NANO
NEW AMERICAN NOTES ONLINE

ISSN: 2160-0104

Issue 11: Economies of the Gift in an Age of Austerity

July 2017

The Gift Network: Dave Eggers and the Circulation of Second Editions

by Jacqueline O'Dell

Jacqueline O'Dell is a Full Time Lecturer at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. Her research focuses on emerging literary networks, contemporary American fiction, and discourses of literary value.
Contact: jodell@umassd.edu

https://nanocrit.com/issues/issue11/The-Gift-Network-Dave-Eggers-and-the-Circulation-of-Second-Editions

---

Abstract:
This article argues for a view of the gift as an affective network and investigates how Dave Eggers's practice of publishing second editions works to produce this network. Framing my discussion of the gift with Sara Ahmed's work on affective economies, I suggest that the gift, like affect, is best understood as a surplus effect of circulation. I argue that Eggers negotiates the gift's double bind by emphasizing the impossibility of identifying a "pure" gift or an authoritative "original" edition; his double editions show how the gift survives through the surplus values generated by their ongoing circulation. Eggers's symbolic and material gift network ultimately depends on the uncertainty and mystification emblematic of Eggers's anxious aesthetic and mode of recirculation, adding to critical conversations that position Eggers's aesthetic within movements of new sincerity or post-irony.

Keywords: Dave Eggers, affective economies, gifts, editions, recirculation, literary theory

---

Since his 2000 career-making memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Dave Eggers has worked to allay anxieties about literature's double life as gift and commodity. His *McSweeney's* publishing company has created a new market for books, with output ranging from the experimental literary journal *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern,* to charitable organizations like the 826 Tutoring Centers and the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation. In forging the connection between literature and life, McSweeney's publishing house has produced what Amy Hungerford calls a "school of life," encouraging "a social context in which to read and be read is not just to buy books or sell books, but to act with generosity, to give and feel the love" (43). This more expansive literary culture thus resembles a gift economy, re-enchanting literary commodities with a value that transcends rationalizing market logic. Fostering this gift economy depends in no small part on building an alternative literary institution that prioritizes spreading the love over the bottom line. We can better understand this development, I argue, by looking at Eggers's early practice of re-releasing limited-edition second versions of his first two books, *A Heartbreaking Work* and the 2002 novel, *You Shall Know Our Velocity.* In what follows, I turn to Eggers's early practice of publishing amended second editions to show how the literary gift adapts to its double bind in today's market economy by recirculating the surplus "feeling" generated by economic exchange.

In his seminal work on art's status as gift, Lewis Hyde identifies the gift's central paradox as its "simultaneous" existence in a market and gift economy (xvi). Jacques Derrida, too, has linked the gift's double bind to its dependence on circulation and exchange. Being presumably unconditional, the gift "suspend[s] economic calculation" and "must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, by the process of exchange" (Derrida 7). At the same time, "the simple identification of the gift seems to destroy it," making its ontological existence more than impossible, in Derrida's view, and thus a figure of "*the* impossible" (14, 7). While for Derrida, symbolic recognition of the gift is its undoing, for Hyde, the gift comes undone when it is treated like a commodity. Any artwork or object counts as a gift if it creates a community that will "give back" and recirculate its values, paying itself forward rather than culminating in an economic transaction (9). Despite these conditions, Hyde maintains that art can survive as gift in a commodity market if "we the audience can feel the gift it carries" (356). "I still believe the gift can be destroyed by the marketplace," he writes, "[b]ut I no longer feel the poles of this dichotomy to be so strongly opposed" (356). He elaborates that "within certain limits, gift wealth may be rationalized and market wealth may be eroticized," making the limit between gift and commodity dependent upon the "degree [to which one may] draw from the other without destroying it" (358). As the poles of the gift and the commodity move closer together, Hyde suggests that the limit between both depends on an immeasurable degree that registers as a feeling.

Sara Ahmed's theory of affective economies shows how feeling, like the gift, is not generated by a specific material object or body, but rather is the effect of its circulation among bodies and signs (117). Drawing from Marx's critique of capital, she acknowledges that "the movement of

commodities and money, in the formula *M-C-M* (money to commodity to money), creates surplus value" that causes M to acquire more value as it continues circulating (120). The affective quality of an object therefore arises from its circulation among people, helping to produce communities who define themselves in relation to their shared feelings towards other people, groups, or objects (Ahmed 117-19). Both affect and the gift, rather than being identifiable in and of themselves, register as surplus effects of circulation; to this end, we might more profitably consider the artistic gift as the network of affective connections it generates.

