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Authors	Gibbs, Alan
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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

The Exonerative Deterministic:
Uses of Neo-Naturalism in Twenty-First Century American Culture

Abstract:

This article examines the resurgence of an especially deterministic form of naturalism in contemporary American culture, which can be linked to particular attributes of neoliberalism. In particular, neoliberal power is shown to have been exercised partly through what the author terms "exonerative determinism", a discourse whereby those in power claim to have been forced by outside circumstances into morally dubious policies. Two neo-naturalist texts – Dave Eggers' novel, *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?*, and the TV mini-series *The Night Of* – are employed as case studies in order to examine the discourse of exonerative determinism. The essay concludes with a brief examination of how this discourse has been more overtly employed during the Trump administration.

In September 2015, *McSweeney's* published "An Interactive Guide to Ambiguous Grammar", a short satirical article which initially appears to be about the occasional necessity of using the passive voice in writing, despite numerous style guide prohibitions.[1] Vijith Assar's article adjusts the familiar pangram, "the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog", by a series of incremental modifications, for example, "a lazy dog was involved in a jumping incident with a quick brown fox". The sentence is ultimately converted to the surpassingly passive, "speed was involved in a jumping-related incident while a fox was brown". Assar notes how this final version eliminates any form of agency on the part of both the original subject and object of the sentence (indeed, the original object is rendered absent), as we arrive at what is sardonically labelled "the past exonerative tense, so named because culpability is impossible when actions no longer exist". Finally, the barbed point of the piece is revealed, as Assar compares a police press release, "The St. Louis County Police Department was involved in an officer-involved shooting after officers came under heavy gunfire", with the bald statement "*A police officer shot a black person*" (original italics).

[1] Vijith Assar, "An Interactive Guide to Ambiguous Grammar," *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, 3 Sept. 2015, at https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/an-interactive-guide-to-ambiguous-grammar.

Assar's piece demonstrates two important elements relevant to this article. Firstly, the capacity of language to obscure notions of agency, and therefore related conditions of responsibility and blame. Secondly, how such language usages have been increasingly employed by those in positions of authority in America as a means to deny both responsibility for the consequences of exercising power and, at a more fundamental level, the very existence of such power. The following article explores how American culture – including literature, cinema, and television – in the early twenty-first century is in part characterized by a resurgent naturalism, a foundational component of which is a prominent determinism.[2] This is employed sometimes to obscure and sometimes to interrogate notions of choice and responsibility in contemporary political power relationships. In other words, part of the purpose of redeploying naturalist perspectives in contemporary American culture is to construct what I am terming the "exonerative deterministic".

This essay does not argue, however, that this is the only reason for naturalism's resurgence. On the one hand, a number of texts have emerged which provide support for the status quo, depicting those in power as being compelled to act in particular ways, generally following utilitarian moral paths which produce variable degrees of collateral damage. A number of television crime series of this period, *24* or *Dexter* for example, depict white males working in law enforcement who are placed in incongruous positions of relative powerlessness, often feeling forced to bend or break laws in order to bring criminals to justice. The exonerative determinism of these texts seeks to justify the actions of their apparently constrained protagonists. On the other hand, numerous subaltern texts – *The Wire* is a pre-eminent example on US television – are constructed more from the position of those genuinely disempowered by the results of the early twenty-first century's neoliberal and

[2] This is not to suggest that neo-naturalism is solely an American phenomenon; consider Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) for example. The resurgence of naturalism is, however, most conspicuous and widespread in US culture.

neoconservative policies. In these texts, protagonists from marginalized groups – whether due to issues of class, race, gender, or a combination of those factors – find themselves overwhelmed by societal forces, very much in the manner of the protagonists of the "classic" period of American naturalism, in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century.

In order to examine more precisely the employment of naturalist literary strategies in contemporary America, it is necessary to fill in some of the background to that neoliberal culture in more detail. This essay follows recent writing on neoliberalism which tends to note its varieties of formation according to temporal and geographical location. A useful definition so far as the US is concerned is to recognise that neoliberalism drives towards "the dismantling of public entitlements such as education and welfare and the construction of alternate versions of the social safety net that allow states to appear sovereign in the eyes of national populations, such as prisons, semicarceral workfare, and military expansion".[3] In particular, examination of this socio-political context shows how heavily imbricated neo-naturalist discourse is with neoliberalism. For example, the bifurcated manifestation of deterministic discourse mentioned above reflects the twin dynamics in neoliberalism. That is, on the one hand, those in power in neoliberal America seek to evade blame for actions such as American forays into the Middle East ending in torture and extraordinary rendition, or repression of minority ethnic groups within the United States. This is achieved by portraying political motives as responses to unassailable forces, denying responsibility through denying power. On the other hand, Rachel Greenwald Smith notes that neoliberalism also seeks to position the actually relatively disempowered individual in society as responsible for their actions: "[a]s social institutions, from welfare systems to educational systems, and from media sources to public spaces, increasingly become personalized and privatized, neoliberalism amplifies this tendency for capitalism to individualize, casting individuals as

[3] Jane Elliott and Gillian Harkins, "Introduction: Genres of Neoliberalism," *Social Text* 31.2 (2013): 1-17, 5.

exclusively responsible for themselves".[4] The discourse of neoliberal ideology, in other words, casts the individual as enjoying sufficient free will to become self-determining at least in the realm of economic success or failure. The individual is thus transformed into what a number of commentators term "homo oeconomicus", the neoliberal entrepreneur supposedly in control of and responsible for their own development.

That these two discourses function simultaneously within the ideology of neoliberalism represents one of the paradoxes at its heart. In fact, these two dynamics are not incommensurate, since those in power seek to deny their own agency, and thus responsibility, in part by suggesting that it is in the hands of those who are in reality relatively powerless, but who are positioned in neoliberal society as responsible individual actors. As such, it is nothing but appropriate that this position is maintained through another seeming paradox identified by Smith, namely that "the exercise of individual freedom becomes a requirement that the subject is compelled to fulfil".[5] In other words, responsibility – couched in terms of "freedom" – is *imposed* on the neoliberal subject. Those in positions of power are thus able to disavow responsibility, while the neoliberal subject is compelled to assume it through their apparent but largely illusory exercise of individual agency.

Genealogies of neoliberalism included in two recent edited collections are pertinent here. In their introductory chapter to *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture* Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith posit a four-stage development of the hegemony of neoliberalism in the US: the economic, the political-ideological, the sociocultural, and the ontological. The first two stages take place in the 1970s and 1980s, whereas the latter two, "when neoliberalism expands more granularly into the sociocultural

[4] Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3.
[5] Ibid., 81.

and ontological fabric of everyday life" occur in the 1990s and 2000s.[6] The final, ontological stage is especially interesting for this article as it posits a culminating pervasive neoliberalism which subsumes all cultural and social experience in the West. Given that naturalism is typically conceived as a pessimistic form wherein larger forces overwhelm characters, there is clearly here a potential congruence.

