Worlding Domesticity:
Transnational Methodology and Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*

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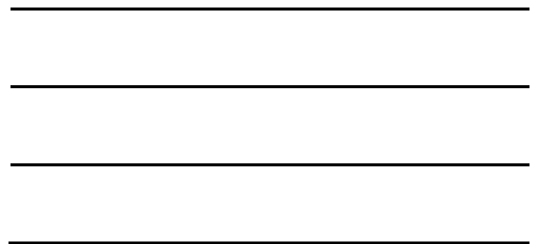
B.A. University of Copenhagen, 2010

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of English

University of Virginia
May, 2014



> There was no controlling narrative: he seemed to himself a purely reactive pinball in a game whose only object was to stay alive for staying alive's sake. To throw away his marriage and follow Lalitha had felt irresistible until the moment he saw himself, in the person of Jessica's older colleague, as another overconsuming white American male who felt entitled to more and more: saw the romantic imperialism of his falling for someone fresh and Asian, having exhausted domestic supplies. (338)

In his attempt to situate himself in the world, Walter, the protagonist of Jonathan Franzen's 2010 *Freedom* struggles to find an appropriate autobiographical narrative in which to inscribe his life. Like his wife Patty, who literally undertakes a therapeutic autobiography on the advice of her therapist, he struggles to become the author of his own life story. However, if a controlling narrative is lacking, it is merely because the perspective of the individual never extends to a systemic totality, on the level of which we would be able to identify a controlling narrative. Thus, Walter is entirely right in his intuition. But he is a reactive pinball insofar as a "game" actually is operative, in that there is a structure controlling him, not vice versa. Despite *Freedom*'s psychological-individualist construction of its characters, what emerges out of their stories is exactly an uncanny system of totality, which Walter glimpses in his most desperate moment, when he is most dislocated from his domestic, fatherly, liberal, and nature-loving ideal of Walter-identity.

In literary studies, the two recent decades have seen an immense aspiration to relocate American literature in a global context. Transnational and global studies have shifted the conceptual lens in transforming imperialism from simply an analysis of foreign policy to the study of a global dialectic that turns upon an international, rather than a national, axis. In terms of conceptualizing this transition in analytics, Paul Giles' proposition is illustrative. Instead of understanding U.S. power as an imperious colossus, he suggests that "we should read the United States itself as one of the objects of globalization, rather than as merely its malign agent, so that all the insecurities associated with transnationalism are lived out experimentally within the nation's own borders as well" (23). The maneuver worth paying attention to, as made here by Giles, is one that was introduced into the field of American Studies with the rise of the New Americanists in late 1980s and early 90s. This maneuver opened up new ground for American Studies scholarship in a global world, beyond a strictly national context. Instead of setting up the United States as the cause for recent events in world history—and, as a consequence, paradoxically excluding it from the same history—the New American Studies sought to place United States within a mutually interdependent and constitutive relation to the world. In short, their approach stresses an inherent connectedness between spheres previously considered separate and autonomous, allowing for a reconceptualization of domesticity in America.

Several fields of scholarship express a desire to identify connectedness across spheres, borders, and languages, where the connectedness would imply the nation-state is not the only organizing key for understanding history. Namely, hemispheric, transnational and postnational studies are most likely to take this view and dispense with

the nation-state as the main historical explanatory framework. An important problem in this inquiry concerns the question of whether transnationalism should be regarded as a method applicable to any material or whether transnationalism is, rather, a feature of the material itself. Does transnationalism respond to a changing constitution of the world which then emerges as features of literary texts, or is it an approach, a mode of analysis, which seeks to consider how texts are inherently bound up in discursive modes of knowledge exceeding the nation-state? Insofar as transnationalism has been applied as a historical analytics, we can, to begin with, regard it as a methodological framework. However, if the aim of this historical revisionism is precisely to reveal that texts participate in the negotiation and constitution of national and transnational spheres, then it retrospectively ascribes, through a process of exposure, transnational qualities to texts as the very features of the text. Thus, the problem of discerning between method and object persists. When we turn our attention to the contemporary cultural and literary products, it is a somewhat different matter: literature responds to the same transnational discourses that have produced the transnational turn in academic scholarship. In other words, literature of the period of recent globalization is a symptom of the same cultural unconscious that constitutes our discourses on globalization. Thus, public concerns with globalization, as I take it, would find its response in both literary and scholarly knowledge.

Thus, it is hard to identify whether transnationalism is to be located in the text or in the method. Instead of endorsing one answer over another, I want, rather, to direct my inquiry toward asking what is at stake in the so-called worlding of American literature. Which procedures does academia adopt in taking this transnational turn? What

procedures of reading seem transnational to academia? In redirecting the issue down such a path, one cannot avoid a discussion over cultural politics in academia on the one hand, but it appears, on the other hand, to be an aspect that is avoided in scholarly debate.

I want to bring this discussion of framework to bear on the analysis of Franzen's *Freedom*, which as a contemporary novel is deeply embedded in globalizing discourses. The assertion of the New Americanists, that domestic discourses cannot be detached from international concerns, will be my main analytic point of departure in order to show how a contemporary novel, itself a product of the discourses of globalization, must engage in the cultural representation and negotiation of domestic borders.

Freedom presents itself as a very domestic novel in that it takes as its subject the modern family as an institution of society. Here, every single character must struggle with domestic issues and family matters, in which love is indistinguishable from hate. You born into this domestic struggle; moreover, your life is predetermined by your history, unfolding in a sequence of desperate, reactionary actions that aim at establishing a new autonomous, domestic sphere. But in *Freedom* there is no such thing as a separate and autonomous sphere. If the family *is* a container, then it is permeable one, and the nation-state is just as porous. Moreover, the mediation between the local and the global is continuous, unstoppable, and rapid. Thus, it seems, contemporary fiction cannot deal with domesticity without dealing with the foreign, insofar as they can no longer be conceptualized as separate spheres detached from the domestic space of the nation. I go on to prove this below on my reading if the novel.