For many scholars, Eggers's work is emblematic of contemporary literature that challenges the kinds of theoretical and economic double binds that define the gift. In particular, Adam Kelly and Lee Konstantinou have described Eggers's work through the lenses of New Sincerity and Post Irony, respectively, both of which hold open the possibility that fiction can overcome postmodernism's denial of pure sincerity or literal meanings. Kelly and Konstantinou focus on how metafictional and paratextual techniques make the individual reader aware of language's constraints while still prompting her to accept that sincerity and belief are tenable. Approaching Eggers's work from the outside, Hungerford's *Making Literature Now* borrows from Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory to track how Eggers's McSweeney's publishing projects both channel and exceed existent institutions and markets to condition our reception of its literary output. With a sharper focus on Eggers's earliest books, this article opens to view how Eggers negotiates logical double binds through both aesthetic techniques and publication strategies, his symbolic and material gift network ultimately depending on an aesthetic and a mode of recirculation steeped in anxiety. His second editions thus reveal that the "true" edition and the "pure" gift are fantasies whose ongoing circulation produces the surplus affects and meanings that are the engine of the gift network.

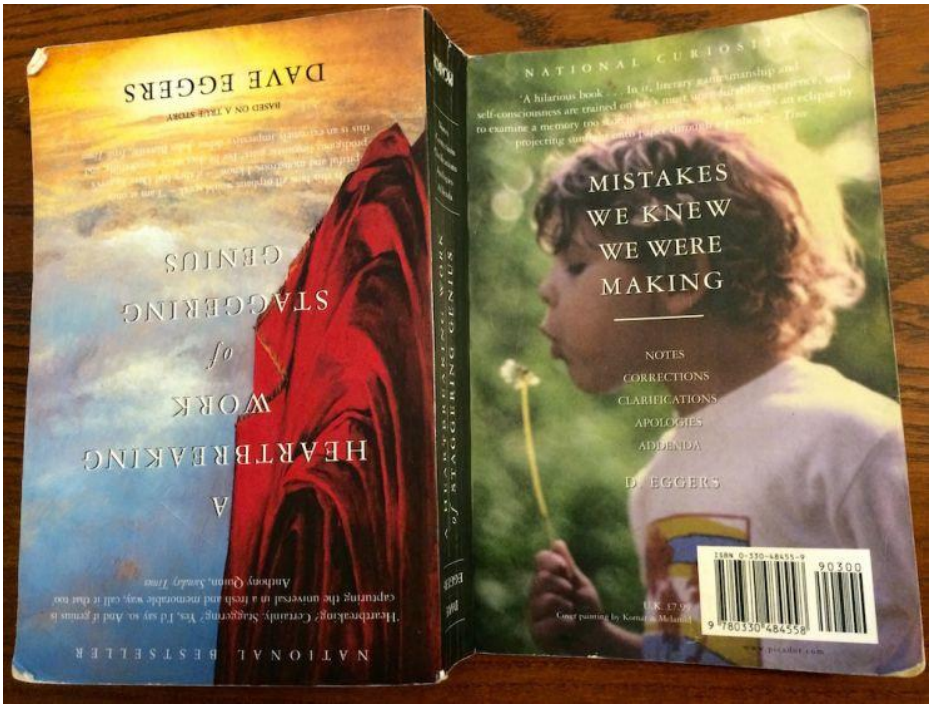
• • •

We can trace the beginnings of Eggers's gift network to *A Heartbreaking Work*'s fantasies and anxieties about how art can produce affective bonds despite its reliance on the market. His memoir's thematic concerns with navigating the marketplace echo the material concerns that would surface in his later publishing practices. As much as *A Heartbreaking Work* is a tale of familial tragedy, it is also a *Künstlerroman* depicting the launch of Eggers's first literary magazine, *Might,* and his failed attempt to join the cast of MTV's 1994 season of the *Real World*. In an oft-discussed portion of the novel, a parodic transcript of his *Real World* audition interview*,* Eggers uses the interviewer to ventriloquize his own doubts about how his audience would receive him. He explains that he wants his appearance on the *Real World* to build a "lattice" of viewers that would function as "the connective tissue" binding him and his public; this lattice is "everyone else, the lattice is my people . . . I see us as one, as a vast matrix, an army, a whole" (211). Eggers stutters and cuts himself off as he concludes his reverie of the lattice: "if we can bring everyone to grab a part of the other, like an arm at the socket, everyone holding another's arm at the socket . . . and thus strengthening— Then, um— Like a human ocean moving as one, the undulating, the wave-making—" (211). Having refigured his lattice as an army and an ocean, his interviewer then compares it to "a snowshoe," which he soon admits is a "mediocre metaphor" (212). Eggers's inability to properly imagine or metaphorize his