In their introduction to *Neoliberalism and Contemporary American Literature* Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro provide a more complex genealogy for neoliberalism, which traces its origins further back to the 1930s, and follows its subsequent progress through a number of phases, crises and retrenchment. Proffering their model, Kennedy and Shapiro also find three particular reasons for rejecting that of Huehls and Smith. Firstly, they criticize how the notion that neoliberalism first emerged as a "political policy during the rule of Reagan and Thatcher" overlooks its earlier conceptual and practical historical emergence.[7] Secondly, they accuse Huehls and Smith of an overly simplistic charting of cultural examples as mere reflections of the economic realm. Such a position, they claim, reinstates an outdated "base-superstructure or reflection theory model".[8] This should be borne in mind in relation to the point above regarding correlations between ontological neoliberalism and neo-naturalism. That is, undoubtedly there are links between the economic and political conditions of neoliberalism and the cultural artefacts of neo-naturalism, but as this article will demonstrate, these links are complex, equivocal, and politically variable. Finally, Kennedy and Shapiro specifically critique the notion of ontological neoliberalism. This "capitulation" to a final victory of neoliberalism is, they suggest, unduly despairing, and overlooks "the host of self-

[6] Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, "Four Phases of Neoliberalism and Literature: An Introduction," in Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, eds., *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 1-18, 3.
[7] Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro, "Introduction," in Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro, eds., *Neoliberalism and Contemporary American Literature* (Hanover NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2019), 1-21, 6.
[8] Ibid., 6.

consciously, anti-liberal alternatives and social movements emerging recently".[9] This view accords with analysis in this article which, although it detects pessimism in the corpus of neo-naturalist texts, also finds in them significant diversity, including active political criticism of neoliberalism.

Political activism in the face of neoliberalism has often had to react and adapt quickly in response to the suddenness of change brought about by new policies. We should note here for example, that the introduction of neoconservative policy directives (which I take as broadly ideologically commensurate with neoliberalism but more socially coercive) was couched in terms suggesting necessity, as if such measures were a determined response to circumstance. Discourse concerning the events of 11 September 2001 provides a crucial example of this process. The American mass media and politicians tended to view 9/11 as a limit event, transcending ongoing chains of cause and effect. This enabled the conversion of a self-diagnosed sense of collective victimhood into a desire for revenge, and a concomitant broad acceptance that extreme measures at home and abroad were now required. Even important pieces by renowned liberal writers – including Don DeLillo's 'In the Ruins of the Future' and Toni Morrison's poem "The Dead of September 11" – by confirming that 9/11 is indeed a limit event, outside history and comprehension, unwittingly work to facilitate a process described by Naomi Klein as "bold experiments in crisis exploitation", whereby extreme neoconservative policies could be introduced in the name of necessity.[10] Just so, as Smith notes, "[t]he increased privatization of the U.S. military … already a stated goal of Donald Rumsfeld early in the Bush presidency … was accomplished largely by seizing on the prevailing sense that the world as we once knew it was destroyed and that anything therefore was possible".[11] David Harvey similarly observes that after the Cold War, threats were

[9] Ibid., 7.
[10] Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine* (London: Penguin, 2007), 9.
[11] Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature*, 66-7.

identified from radical Islam and "dissident internal movements", which "*had to be* targeted internally by stronger surveillance and policing".[12] The response to 9/11, he argues, was deemed as necessary, producing "the declaration of a permanent 'war on terror' that *demanded* militarization both at home and abroad to guarantee the safety of the nation".[13] Extreme circumstances, the neocons argued, forced extreme solutions, and so the free market ideology of neoliberalism could be applied to the military, to welfare, and to education as if demanded by external events. As Klein notes, this process entailed a significant strengthening of the "corporatist state" in the US, a neocon worldview in thrall to market ideology, which "has harnessed the full force of the U.S. military machine in the service of the corporate agenda".[14] In the aftermath of 9/11, neoliberal and neoconservative policies are thus justified as being specifically determined through outside forces. As we shall see towards the end of this article, the Trump administration has differed only in terms of the extremity of measures exonerated through such strategies, and the overt way in which they have been employed.

Since core tenets of neoliberalism appeal to long cherished American ideals of freedom, their ideological inclinations are obscured. Instinctively, 9/11 was thus widely interpreted in the US as an assault on freedom. Promoting strategies such as George W. Bush's military response in terms of maintaining (and exporting) freedom, Harvey argues, efficiently fosters "a climate of opinion in support of neoliberalism as the exclusive guarantor of freedom".[15] Indeed, as Harvey demonstrates, freedom can even become a determining factor, which neatly underscores the paradox at the heart of neoliberalist exonerative thinking: "[w]hen all of the other reasons for engaging in a pre-emptive war against Iraq were proven wanting, the president appealed to the idea that the freedom conferred on Iraq was in

[12] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 83 (italics added).
[13] Ibid., 83 (italics added).
[14] Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 15.
[15] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 40.

and of itself an adequate justification for the war".[16] Neoliberal policies at home and as an integral element in America's foreign policy are thereby justified both in terms of their necessity – being driven by external events – and, paradoxically, by their being opportunities to foster greater freedom. Neoliberalism, in other words, is somehow compelled to propagate freedom.

In this sense, while determinism is an ostensive counternarrative of neoliberalism, it is also incorporated into neoliberalism at an ideological level. This is because neoliberalism presents policies through the mass media as necessary, driven, inescapable, even forced, a result of external conditions, and its actions are therefore thoroughly and consistently exonerated. Neoliberalism and neoconservatism are thus seen as equally blameless for repeated economic downturns, police violence against Black Americans, and American aggression overseas. In this sense it should be starting to become clear how naturalism and its expiatory deterministic narratives might be useful to those wielding power.

Naturalism, American Naturalism, and Neo-Naturalism

Naturalism emerged in the late nineteenth century as a mode of writing borrowing heavily from contemporary evolutionary theory. Literary naturalism purported to provide the means for authors to conduct experiments into how human lives are governed by internal and external forces. Émile Zola is the figure most fully associated with naturalism's popularity in Europe, and was its first proponent of carefully considered philosophical principles. These demanded that the author withdraw from control of their creation once an initial scenario is devised, allowing deterministic forces to shape the characters' actions and experiences. With free will highly circumscribed in the naturalist universe, its characters' actions are thus largely determined by forces greater than themselves, most significantly inherited biological traits and external environmental factors. While prominent practitioners including Jack

[16] Ibid., 6.

London, Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, Edith Wharton, and Stephen Crane made naturalism briefly popular in America at the turn of the twentieth century, it soon fell out of favour. More than in Europe, however, naturalism in the US has enjoyed periodic resurgences of popularity. This would include, for example, the 1930s, when a US suffering through the Depression framed the emergence of naturalists such as John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell, and Michael Gold. As we shall see, naturalism's most recent resurgence occurs during the early years of the twenty-first century.

