It's All In the Family—Metamodernism and the Contemporary (Anglo-) "American" Novel

A Dissertation submitted by Terence DeToy in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the function of family as a thematic in the contemporary Anglo-American novel. It argues that contemporary aesthetics increasingly presents the family as an enabling platform for conciliation with the social totality: as a space of personal development, readying one for life in the wider social field. This analyses hinges on readings of Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010), Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012), A. M. Homes' *May We Be Forgiven* (2012) and Caryl Phillips' *In the Falling Snow*. In approaching these novels, this project addresses the theoretical lacuna left open by the much-touted retreat of postmodernism as a general cultural-aesthetic strategy. This project identifies these novels as examples of a new and competing ideological constellation: metamodernism. Metamodernism encompasses the widely cited return of sincerity to contemporary aesthetics, though this project explains this development in a novel way: as a cultural expression from within the wider arc of postmodernism itself. One recurrent supposition within this project is that postmodernism, in its seeming nihilism, betrays a thwarted political commitment; on the other hand contemporary metamodern attitudes display the seriousness and earnestness of political causes carried out to an ironic disregard of the political. Metamodernism, in other words, is not a wholesale disavowal of postmodern irony, but a re-arrangement of its function: a move from sincere irony to an ironic sincerity. The central inquiry of this dissertation is into this re-arranged role of family and familial participation amidst this new cultural landscape. My argument is that family and the political have maintained a tense relationship through the twentieth century in the American consciousness. They represent competing models of futurity in a zero-sum game for an individual's life-energy. What metamodernism represents, so this dissertation will articulate, is a new form of anti-politics: a fully gratified impulse to depoliticize. Analyzing what this project terms the "politics of the local," this dissertation will argue that the highly popular and successful models of conscientious capitalism have been superseded. Today, increasingly, redemption from consumerism guilt is itself wrapped up in commodities: the utopian impulse celebrated by Fredric Jameson has itself obtained a price tag. The contemporary novel thus reflects new social functions for that which has trumped the political: the family.

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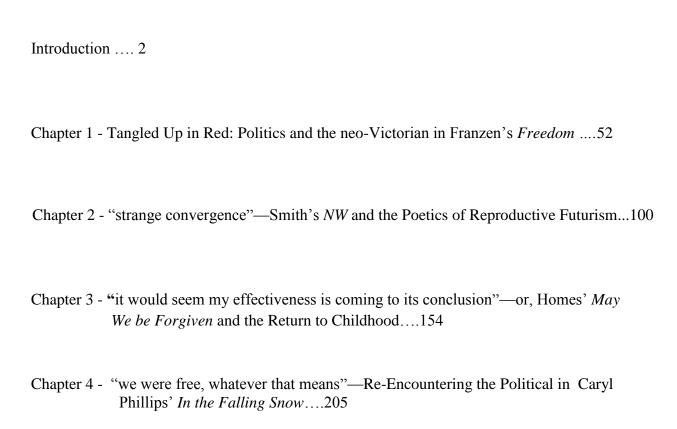
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Introduction

This project examines four texts: in order, Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, Zadie Smith's *NW*, A. M. Homes' *May We Be Forgiven*, and Caryl Phillips' *In the Falling Snow*. It explores the role family plays as a platform to social inclusion in each of these texts. Intending to maximize the cultural-historiographical scope of this project, I have intentionally selected authors not conventionally read together—authors that crisscross the identity matrices according to which literary studies largely adheres: two males, two females; two whites, two non-whites; two Americans, two Brits. In other words, these are four very different novels doing very different things. What unites these texts thematically is the centrality of nuclear kinship formations as a mechanism to foster conciliation with the wider social field. That is to say, each of these texts is ultimately "about" family, though in an interesting way. They seem to propose a specific use-value for kinship relations: the development of proper citizenship and thus entry into world of the social. This logic may be a familiar one—the domestic space of the family as a developmental site for the child is certainly a very old educational theme; however, what is unique about these texts is that this logic is applied to breadwinning adults. Each of these novels feature loopy, aloof protagonists who are out of sync with their communities; family features as an epistemological constant in these texts because it serves as the highly localized and intimate social site upon which to negotiate the gap separating the estranged individual from the seemingly closed social totality.

This dissertation argues that such a thematic tendency laid out across a set of such differing texts perhaps indicates something immanent in our wider contemporary outlook regarding family and sociality; intimacy and community; individuality and collectivity; etc. This project, put simply, proposes to unpack this thematic tendency in the hopes of shedding some light on aesthetics in the contemporary moment. My implicit suggestion throughout will be that

the current moment is one much in need of historicizing. This project is conceptually formulated in terms of a growing critical consensus that postmodernism is, as a dominant aesthetic attitude, well on its way out (if not already dead and gone)—"Let's just say it; it's over," (166) as Linda Hutcheon memorably closes *The Politics of Postmodernism*. Against all the surety of this outlook we must counter-pose the troubling fact that whatever American society is experiencing at present, after postmodernism, there has yet to emerge a compelling critical account that has garnered any sort of consensus save that we're currently experiencing "post-postmodernism" or "contemporaneity"—two designations formulated ironically in order to call attention to the moment's own theoretical vacuity.

As arbitrary as it may immediately seem, the selection of my texts was not haphazard. This project advertises itself as a study in the contemporary novel, though to be clear its focus is on a certain class of contemporary fiction. What these novels share as fictional objects— and thus my rationale for reading them together—is their function of self-conscious cultural metrics: that is, their dual negotiation of the market and literary sensibilities (not to mention hefty social concerns). These texts, in other words, are self-consciously "literary" in that aspire to a high formal textual quality while at the same time maintaining the necessary cultural relevance and readability for market viability. Thus they simultaneously do two things: they attempt a careful and thoughtful critical distance while also paying sedulous attention to the state of contemporary culture as they contribute to it. These texts, I suggest, are in a unique position to offer critics and cultural historians insight into the ideological makeup which is at issue in thinking through the current state of culture in Europe and the United States. As this project will elaborate, an artistic rendering of "the way we live now" is a central concern to the writers of the texts this project examines. Their dual effort to artistically communicate *and* analyze the contemporary cultural

climate makes these texts more useful analytic devices then perhaps more popular, widely-diffuse market-driven texts. The goal of the following pages will not be to lay out the definitive historiographical-theoretical account of culture in the present moment (as if I were capable of such a feat), but rather to draw out conceptual consistencies and attempt to contextualize them. In this way I hope this project may help edge forward the wider conversation toward general cultural self-definition.

In responding to these texts this project cautiously adopts a theoretical approach ascribed to metamodernism—a critical interpretation of contemporaneity which has gained some traction in recent years. The term was originally coined by Mas'ud Zaverzadeh in 1975, though I will deploy it with fidelity to what I take to be its definitive treatment: delivered in a 2010 paper by Dutch cultural critics Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker. As many critics have asserted, contemporary artistic concerns have demonstrated a move away from the hopelessness and cynicism of postmodern irony; this in turn, as this project will demonstrate, has lead to re-calibration of the aesthetic-productive field and a return to an ethos of sincerity, temporality and meaning. Indeed, many critics argue that aesthetics in the present moment are beginning to favor a photo-negative of the postmodern landscape, though strangely not in a way that erases major postmodern themes (such as irony, superficiality and repetition) entirely. Thus the present moment, briefly, is not so much post-postmodern as it is simultaneously postmodern *and* something else. It is out of this cultural milieu that my four texts emerge. This project examines closely four authors who themselves, both artistically and critically, are engaging the contemporary cultural fabric; each of them presents a scene of contemporary cultural life mediated through the locality and intimacy of nuclear kinship relations (whether literal or figurative).

The goal of this dissertation is to try and sort this out: what is it about contemporary Anglo-American cultural configurations that produce the logic these texts ultimately reflect? I propose to use metamodernism as a theoretical base of operations: Vermeulen and van den Akker's analysis of contemporary culture as, in their term, "oscillating" between postmodern irony and modernist sincerity is one that offers a great deal of headway in understanding culture in its present state and thus serves as a starting point for approaching these novels. Each of these texts, as this project will labor to propound, are metamodern texts in a direct sense: they are all, compositionally-speaking, hybrids of narrative realism and postmodern artifice. Each of these novels is realist in the sense that it depicts realistic people functioning in recognizable situations in an immediately recognizable world: they describe "the way we live now." However, these texts also take on a secondary literary quality: they all are crafted in terms of a mimetic formalism—that is, with an apparent thematic resemblance to a different, recognizable literary modality. My argument is that the dual social negotiation the protagonists of these texts undergo is fundamentally a reflection (or perhaps a symptom) of the dual-positionality inherent to cultural logic in the present moment as theorized by Vermeulen and van den Akker.

The goal of this introduction, then, will be to frame metamodernism itself as a cultural happening. To this I turn ultimately to the political. If the social logic of these texts emerges from a larger cultural formation described as metamodernism, then metamodernism itself must be symptomatic of a certain political state of affairs. This chapter will argue that metamodernism is engaged in a continuous process of de-contextualizing the social universal into the locality of the intimate—that, in other words, it reflects a fundamental process of de-politicization (as I will make clear in my first chapter). However, this introduction will first address metamodernism as an account of contemporary poetics; it will both present Vermeulen and van den Akker's

analysis as well as modify it. It will then engage certain salient attempts to theoretically account for culture in its present state—that is, various attempts to affix an –ism label to the present moment. This introduction will do this in order to make clear that each such attempt presupposes a political position. This introduction then will explore metamodernism in relation to what this project terms redemptive capitalism. It will briefly trace out how recent attempts of neoliberal regimes to reconstitute their market presence in terms of liberal sensibilities has resulted in a new identity for capitalist accumulation wherein consumerism itself becomes identified with liberal efforts to compensate on a global level for the very damage wrought by that very consumerism. Furthermore, this introduction will suggest that the left itself adopts these coordinates, resulting in an evacuation of palpable political concerns and an emphasis on ostensibly responsible and sustainable lifestyle amendments centered on the concept of "the local." I will contend that the thematic structure evident in these texts, and identified in my analysis with metamodernism, is in the first instance a fundamental reflection of these (anti-)political developments.

Metamodernism as a Poetics

Metamodernism is an increasingly deployed and remarked-upon term; however its recent upsurge in circulation has since necessitated some degree of connotative upkeep. That is to say, its increasing usage has lead to cleavages in its meaning. There doesn't appear to be a great deal of consistency in the way metamodernism as a critical term gets used. My goal in this section is to lay out roughly what the term designates before stating exactly how I will be using it. David James and Urmila Seshagiri, in a recent piece published in *PMLA* (surely a sign metamodernism as a critical outlook has made it), use the term to denote "current reconstructions of modernism as a period and as a paradigm" (88) in literature. For James and Seshagiri, "Metamodernism regards modernism as an era, an aesthetic, and an archive that originated in the late nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries" (88). In this deployment, metamodernism is a term referring a specific tendency in contemporary literature which reaches back to the formalisms of the modernist period—an effort which they insist may help us rethink the periodizing question (whether modernism refers to a trans-historical and trans-cultural impulse or simply refers to the works of a specific group of artists working in a specific time period). James and Seshagiri's piece is useful for situating the general tendency in the arts that is referred to by the term metamodernism, even if there is little that unites this term's proponents in the way of theoretical outlook and methodological practice. What the term signifies across the board, in other words, is a return in literature of meaning, teleology and sincerity. The "return" to modernism is more of a thematic maneuver than a formal reaction: an attempt to "imaginatively reconnect with an ethos" (93) as James and Seshagiri put it. What is significant about this effort is that it reads the reintegration of modernist tendencies genuinely: nostalgia, it seems, can now be carried out un-ironically.

My own use of metamodernism differs to some degree from that of James and Seshagiri (although I greatly appreciate their focus). I deploy the term with fidelity to its usage in reference to a current, widely-dispersed ideological disposition (as opposed to a specifically literary aesthetic, itself emergent from an ideological apparatus). In 2010 Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker published "Notes on Metamodernism" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, giving the term what I take to be its definitive theoretical treatment. They describe metamodernism as a "structure of feeling" (2) (in Raymond Williams' sense) rather than a theoretical construct or ideological marker. Vermeulen and van den Akker echo the critical party line—"the postmodern years of plenty, pastiche, and parataxis are over. In fact, if we are to believe the many academics, critics, and pundits whose books and essays describe the decline

and demise of the postmodern, they have been over for quite a while now" (2)—however, they remain ambivalent that contemporary attempts to reevaluate the cultural scene get at the heart of the matter. Where these theories seem to go wrong, in other words, is in their attempts to pin down the dynamics of the current cultural situation too tightly. Linda Hutcheon's emphasis on the paradoxicality of postmodernism is almost certainly reflected in their analysis: for Vermeulen and van den Akker, any attempt to theorize the cultural contours of the present moment runs the haphazardous risk of ignoring something important. In other words, as I read their account, they are aware that one is prone to errors in theorizing complex social situations simply by engaging in the act of theorization. Advisedly, they build their own interpretation around the idea of movement itself: "Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naiveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (5-6).For Vermeulen and van den Akker, what characterizes the contemporary moment in culture isn't merely a set of traits or values, or even a specific grouping of texts, but ideological negotiation as such.

This notion of oscillation allows for Vermeulen and van den Akker to account for the perceived contradictory impulses of contemporary aesthetics, however it also calls attention to its own theoretical underpinnings. Their analysis announces forthrightly the "meta" in metamodernism—that is, it directs attention to their own critical task as much as it locates a perceived self-reflexive modernism operating at the core of present moment aesthetics. This is what allows them to avoid the theoretical trap of trying to postulate *beyond* postmodernism. For Vermeulen and van den Akker (much to my own critical appreciation): "Both the metamodern epistemology (as if) and its ontology (between) should thus be conceived of as a 'both-neither'

dynamic. They are each at once modern and postmodern and neither of them" (6) a relation drawn from Eric Voeglin's concept of *metataxis*. In other words, a reading that postmodernism is at present a palpable cultural force is not discounted. Metamodernism thus calls attention to its own theoretical vacuity just as "post-postmodernism" in its syntactic absurdity calls attention to its own theoretical anti-foundation. In making this argument, they do not discount the shift in aesthetic sensibilities that other critics have pointed to: "if, simplistically put, the modern outlook vis-à-vis idealism and ideals could be characterized as fanatic and/or naive, and the postmodern mindset as apathetic and/or skeptic, the current generation's attitude for it is, and very much so, an attitude tied to a generation can be conceived of as a kind of informed naiveté, a pragmatic idealism" (5). They are furthermore aware that "the cultural industry has responded in kind, increasingly abandoning tactics such as pastiche and parataxis for strategies like myth and metataxis, melancholy for hope, and exhibitionism for engagement" (5). However, Vermeulen and van den Akker keenly understand that these developments do not constitute (or are not evidence of) a wholesale ideological disjunction of the cultural parameters of postmodernism. "The current, metamodern discourse also acknowledges that history's purpose will never be fulfilled because it does not exist. Critically, however, it nevertheless takes toward it as if it does exist. Inspired by a modern naiveté yet informed by postmodern skepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility" (5)—this, then, is the metamodern position: an emotive and ideological reconfiguration (as opposed to breakage) from within the greater coordinates of postmodernism itself. It represents a generational reconstruction more than a transformation or hyper-tensification. In my reading, metamodernism is to a considerable extent a postmodern affirmation of decidedly un-postmodern sensibilities.

Vermeulen and van den Akker devote attention to a curiously un-discussed aspect of cultural production in the present moment: "Romantic turn in contemporary aesthetics" (2). They describe the "multitude of galleries exposing the often-figurative paintings and photographs of twilights and full moons, ethereal cityscapes and sublime landscapes, secret societies and sects, estranged men and women, and strange boys and girls" (8). Admittedly, much of the visual artists they engage with are Dutch (or, more broadly, Northern European), however their engagement with American film (and the fact that they're writing in English) suggests an intended applicability to Anglo-American cultural spaces. What is crucial to understand about this development is that, in Vermeulen and van den Akker's estimation at least, it is this Neo-Romanticism that ideologically facilitates the oscillation at the center of metamodernism. "Metamodern neoromanticism should not merely be understood as re-appropriation; it should be interpreted as re-signification" (12)—of course, this is a matter of nuance. A statement of metataxis, such a pronouncement can be (and is meant to be) read both ways. This aspect which looks back as it looks forward, which imbues the ordinary with mystery, the mundane with significance—all of this which finds expression in the Neo-Romantic cultural impulse is the engine driving the oscillation which makes metamodernism (and thus contemporary aesthetics) a workable, seemingly coherent enterprise. In this, Vermeulen and van den Akker have done what the theorists of the contemporary have largely failed at: they have offered a consistent account of the new sincerity and the reinvigoration of realism as a narrative mode. Previous critical attempts generally suggest that culture today is finding a renewed appreciation for sincerity and realistic texts largely out of an oedipal backlash against the cynicism and meaninglessness of postmodernism. True enough from a distance, such an outlook is the sort of account that can hardly be proven wrong. But the real pitfall of this assertion is that it requires *ipso facto* a

position beyond postmodernism. What, to put it another way, might we postulate as the originating momentum of such a backlash? The generation gap is a candidate, but then as the following chapters will illustrate oedipal struggle is not exactly a centerpiece in contemporary novelistic thematics. The great advantage of metamodernism as an analytical framework, in other words, is that it allows for these aesthetic developments from within the postmodernism cultural impulse: from within a framework that doesn't need to account for some purported epistemic breakage.