In approaching *Freedom* through the theoretical discussions of the transnational turn in literary studies in general and New American Studies in particular, I depart from

the historical revisionism associated with the New Americanist approach. My inquiry will thus evolve around the question of whether the method of analysis must be transformed when one takes as the object a contemporary novel, instead of a novel situated in historically different discourses of global space. Can the New Americanist revisionism be applied directly to contemporary cultural representations or must it undergo a translation in order to conceptualize the concerns of globalization of which this revisionism is itself an outcome?

Thus, I intend to critically scrutinize the foundation of the New Americanist project and the way it presents itself as a new platform for critical inquiry into an American nation deeply embedded in global history. My reading of *Freedom* will bear on the insights of this scholarship, but simultaneously ask how a contemporary novel conscious of its position in a globalized world responds to the same cultural anxieties.

The New Americanist Intervention

The New Americanist project, as outlined from the beginning of 1990s, initially set out to reform a field driven by ideological blind spots and a methodological idealism that promoted American exceptionalism. These were the assertive claims put forward by Donald E. Pease in the manifesto-like 1990 essay, "New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon." According to Pease, New Americanists have "questioned the most self-evident (hence least available to critical scrutiny) of beliefs Americanists hold—that American literary imagination transcends the realm of political ideology" (4). This critique is directed against a scholarly tradition that reproduced an ideology of exceptionalism in its construction of a proliferating sequence of separate spheres. Older

criticism maintained that America, being distinct from the old world and thus lacking class antagonism as a historical agent, was exempt from Marxist analysis in which culture would be predicated on the economic mode of production. Pease's critique leads, according to Pease himself, to a "crisis in the field-Imaginary" of twentieth-century American Studies: "By the term field-Imaginary I mean to designate a location for the disciplinary unconscious mentioned earlier. Here abides the field's fundamental syntax—its tacit assumptions, convictions, primal words, and the charged relations binding them together" ("New Americanists" 11).

In rejecting this fundamental field syntax—an autonomous cultural sphere and an end-of-ideology consensus—what Pease advocates is, in turn, that we return ideology critique to the field of American Studies. It is therefore precisely in criticizing "the liberal imagination as an ideological construction" that New Americanists seek to distinguish themselves from their predecessors. Thus, for the New Americanists, "the liberal imagination discloses itself as ideological when it produces an *imaginary separation* between the cultural and the public spheres" ("New Americanists" 8, original emphasis).

We see here, in Pease's iconoclastic criticism, an aspiration to break down borders between the separate spheres set up, consciously or not, by the field of American Studies. What matters to Pease is the metanarrative constructed through a kind of scholarship that does not take into account the inter-determinacy of spheres, which were instead ideologically and analytically disengaged by older criticism. This formal device of stressing overdetermination is formative of the rejection of separate spheres and ultimately makes possible a global perspective. The principle of multiple but interrelated

determinations of spheres exorcises the notion that a cultural sphere can be independent and self-determinant.

Calling attention to the notable absence of culture from the history of U.S. imperialism and the corresponding absence of empire from the study of American culture, Amy Kaplan extends, in her introduction to the seminal *Cultures of the United States Imperialism*, the New Americanist critique of the "resilient paradigm of American exceptionalism." Speaking of "empire as a way of life," she seeks to stress dialectical constitution in an imperial world order that not only subjects the "foreign" to U.S. authority, but shapes and constitutes the life of U.S. citizens "who benefit from it, who are subjugated to it, and who resist it" ("Left Alone" 14). In this perspective, imperialism is not solely military and economic dominion beyond national borders but just as constitutive of the way "international relations reciprocally shape a dominant culture at home, and how imperial relations are enacted and contested within the nation" ("Left Alone" 14). Reciprocity, however, is not simply a reintroduction of base-superstructure determinism, but a way of highlighting interdependence of economics and culture. According to Kaplan, "imperialism as a political or economic process abroad is inseparable from the social relations and cultural discourses of race, gender, ethnicity, and class at home" ("Left Alone" 16). In other words, Kaplan's "reciprocity" is as much a 'culturalization' of politics as it is a mere politicization of culture. The attempt to break down separate spheres entails a dialectic in which domestic culture is as present in imperialism as imperialism is in national culture.

Imperialism, Pease adds, should no longer go unrecognized as an American way of life now that "the ideological disjuncture separating the diplomatic history of U.S.

imperialism from academic study of the national culture" has been revealed ("New Perspectives" 25). The anti-imperial metanarrative of American history constructed by most twentieth-century American Studies should, he claims, "insofar as it involved a universal subject in a transhistorical action […] should have been classified as political mythology rather than history" ("New Perspectives" 24).

The scholarship of the New Americanists has therefore sought a revisionist approach to the historical period where separate spheres were being negotiated and formed. According to Pease, the methodological struggle is one of opening up and subverting the national metanarrative, which new historicism only managed to confirm. His assertion that "new historicism can be said to reenact as its methodology the imperializing power of U.S. nationalism"—that it associates the domestic struggles over race, class, and gender with emancipation only—is illustrative of the global analytic dimension which a more world-systems oriented approach seeks to apply. Domestic struggles over hegemony and the separation of spheres are not simply national issues; these are inherently bound up with, and thus not to be separated from, a global struggle for emancipation, and they are, as Kaplan argues, ideologically implicated in American empire-building. Pease and Kaplan, here taken as representatives of the early phase of New American Studies, advocate a global perspective on American Studies, since emancipatory struggle within one nation can amount to imperial subjugation elsewhere. Distinguishing between these, and not acknowledging their connectedness, claims Pease, reproduces yet another binary of separate spheres since "a group who successfully overcame cultural oppression in the first world may have depended, for their surplus cultural resources, on class exploitation in the so-called third world" (25).

As a revisionist project, the New American Studies emerges clearly as a struggle over history. First, it must dismantle previous scholarship by condemning its lack of methodological and analytical transparency, showing that such scholarship participates in a nationalist project wherein nation-building corresponds to empire-building. Second, it must undertake the rewriting of this history through the same material, i.e. literary texts, and thereby expose how America was constituted imperially and in fact always remained imperial. Thus, the previous decades have seen a proliferation of global, transnational, transatlantic, and hemispheric remappings of the cultural and literary history of United States. It is remarkable, though, that the New Americanist approach has been applied mostly to the historical period of nineteenth and early twentieth century.