Donald Pizer, the key scholar of American literary naturalism, approvingly identifies as one of the reasons for American naturalism's longevity, "the looseness and freedom with which American writers dealt with the gospel according to a European prophet".[17] Pizer argues that Zola's documentary realist practices rather than his literary philosophy were "the source of the strength and permanence of the movement in America".[18] Pizer's diminished emphasis on determinism in American literary naturalism has gained wide critical approval, with many sharing the view that it is not only less committed to determinism than its European counterpart, but is also as a consequence more open to synthesis with other ideologies, discourses, and forms. Some contemporary critics, however, argue that the extent to which determinism is an important component of American naturalism has been underestimated. Ian F. Roberts argues that Pizer's view has weakened the philosophical thrust of naturalism. Pizer, Roberts claims, "attempts to domesticate naturalism and muzzle its philosophical bite by leashing it to comparatively milquetoast humanism", a betrayal given that, "naturalism flatly denies humanism's privileging of humanity with a unique freedom or

[17] Donald Pizer, *The Theory and Practice of American Literary Naturalism: Selected Essays and Reviews* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 39.
[18] Ibid., 39.

special status".[19] Instead, Roberts argues, "what is most central, unique, and valuable about naturalism, its characteristically objective and scientific perspective, stands in stark opposition to humanistic thought".[20] Roberts is not alone, John Conder for example arguing that American naturalism is considerably more deterministic than critics such as Pizer had allowed, that it "does indeed possess philosophic coherence, and that such coherence depends on the evolution of a concept questioning man's freedom".[21] I concur with the critical position that American naturalism is more committed to determinism than critics such as Pizer have allowed. Moreover, this commitment to determinism is a feature even more marked in its recent resurgence. Indeed, twenty-first century American naturalism is arguably more committed to determinism than any other manifestation, European or American, since Zola. Michael Tavel Clarke notes just such a phenomenon, for example, in the recent work of Cormac McCarthy: "[w]hile early naturalism was preoccupied with but ultimately undecided on the question of determinism, McCarthy's work is far more decisive on the subject".[22] In short, in its manifestation in contemporary American culture, naturalism's most important element is to prescribe a model of determinism upon its characters. This level of determinism may vary, according to cultural practitioner, but it is a cornerstone that virtually all works of contemporary American naturalism share.

Two elements of neoliberalism should be considered carefully alongside this resurgence of a strongly deterministic literary naturalism. Firstly, this determinism underlines how in contemporary America the capacity of the disempowered to choose meaningfully – ostensibly one of neoliberalism's principal freedoms – is in fact considerably diminished.

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[19] Ian F. Roberts, "Determinism, Free Will, and Moral Responsibility in American Literary Naturalism" in Keith Newlin, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 121-38, 123.
[20] Ibid., 123.
[21] John J. Conder, *Naturalism in American Fiction: The Classic Phase* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 4.
[22] Michael Tavel Clarke, "The New Naturalism: Cormac McCarthy, Frank Norris, and the Question of Postmodernism," *Studies in American Naturalism* 9. 1 (2014): 52-78, 68-69.

Instead, individual behaviour is actually narrowly determined. This is not to say that those oppressed by neoliberalism are utterly bereft of choice, as Jane Elliott's coinage of "suffering agency" underlines:

> Neoliberal governance is obviously not the neutral framework for free choice it purports to be, but the unacceptability of the choices it offers does not render them illusory or without import – quite the opposite: the choices between gas or childcare, illegal immigration or destitution, prostitution or starvation, are so significant and so painful precisely because they are so unjust.[23]

The choices presented to those oppressed by neoliberalism are thus so narrow and dismal that they constitute a mere mockery of free will. Secondly, the strongly deterministic form of contemporary American naturalism has important moral implications. For certain practitioners, the characters they construct bear little moral responsibility for their actions. This is because their behaviour is largely determined by forces outside their control, whether innate biological drives or external environmental factors. While such a position may be realistic with regard to the disenfranchised, it is more problematic when transposed onto those actually in positions of societal power. Notwithstanding that more dogmatic naturalists would insist that determinism exerts a dominant force over all members of society, this is arguably, as we shall see, a matter of degree. The deterministic framework of naturalism thus provides an opportunity for the purveyors of neoliberalism and neoconservatism – and their supporters in the culture industry – to insist that their actions are forced and therefore blameless.

These are crucial observations, both in terms of the wider cultural resurgence of naturalism, and the particular case studies discussed in in the final sections of this essay:

[23] Jane Elliott, "Suffering Agency: Imagining Neoliberal Personhood in North America and Britain," *Social Text* 31.2 (2013): 83-101, 87.

Dave Eggers' novel, *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?* and the 2016 television mini-series, *The Night Of*. We should consider here a political class struggling either to justify or abnegate responsibility for domestic policies including the Patriot Act's curbing of civil liberties, or the numerous Black American deaths resulting from a militarized police force at the vanguard of the US's institutional racism, also reflected in neoliberalism's expansion of the prison-industrial complex. For those in positions of power, conceiving of the self as lacking in free will and being obliged by more or less overwhelming exterior forces to act in particular ways is an attractive exonerative proposition. Some neo-naturalist cultural products implicitly provide support for such policies, helping to justify them to a wider American public. A model of naturalism has thus emerged in contemporary American culture, with texts at one end of a spectrum absolving seemingly powerful characters from blame by positioning them as compelled to act in certain ways. At the other more politically radical end, texts parody exonerative determinism and/or depict marginalized and oppressed characters genuinely overwhelmed by neoliberal policies. As we shall see, the discourse of determinism is deployed in this range of texts in complex and frequently contradictory ways, which makes critical engagement with them as a body of naturalistic work essential.

The texts comprising this body of neo-naturalism include novels from a seemingly disparate group of writers, and a diverse selection of TV series and movies. Novels include Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004), whose subtly graded alternative history functions precisely as an experiment into the behaviour of known characters – that is, autobiographically-rendered members of Roth's actual family – under the particularly stressful determining conditions of a Lindbergh presidency.[24] Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark*

[24] HBO's 2020 adaptation of Roth's novel demonstrates its continued relevance to the American political landscape. It also underlines links between contemporary naturalist texts, given that it was adapted by David Simon and Ed Burns, previously showrunners on another key neo-naturalist text, *The Wire*.

(2008), another counterfactual novel, similarly experiments with determinism, positing an America enduring a savage civil war following the secession of the blue states after the 2000 presidential election. Through explorations of alternative American histories, both novels offer thinly-disguised critiques of the then current Bush administration. Lionel Shriver's *Big Brother* (2013) and *The Mandibles* (2016) both draw heavily on naturalist conventions in their exploration of agency, gender, and determined behaviour. In both novels, middle-class families are embroiled in struggles very clearly driven by external forces, but political critique in both works is hamstrung by the way in which the endings recuperate characters according to normative neoliberal ideologies. While Cormac McCarthy has occasionally been characterized by critics as, inter alia, a naturalist, two novels he published during this period, *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and *The Road* (2006), are indisputably more overtly naturalistic works.[25] In both novels, characters suffer relentlessly under the depredations of an overwhelming environmental determinism. Philipp Meyer's *American Rust* (2009), a blue-collar tale of crime inspired by industrial decline, likewise strongly evokes numerous traditions of American naturalist writing, while Jess Walter's *The Financial Lives of the Poets* (2009) offers a more humorous, but nevertheless deterministic narrative of middle-class descent. Eggers' *Your Fathers* is selected for discussion in this essay as it offers a complex and equivocal perspective on the degree to which determining forces control the actions of its various characters.