“real” *Real World* audience becomes a figure for his work’s reception as gift and mirrors the impossibility of ensuring that *A Heartbreaking Work* would be received *as* gift, especially amid backlash in the press about its veracity. This shifting lattice suggests that a work’s circulation within a gift network depends as much on its reception as on its intentions; neither the giver nor the receiver can be certain of either in the case of the *Real World* or Eggers’s memoir.

The Eggers of *A Heartbreaking Work* is equally ambivalent about the best way to reach his audience. Earlier in *A Heartbreaking Work,* he hesitantly describes a form of creative production that could prioritize the affective bonds formed in the act of production over the art produced. He recounts a conversation with his friend Meredith who wants to leave her job working on studio films to make her own “better movies, weird stuff, have a kind of collective” (144). They both lament existing temporal and economic barriers to such communities, explaining that it “cost[s] so much money” and “takes forever” to get independent projects off the ground (144). Ideally, there would be an “easier,” more “automatic,” and more “instantaneous” way to reach their public (144). Eggers’s half-joking solution is a “world-clearing sort of revolution, a bloodless one,” wherein, daily and on cue, all of the people would “create everything from scratch” (144-145). Eggers locates his rationale for this radical uprooting in a feeling he cannot quite name: “but as much as . . . all the political and economic reasons to do it, I mean, beyond that, really, is the feeling of—I mean, imagine walking among the ruins, you know?” (145). Eggers frames this revolution as “beyond” logical, calculated reasoning, turning instead to an unnameable affective charge derived from experiencing the material outcome of his vision. He also insists that his revolution must happen immediately because “[i]t’s criminal to pause” when he and Meredith have the financial privilege to “take what [they’ve] been given and unite people” (146-47). Though Eggers prioritizes the feeling of walking among the ruins of existent economic and creative structures, he acknowledges the need for financial capital to set the wheels in motion. Outside the context of his and Meredith’s fantasy, however, Eggers depends on the flows of financial capital that this scene imagines smashing to ruins.

Eggers’s mystification of the process that connects art to its audience mirrors the logic of gift circulation, which Hyde describes as beyond the calculus of ordinary economic exchange. According to Hyde, the gift opposes the transactional consumer good, which prioritizes the “balance” of exchange, whereas the gift thrives on the “motion [and] emotion” of circulation (12). Eggers’s description of the movement between creator and recipient evokes this mystified circulatory motion, describing the engine of his output as a “feeling” beyond language or the logic of the market. Despite his mystifying efforts, this “feeling” is part of an affective economy that in fact operates like financial capital. The memoir’s ideal mode of artistic circulation therefore does not disavow its reliance on financial capital, so much as it construes that market as continuous with his emotional economy. Eggers’s images of the lattice and creative revolution defang the threat of the market by putting forward an agenda for reinvesting and recirculating capital into affective bonds, producing a gift network whose affective economy keeps Eggers’s work from overstepping the limit into commodity, even as he works to mystify its mode of reception and distribution.



[Fig. 1]

The first edition of *A Heartbreaking Work* expresses anxieties about how, or if, artists like Eggers can reach the right kind of audience to produce a gift network. Though the memoir describes a utopian mode of creative production that could disrupt conventional art markets, its status as best-seller led many to receive Eggers's work as an attempt to profit from personal loss. To set the record straight, Eggers published a limited second edition of *A Heartbreaking Work* through Vintage in 2001 with added material titled "Mistakes We Knew We Were Making." The paperback came in three different versions, each with a different back cover design, listing "Mistakes"'s contents as "notes," "corrections," "clarifications," "apologies," and "addenda."