I want to inquire at this point, however, whether the project of the New Americanists, as it was spelled out initially, formed itself solely as a scheme for historical revisionism. That is, I ask whether the contemporary struggle over analytic methodology was informed by the fact that the historical period over which the struggle took place was distant from the moment of intervention. A similar critical revisionist debate, it seems, could not take place concerning contemporary literature insofar as the exposure of American imperial desire is made possible through the discursive knowledge different from the historical period in question. Did historical distance allow the New Americanists a way of positioning themselves, not outside history, but outside the historical period at stake?

This is, of course, always the condition for historical revisionism. But I want to direct attention to the question of whether the same methodology can be easily applied to contemporary suction if the method implies a historical distance from its object of study.

Is there a mismatch in that the critical scholarship dealing with American literary history in terms of imperialism, and that "transnational" novels now offer a contemporary platform for this kind of scholarship—are these phenomena to be analyzed in the same way—and is it even the same kind of analysis that is being applied?

In "Manifest Domesticity" Kaplan argues that the deconstruction of the binary between the domestic and the public—comparable to in the dichotomies female-male and private-market—is what produces another opposition, that of home-foreign or national-global. That is, the breakdown of one distinction works to manufacture another structural opposition, in which nation-building amounts to empire-building. Here the generation of nationhood inevitably leads to an ideological construction of the foreign as distinct from home since the merging of domestic spheres suppresses the shifting semantics of what domesticity is defined against. By conceptualizing domesticity as a process, as domestication, Kaplan points to the way domesticity is "more mobile and less stabilizing." Consequently, when home is always constituted by the process of domestication, we see how the concept of "domesticity not only monitors the borders between the civilized and the savage but also regulates traces of the savage within itself" ("Manifest Destiny" 582). Kaplan's ambition, however, is to point to how the scholarship on domesticity has overlooked nationalism and imperialism. The development of domestic discourse in America, she points out, "is contemporaneous with the discourse of Manifest Destiny" ("Manifest Destiny" 583).

The double meaning of domestic is important to Kaplan in that it "not only links the familial household to the nation but also imagines both in opposition to everything outside the geographical and conceptual border of the home" ("Manifest Destiny" 581).

The identification of an allegorical relationship between home and nation, both subsumed under the discourse of domesticity, explains why the collapse of the gendered private and the public spheres could shift the structural opposition to another level, that of domestic versus foreign. But it is Kaplan's argument that there is a parallel imperial logic between the home and the nation: "both follow a double compulsion to conquer and domesticate the foreign within the borders of the home and the nation, thus incorporating and controlling a threatening foreignness within the borders of the home and the nation" ("Manifest Destiny" 591).

If we have here a model for conceptualizing the negotiation of domestic borders on different levels, the transnational turn in recent decades should perhaps pay closer attention to the methodology demonstrated by Kaplan. In fact, Giles suggests that our contemporary period has more in common with antebellum America in that borders are once again up for negotiation. Unlike the "nationalist phase of American literature and culture" from 1865 until about 1981, "the current transnational phase actually has more in common with writing from the periods on either side of the War of Independence, when national boundaries were much more inchoate and unsettled" (Giles 21).

If this is so, then it opens up interesting transhistorical modes of inquiry, and we might indeed find the scholarship on antebellum negotiation of domesticity and empire very useful for the study of contemporary fictions of empire. Nonetheless, there seem to be two diverging trends in contemporary American literature, which are being treated differently in terms of what they can tell us about fictional representations of America. Texts of the first trend overemphasize national domesticity, focusing on the unity of American culture and celebrating—if we oversimplify this contrast—the idea of

Americanness. The great American novel falls under this rubric, as does *Freedom*. Texts of the second trend, in contrast, bear what we might call clear indicative markers of transnational diversity in that they take as their literary subject the contrast and diversity of American history. These texts represent diasporic issues, thereby contesting the unity of America. A recent example is Junot Díaz' *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* which I will briefly return to later.

These two tendencies are, perhaps, just as much a result of categories of inquiry produced by recent scholarship as they are actually-existing contrasting categories in literature. Nevertheless, I am interested in the use of literary material taken up by either scholarly trend in order to forward their national or transnational analyses, and consequently, the metanarrative constructed through this selective use of contemporary literature.

Freedom, I would argue, falls into the domestic category in that its author is taken to be, and publicly labeled, "a great American novelist." However, since this kind of contemporary fictionalization of the domestic sphere can no longer choose not to pay attention to how domesticity is constituted against, and must negotiate its relation to, the foreign—as was my initial thesis—*Freedom* is obliged to spell out domestic space against the appropriation as well as the intrusion of a foreign global space.

Since the cultural representations of the national sphere are no longer justifiable without reference to the global scope against which they must be mapped, *Freedom* must take this condition as its point of departure rather than its end. When Kaplan pointed out the collapse of the domestic sphere as in private versus public, her point was that it left another structural opposition intact, which was the domestic contrasted to the foreign.

This is, of course, the opposition that transnationalism sought to investigate, but it did so by pointing to the markers of transnational diversity; I would argue that an investigation of this structural opposition should takes place in the more domestic representations of contemporary America, as well.

In allowing conflicts between domestic and the transnational to emerge, *Freedom* seeks to bridge a gap between two trends by way of failing to live up to the demands that would place a novel in either one of the categories. This is precisely why it makes a suitable example in this inquiry. Contemporary fiction responds to the postnational concerns of globalization, and in this way it can also participate in and extend the scholarly conversation of the last two decades.

Domesticity in *Freedom*

From the limited sphere of family life, *Freedom* projects the consequences of personal struggles centrifugally out onto a global space. Thereby, it exemplifies the oppositions at work in the notion of domesticity. This domestic space sometimes closes on itself, as when individuals are burdened by the weight of family, and at other times opens up, taking the world as an unlimited space for the unfolding of conflicts that originated in domestic skirmish. The text's scope is not transnational but it incorporates traits that make characters struggle with domesticity as a problematic and unsustainable delineation. In this respect, it is relevant to examine how the novel imagines the domestic space and how it thinks this conflict.