Walter's novel arguably offers guarded support for a beset white male discourse as part of its deterministic naturalism, and this is also seen in some of the naturalist inflected television of the era, including *The Shield* (2002-08), *Dexter* (2006-13), *Breaking Bad* (2008-13), and *Better Call Saul* (2015-present). *The Shield* and *Dexter* both feature male, white, middle-aged, heterosexual protagonists, professionally involved in law enforcement, and thus

[25] See Alan Gibbs, "'Things happen to you they happen': Cormac McCarthy, Morality, and Neo-Naturalism," *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 18. 1 (2020): 56-77.

in positions of relative power. Both protagonists, Detective Vic Mackey and forensic scientist Dexter Morgan, are portrayed as regularly forced to violate the law in order to bring more serious criminals to a form of natural justice. Mackey and Morgan are, moreover, respectively heavily driven by environmental and hereditary deterministic factors. While *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* feature white males further down the power hierarchy, both series nevertheless consistently portray their protagonists as beset, being forced to act in morally dubious ways by external forces. *The Wire* (2002-08), while clearly driven by a strongly deterministic naturalism, arguably uses such devices to more politically enlightened ends. It is also the only one of these series which has been directly connected with naturalism in published criticism. Laura Bieger's 2017 article argues that each season of the show "thrives on taking its viewers out of the comfort zone of their ordinary lives and into what Frank Norris famously described as the world of 'rags and wretchedness, . . . dirt and despair' that exists, largely unknown to most of us, just 'across the street'".[26] As such, Bieger suggests, *The Wire* follows a familiar naturalistic narrative of descent and degeneration in order to mount a critique of neoliberalist policies which fostered the rapacious milieu depicted in the series. Similarly, as we shall see, *The Night Of* draws overtly on conventions of naturalism – to the extent of name-checking Jack London's work – to offer a political critique of the American criminal justice system, and its typical depiction in TV crime drama. More recently, televisual naturalism has entered the realm of fantasy, with the ethical considerations at the heart of *The Good Place* (2016-20), and sci-fi, with sustained explorations of free will and determinism in *Devs* (2020).

Neo-naturalist films of the period include *There Will Be Blood*, Paul Thomas Anderson's adaptation of Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* (2007), David Cronenberg's *A History of Violence* (2005), starring Viggo Mortensen as a man whose violent past comes to determine

[26] Laura Bieger, "*The Wire*, Big Data, and the Specter of Naturalism," *Studies in American Naturalism* 12.1 (2017): 127-39, 131.

his present, and *All Is Lost* (2013), wherein Robert Redford plays a lone man struggling to survive on a capsized and sinking boat, in a narrative highly reminiscent of works by Jack London. The Coen Brothers' work of this period, including their adaptation of *No Country for Old Men* (2007), *A Serious Man* (2009), and *The Ballad of Buddy Scruggs* (2018), all employ highly deterministic narratives and feature characters overwhelmed by outside circumstances. Indeed, that most recent portmanteau work includes one piece directly adapted from London's short story "All Gold Canyon".

Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?

In an interview conducted shortly before the publication of *Your Fathers*, Dave Eggers mentioned how the novel's writing "took on a life of its own", and that even when he went back to edit it some time later, "it still felt strange and wild, not exactly like something I'd had a controlling hand in making. It was like some demon baby".[27] If this recalls Zola's advocating how naturalist writers should conduct experiments by setting up a situation and characters, and allowing events to play out, then there are plenty of other ways in which *Your Fathers* evokes naturalism. For example, the novel certainly presents a sensationalist tale, "twisted from the ordinary", to use Frank Norris's famous phrase.[28] Thomas, an otherwise unexceptional protagonist, serially kidnaps and questions seven individuals (including an ex-Congressman, Dickinson; Thomas's former high school teacher, Mr Hansen; and his own mother). He keeps them captive in separate buildings at Fort Ord, a disused military base in California.[29] Since the novel is presented entirely in dialogue form it eschews typically

[27] Dave Eggers, "A Short Q&A", *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* 11 Jun. 2014, at https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/a-short-q-a-with-dave-eggers-about-his-new-novel-your-fathers-where-are-they-and-the-prophets-do-they-live-forever

[28] Frank Norris, "Zola as a Romantic Writer", in Donald Pizer, ed., *Frank Norris: Novels and Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1986), 1106–8, 1107.

[29] In the same interview, Eggers had this to say about the novel's location: "it's important that [Thomas is] at the end of the country, and feels he has nowhere to go. He's like the bear on the California flag. These are huge mammals that need a range of three hundred miles or so to thrive. Well, there aren't three hundred miles anywhere anymore in California, so basically the bears have been driven to the sea. That's where and what

naturalist minute documentary descriptions and detailed plotting, but in its careful weighing of individual responsibility and the role of determinism in its characters' lives it reflects a clear engagement with important elements of naturalism.

Your Fathers is constructed around Thomas devising, discussing and contesting deterministic lines of causation following the death of his childhood friend, Don Banh. For example, Hansen's biologically determined urges lead him to abuse Don (although the extent of this is disputed); this leads to Don's breakdown and death at the hands of police, which in turn seems to be what has prompted Thomas to carry out these abductions and, before the events of the book, to set a fire at the hospital in which the details of Don's death were covered up. The novel is also structured according to determinism to the extent that the testimony of one abductee leads – at least in Thomas's mind – to the next. Thomas thus repeatedly claims that what he is doing is driven by outside circumstances: he tells his mother that he "had to" kidnap her, "[t]here was a vise around my head and now it's easing".[30] Similarly, he earlier explained to Dickinson, "I didn't have any intention of doing this, but then circumstances conspired to make it necessary".[31] Thomas explicitly claims to feel trapped: "I'm just stuck in a tight spot right now. These headaches are messing with my life, and the ceiling just seems to be lowering on me every day".[32] Tellingly, the seven kidnap victims are actually chained up, in a stark literalization of the constriction that was in earlier naturalism more usually metaphorical. Even a familiar and inescapable downward trajectory of decline characterises *Your Fathers*: the narrative concludes with Thomas's capture and likely death (although since it is narrated entirely through dialogue this is surmise).

Thomas is, too – a suddenly unnecessary animal driven off the edge of the continent". In terms of naturalism, that final phrase is particularly telling.

[30] Dave Eggers, *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2014), 85.

[31] Ibid., 29.

[32] Ibid., 32.