The edition's tête-bêche binding [Fig. 1] disrupts the hierarchy between original text and the new paratext, with the latter moving to rectify not just the first edition, but also its reception. Among its tongue-in-cheek efforts to correct "errors" in the memoir, "Mistakes"'s addenda explain how financial gains have been reinvested. Eggers writes that he "promised when the lawsuits were done, [he]'d give [away] a wad of the kind of silly money that's come to [him] and [his] family via this book, money that was never [his] and could never be [his]" (45). "Mistakes" emphasizes how this "silly money" is paid forward and would indeed contribute to the growth of Eggers's McSweeney's publishing house, which would in turn underwrite the publication of his next book, along with future literary and humanitarian projects. This second edition is possible because of the income from the first edition, allowing the latter to continue circulating through new hands and extending Eggers's lattice.

In addition to showing how his memoir's profits continue to circulate, "Mistakes" reiterates the initial motivations for the memoir, quelling anxieties that they may have been tainted by financial success:

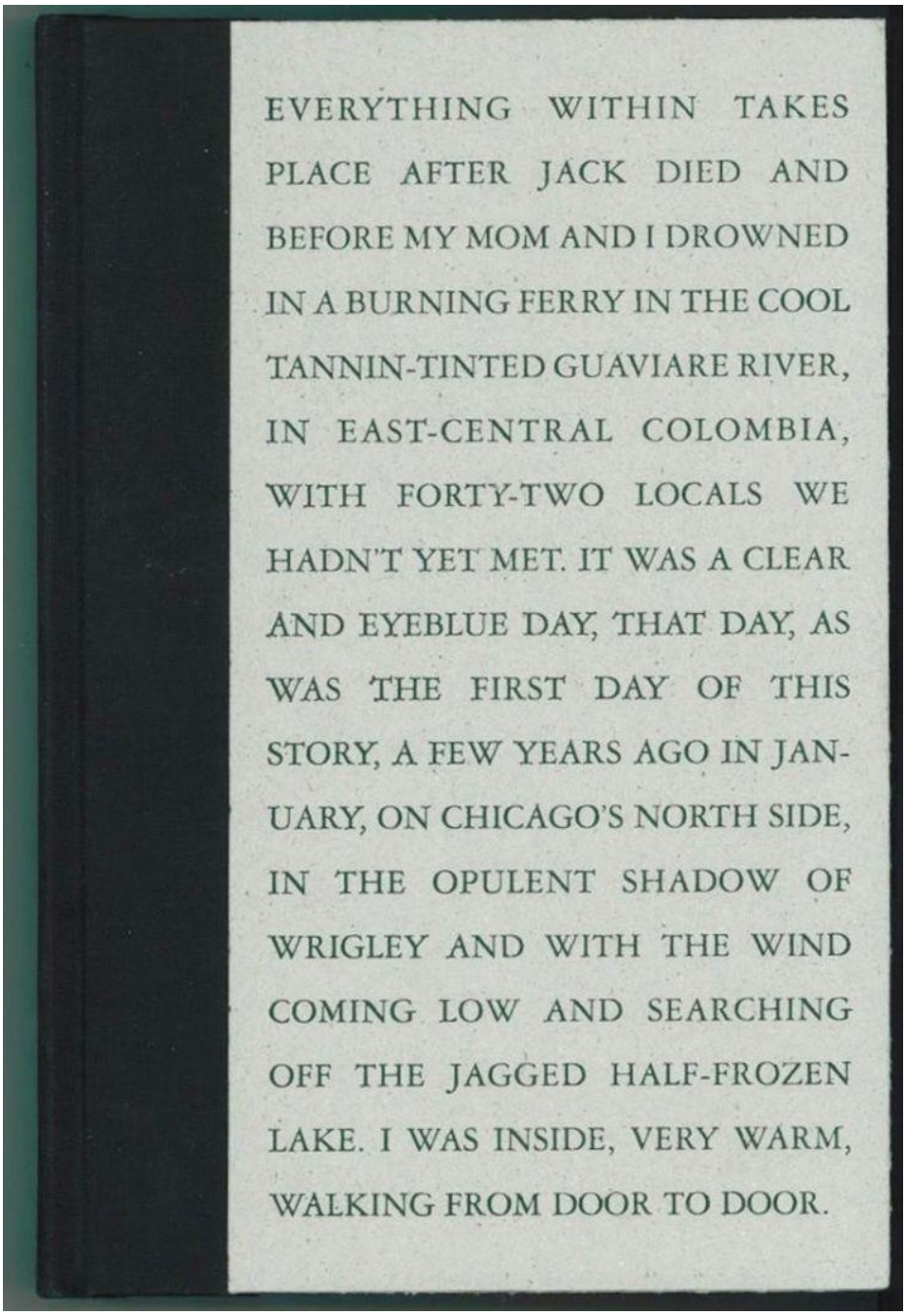
> [W]e honestly did want people banding together. For me and I think for the rest of the coterie, what was important first was the alliance. An agenda, if we needed one, would come later. The warmth of other people, their electricity, then the direction of that energy somewhere, if need be. Does that make sense? How about this: True community cannot be political. (29)