A uniting trait of the novel's characters is that they are all framed in terms of their respective backgrounds. Walter admits this organization most honestly in equating "So

this is me" with "This is where I come from" (133). Origin is existence; the one is not even thinkable without the other. Characters remain embedded in a personal life-story, where their past is always present. This choice in characterization is part of Franzen's psychological realism, due to which conflicts between individual and collective emerge. At stake here is a structural opposition, which is easily exported and proliferates on multiple levels: private versus public, family versus society, nation versus global. The structural separation of antagonisms, of course, cannot be upheld since the dissolution of such oppositions is exactly what drives forward the plot of *Freedom*.

Thus, characters are constructed as psychological projections of their backgrounds, and against which they struggle to break free. Patty cannot accept Walter's love because she was never loved by her own parents. Walter does not drink because he does not want to be like his father and brother. Richard too, refrains from alcohol due to an alcoholic father. Generational resistance, however, can only take place as a displacement of trauma on an individual level that never amounts to systemic critique. Richard resorts to drugs and sex instead of alcohol, while Patty's desire to make a better family than her parents results in the destruction of a sacred domestic sphere when she cheats on Walter, who has devoted his professional life to "safeguard[ing] pockets of nature from loutish country people like his brother." All three main characters are driven by contempt of their background; their dreams can only be inscribed as negations of their own pasts. Consequently, more than anything else, they all desire to establish small pockets of domesticity separated and protected from a chaotic world: Walter desires the purity of nature, Patty the homely belonging of a family, and Richard the love he believes he can only find in a relationship with Patty.

This sacred mission, the romanticized founding of pockets outside the circulation of goods and desire, is, nevertheless impossible in a world profaned by empire. Dreams are abstractions necessitated by troubled pasts and, as such, instrumentalized techniques of opportunistic survival. The central problem is the lack of correspondence between abstract universalized ideals for living and the particularized practice of everyone's life. No one is freed from the burden of being born into a particular life story, without which life would have been easier to live. Being a functional human being is impossible in practice, but Franzen's individuals cannot, no matter how hard they aspire to it, exist in the abstract. The traumatic event of being particularized in a world that rewards non-particular individuals hinders every attempt to make a home for oneself in the world.

Freedom's tendency to psychologize its characters means that an event, which would cause a rupture of determinism, can never take place. This goes for the systemic as well as the individual level. On the individual level, all human action is conditioned. That is to say that life in *Freedom* is lived in the conditional. In fact, as a stylistic mode, the conditional is the grammatical mood in which Franzen narrates the story, as the extended passage below suggests. But instead of stressing the hypothetical character of this mood, the text renders each speculative sentence factual, thus showing that circumstantial contingency that turns into necessity**.** The potentiality of the conditional tense is thus cancelled out; nothing else could have happened, the metanarrative seems to say. This makes for the unfolding of plot since it sets up consequences as inevitable. Simultaneously the conditional mood makes the characters reflect on and evaluate, to a certain extent, the conditions in which they are inscribed, although it does not make them more capable of breaking free and making correct decisions.

> At that point, the only thing that could have thrown Walter back into the bad ways he'd felt in college, when he'd been tormented by his sense of losing to the person he loved too much not to care about beating, would have been some bizarre pathological sequence of events. Things at home would have had to sour very badly. Walter would have had to have terrible conflicts with Joey, and fail to understand him and earn his respect, and generally find himself replicating his relationship with his own dad, and Richard's career would have had to take an unexpected latter-day turn for the better, and Patty would have had to fall violently in love with Richard. What where the chances of that happening?
>
> Alas, not zero. (148)

Naturally, the bizarre pathological sequence of events is bound to happen. Patty's life is predicated on the idea that she could have been happy if only she had had sex with Richard. Ideally this should have happened before she married Walter but Patty, again, is not the author of her own life story. She can never let go of the thought that she missed out on something.

When Patty exclaims that she hates her family, Walter's solution is that they make their own. Their only desire is to construct a domestic sphere of their own in a world where they do not feel at home. History, of course, is bound to repeat itself. And if Patty herself was brought up in tragedy, then she will enact a farce in her new self-established family. In replicating the formal domesticity of their parents, she and Walter cannot but help reproduce the law of their parents. The domestic space of the Berglund family is from the very beginning constituted on a repression, a lie. It relies on the repression of

Richard. The constitution of a family, therefore, seems to be a construction that denies the outward desire, sexual and economic, of its internal affairs. As a container with a valve regulating incoming and outgoing circulation, the family is exposed as an artificial ideological construction.

The Berglund marriage must end when Walter reads Patty's therapeutic account, left by Richard on Walter's desk as if it were an assignment for personal life. Thus, the intrusion of external forces, here Richard, is what in the first place makes possible honest communication in the domestics of the family, and in the second place, dissolves the family as a unit. Patty's therapeutic attempt to write her own story is exactly what, when it comes to light in the domestic sphere, causes it to break down. Her personal autobiography was supposed to enclose the desire that reached outward but, lingering on the threshold between private and public, this account expels her from the domestic sphere instead.

Readings of *Freedom* After 9/11

Academic criticism of *Freedom* has mainly contextualized the novel within the frameworks of "post-9/11 literature" or "post-postmodern literature." This exemplifies the tendency of reading so-called domestic novels within a tradition of national allegory. No doubt, *Freedom* lends itself well to this kind of reading, but the inclination to accept a kind of straightforward reading—as if it were a natural framework of interpretation—runs the risk of repeating the ideology within the text.