Thomas is holding his various abductees responsible for two important and linked elements in his life. Firstly, Thomas seeks to lay blame onto those around him for the various ways in which he feels he has failed to fulfil his potential. As such, Thomas is here engaging with a key tenet of neoliberalism which, as discussed above, conceives of the individual as homo oeconomicus, in control of their own success. Secondly, Thomas seeks to hold to account those whom he believes to be responsible for the death of Don Banh, who was shot by local police and a SWAT team in his own garden, and for the cover up operation at the hospital subsequent to this incident. *Your Fathers* steers the reader towards sympathy with this second of Thomas's complaints, not least because Don's status as a member of an ethnic minority and a vulnerable child of a single parent positions him as one of those marginalized by neoliberal society. Thomas's tendency to blame others for a failure to fulfil his own potential, on the other hand, is treated more sceptically. *Your Fathers* is therefore a naturalist novel less in the sense that it explores determinism per se, but because of its more specific attempt to critique the use of exonerative determinism by those in positions of relative power as an act of bad faith. The beset white male discourse we encounter in, for example, *The Shield* and *Dexter*, is in this respect satirized. The novel thus includes both the main impulses identified by this essay in relation to neo-naturalism: firstly, the tendency of those in privileged positions to deny their own agency, as Thomas frequently does, through exonerative determinism. Secondly, Don's slaying foregrounds the genuine victimisation of those at the margins of neoliberal society. The following examines the appearance of these contrasting discourses within *Your Fathers* in more detail.

In his refusal to accept responsibility for his perceived failures, Thomas seems explicitly to be rejecting elements of neoliberal ideology which insist on referring such matters back to the individual. As Harvey notes, under neoliberalism, "[i]ndividual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings (such as not

investing significantly enough in one's own human capital through education) rather than being attributed to any systemic property (such as the class exclusions usually attributed to capitalism)".[33] Thomas's abductees vary in terms of the extent to which they sympathise with his refusal to take responsibility and thus, implicitly, how far they corroborate this element of neoliberalism. Thomas's first victim is a trainee astronaut, Kev, with whom Thomas attended college. Thomas decries the way in which Kev's ambitions to fly on the space shuttle are scuppered – despite him having done everything that was required in order to follow that path – when the programme is defunded. Thomas voices his grievances regarding how both his and Kev's ambitions failed to manifest to his second kidnap victim, ex-Congressman Dickinson, mapping this series of events onto wider ways in which the US has squandered its status as a land of opportunity. In respect of the defunding of NASA, Thomas rails against the diverting of money towards pointless wars abroad, although this is clearly incompatible with his desires expressed elsewhere in conversation with the Congressman, to be part of such foreign adventures. As the Congressman points out: "[o]ne minute you're complaining about your astronaut buddy who didn't get to ride on a cool spaceship, and the next you're saying you wish you'd been drafted".[34] Thomas, sounding increasingly incoherent and self-pitying, replies "[y]ou should have found some kind of purpose for me …. Why didn't you tell me what to do?"[35] Dickinson's attempts to ameliorate Thomas's sense of alienation, while reasonably understanding, revealingly adopt a Social Darwinist tone pertinent to naturalism's literary history: "Son, not everyone can win the game. Some people play it poorly. Some people quit. Some people don't even read the playbook".[36] The Congressman continues, "I think this is the result of you being prepared for a life that does not exist. You were built for a

[33] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 65-6.
[34] Dave Eggers, *Your Fathers*, 36.
[35] Ibid., 37.
[36] Ibid., 40.

different world. Like a predator without a prey".[37] If not necessarily an enthusiast of Ayn Rand, Dickinson at least seems to have read and absorbed Jack London, here and elsewhere in the novel being something of a mouthpiece for naturalist perspectives. Dickinson is only cautiously critical of Thomas's self-pitying perspective, although it is unclear whether this is predominantly through fear of his captor or representative of genuine sympathy deriving from a belief in determinism.

Two of the female characters – Thomas's mother and Sara, a woman whom he randomly meets on a nearby beach and who subsequently becomes the last of his abductees – are notably more critical of Thomas's tendency to direct blame outwards. Thomas asserts that it was his mother's irresponsibility and neglect that stunted his character and consequently restricted his opportunities for self-fulfilment: "Mom, *everything* you did brought me to this place".[38] If this draws on one of the classical naturalist sources of determinism, one's nurturing environment, then his mother counters with the other, biological factors, stating that Thomas was "born ready to blame others for [his] mistakes", and that he was "screwy out of the womb … screwy as a child, screwy as an adolescent".[39] Both Thomas and his mother draw opportunistically upon archetypal deterministic arguments here as a means of exonerating themselves for Thomas's perceived failures. Indeed, his mother's subsequent arguments seem almost as if she is aware of Thomas's status as a character in a work of naturalism conforming to Zola's descriptions of such as scientific experiments: "If you were raised in a standard two-parent family, with all the money and stability in the world, you would have turned out exactly the same".[40] Certainly, Thomas's mother is more sensitive than Dickinson was to the ways in which opportunity is related to gender in the US, pointedly observing that Thomas "couldn't keep a job. You know how easy it is for a white man to

[37] Ibid., 46.
[38] Ibid., 86 (original italics).
[39] Ibid., 86.
[40] Ibid., 100.

make money in this country? It's like falling off a log".[41] Sara also ridicules Thomas's beset pose, similarly noting the advantages conferred by his gender. She perceptively notes his tendency to seek to evade blame: "my guess is you're inclined toward shortcuts", and when Thomas asks "whose fault is that?" Sara's pertinent reply is "I'm guessing someone else's".[42]

Exchanges such as these underline how *Your Fathers* introduces naturalistic elements not to endorse a strong determinism which would insist that all members of society are subject to such constraints, but to demonstrate that determinism in this respect is a matter of degree, dependent on factors such as gender, race, and social status. The gendered discourse in *Your Fathers* thus reads as a parody of texts (including a number of contemporary naturalist ones) which take the beset white male at face value. Given the strength of the arguments of Thomas's mother and Sara, the novel apparently thus critiques the American white man's tendency to employ deterministic exoneration. Ultimately, however, the ideology of *Your Fathers* is equivocal. This is because while the reader is clearly encouraged to be sceptical of Thomas's complaints, this nevertheless means that the novel endorses a neoliberal perspective which would posit his failures as solely his own rather than society's responsibility. That is, the novel may critique Thomas's self-pity, but in doing so it simultaneously validates a social model which refuses responsibility for individual welfare. If *Your Fathers* disparages white male privilege, it does so cocooned within a neoliberalist perspective.

