goddesses and for Faulkner's Dewey Dell and that her child will know a community in which he will have complete membership and belonging. The storm also forces Skeetah to relinquish the belief that his identification with China and his violent occupation will accomplish anything. When the Batistes and their dogs are swept out of their house, Skeetah must choose between catching his sister and holding on to his beloved fighter. He brings Esch to safety and then stands "looking out the ravaged roof calling China, watching her cut through the swirling water straight as a water moccasin into the whipping, fallen woods in the distance" (236). He must literally let go of her, and when he expresses to Esch the belief that "I failed her," his sister assures him, "You didn't fail us," reinforcing a point about where his loyalties should lie. Skeetah will no longer collude in his own oppression, and Esch is confident that, if the dog returns, she will be "beaten dirty by the hurricane so she doesn't gleam anymore . . . China will bark and call me sister" (258). As with the spaces the Batistes occupy, the storm has helped to expose and defeat the distinctions between the imperialistic power that China represents and the portion of the American population represented by Esch and her family. Though they stand in the ruins, the Batiste children feel renewed hope for the possibility of a fair and inclusive society.

These two recent novels are representative of a growing realization of the problems facing twenty-first century America and the system of global imperialism in which it plays a significant role, as well as the particular importance of the South in the development and potential breakdown of that system. *The Road* and *Salvage the Bones*, however, depict contemporary America, its challenges, and their potential solutions as seen from slightly different perspectives. McCarthy's characters face a nation where

disaster is absolute and the wreckage of global imperialism has left a void. In this vision American identities based on oppressive hierarchies and power structures are no longer useful and the only viable option is total renaming and rebuilding. The family in *Salvage the Bones* lives in a country where internal injustices and disenfranchisements must be resolved for American healing to take place. They endure a disaster that can be known and contained and that has the power to reveal and wash away wrongs hidden in the fabric of contemporary society.

## II. THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE HUMAN IN DAVE EGGERS' *ZEITOUN*

In *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*, Joseph Slaughter theorizes that legal process and literary narrative (particularly the *Bildungsroman* genre) combine to create a meaning of “humanness” in the modern world. Slaughter begins by exposing the fictive principle that “both human rights law and the *Bildungsroman* developed as technologies for making common sense commonsensical, for making what is already known effective” (7). Human rights discourse claims to put into words a concept of what “human being” means, legally and socially, that is inherent and pre-existing. Slaughter argues instead that there is no such thing as a human being before it is constructed through literature, referencing Hannah Arendt’s assertion that “ ‘a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities that make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow man’ ” (12). Literature and law write into existence the “human personality,” which is “a technical term that means the quality of being equal under the law . . . the quality of being a person,” but this imagined person is “an over-determined and inconsistent figure, a metonym for multiple and often irreconcilable political discourse and theories of law, history, and the subject” (19). The referent of human rights is therefore a conflicting fiction composed of a variety of political and cultural ideals. Literature conforming to the template of the *Bildungsroman* plays a key role in determining what it means to be a person in any particular social context, and Slaughter furthermore observes that the prominence of such literature “corresponds to periods of social crises over the terms and mechanics of

enfranchisement” (27). Narratives that define the human person are most needed in times when awareness that everyone is not treated as “being equal under the law” is especially high, and literature has the capacity to expose the reasons for this disenfranchisement and bolster definitions of “human” in pursuit of a defense of human rights.

I argue that this is Dave Eggers’ mission in his account of Abdulrahman Zeitoun’s wrongful imprisonment in post-Katrina New Orleans. The widely criticized government response to the disaster, during which human rights violations such as Zeitoun’s ordeal took place, constitutes an American social crisis over what Slaughter calls “the terms and mechanics of enfranchisement.” Eggers’ book seeks to produce a narrative that gives to one New Orleans victim the personhood he was denied by government forces during the disaster. The book reveals, in its choice of protagonist and the way its story is constructed, twenty-first century American “terms of enfranchisement” – the qualities by which a person qualifies as a person – and also the “mechanics of enfranchisement” – the means by which these qualities are recognized. Even in its criticism of the American system that fails to protect the rights of all its people, Eggers’ story defends the humanity of its hero by presenting him as an ensemble of qualities that point not to an inherent humanness but to a specific Americanness: his adherence to the narrative of the self-made man, his ideological and practical respect for American government, his embodiment of American concepts of masculinity, and, perhaps most important of all, his participation in American capitalism. *Zeitoun* furthermore reveals that being recognized as a person in the contemporary nation is a process that relies on the modern workings of power on the individual, particularly the elaborate systems of visibility described by Foucault. The book is itself an instance of this need to be made visible.

*Zeitoun* differs from the traditional *Bildungsroman* in that it is a work of nonfiction. However, the book is still an artistic creation that does not represent an entire, absolute, or completely objective truth, even though it takes its material from actual events. There is some significance to Eggers' choice of source material and storytelling methods. Hurricane Katrina had thousands of victims; Abdulrahman Zeitoun's story is not entirely unique, and Eggers does not choose to write a book about him because what happened to him happened *only* to him. Around the edges of the narrative it is possible to catch glimpses of other potential candidates. There is Todd Gambino, a tenant of Zeitoun's, who "spent over five months at Hunt Correctional Facility" and "was not compensated in any way for the five months he spent at the maximum-security prison" (320-321). Nasser Dayoob, a fellow Syrian, "spent six months at Hunt" and was unable to recover "the \$10,000 he'd had with him when he was arrested . . . his life savings" (321). These men were equally innocent and arguably suffered even greater injustices than Zeitoun, but they are less desirable for the purposes of defending human rights for several reasons. Todd is "a bit of a wanderer, something of a playboy. He liked to have a good time, didn't want to be too tied down with rules and responsibilities" (138). Nasser made his voyage to America "stowed away on a tanker whose destination he did not know," and after arriving, he "immediately sought asylum" (131). The little we are told about these men creates a contrast with specific parts of Zeitoun's story. While Zeitoun is a business owner and family man, Todd Gambino is unconnected; Zeitoun came to America through industry and quickly rose to success, but Nasser Dayoob was a stowaway, sought asylum upon arrival, and now carries his life savings in a suitcase. Although their imprisonment without cause is also a human rights abuse, the details of

their lives suggest reasons why they do not make ideal heroes in an American human rights narrative.

Eggers crafts his book in such a way as not only to tell the story of what happened to Zeitoun in New Orleans, but to create a narrative that defines him as American. It is for this reason that *Zeitoun* is most properly classified as a biography, detailing its hero's entire life story, with particular emphasis on bridging the gap between his beginnings in Syria and his life in New Orleans. Slaughter suggests that "human rights law does indeed recognize an implicit freedom to plot a life story, and the species of person that the law describes is, in effect, *homo narrans*" (40). It is Eggers' task then to present his hero as a member of this species, requiring him to include Zeitoun's life story and to demonstrate its intentional and self-directed character. Within the book's particular cultural context, Eggers is also careful to demonstrate that, with his freedom to pursue the life he desires, Zeitoun has charted an appropriately American path. In *Sons and Daughters of Self-Made Men: Improvising Gender, Place, Nation in American Literature*, Mary Paniccia Carden describes the enduring mythology that underpins American identity. She argues that, "in the twenty-first century, dominant definitions of American origins remain firmly situated . . . in narratives extolling the dominance of self-made Founder/Fathers enacted and inscribed on a landscape of limitless possibilities" (34). Stemming from the earliest American literature, the pioneer narrative of an enterprising individual with both freedom from domination and the ability to lay the groundwork for something larger than himself, as well as the talent to make use of the land, is still at the heart of understanding what it means to be a person in the context of contemporary America. Tracing the path of foundation/fatherhood/land development that Zeitoun takes in the book is especially

crucial to establishing his personhood and defending his rights, since it provides a solution to the problem of his foreign origins. Telling the underlying story allows the book to represent his Middle Eastern beginnings as a mask that merely conceals his genuinely American identity.

The book begins with the story of a fishing trip in Zeitoun's home town of Jableh, an account that is clearly meant to stand in for any number of such experiences rather than describe one specific instance. Zeitoun and the other fishermen "would arrange the boats in a circle on the black sea . . . and holding their lanterns over the water, they would approximate the moon" (3). Eggers tells us that when Abdulrahman and his brother would return with their catch, "all funds they earned fishing went toward the welfare of the house they shared with ten siblings" (4). Eggers then immediately moves readers to the present time and place of the book: "Thirty-four years later and thousands of miles west, Abdulrahman Zeitoun was in bed on a Friday morning, slowly leaving the moonless Jableh night . . . He was in his home in New Orleans" (4-5). This introduction connects Zeitoun's childhood home in Syria to his current New Orleans life, the narrative segueing smoothly between the disparate cultures. The fishing trip provides no necessary information but instead gives readers a general impression of Zeitoun's childhood and land of origin. It is a nostalgic and romanticized impression, representing Jableh as "a dusty fishing town," whose culture is innocuous and entirely reconcilable with American values and conventions. The men in the story are industrious, fishing in the nighttime to provide for their families, and familiar, passing the time "telling jokes and talking about women and girls" (4).