Lamenting the lack of global ambitions of *Freedom*, Madhu Dubey criticizes the way politics is displaced onto a domestic arena by referring to Franzen's own politics, as

it were, she writes: "[T]he evidence of the novel, which ultimately retreats from the murky politics of the "brave new McWorld" into the haven of domestic life, along with Franzen's own account of his "tragic realism," a form meant not to "change anything" but to "preserve something" (essentially a liberal humanist conception of the value of literature), posits a residual function for the novel" (Dubey 369). It is true that politics is displaced onto domestic life, but what Dubey neglects is that domestic life is simultaneously displaced into politics. It is not a matter of one sphere subsuming the other, as if politics could disappear in domesticity. But my point is neither simply that politics just as well can incorporate domesticity. Quite the contrary, the novel intertwines these spheres to a degree where they are no longer distinguishable. The structural point is thus that one cannot speak of displacement of politics from the public to the private sphere because it is the spheres themselves that are dissolving.

Caren Irr reads *Freedom* in a perspective fostered by the national crisis of 9/11. However, she is more interested in the "emergence of forms that register the conditions created by global neoliberalism" (517). This new geopolitically-conscious novel "tests the continued vitality of national forms and updates them for the struggles of the new millennium." National allegory, for a long time a generic form claimed by postcolonial authors, is on the upswing in contemporary American fiction, she asserts. She does not take *Freedom* to be a retreat to domesticity since there is no longer a pure sphere into which to retreat. However, in her argument, separate spheres can still be found: "Although a compromised location (the place where his wife's adulterous liaisons took place and a bone of contention in Walter's earlier struggles with his no-good older brother), this lakeside house in rural Minnesota nonetheless serves as a restorative

retreat" (527). Walter's withdrawal to his family's lakeside house after the divorce of Patty and the death of Lalitha is a retreat to a very contested space. His relocation, I would like to add, is therefore more desperate than restorative.

Evolving toward the international economic novel, Irr will nevertheless ascribe potentiality to the American national allegory, although it is "relatively early in its revival: "As some consensus about the conditions of cultural, political, and economic interdependence associated with global neoliberalism grows, new narratives become possible" (533). The new allegorical form has the potential of representing politics beyond the horizon of the nation-state in that it exceeds the postmodernism of late capitalism as outlined by Fredric Jameson: "In the domestically focused American national allegory, in short, as in versions of the same project devoted to conditions elsewhere, we can witness the emergence of a new genre, a form arising […] when discredited or simply tired existing forms (here: postmodernism and the national novel) confront the raw logic of the present" (533-34).

Thus, Irr's method of analysis is one that pays attention specifically to the deconstruction of separate spheres on a global scale as promoted by neoliberalism. What this amount to on behalf of literature, is the update of the novel in terms of the insights of the New Americanist revisionism: the novel now is able to represent this dissolving appropriately and critically.

Catherine Morley similarly argues that *Freedom* "engage[s] with an altered America, a nation more conscious of its international role and reputation" (725). It is a novel "steeped in the American relationship with the rest of the world," exploring "the ways in which globalization affects and alters the notion of home, identity and

sovereignty" (731). For all his interest in vast global networks, Franzen "does not sacrifice the domestic dramas of everyday life" because, she argues, "America loses something of itself when it is deterritorialized" and so does American literature "when it is torn loose from its in the domestic and the personal" (731).

Like Dubey, Morley laments "the unarguable fact, that 9/11 simply did not mark the great shift in American literature which so many thought it would." She does not ascribe the same potentiality to new forms of national allegory as Irr because, as Morley points out, "the American state-of-the-nation novel has always taken *e pluribus unum* as its structural mechanism, pinning down the story of the evolving nation to the small-scale dramas of individuals and families. And in the twenty-first century, as in centuries past, that seems unlikely to change" (Morley 731).

The scholarship on *Freedom* thus clearly centers on the question of whether the contemporary American novel can open up a perspective on the world in the same way that transnational and geopolitical novels have done. It is similarly noteworthy that this scholarship believes that domestic American literature should seek to situate itself more consciously in a global context. If American literature has traditionally been driven by a centripetal force, turning in on the individual, then this normative predisposition (as articulated by critics like Dubey and Morley) advocates a the promotion of centrifugal horizons.

Whereas the New Americanist approach would be one of exposure—that is, connecting nation-building with empire-building—scholarship on contemporary American literature seeks to measure novels normatively against a global world order. This reveals first of all, I believe, the difference between the criticism of historically

distant objects and the criticism of contemporary literature. While the struggle over history is included in both, normative criticism, as a kind of political feedback to the author, is naturally excluded from historiography. Criticism of contemporary literature is much more interested in setting up standards for the future.

The three mentioned critics all agree that domesticity is a problem, that domesticity is a retreat from a chaotic world. This might very well be true, but domesticity is not what it used to be and novels cannot think of domesticity in the way they used to. It seems all to come down to whether structural oppositions are upheld in that they all agree that a global perspective is the frame against which domesticity should be measured.

I want to point out that it is not a question criticizing the cultural productions and representations, which are produced at a certain period of time, but rather about explaining and illuminating the conditions leading to these representations. Though scholars of American literature as well as transnationalism often hold the best intention, writing to advance politically progressive ends amounts to treating the symptom instead of explaining the social conditions that produced it. This seems to me a crucial point wherein the New Americanist historical revisionism differs from the criticism of contemporary literature—but it is, perhaps, similarly to be regarded as one of the main problems of working on contemporary literature. The post-9/11 criticism seeks a standard, political or ethical, against which to measure these representations, but it should instead deal with a dialectic of historical materialism, a methodology imposed by the work of Pease and Kaplan. Caren Irr does hint at this in her analysis of the American national allegory as a new generic response to global neoliberalism. But it does not

appear that *Freedom* retreats to a domestic sphere to shut out the world. Rather, the domestic sphere is in itself a problem, and consequentially an issue to be investigated. The more it is desired, it seems, the more it becomes impossible to maintain.