In terms of weighing responsibility for the death of Don Banh and its cover up, the novel is considerably more sympathetic to Thomas's position, being overtly critical of the way in which oppressive institutions employ exonerative determinism. Thomas was school friends with Don, but had lost touch with him as an adult, and there are hints in the

[41] Ibid., 97.
[42] Ibid., 204.

conversation with Thomas's mother that this may have been a minor contributory factor in Don's later erratic behaviour. Thomas therefore has possible ulterior motives, driven by residual guilt, for shifting any sense of responsibility for Don's death. Firstly, Thomas kidnaps Hansen, their former teacher, who may have abused them and thus contributed towards Don's psychological problems, then one of the police involved in the shooting, and finally a hospital administrator who was complicit in covering up the number of times Don was shot by the police and SWAT team. All three characters use deterministic arguments to deny or diminish their culpability in the series of events. Hansen, for example, admits to paedophilic inclinations – which he strenuously emphasizes are biological and therefore involuntary in origin – but denies any actual abuse took place. The police officer insists that Don, despite being surrounded by heavily armed law enforcement officers and wielding only a steak knife, posed a threat. The hospital administrator continually refuses responsibility for the speedy decision to burn Don's corpse – against his mother's wishes – in order to hide that he had been shot seventeen rather than, as in the official report, three times.[43] She may indeed have been only a functionary in a larger system of collusion, but this does not prevent Thomas from angrily accusing her of complicity.[44] When Thomas relates the story to Dickinson he is again sympathetic, indeed, identifying the administrator's evasion of responsibility as some novel and unnatural form of human evolution, a "new mutation" constituted by an "ability to stand between a human being and some small measure of justice and blame it on some regulation".[45] If *Your Fathers* is reluctant to sympathise with Thomas's attempt to employ the exonerative deterministic in order to explain his own failings, it nevertheless firmly identifies it as a discursive practice of those in power. As Bran Nicol notes, "as much as Thomas's kidnapping spree is an act of disillusioned vengeance by

[43] Ibid., 77, 159-73, 179. The cop, in a way which specifically evokes the language of exonerative determinism, refers euphemistically to Don's death as "an unfortunate incident", 167.
[44] Ibid., 181, 183.
[45] Ibid., 187.

another vulnerable young man it also amounts to an act of transnational empathy".[46] To recall the phrase from Assar's *McSweeney's* piece, the novel ultimately doesn't permit Don Banh's death to be obfuscated as representing "an officer-involved shooting".

The Night Of

The Night Of is an eight-episode HBO mini-series broadcast in 2016, freely adapted from an original BBC TV series, *Criminal Justice*. Set in New York, the series tells the story of Nasir Khan, a Pakistani-American college student who one night borrows his father's taxicab from outside their home in Queens. In Manhattan he picks up a young woman, Andrea Cornish, who enters the cab thinking Nasir is a taxi driver. They end up back in her Upper East Side brownstone, where after drinking and taking drugs they have sex. Nasir later wakes up downstairs at the kitchen table, having blacked out, and on climbing the stairs back to the bedroom finds that Andrea has been brutally murdered. Nasir flees the scene, but is arrested and accused of the murder. The series tracks his case through the complex American legal system in forensic detail, also documenting his downward spiral while incarcerated on remand at Rikers Island. During this time he becomes drug dependent and is eventually accomplice to a gang-related murder. In the final episode, Nasir is released when his jury is deadlocked, and the District Attorney declines a retrial since new evidence has emerged indicating Nasir's innocence.

While determinism is a less conspicuous tendency in series such as *Dexter*, *The Shield* and *Breaking Bad*, by contrast *The Night Of* is overtly indebted to naturalism. The series not only employs numerous tropes, a narrative structure, and an aesthetic typically associated with naturalism, but also makes explicit references to it and its earlier practitioners. Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*, for example, is referenced a number of times, even giving its

[46] Bran Nicol, "Typical Eggers: Transnationalism and America in Dave Eggers's 'Globally-minded' Fiction," *Textual Practice* 33.2 (2019), 300-17, 306.

title to the final episode, by which time Nasir sports a tattoo of a wolf or dog on his upper left arm. London's novel is a favourite of Freddy Knight, a kingpin prisoner at Rikers who takes Nasir – not without considerable self-interest – under his wing.[47] Freddy considers London's novel a true representation of the savage nature of life, one which also gives him an approximate moral code. Other characters similarly demonstrate attributes, and experience narrative patterns, familiar from earlier works of naturalism. Nasir, for example, opportunistically takes the keys to his father's car early in the first episode – echoing Hurstwood's famous equivocating momentary lapse in *Sister Carrie* – and from this action follows his entire downward spiral.

Naturalistic elements are also evident in the depiction of the supporting cast. The investigating detective, Dennis Box (even his name evoking naturalism's constricting choices), is described as a "subtle beast" in his predatory pursuit of suspects. Box is being railroaded into a reluctant retirement, and his increasingly doubtful pursuit of Nasir is partly determined by his time-bound circumstances. Nasir's parents are near bankrupted by their son's incarceration awaiting trial, due to both legal costs and the fact that his father's taxi is impounded as evidence, and so he (and the two fellow members of the community who share the taxi) can no longer drive to earn a living. His father eventually takes a humiliating food delivery job, while his mother is forced into cleaning work. The series thus carefully demonstrates that issues of class and race are crucial in determining the narrow choices for the Khan family.

Race is indeed prominent throughout the series in terms of its exploration of the consequences for those marginalized by neoliberal policies. Other than Nasir, the prison population we see in *The Night Of* is overwhelmingly African-American, while in the third

[47] Freddy Knight is played by Michael Kenneth Williams, which forms a further link to American naturalism, since Williams earlier rose to prominence playing Omar Little in *The Wire*. J. D. Williams – Preston "Bodie" Broadus in *The Wire* – also has a significant role as a witness in *The Night Of*.

episode scores of ethnic minority visitors to Rikers – including children and Nasir's parents – are subjected to humiliating and forcible searches. *The Night Of* thus seeks to explore wider issues of the relationship between the criminal justice system and race in America. For example, Nasir's experiences while on remand in Rikers echo the real life brutal treatment of Kalief Browder, a sixteen-year-old African-American who was arrested in 2010 and held awaiting trial in Rikers for over three years, often in solitary confinement. Browder was released when mugging charges were eventually dropped, but later committed suicide after suffering bouts of severe depression related to his experiences. Nasir's fictional experiences in Rikers are similarly brutal: on his first night while incarcerated he witnesses a severe beating, and in his first weeks there he is forced to pick allegiances, dubiously accepting Freddy's protection, and to participate in violence and drug smuggling, merely to survive. It is not that Nasir is entirely denied choice in these instances, since the form of naturalism in *The Night Of* permits a highly circumscribed free will. In this respect however, Nasir's choices – whether or not to plead guilty, whether or not to accept Freddy's protection, and so on – strongly recall the dire alternatives of Elliott's "suffering agency". This is underlined when his defender, John Stone, delivers his summing up: "[w]hat I see is what happens when you put a kid in Rikers and say, 'Okay, now survive that, while we try you for something you didn't do.' And that's how you survive Rikers".[48] By this time Nasir has become a hardened "true convict" thanks to Freddy's influence: shaven-headed, tattooed, muscled, and addicted to heroin.

The Night Of employs this heavily deterministic narrative as a specific means to interrogate key issues relating to race and the American criminal justice system as it has evolved under neoliberalism. This relationship has already been the focus for a number of contemporary cultural commentators. Stephen Shapiro, for example, notes how neoliberalism

[48] *The Night Of*, HBO, Episode 8, "The Call of the Wild," first broadcast 28 Aug. 2016.