Returning to the abstract "electricity" and "energy" of creative revolution discussed with Meredith, "Mistakes" attempts to re-enchant the first edition despite critics' efforts to demystify Eggers's insider publishing network and proceeds from the memoir. Looking back to his desire to unite people, Eggers implies that the agenda "to come" has not come yet, a claim that works to extend the electric charge of his memoir's circulation. Though McSweeney's would eventually undertake explicitly political projects, "Mistakes" shows, both in its claims about community and in its material recirculation of Eggers's first edition, that his creative work must construe its aims as continually evolving in order to continue generating a gift network, wherein gift and market economies are part of a continuum.

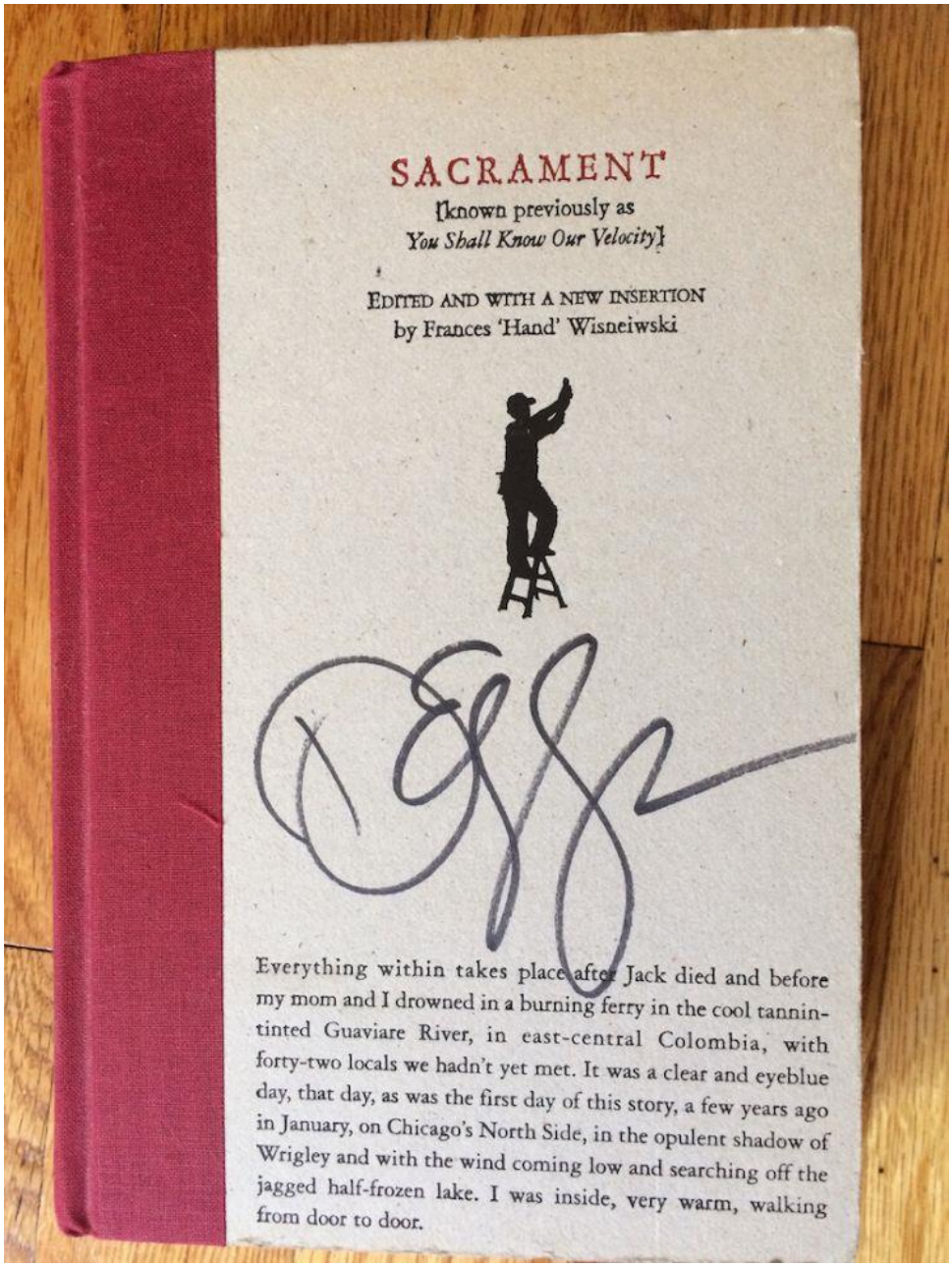
Eggers's 2002 novel, *You Shall Know Our Velocity,* extends *A Heartbreaking Work*'s interest in the intersection between affective and market circulation, turning to gift networks beyond Eggers's creative coterie. The picaresque-cum-bildungsroman is narrated by the protagonist, Will, who travels abroad with his friend, Hand, to disburse a financial windfall that Will earned appearing as a light bulb company's logo. Will and Hand literally hand off Will's money to the less fortunate as they travel to Senegal, Morocco, Estonia, and Latvia, creating quirky methods to gift Will's money, like taping it to donkeys for their owners to find (94) and leaving children with maps to where they've buried it (288). These hands-on forms of charity re-imbue capital with the human labor from which it is usually alienated, and Will's desire to pay his earnings forward mirror how Eggers reinvested funds from *A Heartbreaking Work* into McSweeney's and its myriad projects. In *Velocity*, the death of Will and Hand's mutual friend, Jack, ostensibly motivates the duo's journey, though Will is at pains to explain why. Like the Eggers of *A Heartbreaking Work,* Will mystifies the rationale behind his project, explaining that "I had gotten some money about a year before, in a windfall kind of way, and had been both grateful and constantly confused by it. And now [after Jack's death] I would get rid of it, or most of it, and believed purging would provide clarity, and that doing this in a quick global flurry would make it . . . I really don't know why we combined these two ideas" (4, ellipses in original). Though Will's intentions are purportedly unclear, the novel suggests that keeping his money in circulation, and specifically controlling how it circulates, generate an affective economy that prioritizes human connections.