The Transnational Novel

Two noteworthy examples will serve as transnational scholarship on recent literature that does not fall under the category of the domestic novel. They are, perhaps, not so much representative of transnational criticism as they are critical comments that seek to clarify the transnational criticism. José David Saldivar and Leo Medovoi both treat novels with soundly referential transnational markers, respectively *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Both novels feature protagonists whose stories connect the United States to another country and take place in both United States and abroad (respectively, The Dominican Republic and Pakistan). Finally, both writers have an immigrant background. I do not wish to delve too long in these material markers of transnationalism, but simply note their presence. What is much more interesting is what we see in the two analyses by Saldivar and Medovoi. They seek to map out on behalf of the novels a point of view from which the structure of the world can be illuminated. By establishing a perspective of juxtaposition in which the central contradictions of the world are revealed, the texts permit a totality to be represented. This is, essentially, the idea of the type as described by Lukács that Medovoi openly hints at. On practical terms, transnational literature would thus ideally find a prism through which the narrative representation of an individual can embody the contradictions of global class struggle.

According to Saldivar, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is effectively a retrieval of Americanity's ruptured history. By this he means that the novel "significantly contributes to the emergent industry of the Global South's scholarly books in the Caribbean, the US, and Latin America's southern cone that have analyzed and documented the way the neoliberalist states have also often been "amnesiac" about their ghastly violent pasts" (Saldivar 132). Americanity is the concept coined by Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein, largely denoting the process of the new capitalist world-economy made possible through the "discovery" of the Americas, which made possible the processes of peripheralization, and racial discrimination as labor division on a global scale (Quijano and Wallerstein 549). Since this process excluded the majority of the planet from metropolitan "universal" history, there is a great diversity of different stories to be told in order to understand the world as a totality. I am not suggesting that Saldivar believes that an absolute totality can be described, simply that what *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* does, is reveal the incompleteness of the Eurocentric universal history by unveiling the repressed imperial history: "If the Eurocentric imaginary of modernity has forgotten colonialism and imperialism, the task of Díaz's *fukú americanicus* as analogous to the colonial difference is to reinscribe this erased history in the novel's spatial simultaneity" (Saldivar 134). For Saldivar then, what the novel does can be described as displacement of the logic by which Europeans have represented their others through its reinscription of a different logic. Díaz thus "seeks both to reveal the ways in which the power-knowledge couplet has been at work in creating that colonial difference, as well as the way in which colonial and imperial power

represents difference. The *fukú americanicus* in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* thus produces, evaluates, and manages the colonial difference" (Saldivar 134).

I will argue that Medovoi's analysis of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* seeks to perform the same task in that the novel is seen as adding to a more complete world of contradictory forces. By employing the concept of "world-system literature"—coined with inspiration from Wallerstein—on world-systems theory, he seeks a framework that succeeds the contextualizations of transnational studies. The argument, as I would phrase it, is that we should seek the full consequence of no separate spheres: "[W]hile the rubrics of transnationalism or imperialism can be usefully brought to bear on literature, the ultimate horizon of understanding for both analytics would be the world-system, of which transnational relations and imperial power are but partial expressions" (Medovoi, 652). A point of view that can accommodate as many contradictory worlds as possible is therefore desirable in order to obtain the most complete illumination of structural world exploitation. But world-system literature, it appears, is a question of method in that it is this very perspective that can ask the difficult structural question, "when and how does literature register the (political, military, economic) deployments of power that organize or reorganize global spaces—nations, cities, regions, peripheries, and centers alike?" (653).

The desire to extend the context as far as possible is admirable, but it is important to note on what basis this can be done. Medovoi's analysis is illustrative of how transnationalism seeks to map out transitions and movements across borders because his lens of world-system literature "maps the dynamics of the system as an interplay of subject and object—power and desire, force and affect—as they are propelled by the

spatial dialectics of territory and capital" (657). His point is that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* "engages America's signal crisis first through its thematization of contemporary finance, and then through its continual haunting by the historical rise and fall of empires" (653). Like Saldivar, then, his reading seeks to inscribe the present within the constitutive conditions of this very present. In a historical dialectics that pursues a knowledge of society as a whole, insofar as it brings to light the historical unconscious of imperial politics.

The difference in method from New American Studies is readily discernable in that these transnational readings do not seek to uncover and expose an imperial past repressed by discourses of domesticity. Rather, they find in the novels direct comments on this very past speaking, more or less, the same language as the theorists. Imperialism is not the discursive background; on the contrary, the unveiling of imperialism is foregrounded as the main subject of the novels themselves. It is first of all obvious that *Freedom* cannot provide us the same global point of view. But if we take the novel to be a product of the same cultural logic of late modernity, then we are, perhaps, able to discern the same structural logic at work in the way it must deal with the inherent problems of domesticity.

Transnational logic in *Freedom*

As a domestic American novel *Freedom* does not contain on the same level referential markers of transnationalism. If there is a totalizing desire in *Freedom*, it is rather a totalization of America insofar as the Berglund family allegorically seeks to embody the political contradictions of American society. Walter's liberalism is opposed by the

republicanism Joey acquires during his college years inspired by his best friend, Jonathan's, family. Compared to the standards Medovoi would set up for world-system literature, it is hard to see *Freedom* embodying a historical dialectics on a world scale.

However, it is worth taking a closer look at how contemporary imperialism inflects the novel's discourse on domesticity. If we want a novel to speak the same global language as transnational scholarship, *Freedom* is not one to turn to. On the other hand, I will argue that the same kind of structural logic is at work in *Freedom* as in contemporary discourses on transnationalism and critique of global neoliberalism. That is not to say that the novel argues on the same level as texts that bear discrete markers of transnationalism, but that the form in which it can conceptualize the domestic sphere—or, rather, struggles to conceptualize it—resembles the formal logic of transnationalism.

The product of the Berglunds' domesticity, their son Joey, is a cause of troubles to the family both in a practical and a symbolic way. Dissatisfied with the achievements of their parents, Walter and Patty expected that peace would come as a result of establishing their own family. The belief that one learns from mistakes is a recurrent theme throughout the novel, although no one ever seems to live up this evolutionist teleology. If individuals learn by their personal mistakes, no lesson learned by mistakes can be transferred to a structural level. The system is reproduced, it seems, by the social unconscious, not through the will of individuals. Walter's commitment to fight overpopulation bespeaks this social truth, but all he himself desires at this point is "that everyone else in the world would reproduce a little less, so that he might reproduce a little more, *one* more, with Lalitha" (523). If he believes he has learned from his mistakes, we and Lalitha know that he has not.