Almost all of the information included about Zeitoun's native country represents it in a positive light, connecting it to American qualities and traditions, but also establishing it as a place whose value is somewhat contingent upon its position as an origin rather than a destination. Eggers tells us Syria was "a place where real industry happened: fish were caught, cleaned, and brought to the mainland, and ships, strong wooden sailboats of one or two or three masts, were built using methods perfected on the island centuries before" (80). Although it is pictured as an entirely wholesome place, the descriptions in the book associate it strongly with the past and, due to its connection with the sea, with a certain restlessness. Emerging into adulthood, Zeitoun knows that he "did not want to be stuck in Jableh" and takes the first opportunity to travel the world as a deckhand. On the open seas, he discovers, "he had not known until then how badly he had needed this kind of freedom" (143-144). Sending Zeitoun off on his new life as a voyager, Eggers makes sure to develop in his hero the qualities of the immigrant seeking a new life characterized by freedom and an enterprising spirit that pays off. On board, "though the schedule was grueling . . . he didn't mind. He didn't need to sleep, not yet . . . He was always testing himself, seeing how much his body could do" (144-145). Zeitoun comes to America by choice and only through much hard work, seeking freedom and a new way of life.

Along with this crucial pioneering story, Eggers' account of Zeitoun revolves around his family life (particularly his relationship with his wife, Kathy) and his business. Carden points out that, "so many accounts of national history and stories of national heroes present an America begotten by self-made men on the sometimes pliant, sometimes resistant, but always feminized wilderness" and that such narratives of male



heroes on the female land make “the nation’s desire to expand and secure its boundaries tantamount to heterosexual arrangements based on the dominance of men” (35).

Therefore, the narrative of the self-made man that Zeitoun’s life, as presented in the book, so closely follows, is intrinsically tied up in particular forms of masculinity and participation in a patriarchal system. Early in the story, Eggers includes a favorite anecdote in the Zeitoun household about the day that young Kathy and Abdulrahman brought home their first child, Nademah. Settling upstairs in their bedroom, Zeitoun has the part horrifying, part comedic realization that “He’d left the baby in the yard. *He’d left the baby in the yard*” (9). Finding her safe in her car seat in the driveway, Zeitoun takes a moment to ponder “how he had forgotten his child while aiding his wife. How hard it was to do both, to be partner to one and protector to the other” (10). This scene, though irrelevant to the story of what happens to Zeitoun during Katrina, is crucial because it demonstrates that he is following the well-established formula of the American family. The story of the forgotten baby could have been pulled out of any family-based sitcom and resonates with the basic qualities of American patriarchy and the nuclear family, in which the husband leads the way and the wife’s primary job is to have children.

Other episodes included in the book also function to describe Zeitoun as the traditional dominant man of the house, particularly the detailed story of how he and Kathy met. Zeitoun goes to a friend, seeking his help in finding a woman to date. He becomes intrigued when his friend suggests a possible match and wonders “who was this woman so prized that Ahmaad would not even mention her name?” (31). Early in their courtship, Kathy is set up as a “prize” to be pursued. Though Kathy’s story is secondary to her husband’s, the book provides details of her traditionally American upbringing and

conversion to Islam. The narrative perhaps uses Zeitoun's very American wife who adopts many of the customs of his culture to reinforce his journey as the self-made man's conquest of the new land. When telling the story from Kathy's perspective, Eggers also demonstrates how she views her husband as the traditional male head of the family. When as a young single mother she first meets Zeitoun, she turns him down, largely on the basis of their significant age difference. However, her reasons for reconsidering have everything to do with placing Zeitoun in the role of patriarch:

As Zachary grew, she began to feel guilty. She would take him to the park and watch the other boys playing with their fathers, and she began to wonder if she was being selfish. *A boy needs a dad*, she thought. Was it unfair to dismiss the possibility of a father figure in Zachary's life? (34)

In this telling of the story, Zeitoun's marriage is all about establishing those "heterosexual arrangements based on the dominance of men" that are so closely entwined with narratives of Americanness.

After they are married, the Zeitouns' lives are wrapped up in their business, a detail that reflects the significance of industry and exploitation of the land in the pioneering narrative and also Slaughter's theories about how modern concepts of the human are involved with a capitalistic view of the world. He references literary critic Barbara Johnson to suggest "the possibility that 'what have been claimed to be the essential characteristics of man' may 'have in fact been borrowed from the corporation'"(21). Slaughter, using the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a referent, makes the point that, "the corporation enjoys, nearly universally, at least one of

the fundamental human rights articulated in the UDHR, since it has been recognized almost everywhere as a person before the law” (21). Therefore, the book’s heavy emphasis on Zeitoun’s contracting company plays an important role in its project to make readers recognize Zeitoun as a person. While still setting up the story, Eggers tells readers that “Kathy and Zeitoun – most people called him by his last name because they couldn’t pronounce his first – ran a company, Zeitoun A. Painting Contractor LLC” (5). The company, though run by husband and wife, bears only Zeitoun’s name, a fact that conflates the man and his company and creates an important association between them. His connection to this business enterprise demands that he be recognized as a person within the capitalist system. Furthermore, it positions him in the Founder/Father role that Carden describes. Eggers relates that Zeitoun A. Painting Contractor LLC is “a business of distinct success” (14). Within his role running the company, Zeitoun is making use of the land, functioning as a father figure, and embodying the ideals of the American work ethic.

Eggers provides scenes of Zeitoun driving through the city surveying the houses that he and his men have worked on. He reflects on how the family he and Kathy have built is “woven so thoroughly into the fabric of their adopted city that they had friends in every neighborhood, clients on almost any block they passed” (14). Zeitoun is responsible for the building and maintenance of large portions of New Orleans, and the fact that he works on houses ties him even more closely to traditional American narratives. He is responsible for the constructions that shelter the crucially important American family, that represent the mastery of conquered land. In fact, it is this critical connection to and sense of ownership over the land that causes Zeitoun to remain in the

city during the hurricane, the decision which ultimately leads to his wrongful imprisonment. As Kathy urges him to leave, he responds: “ ‘I have to watch the house . . . The other houses. One small hole in the roof – if I fix it, no damage. If not, the whole house is wrecked’ ” (51). Zeitoun stays on as a protector, not only of his family’s home, but their neighbors’ houses as well. He is more suited to this task than the government. Eggers tells us that, when Zeitoun hears about the refugees sheltering in the Superdome, “as a builder, he worried about the integrity of the stadium’s roof. Could it really withstand high winds, torrential rain?” (55) In this scene, Zeitoun possesses a significant wisdom about the protection of the home, since it was a lack of just such knowledge about structural integrity that made Katrina the disaster it was. Eggers’ focus on Zeitoun’s role as contractor furthermore connects the vital qualities of patriarch and capitalist into one man, since his hero has become wealthy by providing the structures that shelter the American family.

Not only does his business cast Zeitoun in the important role of builder and founder of something larger than himself, it also make him a father to more than just his own large clan. As their business expands, the Zeitouns begin buying and renting property all over the city, and “each renter was, in some ways, another dependent, another soul to worry about, to provide with shelter, a solid roof, air-conditioning, clean water” (14). Zeitoun’s ownership of buildings extends to something like a parenting role for many of New Orleans’ citizens, a role that is borne out when these citizens flee the city and Zeitoun stays behind to watch over their houses. It is a role he does not play only to his clients and renters, however. Zeitoun oversees a large family of employees and feels a deep sense of responsibility for all of them: “Just keeping them in food and

clothing, chasing them down when they were late or absent – all of it was exhausting and occasionally disheartening. He felt, sometimes, as if he had not four children but dozens” (19). His position as the owner of a contracting company is fused with his role as head of a family.

*Zeitoun* sheds light on the “terms of enfranchisement” that are at work in contemporary America – adherence to a narrative of progress and independence, establishment in a patriarchal framework, and involvement with the corporation – but it also reveals something about the “mechanics of enfranchisement” – the means by which someone is recognized to embody these qualities. Eggers’ book suggests that these mechanics have to do with contemporary systems of visibility and invisibility, systems situated on Foucault’s ideas about the way power works in modern society. One mechanism of power is a “legal apparatus” designed for “distributing individuals, fixing them in space . . . maintaining them in perfect visibility. . . constituting on them a body of knowledge that is accumulated and centralized” (*Discipline* 231). Institutions such as the prison are the manifestations of this apparatus of power, and of course, the prison system plays a substantial role in *Zeitoun*’s story and in the larger story of how the American government failed its citizens during Hurricane Katrina. The prison’s abilities to “distribute individuals” and “fix them in space” are revealed in *Zeitoun* as central to an American understanding of which subjects have personhood as Americans and which do not. While confined in Camp Greyhound, *Zeitoun* notices the makeshift prison’s similarities to other key structures. The place is “just like Guantánamo,” and it isn’t long before “someone in *Zeitoun*’s cage mentioned Abu Ghraib” (227-228). These infamous places are sectioned off and intended to contain people who are very specifically un-

American, and so Americans distributed into reminiscent spaces are also treated as un-American, and losing this crucial political identity, as something less than human. The guards exercise strict and unnecessary control over the actions of Zeitoun and the other prisoners: “He was told they could stand in the middle of the cage. They could sit on the steel rack. They could sit on the ground. But if they touched the fence again there would be consequences” (220). The guards are especially adamant that the prisoners are not allowed to touch the fence separating the free and the imprisoned, an arbitrary rule that seems primarily designed to demonstrate that the prisoners do not have inherent rights or the freedom to do as they please.