For this project I adopt metamodernism as developed by Vermeulen and van den Akker as my central theoretical and terminological lens. I do not employ it as a critical dogma (which they themselves caution against), but as a useful framework for thinking through the parameters in which the four texts this dissertation analyzes were constructed and thus what is most at stake in reading them (though, again, perhaps a matter of nuance). This isn't to say my project represents a full-on endorsement of this critical view, but rather that it is a view I find largely commensurate with my own wider cultural observations. I do, however, maintain the liberty to read a crucial point into the contours of their analysis—a point of immediate importance for how I read these four texts (especially Franzen's *Freedom*). This point stems initially from an observation made in "Notes On Metamodernism" regarding irony and its present usage: "metamodern irony is intrinsically bound to desire, whereas postmodern irony is inherently tied to apathy" (10). I do see the relationship between postmodernism and its antitheses within metamodernism as sharing an effect of oscillation; however, this oscillatory effect also makes visible the determinative logic of these two versions of irony via their overlap. In my view, this oscillation represents a certain rearranging in which a predominant hierarchy is evident. As Vermeulen and van den Akker suggest, irony is built atop a rhetorical formation. All of the texts

discussed in this project, for instance, are realist at the core of their literary mechanics,

maintaining the conceit of an alternate literary mode or temporality as a secondary, surface-level

formation. In other words, these novels all share a compositional logic which suggests a thematic

center of gravity. Postmodern irony is generally regarded as nihilistic or anarchic: as disdainful

of hope, teleology, justice, or any other self-consistent conceptual category. My own suggestion

is that such a position does not represent the elimination of the utopian impulse, as Jameson

famously suggests. Rather, it suggests a *thwarted* utopianism. What is there to be so ironic—so

bitter—about if not for some originary goal or teleology? In other words, the nihilistic irony

endemic to postmodern cultural phenomena, or so I contend, presupposes in the first instance a

deep socio-political commitment (or at least conviction) that became marginalized in the

neoliberal economic shuffles which characterize the conditions of social life during the moments

of high postmodernism.

This perhaps came to a head in the 2000s where ironic repetition became something of a

political theme: a US president named Bush (again); the United States attacked by al-Qaeda

(again); the US deploying ground forces in Iraq (again)—"the first time as tragedy, the second as

farce" (594) as Marx famously writes in "The Eighteenth Brumaire." Even 9/11, supposedly the

point beyond which there could be no irony, was itself a morbidly ironic event—al-Qaeda itself

was originally organized and funded by the CIA. If irony and the disregard of politics were the

rule of the day, it is not hard to see why. As Timothy Bewes explains in his close reading of

cynicism as a cultural phenomenon *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (1997), the contemporary cynic

is one for whom the political as a genuine engagement is externalized as a matter of structural

necessity: "For a society so paroxysmally determined upon consensus, no authentic activity is

possible but inertia, no sensibility conceivable but a self-cultivated cynical *asociality*" (76,

emphasis original). For Bewes, politics is a crucial term in the determination of social life as such precisely in its transcendental potential—"Politics reaches for the impossible as a matter of principle, a gesture of faith in the realm of *possibility* that is included within the unknowable" (5, emphasis original). Postmodernity, meanwhile, "collapses the disjunction between aspiration and reality" (5), which in turn eliminates the conceptual grounding of a meaningful politics. What remains for Bewes is cynicism: the "melancholic, self-pitying reaction to the apparent disintegration of political reality" (7). What Bewes' analysis helps to make clear is that postmodern irony and cynicism do not represent the negation of politics (which they are often taken to be), but rather its suppression. Thus irony is not apolitical, but anti-political—that is, reflecting a conscious turning away from (and thus, indirectly, a recognition of) politics. Indeed, one might say a move toward ironic anti-politics is carried out as a matter of deeply political outrage.

I have offered this argument on the suppressed political content of postmodern irony because I want to make clear what it is I see operating below the surface of the seemingly renewed impetus toward the political which characterizes the present moment in culture and metamodern aesthetics. It is only through a substantive reading of the thwarted politics of postmodernism that the outlay of politics in the contemporary moment—supposedly a backlash against its cynical, nihilistic temporal forerunner—can be made clear. In my own reading, present moment political tendencies, especially among "Millennials" (the generation supposedly countermanding postmodernism), reflect a tendency toward political action with the charm of deficit politics. The Occupy Movement is an interesting example of organized political action carried out in all apparent seriousness that nonetheless amounts to a form of anti-politics. It was certainly a watershed moment that helped awaken many critics to the rejuvenated sense of *caring*

that the younger generation was beginning to develop. What was interesting, however, was not Occupy's action, but their political content. The various encampments never provided any set of demands, nor for that matter any clear statement of ideological intent. To engage in such a political dialogue was seen by the movement's set of careful thinkers as an inherent concession to the very status quo they felt themselves at odds with. So, it wasn't merely that they neglected or were unable to offer a politics, but rather that the lack of politics itself was constituent to their political program. It's hard to miss the irony—even the cynicism—of such a position. And yet, words like "irony" and "cynicism" seem maladroit when applied to Occupy. After all, they were so *sincere*; they meant it all so much…What I am suggesting is that part of the grounds upon which we have analyzed postmodernism itself have been mislaid. If postmodernism was a moment of irony, it was an irony conjured in reaction to a highly serious frustration with the politics (or lack thereof) of that moment. Contrastingly, the present moment may indeed be a moment of deep political sincerity, but it is a sincerity that emerges from the sea of irony and absurdity that was the Bush era 2000s. We have moved, in other words, from a sincere irony to an ironic sincerity.

Contexts—Postmodernism and Contemporaneity

In this section I want to contextualize the critical arena in which I propose to work. I want to describe the general debate which has prompted my inquiry. I intend for this project to be understood in terms of the ongoing attempts to think through the nature of contemporary culture "after" postmodernism (to whatever extent we agree it's gone). My suggestion in the previous section was that metamodernism is a suitable theoretical vessel for such in-depth exploring; however the critical picture it paints of the contemporary cultural landscape is one that needs a politically-oriented analysis. Fittingly, then, I want to engage the discourse on contemporary

culture's historiographical status via a discussion of postmodernism's political underpinnings.

When Fredric Jameson published *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*

(1991), perhaps *the* definitive theoretical treatment of the topic, postmodernism came as close to

being regarded as a codified aesthetic system as it ever would. In my apprehension at least, it is

Jameson's analysis that dominates critical reactions to postmodernity. This book furthers the

project he set for himself in writing the Foreword to Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern*

Condition (1984)*,* which famously defined the postmodernism as "incredulity toward

metanarratives" (xxiv). Jameson just three years prior had published *The Political Unconscious*

(1981), "whose central argument was the most eloquent and express claim [for Marxism] *as* a

grand narrative ever made" (Anderson 53). It seems Jameson had a bone to pick.

In rereading postmodernism as an explicitly political phenomenon, Jameson offered a

compelling analysis of its aesthetic forms as anchored in material reality. *Postmodernism, or,*

The Logic of Late Capitalism announces forthrightly that "every position on postmodernism in

culture—whether apologia or stigmatization—is also at one and the same time, and *necessarily*,

an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today" (3,

emphasis original). With this he makes the case for "postmodernism not as a style but rather as a

cultural dominant" (4). As the title of the book suggests, Jameson's prime figure of reference

(besides, as ever, Lukács) is Ernest Mandel and his tripartite theory of capitalist development,

which he himself segments into three contiguous phases of development: freely competitive

capitalism, monopoly capitalism and late capitalism. Jameson astutely takes note that each phase

of development (as Mandel lists them) coincides roughly with major phases in Euro-American

aesthetics. Freely competitive capitalism, by this reasoning, sharing a co-terminal high water

mark with literary realism; monopoly capitalism coinciding with modernism. Jameson, in

making the case for an epistemic break with modernity found himself not only announcing the concretizing of a new aesthetic sensibility, but also the arrival of late capitalism itself as evidenced in these demonstrable shifts in cultural production. It's a remarkable analysis. Postmodernism is thus also the moment when digitalization—that is to say, the movement into computerized abstraction—has come to dominate the processes of international economic organization. Fitting to this, Jameson takes note of reflections of this process in culture itself. He describes postmodernism as "the consumption of sheer commodification as a process" (x), facilitating, of course, the turn toward culture itself as a viable commodity: "in postmodern culture, 'culture' has become a product in its own right; the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself" (x). What this amounts to for Jameson is, quite simply, the compression of historical content in cultural objects.

Jameson describes "the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" (9). If culture itself has become a tradable commodity, then it does so only in image form. In order for the depth and variance of culture itself to tradable, it must be compacted into an easily-apprehensible externalized self-referent: Baudrillard's "simulacra" or Debord's "spectacle." Aesthetic representations thus come to occupy the positions that they themselves had originally been representations for, prompting Jameson to proclaim "the disappearance of the historical referent" (25) altogether. *Postmodernism, or, The Logic of Late Capitalism* expends great effort delineating the various films and musical forms that portray time periods, not with some "authentic" context or recourse to historical narrative, but in terms of glossy, idealized portrayals—images fabricated in the present and deployed to tell the past. "Nostalgia does not strike one as an altogether satisfactory word for such fascination" (19), as Jameson comments, diagnosing instead a "nostalgia for the

present": "we are now, in other words, in 'intertextuality' as a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect and as the operator of a new connotation of 'pastness' and pseudohistorical depth in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces the 'real' history (20).

Jameson hones his focus in on aesthetic tendencies built out of the fusion of incompatible ideologies and tendencies. Without reference to historical background and cultural-contextual weight, the need for totalized coherence is removed. He terms, in fact, such tendencies "historicism," describing "the random cannibalization of all styles of the past" (18) as nothing short of "aesthetic colonization" (19). Any artistic movement, avant-garde, school of thought, aesthetic sensibility, methodology, technique or tendency—divorced from the historical weight which oriented them, each becomes a free-floating object to be acquired and combined with any other at will. This pied-piper approach—this disregard of coherence of assemblage—becomes for Jameson the hallmark of postmodernism proper. If this development signals the (at least temporary) triumph of image over the past, then at the level of abstraction this boils down the dominance of spatial logic over the temporal. Jameson argues that this is adducible at street-level: "our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time" (16). Street level indeed, Jameson originally took note of this phenomenon as an architectural tendency. The result of this becomes a sardonic sense of disorganization, skepticism and the feeling of cultural relativism so much maligned by conservatives. As Robert L. McGlaughlin observes: "As postmodernism's main qualities, irony and self-referentiality, percolated into the culture at large" (64). The ensuing sense of cultural *irony* as the horizon of meaning is evident in Jameson's much-cited formulation of "pastiche":

> Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral

practice of such mimicry, without any or parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satirical impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists (17).

Jameson famously summarizes pastiche as "blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs" (17). After all, without historical and ideological grounding where does one formulate the impetus for serious engagement? Where, in short, is the political? This is Jameson's central question and it is, not incidentally, mine as well.

As was alluded to earlier, "declarations of postmodernism's demise have become a critical commonplace" (Hoberek 233) and the central question is of what political reality this cultural development reflects. Interestingly, announcements that the postmodern moment has passed also, with astonishing unanimity, report the persistence of postmodern tendencies in present day cultural creation alongside seemingly novel aesthetic approaches. In fact, in my own apprehension of the ongoing critical conversation, the passing of postmodernism is somewhat less a of consensus view than the claim that there is such a critical consensus to begin with. It seems as though more scholars are convinced that "postmodernism is dead" is a consensus view than actually think postmodernism is dead. As Ihab Hassan comments: "What lies beyond postmodernism? Of course, no one knows; we hardly know what postmodernism was" (199). Interestingly, the majority of attempts to theorize the epistemology of the present seem to presuppose some degree of postmodern residue. Just what remains (and thus just what has changed) is somewhat murky, and so understandably there has been no shortage of treatises on "contemporaneity." There is much discussion today in the scholarly community—and even culture at large—of a general (and not entirely unwelcome) retreat from the shallowness of postmodern irony and the aesthetics of self-reflexive linguistic play. The assertion is being made, with caution but evermore forthrightness, of the present moment as a post-postmodern moment,

which in turn suggests variously a return of sentiment and emotion in fiction and film (and television); the return of realism (sometimes qualified "Neo-Realism") in fiction and the visual arts; the development of an ethic of sincerity (a condition often termed "post-irony" and sometimes posited in the general media as the "new sincerity" called for in the wake of the 9/11 attacks); a renewed fascination with nature, even romanticism itself; reconsideration of an aesthetic avant-garde; an enthusiasm for the self as a project; a post-Derridean faith in the communicativity of language; the gradual return of modernist artistic sensibilities (often termed Remodernism, with the Stuckists as the proposed exemplum). All of these tendencies in aesthetic production suggest a wider, more diffuse cultural reaction against the increasingly codified practices of postmodernism and its lack of theoretical space for development.

One suggested replacement for postmodernism as a conceptual marker for the contemporary is, quite simply, "the contemporary"—or, alternatively, "contemporaneity"—itself. As Pedro Erber comments: "Contemporaneity is in fashion" (29). Erber's remark is oddly fitting considering Giorgio Agamben, in "What is the Contemporary?," an essay Erber himself draws on, cites fashion itself as an example of the contemporary—that is, as a process which "constitutively anticipates itself and consequently is always too late" (48). For Erber, contemporaneity is distinct from modernity, the present and temporal coevalness. In fact, following Agamben (and, in turn, Nietzsche) to be contemporary involves a precise epistemic relationship vis-à-vis one's historical present. In this view, those who are "contemporary are not the ones who participate entirely in their own time, but rather those who comprehend it by means of a distanced and objective gaze, who distance themselves from the present in order to contemplate it" (Agamben 38). Contemporaneity, then, names not so much an historic-conceptual arc as a subject position. To be contemporary means to be someone who perceives

his/her own time in a qualified way: "he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness" (Agamben 44).

Agamben's commentators (including Erber) take note of this overt Christian symbology; I however would prefer to read back into this formulation what Jameson insists gets dismissed in the postmodern fray: the political. This mention of intently perceiving darkness at the cost of situational remove also speaks to me of the status of the dissident. One of the themes this dissertation will take up in its chapters involves an increasing awareness on the part of Euro-American consumers of the mechanisms of exploitation which underlie our own present mode of life. Erber as well makes this critical turn in trying to formulate the contemporary as a concept with political momentum. The trouble with extrapolating contemporaneity as Agamben deploys it is that such a subject position is non-generalizable—in fact, the whole point of the term is to suggest the possibility of a rarefied position. For Erber, however, the unflinching view into darkness captures something essential about this moment beyond postmodernism: "what the 'blinding light' of the present reveals is rather the impossibility of identifying a certain mode of thinking and a certain set of values—reason, democracy, universalism, etc.—with the history of European man" (36). Erber goes on to describe the "decentering of international political power" and the "emergence of formerly peripheral countries such as China, India, and Brazil as major economic and cultural players" (36) as symptomatic of the contemporary globalized world. Astoundingly, Erber is suggesting that contemporaneity in this sense *is* now the collective outlook (or collective modality of looking) of humanity in general— contemporaneity emerges as the subject position *du jour* of a new and emerging global economic order as western-oriented (and enforced) notions of time, space, locality, identity, etc. too are destined to be supplanted. Perhaps, then, the proper relationship between the present moment and

its postmodern forerunner has been that the latter helped to undermine the very monoliths of

cultural certainty against which the contemporary viewer is positioned. If the contemporary is

one who reads into the darkness against the grain of the overwhelming light, then postmodernity,

for better or worse, or so Erber seems to suggest, has flicked the light switch down thus instilling

contemporaneity as a central feature of present day experience as such.