The problem with Joey was that he from the beginning was "questioning the basis of our authority" as Patty expresses it. And when Joey challenges the authority of his parents, arguing with Walter "about the difference between adult and children, and whether a family is a democracy or a benevolent dictatorship," he is not simply challenging the family as a domestic sphere. His critique contests the very form of domesticity. Walter's attempt to establish a liberal family leads to his son questioning the authority of a family at all. Thus, in Joey's quest to liberate himself from his father, he employs a specific social entrepreneurship that challenges every cultural distinction between separate spheres. When, in ninth grade, he commences this entrepreneurship, he applies the analytics of profanity to the specific rules of his girlfriend Connie's Catholic academy—rules, which were supposed to provide a domain of sacred conduct separate from market capitalism. If this separation is ethical in the eyes of the school, it is unfair in Joey's analytics, which consist precisely in identifying and profiting on inconsistencies between cultural systems of exchange. Walter, of course, condemns his son's business without actually being aware that he himself simultaneously promotes a critique of separate spheres of circulation in referring to the artificiality of the separation: "You were benefitting from an artificial restraint of trade. I didn't notice you complaining about the rules when they were working for you" (13).

Joey's confrontation of the law of his father is consequently twofold in that he, on the one hand, practically destroys the internal constitution of the domestic family sphere and, on the other, becomes representative of the systemic destruction of separate spheres in general. When Joey at sixteen moves out and into the neighboring house where Connie lives with her mother, Walter and Patty seem to have given up their ideals of a family as

a sacred domestic space. It was not, it turned out, a solution to their respective past problems. The domestic sphere they created was not sustainable; it was a mere reproduction of their parent's families. This is tragedy repeating itself as farce.

We can now start to identify the totalizing movement that organizes *Freedom*. The free-market logic of appropriating other spheres by subjugating new spaces to the universal standards of comparison is present throughout the novel. It is present in the anxieties spelled out within the Berglund family, and it organizes the manner by which Joey liberates himself from his father. The same logic is discernable in the relationship between the three main characters, Walter, Patty, and Richard, in the way that the logic of free-market competition is the organizing principle in which the novel frames its characters. Patty can only identify with things outside her interest through the lens of competitiveness: "victory is very sweet" to her. At her most desperate, she reduced her life to this principle of organization. Although losing their chess games, Richard definitely bests Walter sexually, as Patty admits in her therapeutic autobiography. On a structural level, the problem is, of course, that the losers of the game are the ones endorsing the very form of the game the most.

Inheriting the competitiveness of his mother, Joey's entrepreneurship takes an imperial turn in his college years when he—first through a summer job consisting "entirely of researching ways in which LBI might commercially exploit an American invasion and takeover of Iraq"—becomes involved in a suspicious business of supplying the military with old truck spare parts. This involvement, it is important to note, comes entirely out of a domestic issue. Joey simply "wanted to get rich enough and enough fast enough that he would never again have to take shit from his dad" (412). The imperial

desire is not only related to the domestic sphere, it is a straightforward extension of one's domestic existence in the way that competition within the family is fought out in a sphere external to it and thus projected onto the national and global space. As a result, the imperial dimension of *Freedom* is not simply an appendix. It is the logical extension of the organizational structure of the novel itself. It cannot think of domestic structures without extending them to a global space on which they rely and to which they are applied. The domestic unconscious has in *Freedom* come to a point where it acknowledges its global dialectics—although without directly addressing it. It takes domestic issues as the causal principle and projects the conflicts centrifugally to a transnational space. Thus, the topology of *Freedom* maps cause onto a domestic sphere, whose consequences manifest on a much larger sphere.

Considering this move, we can say that *Freedom* repeats the insights of the New Americanists by displaying how the negotiation of domestic issues—family hierarchy, personal competition—have consequences abroad. Whereas the New Americanists approach would seek to identify a more dialectical description of how imperial politics reflects back on the domestic sphere, the circumscription of Franzen's characters suggests that the causal sources are mostly to be located on the interpersonal level, rather than in global imperial discourses.

The imperial dimension, I therefore argue, is not simply referential in that *Freedom* deals with imperialism, as it were. Empire is rather the very form in which the process of personal emancipation can be thought on behalf of the characters. By form I mean the constitution of the individual subjects in Franzen's novel. They are constituted in a practice where domesticity spills over into the global space, not as a consequence of

a deliberately imperial desire, but because subjectivity constitutes itself as a movement away from and out of the domesticity into which one is born.

Joey is entirely aware that personal issues inflect his imperial business and politics. He and Walter, he admits, have simply chosen different politics "for the sole purpose of hating the other" (428). The personal desire to free oneself from one's parents, to constitute oneself as an individual human being, is linked directly, although contradictorily, to the imperialism performed abroad. This is a lesson of the New Americanist approach, and it appears that a contemporary domestic novel like Franzen's pays close attention to this fact.

Freedom seeks to represent the contradiction between the family and the foreign in everything. In the same way that a family embodies contrasting politics, Walter's nature-conservation project is mingled together with corporate exploitation of nature covered up as an environmentalist agenda. The conservation of another of the novel's protagonists, the Cerulean Warbler, is in the end only secured by the American imperial warfare when a new body-armor factory provides jobs to the relocated people from the new songbird sanctuary. Thus, like the vanishing of the domestic sphere, idealist politics is equally bound to dissolve in corporate business. Working for the billionaire Vin Haven, Walter believes he can pursue an environmentalist agenda by establishing his own project of hindering overpopulation. But since problems are present at the incipient stages of the project of Walter's projects, we know they are bound to fail. When he breaks away from his corporate business partner, his personal enterprise ironically ends up being funded by Joey's donation of the money he made from his suspicious imperial business. Ironically, this can only happen after Joey has admitted that he was wrong in

doing business with scrupulous corporations. Just as Joey was motivated by familial relations, redemption must be sought in the same place: “It was to his strict, principled father that a full accounting needed to be made. He had been battling him all his life, and now the time had come to admit that he was beaten” (470).