While the administration uses Foucault’s panopticon in the form of Camp Greyhound to distinguish between American and un-American, the existence and content of *Zeitoun* itself reveal that a different exercise of power is elemental in recuperating the story’s hero – and any subject – into an American identity. Less visible than institutions like the prison but equally integral to the modern power structure is what Foucault calls the “examination,” a process defined by “being constantly seen . . . being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection” (187). This expression of power “makes each individual a ‘case:’ a case which at one and the same time constitutes an object for a branch of knowledge and a hold for a branch of power” (191). It is this kind of power that Eggers himself must use to give Zeitoun a political identity and the rights that come with it. He must make Zeitoun seen, make his actions, history, beliefs, and the details of his life known. Furthermore, he must represent Zeitoun as someone who is well adapted to this kind of study and who is a man of self-discipline and self-examination.

Eggers' story gives the impression that there is no level of scrutiny under which Zeitoun would not stand up. In all aspects of his life he is organized and faultless. Starting in the U.S. with a lowly construction job, Zeitoun progresses quickly: "Within a year, he had saved enough to buy his own truck. Two years later, he was working for himself and employed a dozen men" (28). He is unfailingly virtuous and industrious and seems to have the perspective that being put under the microscope should not present a problem to anyone who has nothing to hide. Enraged over a client's treatment of his wife, Zeitoun goes to confront the ill-mannered women, "barreling to the client's house as fast as was legal" (39). Eggers makes a point to let us know that, even in his rage, Zeitoun does not exceed the speed limit, that this is a man who does not commit even the most minor of crimes. The book also relates that, before introducing himself to his future wife Kathy, Zeitoun parked across the street from her place of work so that he could observe her unseen. Eggers explains his reasoning: "He didn't want to make a move . . . before he could see her. This was the way of doing things where he'd come from: observe from afar, make inquiries, gather information, then meet" (32). The novel's representation of this episode, which is slightly unsettling, as a charming quirk in the story of the Zeitouns' relationship, highlights the value of examination and surveillance in the world Zeitoun inhabits.

Eggers himself then carries out a forms of examination and surveillance on his hero throughout the narrative, because these processes are crucial to establishing a desirable identity. The several photographs included in the book allow readers to see Zeitoun and his family members in a more literal way than the writing alone. In one of the photos, an arrow indicates the location of the Zeitoun home in a shot of Jableh. (91)

Another is an actual surveillance camera photo of Zeitoun and his children on a New Orleans street corner. This photograph is available to Eggers, because Zeitoun's brother Ahmad accesses the video feed through "a website where he could tap into a live webcam at that corner" (149). The story and the image itself of an unwary Zeitoun holding his small daughter have great potential to be eerie, but Zeitoun perceives them as amusing and even comforting: "When he saw it, Zeitoun laughed, amazed . . . Ahmad, technophile and deeply protective brother, was, in very real ways, watching over Zeitoun at all times" (150). It is telling that this instance of literal Big Brother watchfulness does not disconcert Zeitoun or his author. This surveillance is a reassurance, because visibility is vital to being recognized as a political entity and a human being.

A team of disorganized law enforcement officials arrest Zeitoun in a situation in which identities are obscured, in which Zeitoun and his friends are unable to prove that they are law-abiding, American citizens. Then, when Zeitoun disappears from the radar, he loses the rights that should belong to him inalienably. It is not so much the hardship of his stay in Camp Greyhound, and later, at Hunt Correctional Center, that troubles Zeitoun, but rather the loss of a documented identity. All he needs is to make others aware of himself and his predicament. He feels hopeful at the arrival of a television crew. The reporter "approached Zeitoun with the microphone and began to ask a question" when "'No!' the guard yelled. 'Not that one,'" and "the crew was ushered back into the station," denying Zeitoun any visibility as the righteous American citizen he is (226). The failure of the government to uphold Zeitoun's basic rights seems to be predicated on a loss of visibility. Unlike in Eggers' book, where everything is laid bare, in the post-Katrina chaos, those in power cannot see the political identity and therefore the humanity



that Zeitoun possesses. As Slaughter warns, Zeitoun's essential human character is not obvious but something that needs to be proven.

However, it is the way that Zeitoun eventually does free himself that presents the final and perhaps most troubling of the twenty-first century "mechanics of enfranchisement." Zeitoun is confident that he would be freed if only he "would be allowed to make a phone call, would learn about the charges against him . . . would call Kathy and she would hire the best lawyer she could find, and this would be over in hours" (225). Although his ordeal is not over in hours, this is essentially how the story does play out. Just as Slaughter acknowledges that "what were once seen as natural rights are now after-marketed to those with enough money to buy their 'liberty,'" Zeitoun's timely release from the prison where he never should have been to begin with is predicated on his access to resources. He has a wife who in fact does hire the best lawyer she can find, and he is able to post the required \$10,000 bail (282). These resources free him much more quickly than his friends, who are imprisoned for longer periods of time.

*Zeitoun* ultimately represents a paradox that might be predicted by Slaughter's theories – it proposes to work in opposition to the law, if "the law" here can refer to the practices of government, when, as Slaughter explains, literature and the law always work in tandem. The book criticizes the American government's limited ability to recognize personhood but creates a vision of personhood that has many of the same limitations: a concept of "human" that is interwoven with a concept of "American," a conflation of the individual and the capitalist system, and a reliance on visibility to establish personhood. However, understanding this paradox, which stems from Slaughter's observation that concepts of "human" are never inherent but always constructed, also opens up new

possibilities for reading works like *Zeitoun* which are concerned with human rights and the creation of the human personality.

In “Referring to the Human in Contemporary Human Rights Literature,” Mitchum Huehls addresses the possibilities for a new understanding of human rights raised by the theory that the “human” is always an invention. He observes that this invention creates a paradox in which “human” must refer both to each individual and to all individuals but suggests that the impossibility of reconciling the universal and the particular in a narrative seeking historical truth is not thoroughly negative. The requirement of storytelling to mediate between these two in order to arrive at a concept of the human means that “prior to narrating our humanity, we are unknowable, the human is nothing until stories catachrestically constitute it” (13). Huehls refers to Spivak’s concept of “catachresis” “to name a universalizing ‘master word’ that claims to refer to a specific group . . . even though there are no true examples of that group” (6). Therefore, in human rights discourse, “human” becomes such a master word – a construct that refers to everyone and that no one can truly embody. Huehls points out that this method of labeling and defining people is problematic, because “catachresis, which radically severs words from referents, lies by universalizing and erasing particular differences between people” (6). This catachrestic lie plays a role in the way *Zeitoun* shapes its hero into a twenty-first century person. Rather than representing *Zeitoun* as an entirely unique individual, the book, to accomplish its goal of defending his humanity, must fit him into the master word “American,” highlighting only the qualities and the details of his life story aligned with this signifier.

However, such a master word's tendency to "erase particular differences between people" can also allow people to occupy such a word who would once have been excluded. In Carden's argument about the vital importance of the narrative of the self-made man in the formation of American identity, she also notes that "consulting U.S. history books, one would be hard pressed to find discussion of individualized or paternalist African, Hispanic, Asian, or Indian men, much less to find them represented as Founders" (36). The traditional narratives that allow individuals to assume the name "American" apply only to white men, seeing racial differences as crucial and impassable barriers. However, this is a barrier that *Zeitoun* crosses. Eggers carefully maneuvers his subject into the role of American hero despite the fact that he is not a white man, illustrating the usefulness of universalizing names that can fail to distinguish between individuals. *Zeitoun* is remarkable in part because of the qualities that make him atypical: his Syrian background, his multiethnic business, his Southern Muslim wife and patchwork family. In this way, *Zeitoun* serves as an example of how anyone could, theoretically at least, take ownership of the American stories and signifiers.

Ramón Saldívar's "Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction" can help us understand how *Zeitoun* – with its conflict between individual hero and larger nation-state and in its mission to give to its protagonist through narrative the voice and visibility he did not have in reality – seeks a new kind of social justice in twenty-first century America. Saldívar describes the qualities of recent literature that he calls "postrace fiction":

. . . in these fictions, fantasy compels our attention to the gap or deficit between the ideals of redemptive liberal democratic national histories

concerning inclusiveness . . . universal rights, freedom  
guaranteed by rule of law, and the deeds that have constituted nations and  
their histories as public collective fantasies. Accounting for this  
democratic deficit . . . is the dynamic of the new postrace novel. (593)

These novels develop “ a new ‘imaginary’ for thinking about a just society and the role of race in its construction” (574). Saldívar uses the term “postracial,” not to suggest a world in which race no longer has any bearing but to refer to “the logic of something having been shaped as a consequence of imperialism and racism” (576). The works that Saldívar focuses on incorporate elements of science fiction and fantasy with historical fiction to effect a poignant contrast between the world that is and the world that should be – between fantasy and history.