Caroline Hamilton has observed that Will's efforts to humanize economic exchange mirror Eggers's and McSweeney's's publication and distribution strategies for *Velocity*'s first run (72). McSweeney's printed 50,000 total copies of the book, 10,000 of which Eggers signed and sold

exclusively through McSweeney's's website. The remaining 40,000 copies were more widely distributed by independent bookstores that already supported McSweeney's (Brouillette). Hamilton argues that "[t]his limited circle of distribution affirms relationships between certain kinds of readers, writers and retailers and reflects a shared appreciation of what books represent" (76). As a result, *Velocity*'s "limited mode of distribution makes it a 'gift' to independent booksellers, giving them a power within the market that they are normally denied" (Hamilton 76). In this way, Eggers's books can be understood as part of an "ecosystem," a mode of affective circulation Rachel Greenwald Smith identifies as an alternative to the logic of commodity exchange (26). As part of an ecosystem, books "materially influence those with whom they come into contact in ways not entirely circumscribed by the various roles of buyer and seller" (Greenwald Smith 26). The bookseller's market power is thus not only economic, it approaches the lattice-building fantasy Eggers describes in *A Heartbreaking Work,* granting *Velocity* the "certain kind" of elusive, gift-like quality that adheres, in part, as a result of the kinds of hands through which it passes. The financial and cultural capital reinvested from *A Heartbreaking Work* helps Eggers control *Velocity*'s initial release and carve out his own network of circulation within the literary marketplace.