The cultural topology that everything must abide by in *Freedom* is thus that there are no independent spheres, or domains, in society. The novel maps the capitalist logic onto, first the domestic sphere and, second, as an unavoidable extension, onto the global space. What we see then, is neoliberal globalization represented as a totalizing movement. Heterogeneous contestation is only imaginable as parodic politics.

Walter’s environmentalist politics, we see, is a displacement of the desire for private spaces he never had as child and could not establish in his own family. But his logic of exclusion always works to single out the elements intrusive and disturbing to his ideals of a domestic space. For a long time it was his family; later, when he finds out about his wife’s unfaithfulness, it is Richard whom he excludes. When falling in love with his assistant of Bengali origin, Lalitha, Walter cannot stop thinking of having a child with her although it is against his personal politics of overpopulation.

But in Walter’s breakdown without any “controlling narrative” he realizes that Lalitha too is expendable. Seeing in himself an overconsuming American, she is turned into another object of consumption. She has simply become another object of desire because of his competition with Richard. After Walter’s breakup with Patty, it becomes clear that she is commodified by the competitiveness. Thus, Lalitha must exit the novel the way she entered it, abruptly and cast away as dispensable. On the one hand, the novel’s only true idealist, on the other, a product of Walter’s overconsumption, she must

be done away with. The plot of the novel turns her into a disposable object and the structural logic of collapsing spheres cannot accommodate her.

> The woman he loved loved him. He knew this for certain, but it was all he knew for certain, the or ever; the other vital facts remained unknown. Whether she did, in fact, drive carefully. Whether she was or wasn't rushing on the rain-slick country highway back up to the goat farm the next morning, whether she was or wasn't rounding the blind mountain curves dangerously fast. Whether a coal truck had come flying around one of these curves and done what a coal truck did somewhere in in West Virginia every week. Or whether somebody in a high-clearance 4x4, maybe somebody whose barn had been defaced with the words FREE SPACE or CANCER ON THE PLANET, saw a dark-skinned young woman driving a compact Korean-made rental car and veered into her lane or tailgated her or passed her too narrowly or even deliberately forced her off the shoulderless road (532).

Franzen is very suggestive on what material circumstances could have killed Lalitha. However, for once the novel does remain in the speculative conditional since we are given no final answer. But there are simply too many conflicts for Lalitha to be accommodated by the novel; too many forces to penetrate her shell of purity. Thus, the speculative mode is here cancelled out because the cause of Lalitha's death is simply not an issue in that it does not make a difference to the novel. Her death was sealed by her structural position rather than by her individual agency. If you cannot be domesticated by

the neoliberal formalism of *Freedom*, there is no place for you in the form in which the novel can represent the world and its individuals.

Conclusion

If transnational criticism maps out the functional integration of processes across borders, and if transnational literature maps the constitution of worlds across national borders represented by all its complexities but also the very possibility of a transnational existence, then *Freedom* seeks to map out impossibility of a domestic world. This is, I would argue, a part of the same logic of interconnectedness and disruption of separate spheres. As an investigation of this logic, *Freedom* takes a different path than transnational novels that bear more discrete markers.

If the lack of the typical transnational markers deems *Freedom* a domestic novel, my point has been that we should apply a method of analysis that takes into account the structural forces at work in the way the novel can represent domesticity today. This involves a reading that pays attention to the struggle over separate spheres and takes this struggle to be symptomatic of a structural logic of neoliberal globalization.

Freedom does not offer a vantage point from where a global totality can be illuminated. The domestic point of view makes contact with the global circulation of finance and commodities, but as a critical lens it is mostly ignorant of global power structures. Despite personal idealism, the domestic perspective cannot offer a systemic view. Lack of perspective is, of course, one of the central points of the novel. Characters are not able to act and politically correct and rationally because they are embedded in particular social conditions which prevent the practice of abstract politics. However, this

is exactly why I have argued for a symptomatic reading instead of a reflective mode. Thus, it is not on the representational surface that *Freedom* gives us an understanding of how the logic of free market works to tear down separate spheres. In contrast, it is in the form in which we can conceptualize the domestic sphere that we can identify the logic of a transnational globalization. Here we see how domestic discourse encounters the same problems at work in transnational studies. It would be irrelevant to think of *Freedom* in terms of borders between domestic and global spheres, because such a methodology sets up new structural oppositions between spheres of purity. Conversely, the novel advocates the inter-determinacy of domains previously considered autonomous.

According to Winfried Fluck, transnationalism has allowed us to look at the United States "no longer in an insular way but in terms of international embeddedness" (381) but he warns us that transnationalism should not simply justify any scholarship. The label can function as "a new way of running away from the challenge of critically analyzing American history and culture" (381). The problem is that "a rhetoric of flow and transnational communities may mirror and reinforce a neoliberal ideology" (375). In the case of *Freedom*, we clearly see how the free circulation of humans and commodities penetrating spheres mimics a neoliberal global space. Fluck notes that "critics have repeatedly pointed out affinities between the free-flow ideology of globalization and transnationalism, but so far transnational American studies have not been very interested in analyzing these affinities" (375). Thus, what is to be critically analyzed in American Studies is the way it incorporates the practices of transnational analysis. If contemporary fiction engages in the formal consequences of globalization, new scholarship should be just as conscious of its own participation in ideologies of globalization.

Kaplan alludes to the same problem of "uncanny mirroring" when she argues that champions of empire today claim empire should be exposed—but for different political aims, since for them empire could work more efficiently in the open. This makes her worry about "the limits of my own approach, which we might call a method of exposure, on that reveals the repressed violence embedded in cultural productions or that recovers stories of violent oppression absent from prior master historical narratives" ("Violent Belongings" 3). What appears crucial to me then, is that transnational methodology itself pay attention to how it approaches its object of study. If imperialism is now publicly promoted, then the task of critical transnationalism is to expose and explain the causes and conditions allowing for such a promotion of imperial politics to arise, and not simply to reflect the already publicly existing imperial globalization.

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