Although *Zeitoun* does not belong in the fantasy genre, it can function as a work of historical fantasy, because its story exists at the juncture of historical events and wishful thinking, imagining a just world and exposing the injustices that exist instead. The narrative expresses the longing that embodying American ideals would lead to the “freedom” and “universal rights” that are promised. As well as playing the Father/Founder role that should buy him a place within the American dream, Zeitoun believes fiercely in America. Early in the book, we are told that he “was so content in this country, so impressed with and loving of its opportunities” but that he frequently wonders “why, sometimes, did Americans fall short of their best selves?” (37) This musing on the contradictions within his adopted nation foreshadows its potential for failure but also projects the hope that it will deliver on its promises of enfranchisement. After his ordeal, Zeitoun concludes that, “he had expected too much. He had hoped too much” (262). He

reflects that, in his home country, “there were political realities that precluded blind faith, that discouraged one from thinking that everything, always, would work out fairly and equitably” (262). However, “he had come to believe such things in the United States” (262). After falling victim to the American system, though, he realizes that “every piece of machinery – the police, the military, the prisons – that was meant to protect people like him was devouring anyone who got too close” (262). Thus the book itself is phrased as a series of questions about America’s failure to care for and uphold the rights of its people during this critical recent chapter in its history.

*Zeitoun* exposes the contrast between how the country should function and how it does but also offers some insight into the causes of the “democratic deficit” that Zeitoun experiences so personally. Saldívar explains that works of historical fantasy can perform “an ideological unmasking . . . to label the relentless beatings, rapes, murders, tortures, and other lesser cruelties and gleeful sadisms perpetrated in the names of (say) love, ethics, rights, justice, or freedom” (576). *Zeitoun* enacts this ideological unmasking to expose how America can commit human rights violations in the name of protecting its people. Zeitoun’s ordeal, along with the injustices suffered by thousands of other New Orleans residents during the botched government response to the hurricane, stems from the contradictions at the heart of the “post-racial” America Saldívar describes— the America created by the legacy of racism. It is a nation in which racism is both deeply entrenched and largely invisible. The prison in which Zeitoun is wrongfully detained is modeled after the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola, which itself “was built on an eighteen-thousand acre former plantation once used for the breeding of slaves” (310). The New Orleans residents captured or targeted by law enforcement during the storm are

largely members of racial minorities whose criminalization is based upon systemic racist attitudes that are frequently invisible and therefore continue to thrive.

However, Eggers also potentially allows for the possibilities of alternative realities within his narrative by not permitting even the human-rights-violating government to stagnate as an absolute evil, not giving in to the tendency suggested by the pioneer narrative to see the government as a collective whole against which the individual hero is pitted. In the book's conclusion, Eggers includes brief testimonies from the officers who arrested Zeitoun and does not represent them as villains but as scared and frustrated individuals. One of these men, a New Orleans police officer, reports that "The whole place was anarchy" and "My state of mind was rattled" (304). Eggers also suggests that this man's behavior in the aftermath of the storm stemmed from his continual frustration with "the revolving-door nature of the justice system" and years of watching actual criminals slip away through legislative loopholes (306). Another of the arresting officers, flown in and completely unfamiliar with New Orleans, confesses that "If he was innocent, then I feel very bad" and "They should have gotten a phone call" (304). By offering the perspective of these individuals who, from Zeitoun's perspective, remain nameless and undifferentiated parts of a collective oppressive whole, Eggers makes a subtle argument that understanding the government as a collection of individuals who are not inherently evil and can themselves be victims of the system is an important aspect of imagining possibilities for escape from the kind of history that "imperialism and racism" have created.

In telling the story of one man during a crucial moment in American history, *Zeitoun* exemplifies the role that narrative plays in the development of a referent for the

human of human rights discourse. Taking on the fraught subject matter of the human rights violations perpetrated by the United States government against its own citizens during the chaos resulting from Hurricane Katrina, Dave Eggers concerns himself with defending the humanity of one representative victim and understanding why his humanity was not recognized. Therefore, the story of *Zeitoun* becomes the story of how a person can be seen as a person or fail to be seen as a person in twenty-first century America. The book's emphasis on demonstrating its protagonist's adherence to the narrative of the self-made man, situating him within the patriarchy, and associating him with American capitalism suggests that these are the crucial qualities by which America recognizes a subject as human. *Zeitoun* also explores some of the implications of this definition of "human" and the possibilities for and challenges to social progress in contemporary America it suggests. The universal concept that *Zeitoun* must conform to has potential to restrict and exclude but also to remove distinctions between individuals, allowing new kinds of people access to social recognition. However, the qualities that define a concept of human in our world also contain a jumble of ideological contradictions that creates a disparity between the ideal America and the one that exists, particularly, the conflicted ideas of the individual and the state and the coexistence of deeply rooted social injustices and the promise of absolute equality and freedom.

### III. AMERICAN FANTASIES AND THE PERSISTENCE OF EVIL IN *VERNON GOD*

#### *LITTLE*

Written by Australian author Peter Finlay, using the pen name DBC Pierre, *Vernon God Little* (2003) is an unsettling satire of twenty-first century American culture. The novel tells the story of fifteen year old Vernon Little, whose dreams of a better life outside his small Texas town are put on hold when he becomes an innocent suspect in a school shooting perpetrated by his best friend. The nightmarish America the young protagonist occupies is a land where the shadowy horrors of gun violence and legal executions blur uncomfortably into mundane disappointments and frustrations, such as Vernon's fragile and apathetic mother, his all-consuming infatuation with a vapid older girl, the slimy and opportunistic faux journalist seeking to capitalize on the misery of others, and a slew of other incompetent and self-interested authority figures.

This strange and disconcerting tale of a child convicted and subjected to unimaginable punishment for a crime he did not commit and the fellow citizens who appear surreally indifferent to his fate questions the truth-seeking avenues of American society that preserve some of its most pressing domestic evils – the ravages of both crime and punishment. The novel furthermore speculates on the possibilities and challenges of changing the way that we as a culture view the world. Pierre's characters live in Texas, near where the U.S. meets Mexico and also near the places where insulating American mythologies meet painful underlying realities, along murky borders reflected in the



tension between the novel's humorous tone and its utterly dark subject matter. In the novel, misguided American beliefs about the true causes of and appropriate responses to society's various forms of violence exist in a harmful and self-sustaining separation. On one side, Americans cherish the confidence that individual deviants are to blame for the ills of American culture, the belief that the control and punishment of these individuals will work as a solution, and the reassuring promise of pop culture that everything is as it should be. On the other side, the reality of a society whose problems are caused by deep, institutionalized oppression and unfairness struggles for recognition. The unbearable nature of such a reality makes the American illusions of pop culture and the myths about crime and punishment irresistible. These illusions then only further entrench and obfuscate reality. The characters in *Vernon God Little* sometimes succeed, sometimes fail at breaching the line between fact and fiction, but their chances of breaking through the spell of American culture in a meaningful way are heavily predicated on their own desires and agendas, as well as their relative positions within society.

The novel's driving narrative is the horrifically botched response to a school shooting in the usually uneventful town of Martirio, Texas. The event is a rupture in the social fabric, and the natives of Martirio are eager to explain it in a way that does not suggest this social fabric was flawed to begin with. They will seek this explanation by identifying individuals whose deviance, connected to their sexuality, causes them to act as contaminants within an otherwise pure community. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that the modern world has "constructed around and apropos of sex an immense apparatus for producing truth" and that "the truth of sex became something fundamental, useful, or dangerous, precious or formidable" (56). At the heart of the

crime, these fictional Texans decide, is a dangerous sexuality. The shooter, disaffected teenager Jesus Navarro, who kills himself along with sixteen of his classmates, had faced persecution in the town because of his sexual orientation. Vernon, as narrator, tells us that Jesus “was born with six fingers on each hand, and that wasn’t the most different thing about him” (16) Following this information is the detail that “they found him wearing silk panties. Now girls’ underwear is a major focus of the investigation” (16). Vernon’s reflection reveals that law enforcement perceives the matter of sex as fundamental to Jesus’ identity as a criminal, even though his crimes are not sexual in nature, and connects his homosexuality to a pervasive weirdness by mentioning it along with Jesus’ six fingers, a visible deformity. Vernon, who was outside of the school when the shootings began, quickly becomes a suspect because of his association with Jesus. The highly problematic investigation into his involvement also focuses on sexuality. An unauthorized media exploration of his bedroom hones in on a lingerie catalog concealed in a closet. Vernon watches as “pages flap across the screen, sassy torsos cut me that once tugged chains of shameful sap through my veins” (56) The man in front of the camera is Eulalio “Lally” Ledesma, a TV repairman who has used the shooting to launch his career as a journalist. As the camera focuses on the magazine, he poses a question to viewers: “‘An innocent prop . . . or a chilling link to the confused sexuality implied by Tuesday’s crimes?’” (56) This report further reinforces the irrational belief that the truth of the shooting is tied to sexuality and that all sexuality is, as Foucault says, “susceptible to pathological processes,” since there is nothing about the innocuous masturbation material that suggests a connection to deviance or criminal behavior (*History* 68).

The residents of Martirio believe that the truth they are trying to uncover, the truth about who committed the shooting and why, has to do with one deviant individual, and that this deviance stems from a contaminating sexuality. They furthermore believe that it is “necessary to extract the truth of sex through the technique of confession . . . not simply because it was difficult to tell, or stricken by the taboos of decency, but because the ways of sex were obscure” (*History* 66). The novel’s authority figures pursue the “truth” of Vernon’s sexuality and guilt through various manifestations of “the technique of confession,” a truth-producing mechanism in which they have misplaced faith. They also perpetuate the myth that “confession frees,” that “truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom” (*History* 60). Early on Vernon realizes, “I’m snagged in the apparatus of Martirio” (19) He is trapped by the false promise that the methods of confession to which the town subjects him will ultimately lead to truth and therefore liberation.