      There are, however, other interpretations of the present moment. Nicolas Bourriaud's

term Altermodern became an early contender in the debate to reframe our understanding of the

contemporary moment—"Altermodern" was in fact the title of Tate Britain's fourth triennial

exhibition of which Bourriaud himself was the curator. Bourriaud in his brief manifesto defines

altermodernism as

> that moment when it became possible for us to produce something that made
> sense starting from an assumed heterochrony, that is, from a vision of human
> history as constituted of multiple temporalities, disdaining the nostalgia for the
> avant-garde and indeed for any era—a positive vision of chaos and complexity. It
> is neither a petrified kind of time advancing in loops (postmodernism) nor a linear
> vision of history (modernism), but a positive experience of disorientation through
> an art-form exploring all dimensions of the present, tracing lines in all directions
> of time and space (14).

The reassertion of the temporal over the spatial (time itself as lines) immediately signals a

departure from postmodernism proper to Jameson. The term, however, has since come to assume

the conceptual weight of (and eclipse in scholarly interest) the exhibition itself and much

subsequent theoretical groundwork has been laid out by scholars retrospectively helping to

enhance and nuance Bourriaud's strangely ecstatic Deleuzianism. As Jean-Michel Rabaté

communicates in *Crimes of the Future*: *Theory and Its Global Reproduction* (2014): "Bourriaud

calls 'Altermodernism' a movement connected to the creolisation of cultures and the fight for

autonomy. It aims at offering the possibility of producing singularities in a more and more

standardized world. Altermodern can be read as art produced in hypermodernity, hybridity, absorbing the ideas of canonical modernism while inserting these in a globalized context" (207). What is immediately striking about this rendering is that it shares with Erber's endorsement of contemporaneity an outlook rooted in an increasingly visible sense of internationalism (and thus mirroring my own skepticism of national boundaries as definitive conceptual markers, and thus my choice to read American and British authors together). Rabaté offers some critical momentum in developing altermodernity into the makings of a viable epistemology (Bourriaud's own renderings at times threaten to sink his endeavor into the very quagmire of postmodern neologisms he is trying to surge beyond). Although the enigmatic trope of the artist as cultural nomad offers a degree of appetite-whetting intrigue for critics, and the focus on the increasingly real sense of cultural singularity emerging from the trade and technology-connected globosphere is a necessary element in any world-scale theorization, it is unclear on what grounds one can start to register an aesthetic recognition from this position.

Jeffry T. Nealon, however, and not without a tinge of postmodern irony, suggests the present cultural state is best summarized as post-postmodernism. For Nealon, postmodernism has not been overtaken and replaced, but fulfilled—and fulfilled so fully and intensely that its essential processes are no longer recognizable. Late capitalism, that is to say, has run its course so much to completion that its cultural expression has transformed in line with its own logic. Postmodernism has followed through with its own logic so much that it is no longer recognizable. He is up front about his project, which entails developing a "vocabulary for talking about 'new economies' (post-Fordism, globalization, the centrality of market economics, the new surveillance techniques of the war on terror, etc.)" (15). His study, aptly titled *Post-Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Just-In-Time Capitalism* (2012), focuses on what he

terms "intensities": for Nealon the intensification of cultural experience is the post-postmodern aesthetic trademark, just as the reduction of experience to image form was the signature aesthetic maneuver in Jameson's analysis. Culture as it is organized today "functions *not* by conquering or assimilating new territory but rather by intensifying new versions of familiar things" (30, emphasis original). In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Jean Baudrillard famously points to Disneyland as "a perfect model" (12) of hyperreality—of postmodern living. If Disneyland is the symbolic epicenter of postmodernity, then, Nealon suggests, its post-postmodern equivalent is Las Vegas.

He describes the strange reproduction of reality itself within Las Vegas' presentational logic—resort-sized reproductions of Paris, New York and Venice: "In such settings, you don't so much *consume goods* as you *have experiences* where your subjectivity can be intensified, bent and retooled. In contemporary Las Vegas, you are offered opportunities for doing work on yourself (experiencing, seeing, feeling) rather than opportunities for confronting, overcoming, purchasing or otherwise consuming some 'other'" (31, emphasis original). For Nealon, capitalism has become parasitic: a non-productive force of accumulation by other means. He points to the dominance of abstract finance, which he insists reflects a state of affairs such that the present moment, thoroughly exhausted of potential profitability, must be tactically extenuated beyond: "The future of capitalism…rests not on the extraction of profit from commodities or services but on the production of money directly from money—making money by wagering on an anticipated future outcome" (26). If time for Jameson has been suppressed, then for Nealon it has been colonized—and for profit. Finance functions, according to Nealon, by extraction from an alternate temporal moment. Does this not, of course, parallel the very functional logic of Las Vegas—with gambling? More to the point, however, Nealon argues that

the hyper-tension of subjective experience which he suggests sits at the core of post-postmodern experience is a cultural expression of current non-productivity. There is nowhere for subjective experience to go, so this logic goes: one must settle for what is here now. Cultural energies toward change are thus redirected and conscripted into the intensification of what is already extant. This for Nealon is how postmodernism has progressed.

Gilles Lipovetsky, on the other hand, throws the whole narrative of progression from postmodernity into contention—"The 'post' of postmodern still directed people's attention to a past that was assumed to be dead" (30). For Lipovetsky, postmodernism itself is a phase of his master term "modernism"—that is, interestingly, postmodernism is itself a discernible developmental stage of that which it is proposed to have succeeded. We have indeed turned the corner from postmodernism, he argues, but from one phase of a larger developmental shift within modernism to another. This view does not endorse Jameson's pronouncement of postmodernism as representing a clear epistemic break; Lipovetsky lays out an entirely new schema of cultural development. In his extended (and curiously structured) essay that serves as the basis for his book *Hypermodern Times* (2005), he lays out what is essentially a theory of modern conceptual development, which is itself rooted in a particular reading of history. This writing simply does not allow me the space to adequately engage with all the facets of Lipovetsky's analysis, but suffice it to say that he sees cultural development in the twentieth century as emergent from a conceptual reaction to consumerism. This analysis bears some common ground to Jameson's, but he sees no need to follow his predecessor to an examination of capital. For Lipovetsky, the cultural climate of the present moment is informed by the pan-psychic reaction to the institution of consumerism.

In his estimation, consumerism today has moved into a phase of, in his terminology, hyperconsumption: "No longer, as in traditional societies, do we see a repetition of the models of the past, but quite the opposite: systematic novelty and temptation to act to regulate the present. By spreading to broader and broader sectors of collective life, fashion, now ubiquitous, has established the axis of the present as the model of temporality now socially prevalent" (36-7).The ephemeral world of fashion is again on view as it was for Agamben. No longer the quaint subject of Roland Barthes' charming inquiry, but now a raging, all-consuming beast: the fashion industry is Lipovetsky's guiding sociological metaphor. It is to this condition of culture that he applies his much-cited term hypermodernity: a condition in which culture is fully beholden to the logic of hyperconsumption. As Lipovetsky describes, hyperconsumption is not the mere neoliberal market relation that dominated late twentieth century commerce in America, but an apparatus that has been grafted onto the collective psyche of the social body itself: "A whole hedonistic and psychologistic culture has come into being: it incites everyone to satisfy their needs immediately, it stimulates their clamour for pleasure, idolizes self-fulfillment, and sets the earthly paradise of well-being, comfort and leisure on a pedestal" (37). This notion that consumption as an action carries cultural and social (and even psychical) resonances does not escape Jameson (or Marx for that matter), but Lipovetsky gains traction in a subtext to this argument. As he suggests in tandem: "the escalation of consumerism is nourished both by existential distress and by the pleasure associated with change, by the desire to intensify and reintensify, without end, the course of everyday life" (52).

What Lipovetsky is getting at is the fact that the hallmark of twentieth century consumerism in America is the "keeping up with the Joneses" phenomenon: the logic of consumption being, in other words, the continuous fulfillment of what is presented by an abstract

apparatus as a lack. Consumerism itself, in other words, is continuously employed in developing

the very needs its commodified objects are designed to fulfill. For Lipovetsky,

hyperconsumption represents the point at which this logic no longer sustains and collapses into a

phantom act of self-gratification. "We need to think of hyperconsumption as an emotional

rejuvenating experience, one that can start all over again an indefinite number of times" (52).

Under hyperconsumption consumerism is carried out, not for the fulfillment of a perceived lack

or competition with one's neighbors, but for the sheer pleasure of doing so. This function

counteracts a growing nervousness in the population, according to Lipovetsky: a nervousness

about the precarity of the participant's own future due in no small part, ironically, to the ravages

of consumerism-oriented capitalism itself. Futurity and history are linked in the cultural

imagination, as Jameson well knows. Lipovetsky insists that hypermodernity, as a necessary

response to hyperconsumption, is thus an overwhelming sense of presentism: "From the museum

of pancakes to the museum of the sardine, from the Elvis Presley museum to the museum of The

Beatles, hypermodern society belongs to an age where everything is made into part of our

heritage and duly commemorated" (57). While this may seem characteristic of postmodernism—

the cynical compression and reification of historical content—Lipovetsky insists that it be

recognized as hypermodern because "this whole new insistence on everything old is

accompanied by an unbridled expansion, a saturation, a boundless broadening of the frontiers of

our heritage and our memory" (58). To a considerable degree, the transition from postmodern to

hypermodern does not involve a distinct break, but rather a difference of degree. For Lipovetsky,

the sense of infinitude presupposed by these observations is a reliable positional marker.

Hypermodernity is, then, the social conditions underlying postmodernism carried out infinitely.

Alan Kirby as well notes a complete historical collapse into presentism. Laid out

thoroughly in his text *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and

Reconfigure Our Culture* (2009), Kirby posits his term digimodernism to the semantic blank

vacated by postmodernism. This theory suggests that the cultural momentum toward temporal

compression that Jameson identified at the heart of postmodernism has collapsed into a black

hole. Digimodernism, Kirby suggests, is

> lost in the here and now, swamped in the textual present; they know nothing of
> the cultural past and have no historical sense. The difference is clear in cinema:
> where Baudrillard or Jameson identified a depthless 'nostalgia for the lost
> referential' in 1970s films like *American Graffiti* and *Barry Lyndon*,
> digimodernist historical movies like *The Mummy*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and
> *King Kong* make no effort to reproduce the manners and mores of the past.
> Instead, actors behave like people from the 2000s, clad in vintage clothing and
> rushing through their CGI-saturated story (149).

Like Lipovetsky, there is a distinct sense that digimodernism as it is laid out in Kirby's treatise

represents more an intensification of postmodern sensibilities—again, a difference of degree

rather than kind: digimodernism indeed seems to represent for Kirby an ultimate point of

development rather than a radical epistemic break. Indeed, Kirby explicitly rejects the possibility

of determining a "digimodernity" (12) thus leaving it up for debate whether his term is meant to

represent an overarching determinative signifier or a branch-off effect. His reference to

postmodernism as the "unwitting mother" (57) to digimodernism suggests, again, a progressive

generational shift rather than an Oedipal conquest. However, there are palpable developments

that Kirby calls attention to—things, in other words, which do seem to represent genuine social

shifts. "The notion of 'popular culture'—of texts so complex they deserve the name 'culture' and

addressed to such a wide demographic they merit being called 'popular'—is integral to a

postmodernity that defined itself as the aftermath of the avant-garde. I would argue that film,

music, and TV decreasingly justify the label of 'mass' or 'popular' culture. Such a category is

becoming a thing of the past" (135). Kirby is suggesting that cultural objects are increasingly being made for niches: that cultural forms themselves are, in his wording, becoming ghettoized. If postmodernism complicated the boundary between high and low culture, it did so under the pretext that categorical designations initially represented palpable divisions within a singular social context—that they both referred to some notion of a general public. Kirby argues that such aesthetic tendencies today are nostalgic efforts—nostalgic for, ironically, the high era of postmodern production. Today, so this line of reasoning goes, there is no such thing as a unified cultural body (in the United States or Britain, anyway) against which "highbrow" and "lowbrow" cultural forms can be read. Digimodernism, then, entails nothing less than a nostalgia for nostalgic times.

Digital technologies (the "digi" of digimodernism, obviously referring to "digital") are increasingly rearranging the modalities of cultural production, and so as well social recognition within the greater social body (although as to whether cultural production is a driving force or a response to this phenomenon Kirby remains ambivalent). The social totality, in other words, is no longer a unified, self-identifiable whole, nor even the collective of groups established along the discursive lines of identity politics. *Digimodernism* contends that the social body of the present moment (again, in America and Britain at least) resembles the user base of the popular information sharing website Reddit: there isn't merely a group of "Reddit-ers," but rather usage is divvied up into sub-reddits and sub-sub-reddits and sub-sub-sub-reddits *ad infinitum*. This, Kirby postulates, is how social life in Europe and America is beginning to function: with the population increasingly drawn into small, self-identifying clusters—discreet social groups with their own quirks, inside jokes, behaviors, etc. Of course, his overarching point is that this is all facilitated by the internet and the astounding potentiality for connectivity that is represents. For

more and more people, so this logic goes, there is less impetus to construct your behavior to conform to your immediate social group. One can go online and find internet communities with people already disposed to your views, quirks, sort of humor, approach to the world, etc. Thus, Kirby suggests, textuality in the digimodernist present reflects this larger sense of participatory engagement. If literature and the visual arts were the prime cultural product of the modernists, and films and advertising that of the postmodernists, then video games represent the model of digimodernist textuality. This sort of artistic format requires mass production of many different sorts of texts to suit the dynamics of all the various niches. What is more, user participation is a necessary ingredient in a successful "reading." Thus Kirby suggests the digimodernist present is one that favors "liquid" (as opposed to analog) texts: a distinction he seems to be drawing from Deleuze's 1992 essay "Postscript on the Societies of Control." Digital technologies seem uniquely positioned to respond to this social need. In fact, Kirby defines digimodernism as simply "the impact on cultural forms of computerization" (50). If the digimodern era is, like postmodernity, an era of spectacle, it is a spectacle personalized for you and which in turn invites your participation.

Despite Kirby's antagonism to Lipovetsky and his notion of hypermodernity (which he grumblingly dismisses as a poor attempt at imitating Lyotard's analysis), he shares a very important underlying point. For Kirby as well this development is driven by the engine of consumerism. "The most popular and destructive Western grand narrative is not religion but consumerism: by this I don't just mean consumption or even mass consumption, but a conception of life, a system of values, a worldview, a framework for understanding, meaning, and purpose of existence stretching far beyond mere buying" (238). One of the most astounding pronouncements in *Digimodernism* (or indeed in any of the books discussed in this entire

project) is Kirby's notion that digimodernism has effectuated the revivification of that which

Lyotard pronounced dead: the grand narratives. Kirby suggests that at least one new grand

narrative has emerged in the post-postmodern era: consumerism itself—"God may save; most

prefer to spend" (238). If, as Kirby suggests, the population's mode of social identification

increasingly tends toward small, insular sub-reddit-like communities, then consumerism and

mass entertainment, to reach these various quarters, increasingly must generalize their self-

presentations in order to appeal to the broadest swaths of the population. Kirby argues, for

instance, regarding contemporary blockbuster films that they

> draw on the *content* of the children's story, many of them are *shot* with the speed,
> allusiveness, and impact of movies for adults. Stylistically, these are grown-ups'
> movies, their infantilism is purely narratological (they're not just "films for
> kids"); they're too noisy, dazzling and confusing for very young brains to take in,
> while full-blown children's stories are visually too dreary, too slow and obvious,
> for anyone other than children…this reconceptualization enables it to amass
> sufficient numbers of customers to turn a profit on a hugely expensive investment
> (everyone either is or has been a child; it's the sole true universal) (128-9).

This thematic re-emphasis of children and childhood is one that is potentially illuminating given

the importance children play in the thematic explored in this project's later chapters. As my own

analysis will demonstrate, children and the family represent one culturally-calibrated pathway

toward accessing the social totality. For Kirby, however, it is enough to say that such a state of

affairs signals shifts in the way a culture conducts aesthetic appreciation and just what counts as

a work of art in the present moment (and what consequently this suggests about the future).

For my own part, Kirby's analysis that it is a vastly interesting approach that suggests

interesting roads for inquiry, but nonetheless fails to offer a possible foundation for aesthetic

analysis. *Digimodernism* in fact reads as much like an alternative socio-cultural history as it does

an analysis of culture in its present state. As to his social pronouncements I have my

reservations. I have my doubts as to whether the social fabric is quite as divided into little sub-

networks as he suggests, though he may not be entirely barking at the dark so to speak. Certainly

he is identifying a palpable trend in social organization in America and Britain, and this may

perhaps even be where we are all headed, but in the present moment there is much to suggest a

level of national, culture-wide awareness. Many incidents in recent years—since 2009 when

Kirby published *Digimodernism*—not the least being the "Black Lives Matter" campaign that

has arisen over the recent shootings of unarmed black men by white law enforcement officials in

several parts of the country, suggest nation-level consciousness has not yet been extinguished.