EVERYTHING WITHIN TAKES PLACE AFTER JACK DIED AND BEFORE MY MOM AND I DROWNED IN A BURNING FERRY IN THE COOL TANNIN-TINTED GUAVIARE RIVER, IN EAST-CENTRAL COLOMBIA, WITH FORTY-TWO LOCALS WE HADN'T YET MET. IT WAS A CLEAR AND EYEBLUE DAY, THAT DAY, AS WAS THE FIRST DAY OF THIS STORY, A FEW YEARS AGO IN JANUARY, ON CHICAGO'S NORTH SIDE, IN THE OPULENT SHADOW OF WRIGLEY AND WITH THE WIND COMING LOW AND SEARCHING OFF THE JAGGED HALF-FROZEN LAKE. I WAS INSIDE, VERY WARM, WALKING FROM DOOR TO DOOR.

[Fig. 2]



[Fig. 3]

The second edition of *Velocity*, retitled *Sacrament,* emphasizes how the emotional surplus that attaches to literary commodities and financial capital circulates like the surplus meanings passed on through its second edition, *Sacrament.* Published in 2003, just a year after *Velocity*'s first run, *Sacrament* contains a new interruption written from Hand's perspective two years after Will published *Velocity.* Hand's 49-page addendum occurs roughly half-way through the narrative, and like "Mistakes," *Sacrament* reproduces the complete first edition along with its new commentary. Amazon.com's description of *Sacrament*, taken from a 2005 sales post on the book-collecting site Modernrare, considers *Sacrament* an "Alternative Version" of the novel

rather than a new edition and explains that "[t]he book is deliberately produced as a cheap book (but beautifully so, with handsome red cloth spine) [with] two editions . . . published simultaneously, one with and one without the indication 'First edition'" (*Sacrament*, ellipses mine). Upon its initial release, Hand's "Interruption" was also available for a limited time on McSweeney's's website. This fleeting, partial digital existence of Hand's interruption complicates *Sacrament's* double life as simultaneous first editions, indicating the larger network through which *Sacrament* circulated and giving the lie to a false binary between true original and secondary edition, between fact and fiction, and between gift and commodity.

The description of the novel's simultaneous editions makes light of the possibility that there can be one, true version of *Velocity*, but Hand's interruption is initially quite serious about there being a correct record of events that need setting straight. Hand describes his mission to "correct, delete, and elaborate upon Will's text, which tells half the story it seeks to tell, and makes all kinds of things up . . ." (252, ellipses mine). Will, Hand bemoans, "found solace in innuendo and gesture, as opposed to simple and declarative speech—one that left unspoken some of the most essential motivations and implications, and was built in large part upon at least three enormous and unjustifiable lies" (252). Hand thus reveals that it was Will's mother and not a friend named Jack who died (and during Will's youth, at that); Will was never beat up while picking up Jack's belongings from a storage unit; and Will never had a brother. By way of Hand's interruption we better understand the material facts surrounding his and Will's trip, but as Hand's daily journal entries go on to correct Will's errors, Hand comes to feel that accurate documentation is besides the point. "There's nothing to be gained from passive observance, the simple documenting of conditions," Hand concludes, because "[e]very time something is observed and not fixed, or when one has a chance to give in some way and does not, there is a lie being told, the same lie we all know by heart but which needn't be reiterated" (297). Taking a page from *A Heartbreaking Work*'s book, Hand establishes an unspeakable, collective feeling as the best source of literary merit. That merit arises not from any accuracy but from what the text can prompt in the world beyond it. Eggers's tendency to blur fact and fiction has led Konstantinou to attribute Eggers's fiction's "quirkiness" to "its emphasis on nonfictional metacommentary, fiction that approaches the condition of nonfiction, and the necessary infusion of life with a quirky, reenchanted sensibility as a precursor to philanthropic action" (212). In this view, the attitude cultivated in *A Heartbreaking Work* can be seen to inform McSweeney's charitable projects. Crucially, this re-enchantment depends, in part, on the way Hand mystifies this shared heart's truth by refusing to reiterate it. Like the unidentifiable lattice and the unspeakable feeling that Eggers and Meredith's creative revolution would produce, such truths are collective affects that depend on the continued circulation of the original texts that prompt them, but whose truths can never be pinned down.