The novel heavily critiques its characters’ misguided views of sexuality and the belief in individual deviance, but it also illustrates the methods that allow such views to form and become compelling. The story contains a biting criticism of the several processes of confession – police interrogations, courtroom testimony, psychological evaluations – through which its characters wrongfully seek the truth. Martirio is dominated by the Gurie family, whose name, it is probably safe to assume, is pronounced like “jury.” Vaine Gurie is the police officer responsible for the school shooting case. During her first interrogation of Vernon, she assures him that “my job is to uncover the truth” and insists that she can accomplish this task by distinguishing between the world’s two categories of people: “citizens – and *liars*” (6). She furthermore explains that “a liar

is a *psychopath*” (6). Vaine Gurie’s monologue reveals her unflinching belief in the power of an exchange of language to discover the truth of individuals, based on the hidden information a verbal disclosure would bring to light. Her conflation of the terms “liar” and “psychopath” is also telling in that it implies she believes that their performance during a confession has the power to separate people into the categories of “normal” and “fundamentally deviant.” The inadequacy of the police and their investigative techniques is further compounded when the sheriff arrives and interrogates Vernon by asking – “Regular boy then, are you son? You like your cars and your guns? And your – girls? . . . let’s see if it’s true. How many offices does a girl have that you can get more’n one finger in?” (10). Like his vocabulary, the sheriff’s way of thinking is faulty. His brief exchange with Vernon displays the various problems with confession as a truth-seeking device, including the possibility of a disconnect between language and meaning and the capacity of language to weave false chains of cause and effect.

The pervasive use of confession and its involvement with sexuality ultimately spells disaster for Vernon. Although innocent, he is snared into making a false confession on one fateful occasion. Having taken off for Mexico when his situation seemed dire, Vernon is surprised to encounter Taylor Figueroa, a beautiful but uninterested girl who has been the object of his lust for some time. She invites him into her hotel room, and they begin to have sex. In the moment, Vernon feels that he is getting close to “the wet stinking truth behind panties, money, justice, and slime, burning trails through my brain like acid through butter” (194). Despite copious evidence that Taylor is not only apathetic towards Vernon but a generally substance-less person, Vernon believes that she – and particularly her sexuality – holds the key to an elusive truth that would make his

confusing world clear, a truth that is hidden “behind panties,” that underlies such disparate elements as “money, justice, and slime,” “slime” being the term he uses to refer to various kinds of social stigma. As the two of them dive into what Vernon perceives as a source of truth and meaning, Taylor urges him to confession: “*Tell me: Tell me you killed . . . Did you, Vern, did you do all that for me – for us?*” (195) Vernon, distracted and overwhelmed, confesses: “Yeah . . . I did it for you,” but as soon as he speaks the words, “a new reality seeps into me . . . I know I’ve had the last of Taylor Figueroa” (195). In this encounter, Vernon attempts to engage with the transcendent reality of sex, in which his desires and practices are in no way connected to crime, but he becomes ensnared in the faulty “apparatus for producing truth” that his society has constructed around sex, in which the expression of sexuality is believed to be intricately interwoven with pathology. In fact, Taylor has been put in place by Lally to trap Vernon using sex as a device to tease out his guilt, but the confession she elicits neither reveals a hidden truth for the community nor leads to liberation for Vernon. It merely sends an innocent person to prison.

The next process of confession that Vernon undergoes is the trial in which he is wrongfully convicted, which further reinforces the point that confession is a mechanism of power and not an avenue to truth or freedom. The courtroom scenes reveal why confession has as much potential to obscure the truth as to reveal it. Confession relies on language, and language, as the novel proves again and again, is subject to a social hierarchy of power and thus can lie in the service of that hierarchy. One nail in Vernon’s coffin during his trial is the testimony of Mr. Nuckles, the pederast teacher who is the only other surviving witness of the shooting. Mr. Nuckles, whose illicit involvement with

Jesus gives him a motive to lie, points a finger at Vernon and tells the jury “He killed them, killed them all . . .” (238). His lie is accepted because of his superior social position. The testimony of others is rendered useless because of complications with language and power. While in Mexico, Vernon befriends a man who could have provided an alibi for some of the tacked-on charges against him, but this man does not make an appearance in court and in fact remains silent wherever he appears in the novel. He is kept from testifying because of the language barrier but also because, as the prosecutor who speaks for him tells the court, the man only remembers one American boy – “a hitch-hiker called *Daniel Naylor*” (229). “Daniel Naylor” is the false name Vernon gives to the Mexican man to conceal his identity. The court proves its inability to discern truth from falsehood through the avenue of confession during the trial, placing too much emphasis on the value of words that may or may not be meaningful.

The problematic relationship between words and truthfulness comes to a head in the confessional procedures surrounding Vernon’s trial but it is present throughout the novel. Like Martirio’s sheriff, Vernon is prone to malapropisms and verbal garbling. Early in the novel, the sketchy Lally advises him to tell his story to the media in a way that will make him appear sympathetic, explaining that it is possible to manipulate public opinion by creating a “paradigm shift,” in which “the action doesn’t change – the information you use to judge it does” (34). Lally’s advice encapsulates many of the problems with trying to extract truth from language. He recommends that Vernon’s story should be based on a careful calculation of what is to be disclosed or concealed, suggesting that a confession does not necessarily represent any absolute truth. Vernon, however, hears the term as “powerdime,” a humorous misunderstanding of the word that

nevertheless reveals the tendency of language to obscure meaning, since the false term “powerdime” more clearly communicates the function of Lally’s paradigms, which are in essence a way of creating a master narrative through language that gains traction via the support of some authoritative voice. A production of truth by the means of confessional techniques is therefore vulnerable to the dictates of power and money.

Throughout his hellish journey, the novel’s young narrator enacts a process of translation – he translates accepted speech into nonsense that reveals a different kind of truth. He begins with his own name: Vernon Gregory Little. On a Greyhound bus on the way to Mexico, he is “Vernon Gone-To-Hell Little,” when the media demonizes him, he is “Vernon Godzilla Little,” and when he must part ways with his Mexican allies, he laments, “so much for Vernon Gonzalez Little” (162, 181, 183). The name that can capture his essence is not singular, absolute, or formal, but ever-changing and always slightly preposterous. Equally ridiculous, on the surface, are the twists he puts on other words, which tend to reflect his adolescent sense of humor and scatological fascination. After being molested by the police psychologist, Vernon sits “under a personal cloud in the back of the jail van, like a sphinx, a sphinxter,” and he imagines that Lally’s fictitious investment company would have a name like “Rechtum, Gollblatter, Pubiss, & Crotsch” (70. 131). This foul-mouthed mis-naming is a way of divesting proper language of its power, but it also forces into language a reality that the discourse of confession frequently leaves out. The confrontational tone of his scatological wordplay presents the realities of the human body in a matter-of-fact way that challenges the confessional discourse’s irrational associations with the body and treatment of it as a source of always-hiding truths.

If the representatives of power in the novel attempt to ensnare Vernon with a truth about his sexuality extracted through language, it is another, less constructed truth about the body that ultimately frees him. Vernon has a secret alibi for the time of the shooting; he found himself outside of school grounds when he was overcome with a sudden urge to relieve his bowels. He attended to this need in an abandoned lot near the school but was then unable to tell anyone of the evidence he left behind, because he had used the same location as a hiding place before, to stash “my daddy’s gun . . . with all the wrong fingerprints on it” (61). Vernon’s father had gone missing before the story begins. The novel circles around the matter of the disappearance and the gun before finally implying that Vernon’s mother killed him, leaving her son the rifle. Vernon then cannot use the evidence that would exonerate him, partly because of the way he feels this dirty reality of the body is linked to the truth of another crime and partly because of the way that language precludes mention of such realities. After undergoing psychological evaluation in prison, Vernon learns that “dwelling on the bad side of things has been identified as a problem area for me, that and being anal-fixated” (204). Vernon is encouraged not to bring up the very topic of discussion that would save him. However, with a series of phone calls just prior to his scheduled execution, Vernon puts into action a plan that has Lally, with his greed for a story, Vaine Gurie, with her SWAT team, and Taylor Figueroa (who has become a media darling) in a news helicopter converging on the vacant lot in a scene that uncovers the exonerating evidence while making it appear that the gun belongs to Lally. This event bypasses the methodology of confession and allows scientific procedure to use the reality of the body to reveal truth, since, as Vernon surmises, “shit must carry a lot of evidence about a guy” (223). With the discovery of this evidence, a



more rational, scientific view of the body wins out. The crass exonerating detail eventually forces Vernon's community, as well as the reader, to confront and accept as a pivotal part of the story a reality that a sanitized American culture would rather not think about. It is an innocent reality of the body that is more true than the popular myths of sexuality, but also a reality that deals specifically with the matter of waste, with something that is considered distasteful and frequently not integrated into a view of life.