Moreover, digimodernism, as with several of the theories discussed, all seem to exude with

varying degrees of subtlety a willingness or even desire to return to the cultural state of

modernism. Even digimodernism and hypermodernism, two analyses that strive to thrust the

present moment furthest out in front of the historical progression, nonetheless do so in a way that

carries a nostalgia for modernism—from Lipovetsky's subtle longing for an avant-garde to

Kirby's postulation that grand narratives have returned. In the next section I will outline the

political foundation of metamodernism, my own answer to the accounts just provided: an

apparatus I have selected precisely because of its reluctance to look back toward modernism and

its inherent skepticism of postmodernism's passing. In saying this, though, I do not mean to

suggest that I completely discount the theoretical attempts this section has outlined. Aspects of

these theoretical attempts will be drawn on as I conduct my own analyses of my four texts. Each

of these attempts to critically redraw the conceptual territory upon which culture builds has

interesting things to contribute.

Metamodernism and Politics—My Methodology

Thus far I have offered four texts which obey a similar narrative logic: the re-integration into the

social of alienated individuals via the connectivity of the nuclear family. This isn't to speak of

social conciliation as just social recognition, but rather of the bestowing of meaning: of existential drive. This effect of social conciliation via the logic of the family doesn't entail merely playing the part (as most of them do anyhow), but a deep, grokking and intuitive understanding which becomes personally transformative. I have also suggested that the tension inherent to this thematic maneuver is characteristic of metamodernism as a cultural condition in its simultaneous maintenance of irony and sincerity. To bridge these logical dimensions I have to root metamodernism as a cultural condition from which the aesthetics of these texts arise in a political context. Following Jameson et al., I contend that any drastic reordering of cultural attitudes is reflective of (or, as Marxists say, determined in the last instance by) permutations in the state of political economy. Jameson draws a convincing line of reasoning from the abstract organization of capital in the technological age and the aesthetics that characterize postmodernism. This is because postmodernism itself consists of a series of ideas which are emergent from an ideological apparatus that is the collective cultural response to this new reality of production. This in turn finds expression at the level of language and culture in what he identifies as postmodern aesthetics. Similarly, I suggest that the aesthetics of metamodernism must reflect some deeper alteration in political-economic reality (or at least in the way that reality is perceived). The goal of this section is to offer an account of a powerful organizational current at work in present moment capitalist formations which might explain the dual tendency of irony and sincerity as well as the insistence on the localized, intimate level of family as the mediatory site for large-scale social inclusion.

Visible in these texts is a palpable sense of political disarmament: one thing these four novels have in common besides a thematic fixation on the family is the continuous presentation of politics as a failed or failing concern—a lost cause. Struggle isn't what matters: community is

and being a meaningful participant in your family unit is the way in. Each of these novels, in other words, depicts a certain process of de-politicization. From Walter Berglund's self-betrayal to Natalie Blake's politics of fashion to Nate Silver's entrepreneurial third-world activism: radical political struggle in all of these novels is reconfigured as a function of what it ostensibly is struggling against. In explaining this I want to turn to neoliberalism as a politico-economic constellation. David Harvey's indispensible definition of the term runs as follows: "Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (2). There is a vast sea of discourse on this subject, so wide and multi-disciplinary that I cannot hope to represent it here. Suffice it to say, however, that neoliberal tendencies posit the well-being of the locality as an expression of the well-being of the large-scale. As the axes of current popular political discourse makes clear, the state as a formal system of institutions marks a conceptual boundary for the functionality of a free-market. Hence neoliberalism is frequently likened to a self-automated machine: a self-regulating system that has the unique capacity to correct its own errors.

One thing equally clear is that the financial meltdown of 2008 has drawn an intense public scrutiny to this outlook. As Doreen Massey has argued:

> there *was* a moment at the height of the financial implosion when questions were raised that went far deeper then the economic…They went beyond hostility to individual bankers—to touch upon, and question, the philosophy of greed and self-interest that underpinned their wealth and our crisis. There was not just a hostility to bonuses and such but a felt antipathy to the very mode of being human that had lead us to this pass (30, emphasis original).

Massey is suggesting that larger responses to the crisis, at least in their conception, were insistently ideological: that is, they consisted of not just outrage at a grievously outrageous

situation, but an attention to the conceptual foundations of what allowed the crisis to develop in the first place. One response to this seems to have been a well-documented inflection of neoliberal ideas toward its own opposition. Capital's response seems to have entailed a systematic shift away from conspicuously grand, depersonalized schemata toward forms of intimate and ostensibly responsible organization. The ignominy and relative impotence of the IMF and The World Bank seem to necessitate new forms of capital: micro-finance in the third world, fair trade economics, etc. From this, I contend, one witnesses the emergence of so-called conscientious capitalism or "capitalism with a human face"—eco- or "green" capitalism, John Mackey's conscious capitalism, ethical capitalism, fair trade certified capitalism and third-world friendly capitalism, etc. Each of these forms of capital organization turns away from their large-scale platforms and embraces a sense of local specificity: the effect is a distinct absence of social antagonism.

From this one observes a host of new industries: organic farming and farm-to-table food services, local production, a sudden very public attention to bicycles and public transportation, etc. My contention here is this modality of capital isn't merely ethical or conscientious, but *redemptive*. Consumption today is not merely carried out with a need to be scrupulously ethical, but in the vein of counteracting the negative effects of consumerism itself. In *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (2009), Slavoj Žižek calls attention to Starbucks' popular slogan "It's not just what you buy; it's what you're buying into" and suggests that such line might serve as a mantra for a new form of consumptive logic: "The 'cultural' surplus is spelled out: the price is higher than elsewhere since what you're buying is the 'coffee ethic' which includes care for the environment, social responsibility towards the producers, plus a place where you yourself can participate in communal life" (61). Along these lines, Žižek similarly eviscerates organic

foodstuffs: "Who really believes that the half-rotten and overpriced 'organic' apples are really healthier than the non-organic varieties? The point is that, in buying them, we are not merely buying and consuming, we are simultaneously doing something meaningful, showing our capacity for care and our global awareness, participating in a collective project" (62-3). In other words, capital accumulation has absorbed an ethos of redemption which then gets deployed as a presentational logic. Consumerism today isn't merely a cautious, ethical retreat from the excesses that lead to the 2008 financial collapse: a call to consume more conscientiously. Rather, neoliberal practices, through the suppleness of the free market, have located capital's trajectory through the path of least resistance. The path of least resistance *for* capital, so it happens, runs straight through resistance *to* capital. Consumers now increasingly buy not just products but their own exemption—their redemption, as it were—from culpability in the damage wrought by the capitalist enterprise. Here one can observe the political foundation of metamodernism's cultural logic: redemptive consumers consume sincerely, but in doing so take part in a deeply ironic game wherein forgiveness from the mindless ethic of consumerism is *bought* and maintained only with more and more consumption.

It is a tired observation to note that corporate capitalism re-integrates facets of its own resistance; however, in this ideological formation one sees something genuinely new: capitalist processes not echoing resistance, but offering forgiveness. As John Mackey, the founder of Whole Foods Markets, describes in his book *Conscious Capitalism: Liberating the Heroic Spirit of Business* (2013) learning that "business isn't based on exploitation or coercion at all," but rather "cooperation and voluntary exchange" (3). Reading through his book one gets the idea that a corporate boardroom environment functions something like a food co-op. However, as Larry Howard has shown, such an understanding all-too conveniently meets the challenges capitalism

faces at present. In his study he found that "on average, 'bad' social performance significantly increased…consumers' intentions to boycott the company's products" (37). Though only a single study, it points to an increasing sense of consumer attentiveness to the negative effects of corporate procedure. The trouble with so-called ethical or conscientious capitalism is that it merely fosters a set of boundaries and, needless to say, corporate entities have been in the business of crossing boundaries (discreetly or otherwise) for a very long time. The advantage of redemptive capitalism as a model is that in economic terms it creates a demand: the demand is a public need to disavowal culpability from long-term negative economic and environmental effects that consumerism has rendered.

Strangely, the left in my apprehension has largely followed suit and embraced a similar ethos as if following the enemy to their battlefield of choice. The resulting political stance is what I will refer to throughout this project as "the politics of the local." This designation refers to the state of leftist politics such that grand, world-level schemes—the call to world revolution and socialism, the utopian impulse, racial and gender equality, an end to third-world exploitation, the struggle for anti-military disarmament, complete economic equality—become transmuted into a personalized identification with one's locality: the grassroots organizer, the community activist, the farm-to-table purveyor, the white neo-blue collar urban working class, the Indy coffee shop barista, the bicycle repair(wo)man, etc. Each of these roles, following redemptive consumption, is suggestive of a political commitment (renewable food and energy, democratic participation, environmental responsibility, anti-corporate sentiment), but transmuted into a highly stylized professional identity. These serious and sincere positions thus betray a deep cynicism: that an ostensive political position is constructed on top of what is essentially social capital—that these roles in the current cultural climate are first and foremost bridges to social relevance. Thus the

political element inherent to these roles becomes like a vestigial limb whose presence persists despite evolution's having rendered it irrelevant. Rather than a highly stylized semiotic chain meant to signify a politics (the ironic surface construction over a political position that characterizes postmodern politics) one witnesses instead politics itself integrated into that semiotic chain: one sees, in other words, politics itself evacuated of meaning and then worn *as* a style. Jameson suggests that postmodernism entails the marketing of aesthetics and culture; if this is so, then metamodernism reflects the politics of the local which entails, among other things, the aesthetics and culture of the professional market. Here one sees realized my own summation of metamodernism in transition from postmodernism: of a move from sincere irony to ironic sincerity.

What this development amounts to in my estimation is an inversion of the relationship between cultural capital (a term I will use interchangeably with social capital) and material capital as developed by Pierre Bourdieu wherein the latter becomes subservient to the logic of the former. "The local" designates the site at which a political affiliation (progressive politics) is performed for the sake of entry into a culturally-specific economy. This cultural sensibility reflects the development in recent decades of an ironically globalized local industry. Whole Foods, Tom's Shoes, Starbucks—one can easily compose a litany of brands with global presences that nonetheless espouse a concern for local communities and which furthermore cater to higher end markets. This, of course, is the promise of the local: one can continue consuming if it is in accordance with a model presumed to be non-harmful—if it is local (anti-globalization, non-exploitative) and local products are expensive. Thus the politics of the local refers to a state of affairs wherein the ostensibly progressive politics of the left can only be carried out by consuming: thus leftist politics become a lifestyle (with an emphasis on *style*) rather than a style

of life: a set of conventions rather than convictions. As with any consumptive system, cultural capital becomes a regulative mechanism: status, inclusion/exclusion, hierarchy become ironic components of a contemporary ethos espousing progressive, democratic consensus politics and economic equality. Cultural capital in this situation becomes a determinative agent of material capital rather than vice versa and thus materialism, the very grounds of Marxian analysis, is reduced playfully to a conceit. If social capital becomes the prime agent of determination, there exists no conceptual ground upon which to think even the need (not to speak of the means) for authentic political action. The politics of the local, then, is the embrace of a stylized cultural expression in the place of (rather than attached to, as it was for postmodernism) political struggle. Metamodernism I assert is the wider cultural expression of this impulse to de-politicization; metamodernism is the cultural logic of the politics of the local.

In my analysis metamodernism reconfigures the value schema of postmodernism, dragging up from obscurity the disavowed sense of seriousness implicit in the postmodern position and thrusting it into the fore. As I will argue, postmodern skepticism implies a grounded position from which to dissent. To put it alternatively: cynicism implies a thwarted belief—one begins the journey to cynicism from the spawning grounds of idealism. If the hallmark traits of postmodern skepticism are built out of seriousness and sincerity, then I assert the contemporary emphasis on seriousness and sincerity emerges out of the vacuum that was the postmodern values system. My suggestion in this section has been that this logic is fundamentally enacted in a specific set of socio-politico-economic developments summarized as redemptive consumption and its cultural response, the politics of the local. The final question to address in this section is thus a linking one: why the family? If the political situation today is one that orients the individual to the social totality in terms of the local, why then in metamodern texts does the

mediatory term of locality get inscribed as the nuclear family? It is telling that Robert Beuka

closes his study *SuburbiaNation* (2004) with a discussion of Peter Weir's 1998 film *The Truman*

Show. The film actualizes latent anxieties about the suburban experience as a trapping, self-

enfolding domestic apparatus. In my own reading, this is the case, though I would embolden the

term "domestic." What gets overlooked in Beuka's reading, in other words, is the extent to which

the general efficacy of Truman's anti-social search for truth (his escape into the wider world of

"real" things) gets countermanded at the site of his immediate domestic experience. His

containment—his prevention from escape into the *outside*—is logically centered around his own

immediate domestic space and his local social relations: his home effectuates his containment.

This logic is not just a manifestation of suburban anxieties (though it is that as well), but a wider

cultural logic currently operative in mass culture which takes on a plethora of forms.

Interestingly, film and television seem to incorporate the family as a normalizing

mechanism that keeps individuals from going beyond—especially if that beyond is really and

truly *beyond*—the domestic horizon. The Pate brothers' short-lived television show *Surface,* for

instance*,* proffers the scenario of genetically-modified sea creatures manipulating the ocean floor

in such a way as to cause tidal waves and threaten all surface life. One of the protagonists,

Richard Connelly, is convinced of the existence of these creatures and studies them obsessively

to prove their existence. He stops going to his job and participating in family affairs in order to

fully dedicate himself to this seemingly mad search. This effort costs him the presence of his

wife and child, who have meanwhile become disconcerted at his discontinuation of normal life

functions in the service of a higher purpose. What is jarring to my mind is the difficulty he

encounters in trying to maintain the moral high-ground, as if ethically implicit in our greater

cultural understanding is the subservience of transcendent, world-level causes to localized

domestic concerns. Similarly, Eric Kripke's long-running *Supernatural* posits a renewed war between heaven and hell which threatens all of existence—talk about high ontological stakes! One central figure is Jimmy Novak who wishes to offer his body as a necessary vessel to the angel Castiel in service to the cause of heaven. His wife and child offer him a choice: he must choose between "us and them." Here, in this situation of supreme importance, the election of a cause outside of the family takes on a resonance of unseemliness, as if taking part in an important, universe-level cause were akin to having a midlife crisis or irresponsibly skipping a child's soccer match. To leave the family in the service of authentic struggle—as it is for Truman to leave in search of truth—is done only by accepting the rhetorical weight of failed responsibility.

Such scenarios in film and television ought to be familiar enough; however, I want to suggest that this rather permeable trope has a specific political antecedent: John Dos Passos' novel of 1930 *The 42nd Parallel*. In this text one encounters Fainy "Mac" McCreary's now-archetypal struggle between the world of politics and his family. Mac loves Maisy, but a life with her necessarily forecloses his aspirations of taking part in a political struggle to redefine the organization of social life and economy in the United States. As much as he wants a life with this woman, he understands that for his life to mean something he must take part in something bigger than himself—as Mac fulminates to the man from San Jacinto: "'But God damn it to hell…a man's got to work for more than himself and his kids to feel alright'" (107). While watching a show with Maisie: "He sat there feeling sick in the pit of his stomach. The boys must be staging a free speech fight here in town…She'd already forgotten everything and was completely happy watching the show" (105). What keeps him with her is what keeps redemptive consumers consuming: guilt—"It was understood between them now that he had to do everything that

Maisie wanted because he had given her such a tough time before they were married" (104).

What Mac had done was run off to join a campaign of political action. In this, we have the

primal scene: the archetype of domesticity trumping the utopian impulse.

In suggesting this, I do not mean to enforce the gender alignment these examples

admittedly defer to wherein the aspiring male is trapped hopelessly by a female counterpart who

demands servility to the dominance of an established order. I certainly hope the legacy of

feminism has made it abundantly clear that the impetus to locate life-meaning beyond the

horizon of the family is a potentiality open to women, especially in its political form. I employ

Dos Passos narrative, however, to argue that contemporary usages of this trope maintain a

thematic concurrency. That when individuals face moral blackmail to remain in the family

instead of running off to take part in great, life-defining struggles—even if those struggles are

supernatural and ontologically extraordinary—they relive this primal scene. Thus the need to

take part in a transcendent cause—be it a war in heaven or what have you—in contemporary

media constitutes the historically transmuted impulse to the political. It is thus the family today

that thwarts the utopian impulse—the will to political action. It should be no wonder, then, that

in the present moment when politics as a route to the social whole has been troubled, that the

family should come into the purview. Family and politics are thus competing modes of social

access. The choice appears to be, as always, between Maisie (as a non-gendered symbolic object)

and one's comrades. And one thing to recall: Maisie likes to shop.