"vastly amplifies the State's institutional violence … not least with the onset of the prison industrial complex and aggressive metropolitan policing against non-white citizens and denizens".[49] In particular, the kind of industrial-scale incarceration seen in *The Night Of* is a prominent coercive element which neoconservatives have been able to advance in the name of the state of exception under which the US has been deemed to find itself since 9/11. As Giorgio Agamben observes with regard to the state of exception, "the voluntary creation of a permanent state of emergency (though perhaps not declared in the technical sense) has become one of the essential practices of contemporary states, including so-called democratic ones".[50] This tendency was emerging even before 9/11, during a period of neoliberal hegemony under the Clinton administration in the 1990s, one aspect of which saw significantly increased police numbers. As Elayne Rapping notes of this period, the American justice system became, "increasingly, by popular demand, hell bent on putting more and more Americans in prisons for longer and longer time periods and for less and less socially 'dangerous' crimes".[51] Crucially, Rapping analyses the important ideological role played by popular crime TV of that period in garnering public support for the expansion of the prison-industrial complex. TV was instrumental, she argues, in propagating a neoliberal perspective and fostering an environment "in which virtually every issue on the public table has been transformed from being solvable through economics, social institutions, cultural and educational reform, treatment and rehabilitation, to being treated by the criminal justice system".[52] Attitudes in support of neoliberal ideologies towards crime are easily detectable in twenty-first-century neo-naturalist series such as *The Shield*, *24*, and *Dexter*, but *The Night Of*

[49] Stephen Shapiro, "Foucault, Neoliberalism, Algorithmic Governmentality, and the Loss of Liberal Culture," in Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro, eds., *Neoliberalism and Contemporary American Literature* (Hanover NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2019), 43-72, 44.
[50] Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2.
[51] Elayne Rapping, *Law and Justice as Seen on TV* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 253.
[52] Ibid., 253. Much of this dynamic is also due to steady defunding of social services at the same time as police numbers were increasing.

seems to employ its forensic naturalistic gaze as a means to critique such policies and their effects.

Part of the way in which *The Night Of* achieves this is precisely through the aforementioned level of naturalistic detail, the series revolving around a painstaking and almost comprehensive depiction of the process of crime, detection, and judicial testing. This level of detail is not only a typically naturalist aesthetic practice, but in *The Night Of* it studiously reveals the myriad inherent flaws and prejudices of the various stages of the justice system. For example, in episode two, after Nasir's arrest, the police procedure is followed in extremely precise detail, as he is forcibly stripped, swabbed, and so on. His guilt is already assumed, as Box describes Nasir's physical self as "a crime scene" and regards his body intently as a piece of evidence. This extreme detail continues in other episodes, carefully documenting the various stages of the judicial system and the gradually dehumanising process Nasir endures.

The level of detail is also crucial because it means that at every step of the way we encounter a member of the American working population carrying out a particular, often demanding, job. Over the course of *The Night Of* this plethora of workers, both within and outside the justice system, includes pharmacists, lawyers, police at every level, school principals, courtroom judges, Chinese medicine sellers, a kennel worker, bar workers, sex workers, court clerks and security, taxi drivers, prison officers, pathologists, forensic scientists, photographers, rehab workers, the District Attorney, and her administrators. Noticeably, every one of these characters, however minor, is given lines, often to express a certain degree of world-weariness regarding their role as part of the neoliberal American economy. While each function within the system is rarely in itself depicted as necessarily malign, the various roles combine to produce a constricting effect upon individuals trapped within an industrial justice system. As with numerous earlier naturalistic texts, from Dreiser

and Norris through to McCarthy, *The Night Of* presents a world of fundamentally amoral people, often emotionally deadened. Frequently characters are deliberately placed towards the bottom of the frame and thus appearing as small, overwhelmed, and/or oppressed.

The careful depiction of these characters is significant bearing in mind how we have already observed that, at least on a surface level, *The Night Of* is considerably more politically progressive than other neo-naturalist crime series, with the exception of *The Wire*. It is necessary to note, however, that the numerous workers depicted in *The Night Of* tend to perform their jobs to more or less the best of their abilities, even if they frequently do not go beyond a bare minimum (bar Box in the final episode when he pursues his doubts about Nasir, finally persuading even the recalcitrant District Attorney of Nasir's likely innocence). In terms of ideology, from one perspective this efficiency might seem paradoxically exonerative. Nobody working in the many branches of the justice system is individually hostile towards Nasir; they are – to use a dangerous phrase – just doing their jobs. In other words, the individuals we encounter in this system rarely do anything for which we can morally hold them to account.[53] As Adorno notes of pervasive capitalism "oppression has become anonymous".[54] Stone's summing up regarding the effect of placing Nasir in Rikers and forcing him to survive is pertinent here, since it points to a destructive series of institutions, even if the individual actors within them are not especially morally culpable. It is the criminal justice system, as actor, which transforms the hitherto relatively law-abiding Nasir into a murder accomplice and drug addict. Thus it is the neoliberal political will which

[53] The nearest to such an occurrence is a pathologist who is persuaded by the DA to give interpretive testimony beneficial to the prosecution.
[54] Theodor Adorno, *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader* (ed. Rolf Tiedermann, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003), 116.

has built and now sustains this system that is in fact implicitly criticized through the detailed naturalist formal means employed in *The Night Of*.[55]

This critique operates on a general level, but also censures particular elements of the system which have worked to Nasir's detriment. For example, in episode three John Stone earnestly (although also with obvious self-interest) implores the Khans to employ his services rather than those of a public defender. As Stone describes them, they are overworked, underpaid, and likely to encourage their client to take the first plea deal offered, regardless of guilt or innocence. Stone's position is borne out in reality, where the norm is that public defenders will encourage clients to plead guilty as a means of avoiding trial, and dealing with cases cheaply and swiftly. According to Jennifer Gonnerman, "[f]or a defendant who is in jail, the more a case drags on the greater the pressure to give up and plead guilty …. Stories circulate on Rikers about inmates who plead guilty to crimes they didn't commit just to put an end to their ordeal".[56] *The Night Of*'s naturalistic strategies are therefore important not least since they articulate an effective critique of the way in which exonerative determinism is employed as a defensive discursive strategy by neoliberal policy-making institutions.

While *Your Fathers* largely dismisses Thomas's efforts to exonerate himself and spread blame for his failure to fulfil his potential, it broadly endorses his attacks on the repressive system and those actors within the system such as the cop and the hospital administrator who colluded in the killing of Don Banh. *The Night Of* generally depicts those

[55] Kecia Thompson's article on *The Wire* raises some interesting comparisons with *The Night Of* (Kecia Driver Thompson, "'Deserve Got Nothing to Do with It': Black Urban Experience and the Naturalist Tradition in *The Wire*", *Studies in American Naturalism* 7.1 (2012): 80-120). Thompson notes an Althusserian dimension to *The Wire*, in that it "both represents and demonstrates the controlling influences of institutions: the legal system and the courtroom, the police and the law, local and state government, labor unions, the schools, prisons, and the mass media. *The Wire* is concerned with how these institutions watch us, shape us, frustrate us, and fail us", 82. This compares with the slightly more benign depiction of institutions in *The Night Of* where, even though the system is constricting and discriminatory, justice is ultimately done, and most seem to be working within the system competently and to the best of their abilities.