The parts of Vernon's story in which the town investigates him as a suspect in a crime reveal the ways in which his community maintains damaging illusions about the societal plague of violence perpetrated illegally by individuals. The next part of his journey, in which he is imprisoned, filmed, and nearly executed, sheds light on how the desire to blame problems on the pathologies of rogue members of society and then boundlessly punish these individuals sustains society's institutionalized evils, such as executions and media exploitation. As Foucault argues, in the pre-modern world, executions were an expression of power that manifested itself in the "right of the sword," the ability of the sovereign to cause death (*History* 137). However, in the modern world, power has "the function of administering life" rather than threatening death (138). In such a society, the way that power acts on the body has shifted from destruction to control, and so the justice that society enacts on the bodies of criminals must fit into "*a biopolitics of the population*," a system for regulating the lives of individuals. In this system, focus and blame are necessarily on the individual and not society as a whole.

Furthermore, in the modern world, "capital punishment could not be maintained except by invoking less the enormity of the crime itself than the monstrosity of the criminal, his incorrigibility . . . One had the right to kill those who represented a kind of

biological danger to others” (*History* 138). This justification of capital punishment in today’s society applies particularly well to the fictional case of crime and punishment in *Vernon God Little*. During the trial, the prosecution places emphasis on portraying Vernon as fundamentally, and incorrigibly, deviant, primarily by invoking the term “psychopath.” The corrupted expert witness tells the court that Vernon suffers from “maladjustments of character,” and that people like him are “*impassive* to the results of their actions – they feel no remorse” (211). He implies that there is something wrong with Vernon that is greater than just his crime – that he is flawed in a way that cannot be fixed, and he will always be a danger to society. Furthermore, he connects this fundamental criminality to a sexual truth, relating the belief that “sex and death are common bedfellows” (212).

It is significant that the crime that inspires the people of Martirio to sentence a teenager to death is a school shooting. It is exactly the kind of event that can be seen as representing “a biological danger to others,” since it often lacks a clear motive, seems to be the work of a sick mind, and, in recent times, is frequently referred to as an “epidemic,” an elusive threat to life on a large scale. In this scenario, the focus is on the individual as an agent of evil and the community as the victim. It is especially significant that the novel portrays the death sentence of a minor in Texas. As of 2005, it is illegal throughout the country to execute people for crimes they committed as minors, but previously, and during the time of the book’s publication, twenty states allowed such executions, and of these, Texas was by far the biggest practitioner (Lane). The novel’s focus on this particularly abhorrent part of the justice system further reinforces the faulty logic of believing that society’s problems can be eliminated by eliminating the

individuals who commit crime (or are believed to have committed crime), since in this case, the criminal is just a child.

Just as the Martirians are swayed by faulty theories of crime and punishment, they are all under the spell of the comforting narratives of pop culture, with their promise that the world is divided neatly into heroes and villains, that happy endings are easy to come by, and that consumption can soothe all of life's pains. They are victims of a society in which "the whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry," and "real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies" ("Culture" 35). Cultural products follow predictable formulas and exist for the purpose of furthering a capitalistic agenda. As Adorno and Horkheimer predict, Vernon and the people surrounding him are caught in "the experience of the movie-goer, who sees the world outside him as an extension of the film he has just left" ("Culture" 35). When first brought in for questioning, Vernon urges the reader, "Just look at me: clumps of lawless brown hair . . . big ole puppy dog features . . . You know right away my movie's the one where I puke on my legs, and they send a nurse to interview me instead" (9). Vernon has already learned to see all individuals as type-cast and to anticipate sequences of events based on familiar movie plotlines. During his first interrogation, Vaine Gurie informs Vernon that there are "two forces underlying all life in this world . . . *cause* and *effect*" (5-6). She then interrupts the interview when "the theme from *Mission: Impossible* chirps on a phone up the hall" (9). Vaine Gurie is as obsessed with popular culture as the rest of the town and doesn't seem to realize that her logic has been largely borrowed from the movies, which portray cause and effect as clear-cut and simple. Vernon fears that a jury will "forget how things really are, and slip into TV-movie mode where everything has to be obvious" (51).

*Vernon God Little* has been criticized for the fact that many of its characters are over-the-top stereotypes. The London Evening Standard quotes Michael Lind, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation, denouncing the judges who awarded the novel the Man Booker Prize in 2003: “Are the British literati so ignorant of the U.S. that they think this is a competent parody?” (“More Abuse” 10). However, it is my interpretation that the grossly exaggerated characters reflect a world taken hostage by Adorno’s culture industry and its false promises. The people of Martirio struggle for genuine identities and meaningful lives in a society defined by cultural formulas in which “every detail is so firmly stamped with sameness that nothing can appear which is not marked at birth, or does not meet with approval at first sight” (“Culture” 36). The culture industry gives individuals the scripts by which they must live but “perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which . . . it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged” (“Culture” 38). The people of Martirio cannot be anything other than grotesque stereotypes devoid of redeeming qualities or genuine human emotion as they seek to conform to the sameness their culture requires.

They are disheartening in their response to the school shooting, after which Vernon observes dismissively that “folk up and down the street are standing by their screen-doors being devastated” (15). Rather than having individualized and legitimate reactions to the event, the town’s citizens step into the role the movies tell them they should play as mourners and reap the emotional and practical benefits of playing this role (vicarious sympathy, donations, and media attention). They have been so inundated with movie plotlines that use tragedies for emotional gratification and commercial motives that they are unable to engage with the reality of what is happening in their town or in

their individual lives. Vernon's mother and her friends live their entire lives according to the recommendations and seductions of consumerism and popular culture. Vernon interprets his mother's every move as an attempt to "keep up with the Unfolding Tragedy of Her Fucken Life" (60). She has constructed her existence around the storyline of the travails of the innocent victim. The lives of Vernon's mother and her friends revolve around the Bar-B-Chew Barn, a fast food restaurant that is a perfect symbol of the shallow nourishment that consumer culture provides these women. Vernon observes Vaine Gurie as a "diet fugitive," sitting by the window of a restaurant, "stuffing emptiness into her void" (84). The women are on a continual search for pleasure and satisfaction that their culture forever withholds.

However, Vernon himself is not free from the illusions of the world that popular culture has created. He heads to Mexico as soon as he is out on bail with the hazy belief that he is running towards an idyllic beach house where he will be free from the ugly reality that surrounds him in Texas. As he approaches the immigration checkpoint, he observes that "the border looks like Steven Spielberg built it" and he crosses it "knowing I step into my dream" (167). Vernon perceives Mexico as a kind of paradise, a perception clearly taken from the movies. However, "the paradise offered by the culture industry is the same old drudgery. Both escape and elopement are predesigned to lead back to the starting point" ("Culture" 40). It is in his Mexican paradise that Vernon falls into the trap set by Taylor Figueroa and Lally, which brings him right back to the literal and figurative prisons from which he had hoped to escape.

The allure of the culture industry and the otherwise misguided belief systems of the society Pierre depicts create traps, especially for the novel's two sympathetic

characters – Vernon and his friend Jesus. They and the other Martirians seek ways of negotiating the entrapments of their world, with varying levels of success. Their struggles demonstrate the difficulty of breaking down the borders of truth and fiction in contemporary America. This difficulty derives from two primary causes – the desire of the society at large to maintain these boundaries and the propensity of the boundaries to hide themselves. For an understanding of why the various borders of contemporary America are sometimes resistant and why Texas makes such an ideal site for the battle against them, we can turn to Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1999). A combination of poetry, personal narrative, and sociological reflection, this book focuses especially on the women who must straddle the line between Mexican and American culture. However, this study characterizes the nature of borders and the connection between geopolitical and metaphorical borders in modern America. Anzaldúa explains that, “a border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge . . . The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants . . . the perverse, the queer, the troublesome” (25). This description clarifies the high stakes of borders, the way they serve a protective function, keeping some things in – those labeled normal and acceptable, the main of society – and others out – the waste, deviant individuals, those considered abnormal.

Alluding to the U.S./Mexico border, Anzaldúa describes how borders also serve to privilege one side over the other and to create dependencies: “Currently, Mexico and her eight million citizens are almost completely dependent on the U.S. market” (32). The U.S. has an economic advantage, and so the ideologies it encompasses overshadow other world citizens and worldviews. Anzaldúa also explains how myths and truths about sexuality are linked to cultural divides, calling homosexuals “the supreme crossers of

cultures,” the people who “have always been at the forefront (although sometimes in the closet) of all liberation struggles in this country” (107). This observation sheds lights on why sexuality – and particularly sexuality that is perceived as different – comes into play in the fight to break down cultural barriers.

While Anzaldúa explains the function and need for the barriers that trap people in Vernon’s world, Foucault’s theories on the carceral nature of modern society shed light on the difficulty of knowing whether or not the boundaries of society have been successfully breached. Foucault warns that the imprisonment of the individual can go beyond physical bars and official convictions. Since the damaging illusions of Vernon’s world are so entangled with a focus on the individual rather than a society as a whole, the various (and sometimes concealed) ways that society acts on and restricts individuals are relevant to an analysis of the extent to which it is possible for the individual to break free. Foucault offers that, “The legal punishment bears upon an act; the punitive technique on a life” and that “it falls to this punitive technique, therefore, to reconstitute all the sordid detail of a life in the form of knowledge” (*Discipline* 252). In the modern world, imprisonment can take the form of liberties taken away from the individual as punishment, but it is also present in the way that a society can stake a claim on the life of an individual, can entrap the individual by making him or her available to be known.