As I have suggested, the hopeful optimism of the local is bestowed by the political

orientation inherent in the roles which sustain it, even if the political itself has been generally

evacuated. Thus metamodernism as a cultural and aesthetic formation mirrors quite closely the

thematic of what I take to be an increasingly salient political disposition. The question this

project will engage is how this gets inflected in the contemporary novel. This dissertation offers a sustained engagement with four novels that self-consciously stake a claim to cultural relevance—that present themselves as "literature." I make this point to indicate that I am examining an approximate, though not codified, class of fictional objects. The point is to think about how contemporary cultural ideas register themselves in artworks that are ostensibly paying close attention to culture and its developments. I mean only to say that I justify my choice of novels on the grounds that these are novels written for the sake of being discussed (rather than entertainment, provocation, etc.). The following section will briefly introduce the texts and outline this project's chapters.

The Texts

My four texts, once again in order, are Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom,* Zadie Smith's NW, A. M. Homes' *May We Be* Forgiven and Caryl Phillips' *In the Falling Snow*. They each develop a similar thematic and narrative trajectory: they are all essentially narratives of familial dislocation and reunification. These novels all tell stories of families that are fractured as a function of the protagonists' own larger sense of personal alienation. It is this alienation that must be ameliorated and this effect occurs, perhaps unexpectedly, at that original site of fracture: the family. What these figures learn is that re-connection to the larger social world is possible only at the intimate level of their own families: that they must in earnest join their families (buy into it, not just go through the motions) in order to experience connection to the social totality. What they learn, to co-opt an old activist cliché, is to live globally means to act locally. These chapters will attempt, in various ways, to trace out how this logic of social inclusion via the family is a logical consequence of metamodernism: or, to put it alternatively, by what aesthetic means has

the politics of the local influenced cultural attitudes such that metamodernism, the expression of this development, ultimately leads to the local, intimate site of family. Each of these texts is metamodern in Vermeulen and van den Akker's sense: of oscillating between postmodern and modernist sensibilities. Most obviously this tension is evident in the texts' formal composition: their structural frameworks seem to be at odds with the logic that ultimately propels their narratives. Each of these four novels is ultimately a realist text, though a realist text with a highly stylized literary supplemental frame. Franzen, writing in the mode of a Victorian novelist, comes closest to thematic unity. However, the weighing sense of paranoia—the overwhelming pressure exerted on the characters by the outside world (and each other)—precludes the sort of social inquiry that, say, *Middlemarch* constitutes. As much as *Freedom* proposes the optimism of an inquiry, it also is engaged in telling it like it is. We thus observe in *Freedom* this oscillatory tension between the idealism of the pan-scopic narrative function and the gritty, dirty worldliness of self-enclosed American culture. In fact, apart from the Millennial youths that populate the novel—and whom embody what I in the previous section have described as the politics of the local—Walter Berglund serves as Franzen's summary figure of the metamodern with his boundless cynicism that mixes untroubled with the naiveté that leads him to get fooled and fooled again.

Smith, whose *NW* is clearly a pseudo-Woolfian modernist project, employs all manner of narrative innovation at the formal textual level. However, the novel's progression ultimately betrays a realist text fraught with family strife, infidelity and crime. The novel is in fact a plain realist text dressed in an experimental text's pelt—a veritable sheep in wolf's clothing. Homes as well takes up a self-consciously imitative literary mantle in *May We Be Forgiven*: perhaps best described as a neo-Cheever or post-Delillo (or post-9/11) suburban novel. This text as well, for

all its absurdity and black humor, finds its ultimate momentum in a push toward flat realism. This novel in fact reconciles absurdism and realism, brining strange situations and absurd social connections into view not to undermine social reality, but in order to domesticate the strange. Phillips as well begins *In the Falling Snow* by writing one novel (the immigrant experience in London novel) only to discover en route that such a novel is not tenable under the premise originally laid out and thus the text retreats into a realist portrayal of an aging but randy and somewhat disgraced middle-class business professional. In other words, all of these novels attempt to write themselves in certain pre-established literary modes, but each of them, despite its best efforts to retain their given formal efficacy, ultimately slips into contemporary realism (more or less). Each text seemingly discovers that its literary conceit is phantasmagorical: that it ultimately is governed by a set of conventions ill-suited to present day Anglo-American life. It is worth considering whether the only mode that can encompass the scope of life at the present moment is direct literary realism. This begs my final question—a question I cannot hope to answer exhaustively—of whether the present age is one worthy of depiction in creative fiction. This question may well pose a central unsaid anxiety which all of these texts are responding to.

I will treat each text as a case study in the sense that I will hold each of these novels against the propositions offered here in this introductory chapter, locating where they echo my sentiments and trace out where they are complicit with dominant cultural attitudes. In doing this, I do not propose that these authors and myself are "on the same page," in fact, each of these novelists responds to (and comprehends) the cultural nuances of the present moment with differing degrees and methods. Despite their many differences, these authors have some crucial things in common such that, or so it is my belief, much can be gained by putting them in conversation. Part of what characterizes contemporary literary fiction as a whole seems to be a

sense of epistemological in-between-ness. An anxiety of being caught frustratingly between identifiable social categories is present in all of these novels. Most conspicuously, Keith Gordon, Phillip's protagonist in *In the Falling Snow* suffers from an acute sense of generational displacement. The socio-cultural nuances that, for better or worse, bestow meaning seem apparent in their differing manifestations for his father and for his son, but he himself struggles throughout the text to determine his own sense of self. However, each novel makes use of this trope to greater or lesser degrees. Smith's Natalie Blake is caught bewilderingly between the high-powered professionalism of the life she aspires to and the self-affirming sense of belonging to her family and neighborhood. She doesn't quite fit into either. More abstractly, Homes' Harold Silver seems symbolically caught between the nebulous realms of childhood nostalgia and the impossible futurity of adulthood. Franzen's Walter Berglund as well is trapped strangely between fulfilling his political ideals and betraying them entirely when he learns the hard way that both options both ultimately entail the same course of action.

On a structural note, each of these novels is marked by what I as a critic am tempted to describe as a formal sleight of hand. Each of these novels, in other words, contains some impossible moment of or tendency toward thematic reconciliation. This is consistent with my suggestion that metamodern sincerity functions atop a foundation of irony. *May We Be Forgiven* is the most significant in this regard. Part of my treatment of this novel entails debunking the proposed sociality of the novel, not out of some sense of critical vindictiveness, but because this mode of operation is especially interesting when read in light of the metamodern. The novel postulates an impossible sociality that is miraculously accepted and smoothed over into a narrative fabric. Smith as well indulges in this tendency with Natalie's seemingly miraculous, out-of-nowhere expostulation of motherhood as the supreme object of self-affirmation. Even

Franzen, with his relentless realism, gives way to sentiment when Walter and Patty, against all

odds, get back together (Lalitha's death, though a terrible tragedy, becomes miraculous: it is

structurally necessary to their reconciliation). *In the Falling Snow* as well contains such a

moment of seeming extra-narrative intervention, though Phillips uses this moment to reorder the

whole thematic I have laid out. This, in fact, is my rational for selecting (and closing my project

with) this text. My treatment of Phillips' novel will address Keith's startling rejection of his

family; however, this move is so unexpected—his return home is something he longs for the

whole novel—that it stretches readers' expectations and in the process makes clear how subtle

yet unavoidable is the tug of the current pulling one toward familial and social conciliation.

The first chapter will focus on *Freedom*; it will argue that the text is the most

conspicuously bound up in the politics of the contemporary moment. This chapter sets the tone

for the others to follow. As I (and many others) have suggested, politics has a crucial function in

the background mechanics of cultural conceptions. This chapter, quite simply, helps lay the

conceptual groundwork for the others to follow. In the previous section I have offered an account

of politico-economic developments from which metamodernism as a general cultural orientation

might have arisen. This chapter, then, read this text as an exploration of the cultural climate

under such political conditions and treat it as an aesthetic expression of the wider cultural

response to these conditions. This chapter will suggest that Franzen hinges the cultural

developments of the present moment on a particular reevaluation of the American political

terrain. The generational gap that divides the Berglunds is not one characterized by family

quibbling and differences of opinion, but ideology itself. The narrative of this family posits that

something has really and truly changed in American society: the conquest of a market ethic has

rearranged the central premise of what political life is and means. In the absence of this, a

sociality, not of comradeship, cooperation or solidarity, but plain old community emerges. This is what Walter must, with Patty and the rest of his family's help, ultimately reconcile himself with when he abandons his politics like his cabin by Nameless Lake.

The focus of chapter two is Zadie Smith's *NW*, an experimental text which gradually weaves together voices and vignettes into an unsettling narrative of discomfiture. The fault line fracture in this text is not intra-generational, but between two women: best friends from childhood, Leah and Natalie (formerly Keisha). One of these women, Leah, ends the novel in dejection: she lies miserably in a hammock, despondent to the world after deciding that she does not want children or a family. Natalie, on the other hand, who has spent much of the novel in a similar condition, finds near the end of the text, in a moment of sudden rapture, that having children bestows meaning on her life. Two women: one stalled indefinitely, one finding the joy of continuity—the meaning that comes with knowingly passing through life-stages. The novel represents Smith's latest installment in a career-long project of reinventing for the present moment texts that follow, stylistically and thematically, from past literary models. Her breakthrough novel, *White Teeth*, follows the manic trajectory of a magical-realist text. *The Autograph Man* is her attempt at Dave Eggers-esque fiction; *On Beauty*, as virtually no critic has failed to recognize, is an homage to E. M. Forster. *NW*, then, is clearly Smith's Woolfian modernist text. This chapter will suggest that the sincerity of Smith's expression emerges strangely from a logic of bricolage. Smith self-consciously turns to past literary efforts, and like Franzen she identifies children and the family as the base level ground of social support a given individual can draw from (however unsavory they may be). *NW* then offers the proposition of a serious and emotional novel that emerges from a logic resembling the surface-level assemblages so characteristic of postmodernism. The novel tellingly closes with Leah and Natalie resuming

their childhood voices, as if asserting that children are the logical center of gravity in a system of moral responsibility.

Chapter three as well entails a thematic return to childhood; it focuses on Homes' *May We Be Forgiven*, an odd, irreverent text of a bumbling failed academic who finds ultimate self-satisfaction in the social connectivity of a family unit—even if it is one he himself has assembled. Harry Silver, the novel's main figure, seemingly floats through life. His brother, a high-powered TV executive, murders his own wife leaving him to move into his house and become caretaker to the children. This novel displays a curious logic: the sociality he comes to enjoy via familial integration (the trajectory of each of these novels) appears ultimately predicated on nothing. Throughout the novel, the reader witnesses seemingly genuine professions of love and care that come out of the blue. The only logic that appears to prompt any of it is that he is an active participant in a familial structure. Harry ultimately accumulates an extended family of essential strangers who proffer a sense of intimacy that appears unfounded: everyone in the novel appears to inexplicably love him. This chapter argues that this development betrays a deep need to return to childhood: to a space of unconditional love and care. Here the novel exposes the fixation that childhood in a loving familial environment provides the formal possibility of meaningful sociality. Building off the thematic tensions developed in the previous chapter, chapter three will suggest that this nostalgic impulse sharply parallels both the sense of reaching back and the sense that the future has nowhere to go: a genuinely metamodernist double-bind. Correspondingly, the children of the text are the true adults: they are worldlier, more knowledgeable, more intelligent, more resourceful and more mature than the adults in the text. *May We Be Forgiven* reflects an anxiety of a future that appears headed nowhere in particular. If postmodern irony maintains in the present moment it is

perhaps because it can never be fully retreated from. Whatever sort of epistemological future is possible remains obfuscated, which prompts a fantasy of return: return to modernism, to romanticism, to Victorianism, to…childhood. This aesthetic realization coincides with the cultural logic of the American suburbs, and even American consumerism itself. The absurdity of this text emerges from the difficult realization that the history of environmental degradation, international instability, industrial production and military-enforced trade provokes the question of just what sort of future there can possibly be.

Chapter four examines Philips' *In the Falling Snow* and argues that the most significant event of the novel is Keith's ultimate disavowal of the family and the contemporary logic which holds the family as basis for individual social meaning. That is, the novel sets up only to defeat the logic of the preceding texts. *In the Falling Snow* largely follows the trajectory of the others: Keith is an awkward, off-kilter, dry man—an oddball who is difficult to come to terms with. He as well is isolated, holding no real place in the social milieu; he is plagued with the sense of feeling out of place. This sense of placeless-ness stems from the dissolution of his marriage which, as with virtually all the marriages this project discusses, breaks up after a brief stint with infidelity. Keith is the son of Caribbean immigrants and maintains the sense that he is an outsider, a marginal figure in London society. The novel focuses on the cavern that separates him from his ailing, belligerent father. The whole of the narrative seems to point toward some impending reconciliation between them. Keith, in proper melodramatic form, goes to see his father on his deathbed, but from there the logic of cultural self-recognition breaks down. His father relates the story of his passage to Britain, which, while suitably gritty, does nothing to illuminate his son's identity. What Keith learns, this chapter argues, is that the gap that separates father and son is absolute: the logic of identity-attainment via familial conciliation fails. The

trauma that Keith faces is that he perhaps is not the outsider he fancies himself; that, after all, would at least bestow some existential logic—some *raison d'être.* Keith is no insider: he suffers racism in the course of his life, though it's nothing like what his father suffers. He neither is an outsider, being educated, a legal citizen and maintaining a substantial income drawn from a line of socially-meaningful work. Keith, rather, is lost somewhere in the middle—he is at a standstill. Thus, Keith, like the aesthetic sensibilities of the present moment, can neither go backward nor forward, but remains trapped. Phillips' choice, however, to have Keith ultimately reject his wife's offer of reconciliation breaks the pattern set by the previous novels. This project closes with this novel because Keith's decision suggests some level of self-awareness that the family, as an apparatus of bestowed meaning, is nonetheless imposed. What is more, this ending is suitably irony-free. Keith suffers a dull sense of discomfiture in his lack of a firm identity, but his decision to reject an easy answer opens up possibilities for alternate engagements with these contemporary cultural assumptions. This act is not an irony-soaked gesture that he nonetheless means (as are most of the acts he commits in the novel). This act of rejection is genuine, this chapter will argue, not in spite of, but because of his status as an in-between-er. This chapter will close with a brief discussion on how this refusal of the logic of family could potentially open up new approaches for the twenty-first century novel.

Each chapter is designed to trace out a set of ideas in pursuit of wider cultural themes I see at work in the contemporary moment. I have ordered these chapters in the hopes that some degree of thematic development is evident. It is important that these chapters be understood as engaging these texts as cultural-historical documents; this project does not, however, attempt to merely verbalize the authors' own social critiques, but rather strives to get at the foundations of the authors' own cultural perceptions. In other words, what Franzen or Smith may think of a

given social issue is of less interest to me as a critical reader of their novels than the fundamental assumptions which underpin those views. Indeed, what underlies this project is ultimately the question of what terms like "authorship" and "literature" today mean. These texts are (though not merely) barometers of cultural attitudes: tools with which literary critics and cultural historians can register deeply held attitudes. These attitudes don't dictate what we make art about, but rather influence our conceptions of what art is and what it means to create it. I hope these chapters are illuminating, but more than that I hope they raise as many meaningful questions as they attempt to answer.

Chapter 1 – Tangled Up in Red: Politics and the neo-Victorian in Franzen's *Freedom*

This chapter will address Jonathan Franzen's 2010 novel *Freedom* in terms of the developments described in the introductory chapter. As was suggested, this chapter will take up the question of politics in the midst of the metamodern culture-scape by attempting to historicize culturally the primacy of family as a thematic in the contemporary Anglo-American novel. What is at stake in this discussion is the importance of the political itself. Our contemporary ideological constellation, as Franzen will emphasize, isn't one in which politics faces the threat of becoming mystified or muddled, but extinguished altogether. What *Freedom* dramatizes involves a societal shift away from the agency of political action toward an engagement with culture. Such a shift complicates the designations and boundaries that have marked the political struggles of the twentieth century. As this chapter will demonstrate, Franzen is well aware that the turn to culture is not by any means incompatible with consumerism. However, as I will emphasize, there is more to this story than this recognizably postmodern development. What is at issue for Franzen is a cultural turn which would see this accomplished un-ironically. The emerging generation in *Freedom* is not some ruthless, cynical profit-driven force, the likes of which populate media caricatures of Wall St. and corporate boardrooms. On the contrary, the ethos of the young generation is one which would reconcile a ravenous entrepreneurial spirit with its own hopeful opposition. For Franzen, this is not a heartening development; the clearly-demarcated spaces of past political advocacy seem no longer to hold. The hope for a better future—that is to say, what Jameson calls the utopian impulse—has itself been confiscated by that which it dreams of superseding.