[56] Jennifer Gonnerman, "Three Years on Rikers Without Trial" *The New Yorker*, 6 Oct. 2014 at https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/10/06/before-the-law. Gonnerman adds that in the Bronx in 2011, 165 cases went to trial, whereas in 3,991 cases, the defendant pleaded guilty.

working within the justice system as exercising power only within fairly rigidly defined limits, and is thus more likely to grant them deterministic exoneration, reserving its critique for the neoliberal doctrine which shaped the evolution of US criminal justice system, with its inherent prejudices. While Dennis Box is under particular pressure to produce a conviction before his retirement, this is clearly of a different order to the kind of life-or-death struggle experienced by Nasir in Rikers. Thus if *The Night Of* is willing to extend determinism to all levels of society, the serial nevertheless depicts how its level of force varies under neoliberalism according to factors such as race, gender, and social class. As these two case studies demonstrate, twenty-first-century naturalism engages with its neoliberal American context in complex ways. Each text varies, not least in terms of the extent to which it endorses or critiques attempts by key protagonists to employ naturalism's deterministic model as a means to exonerate their actions, ethically and politically.

Coda: Exonerative Determinism and Trump

This article has largely focussed on cultural products of the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, and there are clear reasons, as explored above, for the emergence of such a body of work during this period. A question remains regarding the period which follows, beginning with the Trump administration's assumption of power in 2017. A significant part of Donald Trump's campaign was based on crude appeals to those who have felt themselves disenfranchised by the depredations of post-industrial neoliberal America. However spurious its basis, in linguistic terms "Make America Great Again" evokes reasserting control. While its crudely racist subtext should not go unacknowledged, the slogan nevertheless clearly resonated with those who – to echo a description of characters in naturalist works – felt overwhelmed by forces greater than themselves. In this sense, the election of Trump might be considered a partial result of the sense of disenfranchisement and victimisation articulated in some of the texts of neoliberal neo-naturalism. The Trump

administration in this respect represents a continuation and expansion of the use of exonerative determinism. Trumpist nationalism is merely more crude, extreme, and overt in such usages. A November 2018 edition of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* demonstrates both how mainstream the idea of exonerative determinism has become under Trump, and just how dangerous it is for those in power to adopt this discourse without challenge.[57] This episode focuses on the Trump administration's Family Separation policy. Oliver noted that politicians have consistently painted immigration as an existential threat to the extent that they are now able routinely to talk about the issue employing "the language of war", going on to point out how "that kind of militaristic talk can make people think that it is necessary to make the kind of impossible choices made during a war. Which is how things like Family Separation happen". This is followed by a short clip, in which Jessica Vaughan, of the right-wing Centre for Immigration Studies, says "I think it's appalling that we have to do it", before admitting that some of the children who have been through this process will suffer "some lasting effects". This discourse, Oliver noted, is thus a convenient way of excusing atrociously inhumane acts perpetrated on children: "[w]e don't *have* to do any of it. Because even though the language of war is being used, there is not a war. And the only reason people keep talking like there is one, is to give themselves permission to make the choices they want to be forced to make". Giving oneself permission to make the choices one wants to be forced to make is an apt phrase for much of the use of the exonerative deterministic in contemporary naturalist cultural production. Characters in relatively privileged positions seek to deny their agency and thus their responsibility.

It should be conceded that Trump would be personally unlikely, at least publicly, to conceive of himself as lacking in free will. Neither, indeed, does Trump appear to be an individual with the kind of moral awareness to require justifying acts through exonerative

[57] *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, HBO, broadcast 5 Nov. 2018.

determinism, instead denying committing anything blameworthy and insisting on his own ability to control policy and events. Ostensibly, therefore, exonerative determinism would be anathema to Trump, but this has not prevented his supporters, members of his administration, and even Trump himself from employing the discourse. For example, exonerative determinism was prominent in the political establishment's response to the June 2020 police killing of George Floyd, and in ways which evoke Assar's piece discussed in this article's introduction. Writing in *The Guardian*, Patricia Williams notes how the Minneapolis medical examiner's original report, through "a shameful locution", sought ways to avoid attributing the death to asphyxiation.[58] Noting the same "systemic bureaucratic corruption" encountered by Thomas with regard to Don Banh's death in *Your Fathers*, Williams goes on to illustrate how "[t]he linguistic effacement of agency often directs gaze in powerful ways, tells us where to look and where not to".[59] Citing the 2014 case of Black American Kajieme Powell, who suffered from mental health problems and, when confronted by police while allegedly holding a steak knife, implored them to shoot him, Williams foregrounds the kind of language used. The police did indeed shoot Powell, twelve times, and his death was described as "police-assisted suicide" or "suicide by cop". As Williams notes, this represents "an interesting deployment of the passive. It eliminates official responsibility by recasting a trigger-happy officer as the extended will of the deranged, self-sacrificing Powell. He did it to himself. No one's fault but his own".[60]

Similar exonerative language was used by both Trump and some of his high profile supporters in August 2020, in response to the shootings of two Black Lives Matter demonstrators, allegedly carried out by 17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse. One of Trump's most

[58] Patricia Williams, "Language is part of the machinery of oppression – just look at how black deaths are described", *The Guardian* 10 June 2020, at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/10/language-is-part-of-the-machinery-of-oppression-just-look-at-how-black-deaths-are-described.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.

ardent and high profile media supporters, Tucker Carlson of Fox News, tweeted that Rittenhouse had taken this action based on a decision that he "had to maintain order".[61] Trump himself meanwhile defended Rittenhouse on the basis that protesters had "very violently attacked him" and that if he had not used lethal force he "probably would've been killed".[62] In other words, Trump excuses Rittenhouse on the basis that he was forced into shooting protesters. The exonerative deterministic thus represents a racially-charged and potentially lethal discourse. Its deployment within contemporary resurgent naturalism, either in straightforward support of the status quo or as critique, therefore demands careful attention.

Author bio/Acknowledgements

Alan Gibbs is a lecturer in American literature at University College Cork, Ireland. His monograph, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014) won the 2015 Peggy O'Brien Book Prize. The author gratefully acknowledges suggestions made by Bronagh Clarke and Sarah McCreedy in preparing this article, and the helpful comments made by the *JAS*'s two anonymous reviewers.

[61] Quoted in Jack Holmes, "This Is Not a Recipe for 'Order'," *Esquire*, 27 Aug. 2020, at https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a33813049/tucker-carlson-kenosha-shooter-police-chief/.
[62] Quoted in David Smith, "Trump fails to denounce an accused killer – which comes as little surprise," *The Guardian*, 1 Sept. 2020, at https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/31/trump-kyle-rittenhouse-press-briefing-kenosha.