The novel presents three examples of individuals – the “journalist” Lally, the innocent Vernon, and the ill-fated Jesus – working with or struggling against the mythologies of Martirio, Texas to describe the ways in which these mythologies are maintained and how they might be overcome. In a world under the sway of the commercialized products and narratives of the culture industry, the efforts of these three

individuals can be thought of as (sometimes radically untraditional) works of art. These emergent artworks align with Adorno's mandates that "art is autonomous and it is not," that "artworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world . . . as if this other world too were an autonomous entity" ("Aesthetic" 2). The artworks that Pierre's characters create new worlds that alternately seek to deepen the cultural spells under which their community lies or break them.

The first example, and the one most easily identifiable as art, is Lally Ledesma's media campaign. His reporting and his later reality show collude with the culture industry in an effort to palliate the undesirable realities of existence in Martirio. This new art takes advantage of the way the culture industry blurs the line between life and the movies, not only creating an image of an autonomous other world but causing this image to act directly on the "empirical" world. Lally's creation of art in the role of reporter allows him to become someone he is not. He tells the besotted townspeople that he has been sent from CNN, when he is in fact a media technician from a few towns over. Vernon observes the interior of his van: "You can see a lunchbox behind the seat . . . a chewed-up ole book titled 'Make It In Media.' Then you see Ledesma's head rested on a pair of ole boots. He splays naked across a canvas mat inside" (31). This image represents Lally's genuine, and decidedly unglamorous, identity. However, he is charming and "dressed like Ricardo Moltenbomb," (as Vernon's mother calls him), so he is able to step into a new identity. His artwork as a reporter also allows the women of Martirio to enter an alternative universe, where they can also be reinvented. Lally promises first Vernon's mother and then various other members of her group that they can become TV personalities with stage names such as "Vanessa Le Bourget" (106). If Lally's career as a



reporter attempts to bring an appealing fiction into reality, his Death Row reality show is an effort to turn an unpalatable reality into fiction by putting something uncomfortably real (imprisonment and execution) into a pop culture format. Vernon explains the logic behind the show: “the cuter we act, the more we entertain, the longer we might live” (246). By putting Vernon’s terrible circumstances in the terms of a television show, Lally allows people to avoid confronting the reality of what is happening to him and his fellow prisoners. By encouraging them to vote on the next one to be executed, the show also casts the comforting illusion that it can offer viewers something that exists in movies and television but usually eludes people in reality: the ability to control and make sense of death.

The art that Lally creates has a collaborative relationship with the illusions of his culture, but the artwork of Jesus Navarro represents a confrontation with reality in the hope of changing it. Adorno argues that “art is not only the plenipotentiary of a better praxis than that which has to date predominated, but is equally the critique of praxis as the rule of brutal self-preservation at the heart of the status quo and in its service” (“Aesthetic” 14). In this sense, Jesus’ crime, because it is meant as a cry against the oppressive status quo, is also a (horribly flawed and doomed) work of art. Jesus’ classmates victimize and taunt him for being gay. Dana Gurie, who will “make a fine journalist” someday, expresses her belief that “we have a constitutional right to be protected from deviated sexual influences” (232). Jesus’ violent attack on his tormentors contains the strongest imaginable “force of negativity” that is “the measure of the chasm separating praxis from happiness” (“Aesthetic” 15). It creates, momentarily, a rupture in the comforting narratives that Martirio acts out. As Vernon cycles toward the school

while the massacre is still unfolding, he senses that “my life rolls toward a new alien world,” and witnessing the aftermath, he observes that “your mind sprays your senses with ice. Not to deaden the brain, but to deaden the part that learned to expect” (235-236). In this moment, it seems as though Jesus has in fact created a work of art that breaks the spell of the culture industry and the familiar plotlines that society has internalized, but ultimately his shocking actions only play into the familiar cultural formulas.

After Jesus has stormed out of the classroom and before he has arrived back with his gun, “the class casually slips into character for the scene, the one where they’re innocent bystanders at a chance event” (233). Jesus’ art is an “imitation” that “becomes absolute” and exists as “obedience to the social hierarchy” (“Culture” 38). Through his crime, Jesus only cements his existing social position as an outcast and deviant. He remains one of the “prohibited and forbidden” who cannot break down the artificial border between “normal” and “deviant.” It is not an artwork that ultimately succeeds in overturning the status quo, which manages to preserve itself. In the aftermath of the shooting, the town casts the tragedy as a “chance event,” covering up the reasons that drove Jesus to his violent actions. Jesus becomes a sacrifice to the continued survival of the culture industry in *Martirio*. In the early pages of the novel, Vernon contemplates a picture on the wall of the police station of “Jesus’ face, his bangs of blood, his forsaken eyes” (10). This passage comes before the novel has introduced Jesus Navarro, and the reader initially assumes that Vernon is looking at an iconic image of the crucified Christ. This misunderstanding highlights the point that Jesus has been used as a sacrifice from the town, a sacrifice that can bear the full weight of all of the town’s problems. It is in

part Jesus's outsider status that keeps him from being able to force a confrontation with reality on the town, despite the violence of his actions. This status makes it easy for the townspeople to dismiss him as a stand-alone deviant rather than a fully-integrated product of their society.

Vernon himself creates what at first seems to be a more successful work of art from his Death Row prison cell, where the twisted designs of Martirio threaten to overwhelm him. In his cell, he has a small collection of possessions, including "a towel, with my art project under" (244). The nature of this art project remains a mystery until the day of his execution. In the execution chamber, Vernon takes off his shirt to reveal skin that is "mostly healed from my art project. Tattooed in big blue letters across my chest are the words '*Me ves y sufres*' – 'See me and suffer'" (268). It is a phrase he has previously seen painted between the mud flaps of a truck in Mexico. Adorno argues that, in traditional artwork, "the beholder disappeared into the material" and that "this is even more so in modern works that shoot toward the viewer as on occasion a locomotive does in a film" ("Aesthetic" 15). The Spanish command sprawled across Vernon's chest is, in a way, the locomotive shooting dangerously toward the viewer, forcing a confrontation with reality. It asks those who would put to death a high school student to see the horrific error of their ways and to suffer the knowledge of their own culpability in both the crime that has taken place and the punishment they have demanded. In a way, they *do* see Vernon (although whether or not they suffer with him is debatable). They see him literally, over the cameras, and they see his innocence with the last-minute discovery of the "evidence" he left behind. However, it is questionable the extent to which this

artwork brings about a genuine understanding of the realities behind the situation in Martirio or a liberation for its citizens.

The tattoo, along with Vernon's scheme involving Lally and Taylor Figueroa, does free him from his literal prison. However, he is then returned to a society unchanged, a society that still has a hold on him. The extreme visibility, in the form of Lally's reality show, that dominates Vernon's life in what would have been his last hours, is also the path to redemption. Like Eggers' hero in *Zeitoun*, Vernon makes a deal with the devil of his society's panopticon, achieving "freedom" only by allowing himself to be examined with intense scrutiny. Vernon's every act is now available for public consumption. After his release, he sees "next week's *Time* magazine – the headline reads: 'Stool's Out! The picture shows the dried remains of my crap . . . sitting in a scientific laboratory" (275). The media of his society is furthermore still using Vernon's story to feed the horrors of the crime into pop culture saccharine.

A bigger problem, though, is that it is questionable whether the coming to light of Vernon's innocence truly reveals larger truths behind the shooting, whether he genuinely manages to break down the barriers between insulating fictions and harsh realities. The ending suggests that Vernon does not truly understand the nature of the borders that crisscross his world. The phrase "*Me ves y sufres*," which promises recognition and co-suffering, seems all the more poignant because it crosses the language barrier. However, although someone eventually informs him what this phrase means, Vernon is initially clueless. Seeing the words painted on a truck, he thinks: "My vesty surfers, or something" (177). Though humorous, this misunderstanding perhaps hints at a larger insensitivity towards the difficulty of permeating social boundaries. Even when the literal

meaning of the phrase is clear, its meaning within the scene is still ambiguous. “Me Ves y Sufres” is the title of an English language song by a band called “Hope of the States,” which ends with the lyrics “I have been doomed from the first time I tried/ to find something to save me from all of my lies/ I’m always fake, and it’s always the same/ over and over and over and over again.” In an interview with Harcourt Publishers, Pierre says only “ ‘You see me and suffer’ is a Catholic lament as might have been used by Christ on the cross” (“Interview”). Such a lament also seems appropriate as Vernon ascends “the gurney, which is kind of person-shaped” in the execution chamber, but who in this story is crucified and who is saved? Vernon is ultimately able to step down from his cross, but perhaps that is only because his friend takes his place. Ultimately, Jesus becomes a ghost, his reality and his suffering not fully acknowledged. Vernon imagines his dead friend beside him from time to time during his journey, but always as a presence that struggles to hold on. In Mexico, “Jesus wisps around me in fragments, maybe happy to be home in the land of his blood, maybe vengeful for the foreigners that killed him. I beg him for peace” (172). Here Vernon acknowledges that Jesus, a product of another land, has been a victim of his adopted American culture, but can only “beg him for peace,” wishing him back into oblivion. Another time, Vernon watches the waves from the beach and “Jesus comes with them, waving, but he’s engulfed, drowning, gulping flies that join with the night to claim all his colors, return him to black” (166). In Vernon’s visions, Jesus is always pulled back into darkness; the realities of his victimization fail to find a voice despite Vernon’s attempt to use his language.