My suggestion in this chapter is that the political developments Franzen astutely presents in *Freedom* represent for metamodernism what "late capitalism" represented for Jameson. The

strange inversion of political consciousness that this chapter will trace through *Freedom*'s

narrative serves as the enabling mechanism for the oscillating effect that Vermeulen and van den

Akker describe. The particular means of political obfuscation that Franzen portrays doesn't

merely signify the total cultural conquest of postmodernity: the utopian impulse, after all, hasn't

been blotted out altogether. The way in which sincerity and hope interact un-problematically

with what is essentially market logic suggests a mediatory function reconcilable to the oscillatory

effect of metamodern aesthetics. The coexistence of postmodern cultural commoditization and a

sincere belief in human potentiality signals that *Freedom* is drawing its conception of the

American social fabric (as it is developing in the emerging Millennial generation) from this

moment of cultural transition from postmodernism to something else. That is to say, his

conception of the direction of American culture as it is taken up by the next generation is as

decidedly metamodern.

In light of this, it is worth hypothesizing that metamodernism represents, to rephrase

Jameson, the cultural logic of the contemporary hypermarket. What this chapter will trace out is

the means by which family is posited as a conceptual alternative to the totalizing social force of

politics: family, the site of private domesticity, becomes instead a point of contact to the wider

world of sociality. I will argue that *Freedom* poses a very sharp (though not absolute) ideological

demarcation on the nature of politics and the means by which they are practiced. This is a

demarcation which would see Walter Berglund and Richard Katz as inarguably on the losing

side, uniquely poised to take in America's political future from their diminishing vantage points.

Walter in particular suffers the effects of an ideological war of attrition; in the course of the

novel he discovers that the world is changing in such a way that his own politics become

unrecognizable. In attempting to swim against the stream, so to speak: in attempting to carry out

his principles regardless of the cultural counter-currents, he finds himself having to compromise them as a matter of necessity. Wounded from this ideological scuffle (and a quite real physical one that follows) he throws it all aside for a summer cross-country trip of free love and youth-inspired music festivals. Such an escape is temporary, though; Walter soon finds himself in seclusion, maintaining fidelity to his old political ideals only by living in the old family cabin on Nameless Lake. Instead of building solidarity, his politics isolate him. As this chapter will show, he re-enters the social at the close of the novel, but only by re-uniting with his estranged wife and reestablishing his scattered family (the close of the novel sees Walter and Patty moving to, of all places, New York City: the epicenter of commodifiable culture). It is through the family that Walter eventually rejoins social reality, though this time it is in a new way. The implication is that his rancorous politics, like the little bird preserve named after Lalitha, is left behind him in the middle of nowhere.

This usage of the family as a guiding thematic in this particular manner is, I contend, unique to the present moment. The goal of this chapter is to elucidate the above explanation in detail and anchor it firmly in a reading of the text. In order to accomplish this, I will break this chapter down into three sections. The first will articulate Franzen's concerns about the emerging youth generation. It will offer an account of the logic inherent to this generation as depicted in *Freedom*. I will explain how these characters' value systems ultimately presuppose a logic of cultural commoditization that isn't merely postmodern. I will then, to help contextualize the conceptual divide I am postulating, articulate the political logic of Walter and Katz and how developments in the present moment have complicated it. My formal analysis of *Freedom* will attempt to come to terms with this divide in the conceptual choices that Franzen has made to structure his narrative. *Freedom*, I will suggest, is a new sort of neo-Victorian novel. The neo-

Victorian, as it has been elucidated by scholars, refers to the tendency in art and culture to re-posit commoditized nineteenth century in the present moment. Jameson's phrase "nostalgia for the present" clearly applies: it is a decidedly postmodern phenomenon. Franzen, of course, is not doing this; *Freedom* is set in the present moment. This novel is neo-Victorian in a different way: in its adoption of the family as a lens for societal examination—in its utilization of a recognizably nineteenth century strategy to engage the present moment. If the neo-Victorian, as I will explain, signifies a pastiche-like recreation of the nineteenth century in a moment of sincere longing, then *Freedom* represents a sincere presentation of culture (aided by his Victorian method) to engage a cultural outlook that seems utterly cynical. This chapter will labor to explain that the adoption of a characteristically nineteenth century method of storytelling is meant to refocus the reader's attentions away from structural determinants of human relations (politics, now defunct) and toward a mode of social development grounded in family and locality. The troubled Berglund family, which simultaneously seems to implode and blossom, poses a challenge to contemporary readers to rethink the grounds upon which we ourselves live and engage the world.

Kids Today—Metamodern Youth

About halfway through *Freedom*, Richard Katz becomes famous. No one is more surprised than him, and certainly no one more disconcerted. To temper himself, he takes up a suitably depressive proletarian occupation: building roofs for Manhattan's elite. During the course of this work he finds himself dealing with a client's star-struck high school-aged son, Zachary—a "hipster-in-training and apparently something of a guitarist" (206). The boy recognizes Katz and watches him "from a safe distance, as if Katz were a lion on a chain" and "peppered him with

questions about vintage guitars, which Katz considered a particularly tiresome commodity fetish" (206). Zachary speaks with him—asks him questions, barrages him with the names of obscure, new rock groups that Katz admits (or feigns) ignorance of. Zachary is trying to engage him in a particularized mode of conversation: he is trying to speak with him using the vocabulary and a set of cultural references meant to identify him as inside Katz' frame of reference. However, Katz refuses to "perform himself" (207), responding to the youth's queries with entreaties to allow him to resume his work: "'I need that piece of material you're standing on'" (209).

What gets Katz' attention is, as ever, women: "'There's this girl in my class that's totally into *Nameless Lake*. It would be really helpful, in terms of getting her to talk to me, if I could digitally record one short interview and put it online'" (209). Immediately, several differences between these rough cultural equivalents emerge from this black hole of a generation gap. Any notion of politics (or even social causes more broadly) has been obliterated in the transition between these two figures: from post-war subculture to its contemporary update. Part of what Katz comes to realize is that Zachary represents a genuinely new form of subcultural subject. Just as Walter ultimately discovers the modern exploited have embraced the very mechanisms of their exploitation, Katz finds the modern bourgeoisie has embraced the figures who have traditionally resisted it: "Rather than thwarting his father's vicarious rock ambitions by pursuing entomology or interesting himself in financial derivatives, Zachary dutifully aped Jimi Hendrix. Somewhere there had been a failure of imagination" (211). Katz would seem to have preferred it if the boy *had* gone into abstract finance: at least that would be straightforward. What he instead finds is the ironic figure of a boy that embraces subversive culture precisely as a means of parental obeisance. Here, in other words, one can observe the metamodern logic on full display:

the boy's method of social interaction—that is, his social persona—has developed as an expression of familial fidelity. Furthermore, what is ironic about this figure is the sincerity with which he performs this function. The subversive force of rock music and subculture has, in the figure of Zachary, come to function as a means of cultural conformity.

Katz does his utmost to disillusion the boy: to compromise his own status as a genuine rocker and thereby deflate his expectations. He speaks with ease, employing repeatedly his memorable metaphor of Chiclets to encapsulate the properly Bourdieu-an conception of artistic production following a similar logic to material production. It is one of the most stirring political evocations of the novel (far more tactful and convincing than Walter's increasingly hysterical and self-pitying rants). His effort, however, avails itself little on Zachary, who continually interprets the ill temper of his interlocutor as the sort of self-disavowal that he perceives to be central to the authentic mode of artistic production:

> A:…I think it's good for the honesty of rock and roll and good for the country in general that we can finally see Bob Dylan and Iggy Pop for what they really were: manufacturers of wintergreen Chiclets.
> Q: So you're saying rock has lost its subversive edge?
> A: I'm saying it never had any subversive edge. It was always wintergreen Chiclets, we just enjoyed pretending otherwise.
> …
> We in the Chiclet-manufacturing business are not about social justice, we're not about accurate or objectively verifiable information, we're not about a coherent set of national ideals, we're not about wisdom. We're about choosing what WE want to listen to and ignoring everything else (213-4).

Katz is attempting to highlight, *reductio ad absurdum*, what logically follows from his, Zachary's, own assumptions on art and culture. His tactic fails, however, because Zachary ironically interprets his rancor as part of the very rocker persona that Katz is, for didactic purposes, trying to momentarily disavow. Zachary assumes being a true rock legend entails a degree of self-conscious distanciation and so inverts the whole system of communication. Well

aware that social capital can only be accumulated indirectly, he presupposes the impulse to self-effacement as a necessary proof of authenticity. He interprets, in other words, what is essentially a plea for recognition from Katz as part of his act. Their relationship, and the symbolic generation gap these figures dramatize, can be easily summarized in a single exchange. When Katz angrily gives up and orders the youth to shut off his recording device: "'That was great,' Zachary said, pointing and clicking. 'That was perfect. I'm going to put this up right now'" (216).

What disarms Katz is that Zachary is not subject to disillusion: he has no ideals to begin with. He wants the interview with Katz for the sheer sake of having it: they are a form of property he can show off and use as social capital. He isn't using his time with Katz as artistic inspiration or as an introduction to the artistic world (the way a letter of introduction from Gertrude Stein or Djuna Barnes would get you into the right company in 1930s Paris), but as a means of getting closer to a girl: for the sake of conducting and maintaining ordinary social affairs. Thus, for Zachary, culture is not a medium, but a form of exchange—of capital. His access to Richard Katz is employed to impress a girl the way other boys might try and use a new car. He is, as this chapter will lay out, the left's equivalent of Coyle Mathis (who shall be discussed later) in that he represents a point of ideological deadlock—he symbolizes the point at which culture and art, which in a subculture are meant as a means of conveyance, are themselves set as the horizon of meaning. Zachary represents that which dispenses with the corn of politics in favor of its cultural husk. This is the frame of reference of those slated to take up the progressive causes in the twenty-first century.

What is crucial to understand about Zachary is that he doesn't merely represent the cultural outlook of postmodernism. Here as well culture becomes a tradable commodity.

However, something is different with Zachary: he lacks a sense of irony, of self-awareness. The experimental elision of art and commoditized production that postmodernism made a facet of American aesthetics is one that ultimately alienates the individual consumer, pushing art further and further into an abstract miasma of meta-awareness. In other words, the commodification of art and its ensuing cultural repercussions (the compression of history and the "waning of affect" that Jameson articulates) automatically entail a rhetorical repositioning of art in the general space of culture. If art is self-consciously produced and consumed on a mass scale, then this development itself may be identified with the aesthetic theory underlying it. For Zachary, however, this is not the case: in fact, this character flips the equation around, so to speak. He is self-conscious, in a sense, but what he is self-conscious of is not the positioning of art in a cultural space (he is, incredibly, unaware of the irony behind his own pseudo-rocker persona). What Zachary maintains self-awareness of is, on the contrary, the commodification process itself. Where a postmodernist would take the mass production of art itself as a serious statement on the nature of art in culture, Zachary and his generational ilk instead invert this observation and suggest it implicitly reveals the centrality of consumption as an act. (This is perhaps the enabling conceptual groundwork behind Lipovetsky's notion of hyperconsumption.) Thus, it isn't that commodities make good art (as postmodernists might say), but that artworks makes good commodities. Hence, the utopian impulse associated with art—the sincerity, the hopefulness, the willingness to look toward the future untroubled—returns to circulation. Katz as well is used to dealing with postmodernism: his willing (indeed, eager) disavowal of public recognition can clearly be recognized as a reaction to the popular postmodernist celebration of reproducibility. Postmodernism, however, leaves open a rhetorical space for opposition; this boy does not. Katz is unable to deal with Zachary—the boy leaves him utterly flummoxed. He thus

represents a recalibration of postmodernism: an internal reconstruction in which the same

processes take on different significations. Zachary is postmodern in a different way: he

embodies, in fact, the social dynamics of metamodernism.

Katz comes face to face with this new comprehension of aesthetics—with

metamodernism proper—when Walter drags him to see the popular band Bright Eyes play. The

up-beat, progressive positivity of the performance and the youth of the crowd (who, unlike fans

of The Traumatics, are in their teens) absorb Walter, but leaves his friend feeling flat. Katz,

perhaps educated somewhat about the direction of youth culture from his encounter with

Zachary, perceives in the crowd an entitlement toward "unadulterated worship of a superficial

band. To being left to themselves to ritually repudiate, for an hour or two on a Saturday night,

the cynicism and anger of their elders" (392). Katz interestingly also perceives a sense of general

optimism on the part of the crowd, evocative no doubt of the currently emerging ethos of new

sincerity. This sense of entitlement and optimism are (as they are in my introductory chapter)

clearly linked in his observation:

> Katz could see it in their clothing, which bespoke nothing of the rage and
> disaffection of the crowds he'd been a part of as a youngster. They gathered not in
> anger but in celebration of their having found, as a generation, a gentler more
> respectful way of being. A way, not incidentally, more in harmony with
> consuming. And so said to him: die (392).

What Katz observes leads him to formulate an understanding of metamodern aesthetics. Bright

Eyes enacts Zachary's logic of aesthetics as pure cultural presentation—a mode, as Katz keenly

observes, entirely compatible with market consumption. In order for this conduit to be opened

up, politics must be jettisoned. After all, the only possible common objects these two frames of

reference —subculture and consumerism—share are the objects of culture: music, clothing, art,

etc. This fusion requires nothing of politics; in fact, politics names the site of mass

consumerism's opposition. The political is the weight grounding a given sub-cultural field in meaning: "The nation was fighting two ugly ground wars in two countries, the planet was heating up like a toaster oven…" (391) as Katz reminds himself during the concert (and starting to sound more and more like Walter), as if even he were at risk of forgetting his own politics and must, like Odysseus, tie himself to the mast with harsh facts about the world to avoid being caught up in the sirens' song. As Walter informs Katz, the lead singer "Obrest works the word 'lift' into every song. That's the name of the record, *Lifted*" (392). Without the unpleasant weight of politics (and the skepticism of meaningful futurity such analyses entail), the crowd is free to indulge in the pure optimism of materially-based cultural experience. If one forgets about the political, there is nothing to feel bad about—Katz himself feels "homesickness for Jersey City, its belief-killing streets" (392). Katz realizes this freedom—this free market of cultural desire— can only be sated materially. Subcultural signification as such thus becomes grounded in material commerce: a matter or purchase and thus those whose commerce is culture—the punks, the bohemians, the starving artists—become obliged to invest more of their resources in a material economy until the only authentic participants are those like Zachary (a Manhattan elite). Oberst himself is thus a fully-actualized Zachary: the future of the cultural position Katz himself used to occupy. The real problem for him isn't the superficiality he cites, but the precisely authenticity that he observes: "he [Oberst] was performing sincerity, and when the performance threatened to give sincerity the lie, he performed his sincere anguish over the difficulty of sincerity" (392)—a truly Katzian feat: "He was the real deal, a boy genius" (392). What Katz fears isn't that the show is insincere (that is to say, glazed with postmodern irony), but that the show *is* deeply sincere—that it marks a definite cultural turn; that Oberst *is* a heavily-revised future Katz.

Perhaps Katz' rough state would have been ameliorated had the whole affair betrayed itself as a phony image: as a shallow gesture—a postmodern simulacra. Part of what Katz' artistic self-effacement calls attention to is its own professed sense of depth. Postmodern cultural production celebrates the surface level in order undercut efforts which posit genuine historicity: the utopian impulse. The Traumatics, of course, are presented as the ever-present resistance to this theory-heavy artistic prescription—and all the more so efficacious for their neglect. As Theodor Adorno observes: "What takes itself to be utopia remains the negation of what exists and is obedient to it. At the center of contemporary antinomies is that art must be and wants to be utopia, and the more utopia is blocked by the real functional order, the more this is true" (32). Katz, in other words, is used to holding the rhetorical stage and propositioning genuine resistance to the hollow irony of the postmodern moment. It is a struggle which, in fact, defines him. What Katz finds in Oberst is, troublingly, an unwelcome ally that threatens to disturb his own position by association. It would be convenient if he could locate in Oberst, and in the crowd, the sort postmodern superficiality that would re-set the narrative into place. However, Bright Eyes is something he hasn't seen before: it offers a consumable experience that is genuine. Franzen describes the whole scene in nothing short of religious terms: "How almost religious in its collective seriousness" (391); "worship of a superficial band" (392); Katz as "the one nonbeliever at a church revival" (392), etc. There is, indeed, something ineffable about the performance, the crowd and the general feeling of the experience for Katz.