Hand also suggests how *Velocity*'s recirculation generates its larger gift network when he tells the story of a priest performing the sacrament in the Copenhagen airport. He and Will hear the priest describe the sacrament to his group of auditors as "the external, social demonstration of how we feel within. It is not practical and without it we would feel the same way; it is a reminder only, and a relatively unnecessary one at that. But that does not mean it is dispensable . . ." (287, ellipses mine). Upon connecting the priest's account of the sacrament to his and Will's trip,

Hand “nudged Will, and he smiled. I want to think he knew what I was thinking about, but we never had a chance, afterward, to talk about it” (288). As Hand acknowledges, “[*Velocity*] as a whole is a sacrament of sorts, a physical representation, of too many things otherwise ephemeral—a social demonstration of a partly unknowable internal state . . .” (296-97, ellipses mine). This faith-based model of the sacrament leads James Clements to conclude that Eggers renders the “impossible gift” irrelevant because he “attempts to forge a matrix of meaning via pacts between individuals, which are presented by the giver/author to the recipient/reader and which come into existence once accepted” (134, 133). For Clements, these pacts weave “the desired lattice,” and though we can’t know for certain if something is given sincerely as a gift, “we can at least agree to treat it as if it were” (133-34). This agreement functions like a “contract offered by the giver and accepted by the receiver, [and] gains value only through this exchange” (133). Choosing to accept these terms returns to the logic of one-to-one exchange that Hyde associates with the commodity and overlooks the surplus meanings and values that attach to Hand’s unfinished interaction with Will. Hand only thinks Will gets his meaning, stirring the uncertainty that gets re-channeled into Hand’s writing of *Sacrament*. Clements looks to the individual reader to receive *Velocity* or *Sacrament* as sincere gifts, when Eggers’s thematic and material engagement with literary circulation suggests instead that the gift is an effect of coterminous financial and affective networks, not individual choices.
S*acrament* ultimately shows that the gift trades in riskier, non-transactional, forms of collective mystification.

With their ostensible goals of uncovering the true origins and motivations of the original texts, Eggers’s second editions construe original intentions as moving targets beyond definitive representation. The double editions of both texts thus rupture the temporal movement towards closure that the gift also disrupts. This disruption is more in keeping with Derrida’s claim that the gift must break with temporal logic than with Hyde’s view that the gift’s essence survives by paying itself forward through future circulation (Derrida 9; Hyde 9). Eggers’s work sheds light on the way the gift operates today as an affective and financial surplus whose limit point becomes dislocated through ongoing circulation. These second editions suggest that underscoring the similarities between gift and market economies can paradoxically defang the market’s threat to the gift’s ongoing circulation as a surplus effect of capital.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. “Affective Economies.” *Social Text,* vol. 22, no. 2, 2004, pp. 117-139.

Brouillette, Sarah. “Paratextuality and Economic Disavowal in Dave Eggers’ *You Shall Know Our Velocity*.” *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2003.

Clements, James. “Trust Your Makers of Things!: The Metafictional Pact in Dave Eggers’ *You Shall Know Our Velocity.*” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2015, pp. 121-137.

Derrida, Jacques. *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. U of Chicago P, 1994.

Eggers, Dave. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.* Simon & Schuster, 2000.

---. *Mistakes We Knew We Were Making.* Vintage Books, 2001.

---. *Sacrament.* Ed. Francis "Hand" Wisniewski. McSweeney's Publishing, 2002.

---. *You Shall Know Our Velocity.* McSweeney's Publishing, 2002.

Greenwald Smith, Rachel. *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*. Cambridge UP, 2015.

Hamilton, Caroline. *One Man Zeitgeist: Dave Eggers, Publishing and Publicity.* Continuum, 2010.

Hungerford, Amy. *Making Literature Now*. Stanford UP, 2016.

Hyde, Lewis. *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World.* Vintage Books, 2007.

Kelly, Adam. "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction." *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays,* edited by David Hering. Slideshow Media Group Press, 2010.

Konstantinou, Lee. *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction*. Harvard UP, 2016.

"SACRAMENT. Known Previously as You Shall Know Our Velocity." *Amazon*. Amazon.com, Inc., 2005, www.amazon.com/SACRAMENT-Known-Previously-Shall-Velocity/dp/1932416005.

Figures

Fig. 1. *Mistakes We Knew We Were Making* edition of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.* New York: Vintage Books, 2001. Author's Photograph. JPEG.

Fig. 2. *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, first edition, 2002. *This Book Is Collectible. http://www.ainsworthbooks.com/?page=shop/flypage&product_id=9944&keyword=eggers&searchby=author&offset=0&fs=1*. JPEG.

Fig 3. Reynolds, James P. *Sacrament,* 2003. *This Book Is Collectible*. jamespreynolds.com/sacrament. JPEG.