Like *The Road*, *Salvage the Bones*, and *Zeitoun*, *Vernon God Little* takes a critical look at current American ways of seeing the world, the ways that those perspectives

maintain the problems of the contemporary nation, and the challenges involved with changing deeply entrenched worldviews. DBC Pierre's satire reveals how Americans are caught in the double bind of a society whose faulty belief systems reinforce the very realities they obscure. The scars on the landscape of Vernon Little's America are two particular forms of violence: the violence of crime, represented by the massacre that compels the action of the novel, and institutionalized violence, represented by the indignities of the flawed justice system. The residents of this America are lulled, by the false promises of pop culture and the doctrine of pathological criminality, into the belief that they can heal these scars by targeting and eliminating criminals. At one point during his journey, Vernon Little catches his reflection in "a straw hat, to soften my coconut-tree hair, and oyster-shell ears," and imagines himself as "Huckleberry Finn, boy" (188). Telling a story of twenty-first century American crisis, *Vernon God Little* uses as a model the legend of Mark Twain's character, whose fictional journey shed light on the social and cultural uncertainties of the nation in its infancy. Like Huck, Vernon Little struggles with the binds of a troubled society and finds that freedom is sometimes illusory and the borders separating the privileged from the oppressed are not so easily crossed.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, I have selected four novels whose stories reflect on the crises faced by contemporary Americans and explore the possibilities for resolving them. These recent works of literature, though representing very different genres and styles, take on, directly or indirectly, the issues of America's tangled involvement in twenty-first century global imperialism, its domestic government dysfunction, and its frequently troubled and unfulfilled population. I argue that the novels I focus on get to the heart of the problems that plague the nation by examining the contemporary, though historically rooted, ideologies and worldviews that allow them to persist. The first two novels that I consider, *The Road* and *Salvage the Bones*, each depict a fictional America imperiled by its beliefs and practices concerning the nation's political mission. The catastrophic circumstances that Cormac McCarthy and Jesmyn Ward describe in these novels suggest dawning consciousness that this mission, while traditionally imagined as a paternalistic and protective obligation to the rest of the world, is often in reality an exercise in economic exploitation and a political grab for power and control. While the characters in both of these stories witness the ways in which the faulty imperialist logic of the nation brings disaster to its shores, they ultimately take different paths forward.

While *The Road* suggests that the future America will need to construct entirely new identities and communities, *Salvage the Bones* expresses the importance of rebuilding and rehabilitating the existing structures in a way that includes all of the

country's people. Dave Eggers' nonfiction story *Zeitoun* takes a closer look at the domestic side of a nation that has fallen into a tradition of exploitation and human rights abuses by following the ordeal of a man wrongfully imprisoned in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. This literary effort to expose and critique the reasons behind the American government's mistreatment of its own citizens becomes a study in how contemporary America constructs a particular meaning of personhood that coincides with traditional definitions of what it means to be an American and reveals how these limited concepts of humanness affect the extent to which individuals are fully recognized as people in the eyes of the law. Further examining conflicts between the American community as a whole and the individuals who comprise it is DBC Pierre's black comedy *Vernon God Little*. This tale, despite its humorous tone, engages with the dark subject matter of violent crime and government-sanctioned killings to explore the American mythologies that obscure the true relationship between the individual and society as a whole, allowing the nation to blame its problems on the actions of a few people working alone and thus avoiding a potentially healing confrontation with the realities behind the country's troubles.

All of these authors, though some are native Southerners and others are not, choose the South as the setting for their stories about the condition of contemporary America. My argument explores the reasons behind this choice in an effort to reveal what these novels express about the role of the South in the nation's current predicaments. Although addressing different dimensions of this fabled region, all of them indicate that the South is a space in which the pains and dilemmas of the present American moment are most visible and most pressing. In *The Road*, the South is represented as the



birthplace of the twenty-first century problems, given its history of slavery and its past function as a model of the exploitation of people and resources. *Zeitoun* and *Salvage the Bones* focus more on the South as a place where the nation's historical inequalities and the oppression of its own people are best preserved and can best be seen through the lens of contemporary events such as Hurricane Katrina. Finally, *Vernon God Little*, the only novel included in this project written by an author who is not American, portrays the South, particularly Texas, as a liminal space whose proximity to a geographic border between the U.S. and a very different world also positions it closer to the boundaries between American delusion and reality.

More so than the other novels in this project, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* contemplate the position of the United States as a world power. They tell stories of fictional American families confronting disasters that threaten the physical landscape and the social infrastructures of the country and suggest that the nation faces a time of large-scale destruction and chaos. Although such a suggestion may seem extreme, particularly in the case of McCarthy's apocalyptic scenario, I argue that they represent a sense of ideological rather than literal devastation, part reflecting and part predicting, not an actual doomsday, but the breakdown of the guiding mythologies that have long supported Americans' sense of identity and purpose. In particular, this structuring philosophy has traditionally revolved around the idea that the U.S. is a safe haven for the unimpeachable values of liberty and equality and an ambassador in charge of protecting these qualities throughout the world. These two novels were published in the early years of the twenty-first century, during the catastrophic reign of the widely criticized Bush administration and in the midst of

increasing ugly American involvement in the Middle East, tension between the U.S. and other nations, and disruptive events such as Hurricane Katrina. They are products of a time in which the foundations of historical American belief systems are faltering, and though a plethora of books, movies, articles, and news pieces have critiqued a wide variety of qualities in the contemporary nation, these two novels are especially revelatory in the way they question the reasons behind an American loss of faith at this particular moment and, perhaps more importantly, the consequences of such an ideological collapse and the possible next moves. The details of the land that the characters of these two novels inhabit and of the disaster that enters it reflect the encroaching realities that have made American philosophies increasingly indefensible, particularly a system of global imperialism in which the nations of the world cooperate for aims that are clearly economic instead of competing in a way that could be used to justify American intervention in the name of defense.

Dave Eggers' *Zeitoun*, the only nonfiction account I have included, shares the goal of the other novels in this paper of exposing the failings of the current American system and the reasons behind them. By telling the story of how an American businessman of Syrian descent was arrested without cause and imprisoned without due process, *Zeitoun* does in fact demonstrate the problem that, during the chaos of Hurricane Katrina, the American government failed to recognize the humanity of one of its people. However, I argue that the way in which Eggers creates a narrative to make this point reveals a challenge encountered when criticizing and attempting to overturn the functioning of American culture or government. This challenge comes down to the nature of the reasons that the nation does not recognize the personhood and rights of all its

citizens – the fact that being acknowledged as a person is highly dependent on adhering to cultural norms and narratives. Therefore, Eggers' task in condemning the government's mistreatment of *Zeitoun* is to show that this man, while fully human, was not treated as human because he did not apparently meet the culture's criteria for personhood. However, in order to make his protagonist visible and sympathetic to American audiences, Eggers must demonstrate his conformity to American models of humanness. Therefore, though *Zeitoun* criticizes a nation that is weakened and corrupted by capitalistic values, classism, and a lack of acceptance of difference, he champions a character who is notable for his success within the capitalist system and full embrace of American ideology. Though *Zeitoun* is a work of nonfiction, it is possible to see how the book is constructed in such a way to establish its central figure as quintessentially American, focusing on his life story as an immigrant rather than just the series of events during his imprisonment in New Orleans. The book celebrates him especially as a business owner and patriarch. *Zeitoun* inspires hope in its righteous condemnation of the actions of a government that is overly militaristic and not protective of the rights of its own citizens. It is also positive in its suggestion that people of various ethnic and religious backgrounds can easily take a place in the American story, since the book's hero, Abdulrahman Zeitoun, hails from a little understood and somewhat mistrusted land and religious tradition. However, it is still problematic in the way it reveals a need to make this man so perfectly American in order to emphasize the unfairness of his mistreatment at the hands of the American government.

The last novel I turn to in this project, *Vernon God Little*, is distinguished from the others by its satirical tone and its foreign author. Both of these qualities allow this

novel to offer more of an outside perspective on the condition of twenty-first century America and, perhaps, a more biting criticism of the values and beliefs of modern Americans. DBC Pierre presents the American conflict as predicated on stark contradictions between the nation's views of its flaws and the actual causes behind them. This novel focuses on two characteristics of the United States that single it out from other first world nations: the violent crime that too often permeates its communities and the institutionalized violence that has been preserved in reaction against such crime. Pierre portrays a cast of characters who are, comically and horrifically, unconcerned with the trauma and loss of life that surrounds their otherwise mundane existences. They are consumed by shallow desires for fame, romance, and stature, to a degree that compels them to persecute children and indulge in a Death Row reality TV show. *Vernon God Little* suggests that their atrocious actions stem from a terribly misguided way of looking at their world, which confuses pop culture with life and TV characters with real people and insists that rogue individuals are at the root of the evil in their society. These beliefs sugarcoat the dark realities of American life, entrapping its people in a society that cannot perceive its own diseases.

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