As was mentioned in the introduction, one reason this project has adopted Vermeulen and van den Akker's analysis as its focal lens has to do with its recognition of certain Romantic aesthetic tendencies permeating the present moment. Jos de Mul's fascinating *Romantic Desire in (Post)Modern Art and Philosophy* (1999) explores sub-currents of Romanticism in a aesthetic

field he identifies as (post)modern: "that is, the interwoven field of modern *and* postmodern" (xvii, emphasis original). de Mul's conception of (post)modern in these terms can be said to anticipate Vermeulen and van den Akker's analysis. It traces postmodernism's conceptual foundations beyond modernism to Romanticism, though he also identifies them in modernism itself: "In principle, the Romantic experience is an ambivalent experience, an expression of the ambivalence that is inherent to the (post)modern individual" (25). However, "where radical postmodern irony…threatens to result in a passive nihilistic or even fatalistic attitude, the Romantic project is borne by the idea that the transcendental movement in the direction of unity and totality is not only constitutive of human experience, but also that it expresses the humanity of man" (23-4). For de Mul, the underlying force of this conceptual trajectory is desire, which he postulates as a fixation upon an object which remains, ultimately, unobtainable: a Lacanian *objet a*. Rather than a postmodern desire, which itself becomes triangulated through a self-reflexive pattern of drives, desire for the Romantic (and modern) subject entails an ultimately untenable progression, though one which itself promises forms of development. Fittingly, then, Vermeulen and van den Akker argue regarding history: "The current, metamodern discourse also acknowledges that history's purpose will never be fulfilled because it does not exist. Critically, however, it nevertheless takes toward it as if it does exist. Inspired by a modern naiveté yet informed by postmodern skepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility" (5). In other words, the tendency these authors ascribe to Romanticism—and which they all identify as an active component in contemporary aesthetics—involves the whole-hearted movement toward a developmental goal which is known in advance to be untenable. Is this not an aspiration that, strangely enough, both Bright Eyes and The Traumatics share?

Metamodernism, then, as was suggested in the introductory chapter, entails a neo-Romantic position—a religious fervor for a promised future deliverance—that grounds a high sense of sincerity upon faith; upon a positively charged space of nothingness. My argument has been that this future generation that Katz identifies as essentially complicit with market participation nonetheless maintains a very real belief in optimism. To account for this, it is necessary to re-invoke Lipovetsky's notion of hyperconsumption. As it will be recalled, this term designates the point at which the neoliberal market ceases intrusion into the consumers' libidinal market indirectly via objects which promise to meet desires, themselves industrially produced. Rather, the hyperconsumer is one in which consumption itself contains the promised pleasure. Social fulfillment is obtained in the very act of consumption: where shopping at the right spot carries more social relevance than the purchase itself. Hyperconsumption, then, entails the condition in which the commodities become secondary to the act of purchasing them. For my own purposes, I wish to bridge this observation with de Mul's conception of Romantic desire and posit the market itself as the unobtainable object of contemporary metamodern desire. What Katz fails to learn from Zachary, and what he comes face to face with at the Bright Eyes show, is that culture itself—not its postmodern simulacra distilled into commoditizable forms—is the new market commodity: forever ungraspable and all the more desirable for being so. My own suggestion thus far has been that this re-conceptualization of the market entails a shift in political orientation. The metamodern signifies, then, the historical site at which culture in its ambidextrousness serves as the hyperconsumption commodity *par excellence* and post-political object simultaneously. This necessarily entails confusion between cultural and material capital. It is this ideological formation that will place Walter and Katz most at odds with the emerging generation.

The Bright Eyes show, of course, is Jessica's idea: "They seemed, as Jessica suggested, at the meeting earlier, to bear malice toward nobody" (392). If Zachary and Bright Eyes represent Katz' refashioned position—the position of the bohemian artist as leftist—then Jessica represents the future of the leftist intellectual: Walter's refashioned position. Like most Americans today who fancy themselves leftists, Jessica is inextricably tied to the academy—"It was clear that she'd gone to an expensive college and learned to speak her mind in seminars" (382). Like with Zachary, Jessica is a typically tech-savvy youth: "If you didn't grow up with cell phones in high school, you don't understand that your phone is very, very different from your e-mail. It's a totally different way of being in touch with people. I have friends who hardly even check their e-mail anymore" (373). She shares her father's continual sense of outrage, but little of his actual righteous justification or political commitments. Jessica speaks the language of class and politics throughout the novel, but she avails herself of none of her father's activist tendencies. Her own ambitions are, showing the influence of the metamodern, artistic: Jessica is an aspiring writer (perhaps a fully-actualized future version of Franzen himself), though to get by she is working as "a barely paid editorial assistant in Manhattan" (337)—a familiar post-liberal arts education story. We are told that "she had a deep green streak and hoped to make environmental issues the focus of her future writing" (337). Here, too, *Freedom* depicts the jettisoning of political commitment to facilitate the pursuit of cultural capital. For Walter, the environment is something worth going to great lengths to save (however problematic his efforts may be); for Jessica it is a matter of interest and as such a possible subject of an artistic pursuit.

Culture is Jessica's primary concern; she reflects quite clearly the ambivalence of the left's embrace of multiculturalism. One of the interesting aspects of her interactions with Lalitha is that they hardly seem to stem from the sexual tension the latter shares with her father—which,

strangely to my mind, Jessica seems hardly concerned with at all—but from the ways she

undercuts her ability to validate in herself in terms of contemporary cultural (or multicultural)

values. One of her complaints of Lalitha involves her subsistence on "'Cheerios, milk and cheese

sandwiches'" (374), expressing regret that her father's assistant is failing to embrace the cultural

heritage that is rightfully her property (and by associative extension, Jessica's to access). As

Jessica fulminates:

> "And you know, as it happens…I know quite a bit about Indian regional cooking.
> Because a lot of my friends in college were Indian? And *years* ago, when I first
> came down here, I asked her if she could teach me how to do some regional
> cooking, like from Bengal, where she was born. I'm very respectful of people's
> traditions, and I thought we could make this nice big meal together, her and me,
> and actually sit down at the dining-room table like a family. I thought that might
> be cool, because she's Indian and I'm interested in food. And she laughed at me
> and said she couldn't even cook an egg. Apparently both her parents were
> engineers and never made a real meal in their lives. So there went *that* plan"
> (374).

Jessica is, as she says, quite accommodating of the other; she is upset with Lalitha, ironically,

because she does not meet her expectations of otherness. Like Keith in *In the Falling Snow*,

Lalitha represents the threatening proposition of an *other* who turns out to be just a bit too

familiar—who turns out to be no other at all: Lalitha disappoints Jessica in being too

Americanized. Jessica's multiculturalism thus maintains traces of leftist politics, with its

Chomsky-an skepticism of American nationalism. However, this has manifested in Jessica's

multiculturalism as acceptance of the other not in spite of Ameri-centrism, but for sake if

performing the act as a form of capital accumulation. Jessica's multiculturalism thus entails an

emphasis on culture for the sake of culture and because the culture of the other is a form of

capital, and so her interactions with Lalitha carry the sour note of a purported oil well having

come up dry. Thus, ironically, Jessica's multicultural extension of the hand to the other has the

effect of orientalizing that very other. She has, after all, a vested interest in making sure that

other remain *other* and not, as Lalitha turns out to be, virtually as American as she herself is. Lalitha represents, for Jessica, an unsavory form of integration: globalization of culture along with ethnicity. Jessica embodies a contemporary liberal multicultural outlook wherein ethnic populations merge in such a way as to preserve their cultural practices. Though rooted in discourses of resistance to empire and anti-capitalism, what the figure of Jessica makes clear is the extent to which this (largely phantasmatic) preservation of culture figures in the multiculturalist's virtual culture market. A perhaps impertinent, but more direct, rendering of the phenomenon might be to say that multiculturalists like Jessica want the culture of the other preserved for the sake of their own consumption—a development Graham Huggan refers to as the "postcolonial exotic". In so far as this, metamodern multiculturalists embody the logic of figures like Zachary in presenting culture itself as a consumable object. If Franzen is dramatizing the metamodern aspect of contemporary American culture, then Jessica personifies an important component: the post-political, post-ideological multiculturalist. However, this figure alone does not account for the total phenomenon. Jessica, then, as the impoverished (though employed) would-be writer, embodies the cultural capital aspect of this phenomenon. It is her brother Joey that represents the factor of material capital—the literal market which enables the rolling-out of this cultural logic.

By Patty's own admission, "Joey has Jessica pretty well beaten" (568). If Jessica embodies the abstract push toward cultural capital, Joey represents the drive toward material accumulation. The sibling rivalry they maintain throughout the book dramatizes the Bourdieu-an struggle between cultural and material capital. What *Freedom* suggests—and what I've been arguing—is that this rivalry doesn't perpetually maintain its inverse relationship but, like the present moment is caught in the act of rearranging itself. In the present moment, cultural capital

and material capital are not even conceived as mutually exclusive: "It frustrates her [Jessica] to be devoted, like her father, to a declining and endangered and unprofitable enterprise while Joey gets rich almost effortlessly. Nor can she conceal her envy of Connie for getting to travel the world with Joey, getting to visit precisely those humid countries that she herself is most multiculturally enthusiastic about" (568). Jessica's loss entails her admission (by observation of Patty) of envy at Joey's commercial success—her admission that access to the cherished multicultural capital requires infusions of material capital. Money isn't, in its current manifestation (its multicultural incarnation), oppositional to cultural capital; as Patty informs us, cultural capital *can be bought*. In one of *Freedom*'s more potent ironies, it is uneducated, Midwestern, Joey-obsessed (that is to say, anti-feminist), culturally-myopic, unsophisticated Connie that is being granted access to these cultural resources.

Joey's victory does not come directly; his commercial approach gets mediated near the end of the novel. Much of his narrative involves salvaging shoddy truck parts in South America to sell to the U.S. Government through LBI: "And then one night on CNN, he saw news of an ambush outside Fallujah in which several American trucks had broken down, leaving their contract drivers to be butchered by insurgents" (469). Joey is haunted for the rest of the novel by guilt (and fear of legal prosecution by the government). Jessica's position is shown to be untenable, but so too is Joey's: the world of Washington DC proves too severe an environment, too shady, too hostile to newcomers trying to break into world of wealth and power and so he, mirroring the increasingly obvious youth preference for technology and other emerging enterprises, ultimately steps out of the world of military contracts altogether. His choice of commercial interest near the end of the novel is interesting: "Walter, with his South American connections, was able to steer Joey into shade-grown coffee at exactly the moment when

fortunes could be made in it" (567). Astoundingly it is Walter, who informs his son in one of the novel's first conversations that making money is not a right, who provides his son with crucial fortune-building advice.

Joey, on his way to wealth, makes a number of small concessions to Jessica: small gestures toward the importance of cultural capital. While in South America, for instance, he reads "the novel his own sister had given him for Christmas, *Atonement*" (447) by Ian McEwan. Thus locked in this sibling rivalry is almost literally the dialectic of cultural-material capital. These two forms of capital thus not only occupy the same space, *Freedom* depicts them as mutually dependent. Aside from receiving financial advice from his father, Joey also marries Connie in effect as payment for a business loan. His business ventures, in other words, have the consistent effect of drawing him into a matrix of familial relations. Joey donates a portion of his war profits to Walter and Lalitha's "Free Space" campaign—"His son had won that war, and he was glad of it" (507). Speaking to Jessica later, "Walter insisted that Joey was a different person since he'd married Connie" (519). At the close of the novel, only Joey and Connie maintain lives that the average reader is likely to term "happy."As Jessica's dreams of literary success melt quickly into frustration; as Patty and Walter's marriage collapses; as Walter's political projects fall into discombobulation; as Patty loses her home and very nearly her sanity; through all these crises tearing apart the Berglund family, it is strangely Joey—the self-centered boy who nearly wrecked his family after leaving home in the first chapter—who anchors the family together: who plays negotiator, conciliator and dispenser of funds. What's more, his ability to play these roles—his ability to function as the center of a family nucleus—stems from his financial success. Joey is thus a dialectical counterpoint to Jessica in the same way that Coyle Mathis is to Vin

Haven. Joey and Jessica, through their sibling rivalry, dramatize the post-political cultural

negotiation that has come to define the contemporary moment.

Freedom *and the State of the Political*

If the Berglund children (and their generational peers) dramatize a changing relationship between

politics and culture, then it is the elder generation which dramatizes that which the new

development deviates from. In 1890, William Morris published *News from Nowhere*, a work

thematically analogous to the sections of Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* concerning Nameless

Lake. I offer the Morris-Franzen comparison not merely as exegetical curiosity, but in order to

get at an important facet of the latter's work. Namely, that *Freedom* is the novelization of a

collective contemporary rejoinder to the social utopianism of the late nineteenth century.

Franzen's novel is not conservative per se, but rather seems to enact the possibility that what we

find at the logical endpoint of utopian thinking is a grinding deadlock. "Freedom," this chapter

will argue, in Franzen's verbiage, signifies something more than the trite, vague meaning that

was ascribed to it during the second Bush administration (when the novel is set): something

roughly along the lines of "freedom from the government" or the "freedom to consume and

maintain an American lifestyle." For Franzen, this word indeed is the point at which utopian

thinking trips up on its own logic and collapses in on itself. Morris' novel was rooted in his

lecture of 1884 entitled, interestingly, "How We Live and How We Might Live." This

immediately should bring our attention to the exchange between Merrie and Seth Paulsen that

concludes the first section of the novel: "'It's a wonder,' said Seth Paulsen Remarked to Merrie

afterward, "'that the two of them are even still together.' Merrie shook her head. 'I don't think

they've figured out yet how to live'" (20). This question of how to live in the contemporary

moment permeates the novel—"How to live?" (339) the narrator says as both a question and an exasperation; this question is the uncomfortable counterpoint to the novel's central thematic term: "freedom." In fact, "freedom" is both the occasion for and the answer to this very question.

Freedom comes to a head amid the turmoil that followed in wake of the events of September 11, 2001. Interestingly, the event is directly registered in—in fact begins, or perhaps is the occasion for—"Womanland": Joey's inaugural section. Joey registers 9/11 as a personal inconvenience that lodges itself bothersomely at the core of his person and throws off-track his progress toward inventing himself and his life as he envisions it: "…on the morning of September 11 he actually left his roommate, Jonathan, to monitor the burning World Trade Center and Pentagon while he hurried off to his Econ 101 lecture. Not until he reached the big auditorium and found it all but empty did he understand that a really serious glitch had occurred" (247). Joey interprets the effects of 9/11 on his life as more than seismic vibrations of a major geopolitical event. 9/11, curiously, takes on an almost metaphysical resonance—it registers for this character as "something deeper, something not political, something structurally malicious, like the bump in the sidewalk that trips you and lands you on your face when you're out innocently walking" (248). "Innocently walking" is a creative way to describe Joey's behavior, which involves among other things getting his first taste of wealth as a war profiteer while still an undergraduate. Joey's (and, later in the novel, Walter's) primary locus is Washington DC, the center of both politics and the war business. Both of these ventures promote the rhetoric of freedom while massaging the action of war into the background. As I will elaborate later, it is Joey that enacts fully the logic of the novel—*Freedom* itself is scrawled on the cover of the physical book while the business of war, despite its profound impact on the events and characters in the novel, exists as the background noise.

Who ultimately bears the brunt of the war's social effects is, of course, Walter. As Morris

argues in "How We Live and How We Might Live":

> let us pass from this 'competition' between nations to that between 'the organizers
> of labour,' great firms, joint-stock companies; capitalists in short, and see how
> competition 'stimulates production' among them: indeed it does do that; but what
> kind of production? Well, production of something to sell at a profit, or say
> production of profits: and note how war commercial stimulates that: a certain
> market is demanding goods; there are, say, a hundred manufacturers who make
> that kind of goods, and every one of them would if he could keep that market to
> himself, and struggles desperately to get as much of it as he can, with the obvious
> result that presently the thing is overdone, and the market is glutted, and all that
> fury of manufacture has to sink into cold ashes (3).

Morris then adds, poetically: "Doesn't that seem something like war to you? Can't you see the

waste of it—" (3). Indeed, waste is very much on Walter's mind. He spends the latter half of the

novel uniquely enraged with the "jumbo *everything* to which his fellow Americans seemed to

feel uniquely entitled" (333). Like Joey, what bothers this character isn't merely the physical

event—the literal and physical refuse littering the planet—but something vague and ineffable at

the core of this phenomenon: "…it wasn't the Walmarts and the buckets of corn syrup and the

high-clearance monster trucks; it was the feeling that nobody else in the country was giving even

five seconds' thought to what it meant to be packing another 13,000,000 large primates onto the

world's limited surface every month" (333-4). What Walter is concerned with isn't just that the

world is littered with litter, but that it's littered with *people*: "The country that minutely followed

every phony turn of *American Idol* while the world went up in flames seemed to Walter fully

deserving of whatever nightmare future awaited it" (334).

It is this facet of the text—Walter's development in *Freedom*'s latter half—where Frazen

makes clear the novel's political quandary. One of the novel's most surprising (and for many

critics, disconcerting) developments is Walter's involvement with Vin Haven and major oil

interests, ironically tied to LBI and the world of dubious military contracts that his son finds

himself enmeshed in at the same time (LBI contracts Kenny Bartles, the man Joey is working for). It's worth noting that many critics felt un-persuaded in this development, chalking this strange partnership up to shoddy craftsmanship on Franzen's part. Aniss Shivani, writing for *The Huffington Post*, exemplifies this tendency: "It's impossible to believe, despite Franzen's strenuous efforts, that Walter would make the Faustian bargain he does, becoming complicit in large-scale mountaintop removal for the sake of getting some money to feed his lifelong obsession with overpopulation" (1). Shivani's objection is understandable, but his own attempt to account for this—Walter's maneuver as "a bout of envy toward Richard, whose band Walnut Surprise experiences unexpected commercial success" (1) —is equally unconvincing. We certainly do have to take into account Walter's lifelong sense of living in Richard's (and earlier, his brothers') shadow and it is true that his assuming control of the Cerulean Mountain Trust thrusts him for the first time into the limelight: while at the helm of this operation he finds himself giving press conferences and interviews with the *New York Times*. However, it is important to understand, as will be discussed, Walter never competes: he withdraws. Furthermore, a reading which continually reduces Walter's motivation to personal emotional and social redemption fails to address the political landscape that this character traverses.

It is Walter's own political position reflected back to him via the gaze of the media that seems to snap him at attention and allows him to reflect on just what it is he's trying to accomplish. It was "not until he was facing the journalists on Monday morning painting LBI as an outstanding pro-environmental corporate partner, had the degree of his own implication hit him" (501). Walter soon reaches his breaking point—at a press conference sponsored by LBI and filled with journalists and government contractors he finally speaks his mind, going on a long, Franzen-esque rant: "It's a perfect system because as long as you've got your six-foot-wide

plasma TV, and the electricity to run it, you don't have to think about any of the ugly

consequences. You can watch *Survivor: Indonesia* till there's no more Indonesia!" (514). "Coyle

Mathis," we are told, "was the first to boo" (514). Mathis, who "embodied the pure negative

spirit of backcountry West Virginia" (313), is a troublesome figure to Vin Haven's relocation

efforts. To strip mine the mountain, and in return grant the Cerulean Mountain Trust land for its

bird preserve, Vin Haven needs to remove the West Virginians residing in the area and get them

to agree to relocate to a new development and accept jobs working at LBI's body armor plant,

and thus also (in theory) moving them into the middle class—"Welcome to the middle class!"

(513) as Walter begins his press conference speech at the plant. Up to this point in the novel,

only Mathis has held out on the deal—"He was consistent in disliking absolutely everybody.

Being the enemy of Mathis' enemy only made you another of his enemies. Big Coal, the United

Mine Workers, environmentalists, all forms of government, black people, meddling white

Yankees: he hated all equally. His philosophy of life was *Back the fuck off or live to regret it*"

(313). At the body armor press conference, the narrator expresses on behalf of Walter "sadness

for Mathis…whose expression remained fixed in contempt" (513). Walter is aware that with his

aid Vin Haven has utterly screwed Mathis and the other West Virginians. Taking advantage of

their lack of education, he helped sell these people a shabby future while swindling them out the

lands their families have lived on for generations. What goes curiously unremarked upon in the

novel (and its critical reactions) is the fact that when Walter vocally expresses their plight and

condemns Vin Haven and LBI, it is Mathis—representative of the surely, impoverished West

Virginians that are the victims—who is the first to condemn him.

This points us to the political deadlock at the heart of the novel—the political deadlock

that I contend bears some relation to the cultural development I have been referring to as

metamodernism. As Morris argues, once again, in his 1884 speech: "as we live now, it is necessary that a vast part of the industrial population should be exposed to the danger of periodical semi-starvation, and that, not for the advantage of the people in another part of the world, but for their degradation and enslavement" (5). Morris' is employing a pun on "exposed," suggesting both literal exposure (in a wry manner, calling attention to the needless suffering attached to wealth inequality) as well as exposure in the sense of education. In other words, Morris is working under a standard assumption that underlies leftwing politics and has done so since the European progressive luminaries of the nineteenth century: that information, education and awareness are at the root of political change. What Franzen proposes, and what Walter learns the hard way, is that in a post-9/11 world this outlook is no longer tenable. A terse summation of the new state of affairs can be located in Slavoj Žižek's recent *Less Than Nothing*: "fundamentalism is a symptom of liberalism" (303). Increasingly it seems that the present economic order headed by the United States requires for its maintenance the enforcement of specific frameworks which reduce those included within them to a state of antipathy toward modernity itself. Many on the radical left are increasingly attune to the possibility that liberal capitalism is unwittingly aiding in the production of the various forms of fundamentalism and nationalism which threaten the enterprise of liberal capitalism itself. As Terry Eagleton argues in his lecture "The Limits of Liberalism": "Reason as a form of dominion has produced some of the very aspects of western civilization to which Islamic radicalism is a pathological reaction. In this sense, civilization and barbarism, enlightenment and irrationalism, are by no means the simple opposites they may appear" (37:46). Or, more laconically, "somehow *Forest Gump* and *Kill Bill* go together" (Eagleton, "Culture and Barbarism" 15:25). The political crisis that Walter encounters in *Freedom* is that the left's grounds for education and advocacy have been revoked.

The ignorant, the rednecks, the fundamentalists, the trailer-trash Walmart shoppers—in short, the Coyle Mathises of the world—are no longer the simple, oppressed class ripe for the organizing; rather, the identity of this third world within the United States is structurally determined by LBIs and the Vin Havens of the world: the industrial classes, the culture of Wall St. and the Washington political elite. They are, as it is often phrased, two sides of the same coin.

The twentieth century political left in America has maintained a fascination with the figure of the political preacher, the radical messianist: eminent leftists and anarchists like Emma Goldman and Big Bill Haywood exemplify this tradition. These figures serve almost as historico-political archetypes, drawing up divisions in the American social fabric and making it clear to those who listen, like Dos Passos' "Mac" McCraery, where those who want change must stand. The notion is one of the lone travelling organizer who arrives at a small town or hamlet to first educate the people about their exploitation and then organize them. (Consider Walter's presumption at "educating" Patty throughout the novel and the residents at Canterbridge Estates near the end of it.) The assumption is that the impoverished, exploited workers and farmers occupy a subject position naturally antagonistic to the wealthy, the bourgeois, the factory owners, the big banks, etc. They need only realize this fact and act on it to constitute revolution. The political deadlock embedded in *Freedom*'s core points to a shift in this relationship. If the "workers" (a label that has grown increasingly dubious): the militant right, the redneck survivalists, the fundamentalists, etc. all enjoy what is essentially a symbiotic relationship to liberal capitalism's mechanisms of power (particularly, big business, Wall St. and the US Government), then it is no longer a simple matter of empowering one division and enlisting it into political struggle against the other. If the very components of Mathis' identity are, as some Marxists today insist, in some dialectical way fashioned out of the processes of the very liberal

institutions he himself despises, then what Walter faces as the representative figure of the post-war left is an entirely new political dynamic demanding an entirely new format of struggle. Walter intuits that the close connection between the leftist revolutionary and the workers today is not a tenable one—"He couldn't see a church or a REAL MEN LOVE JESUS sign or a fish symbol on the back of a car without his chest tightening with anger. In a place like West Virginia, this meant he got angry pretty much every time he ventured into the daylight" (333)—this doesn't put him in a good position to organize politically. Though, like the left of today, he cannot put his observations together in a rational manner. Instead, he allows his frustration to get the better of him. The figure of Mathis is marked by a set of contradictions that left in its traditional manifestation is ill-equipped to interpret. The Coyle Mathises of the world, for instance, may despise the US Government and everything it does, but this will not stop them from posting yellow ribbons and supporting the troops vociferously. This contradiction is symptomatic of the entangled relationship between them and the official powers of the state and big business. During his rant, Walter does not understand that the disagreements between men like Vin Haven and Mathis—the differences he is counting on to enlist the support of Mathis against the big business entities he ultimately deems too corrupt to work for—conceal a deeper connectivity. Anti-government, Tea Party "libertarians"—certainly Franzen is counting on his audience recognizing Mathis as among this crowd—are in this situation far more likely to side with the government itself than progressive liberals like Walter.

In 2010, the year *Freedom* was published, Frank Rich of *The New York Times* helped break the story that Tea Party gatherings and media coverage were being bankrolled by billionaires including Rupert Murdoch and the infamous Koch brothers. Despite the rhetorical antagonism, Coyle Mathises of the world and deep-pocketed organizations of influence have

certain overlapping interests and thus maintain a level of mutual support. This is why Mathis is

the first to boo Walter's speech. The reaction from the left in recent years has been a protracted

sense of *aporia* and cynicism. The political tragedy of *Freedom* is that Walter and his politics are

operating in a landscape that has shifted—that is playing by a new set of rules. Walter, in this

political landscape, experiences the enactment of his political convictions as a passive object at

the whim of whatever environment he is passing through:

> He didn't know what to do, he didn't know how to live. Each new thing he
> encountered in life impelled him in a direction that fully convinced him of its
> rightness, but then the next thing loomed up and impelled him in the opposite
> direction, which also felt right. 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 (339).

 The maddening sense of freedom and privilege with which people in this novel go about doing

as they wish and in the process causing destruction is, upon closer inspection, not at all

contingent but structurally determined. It is clear, then, that Walter does not join with Vin Haven

because, as Shivani suggests, he needs to compete with Richard Katz. Nor does he "sell out"

simply and directly. The uncomfortable political development of this novel is that Walter is lead

to sell out his own principles *as a logical consequence of trying to enact them*. The political

landscape is such that what he is forced to resort to in order to act with fidelity to his convictions

puts him into opposition with himself. The important point in my reading of this text is that the

betrayal is not conducted on the part of Walter himself, but is immanent in the political moment.

In other words, Walter doesn't betray his politics; his politics betray him. It is to this bizarre,

self-alienating quality of the post-9/11 political horizon that Franzen asserts his term "freedom";

"freedom" is the quality of the political situation such that genuine progressive causes either

dissipate in the form of a turn toward culture (such as the case with academic, multi-cultural

liberals like Jessica who are defined in terms of access to culture) or run aground following the

course of its own logic. "Freedom" is the signifier of the political state of the United States at the turn of the twenty-first century—that is, in this contemporary metamodern moment.

Perhaps the most telling example of "freedom" in the novel is the image of the small bird preserve: "To this day, free access to the preserve is granted only to birds and residents Canterbridge Estates, through a gate whose lock combination is known only to them" (597). This image, which closes the novel, informs our reading of the entire preceding text—"free access" in counter-position to "Open Space." Franzen offers the image of a closed-off, gated community as the emblem of "freedom": a gated community so exclusive it's not even for people—Walter finally gets his little bird preserve. The only people it's accessible to are the ones who live in Canterbridge Estates, presumably one of the multitudes of "luxury housing" developments that sprung up in the Midwest throughout the 90s up until the economic downturn of the early 2000s (which in part seems to have been caused by the surplus production of such developments—a fact Franzen surely is aware of). This is a conscious paradox: a bird preserve meant to keep people out that can nonetheless be accessed by the very people from whom the birds must be protected (Walter disappears Bobby, the cat of one residential family, to keep it from killing local birds). Like Nameless Lake—and Morris' "nowhere"—this preserve literally cannot named. The text calls our attention to "a small ceramic sign with a picture of the pretty young dark-skinned girl after whom the preserve is named" (597): Lalitha herself remains unnamable. What these spaces have in common is that they are ironic zones of freedom: self-enclosed spaces reflective of America's self-conception as an exceptional, closed-off space. (This may also be a sly gesture to the infamous "free speech zones" erected at the periphery of major political gatherings.) If "freedom" was the unequivocal term (and core value) of the Bush era, and if freedom itself, as I have tried to demonstrate, merely designates a position in a vast, causally-

overdetermined system, then, the novel suggests, the only locales in which to find genuine freedom are in spaces that are closed off—enclosed spaces, the spaces, ironically, we traditionally are likely to ascribe to the opposite of being free. Freedom, then, has the effect of muddling the distinction between public and private—open and closed social spaces. This seems a fitting thematic corollary to the metamodern conception of social spaces paradoxically mediated by private spaces of familial social relations. Walter's brief time at Nameless Lake is an attempt to experience freedom in an antiquated form: he wants freedom from contemporary life. He wants genuine privacy, but the world comes knocking; it is in his solitude at Nameless Lake—his escape from Patty—where the thought of her torments him the most. Alternatively, then, "freedom" names the site of our interactions with other people, a gift to which we are condemned. If "freedom" as George W. Bush meant it refers to a kind of free access to the market and freedom for Walter means a form of ironic stasis and a retreat from the social, then I would argue that metamodernism reflects where both of these rationales find a curious mutual negation. Political quandaries like Walter's seem to have dissuaded a generation of would-be leftists from joining the ranks of political causes. Movement in the political landscape itself is what generates Walter's unbearable friction; a new generation of sincere, conscience-laden "Millennials" have opted for a novel sort of rootedness and an investment in community and the (local) market (local market consumption itself being a marketable commodity). It is this rootedness and investment in locality that has facilitated the replacement of politics with culture and thus defines the post-politics of the metamodern moment.

It is through certain social connections where the novel makes clear the left's shift away from politics and toward culture. Both Walter and Katz represent two facets of the traditional left: the academic and the authentic bohemian artist:

> "Richard's excited about Margaret Thatcher," Walter said. "He thinks she represents the excesses of capitalism that will inevitably lead to its self-destruction. I'm guessing he's writing a love song."
> "You know me well," Richard said. "A love song to the lady with the hair."
> "We disagree about the likelihood of a Marxist Revolution," Walter explained to Patty.
> "Mm," she said, spitting.
> "Walter thinks the liberal state can self-correct," Richard said. "He thinks the American bourgeoisie will voluntarily accept increasing restrictions on its personal freedoms."
> "I have all these great ideas for songs that Richard inexplicably keeps rejecting."
> "The fuel-efficiency song. The public-transportation song. The nationalized-health-care song. The baby-tax song" (108).

This passage suggests a great deal about the relationship between these two men, but also a great deal about the relationship between their politics. Most obviously, it is taken as a matter of assumption that leftist political overthrow would be desirable (Walter merely questions its likelihood). We are also made to understand, given Patty's lack of enthusiasm, that the bohemian artist and the academic leftist suffer similar degrees of neglect from the general public. It is also interesting to observe the sense of cooperation between their respective positions. Katz' politics are, of course, more romantic—more imaginative. Walter is more pragmatic. Katz' assertion that his friend thinks "thinks the liberal state can self-correct" may even seem to disqualify Walter, on literal definitional grounds, from the role of "radical." Katz himself will later avow difficulty in getting upset during Clinton's years, which might situate him too as yet another loud-mouth liberal playing at radicalism. I should say, for the sake of clarifying my own discussion, I am citing them as leftists in the sense that they identify certain core aspects of American society to be problematic and thus hold that they must be subject to change. My own position on the debate is that reforms of a certain sweeping magnitude would be indistinguishable from the effects of revolutionary action, and so the distinction may not be as stark as the discourse typically holds. Katz' identification of capitalism as the central object of political struggle certainly qualifies him

ideologically. Walter, too, would seem to qualify if nothing else than on the grounds that his

friend (and the novel itself) frequently counter-pose his suggested reforms to the "freedom" at

the heart of the modern American commercial-ideological enterprise. Katz and Walter are, of

course, joking around here, but our attention is nonetheless drawn to the academic fetish for the

outsider (consider Foucault's project to examine the subject positioning of the mad, the queer,

the prisoner, etc.) as well as the academic pretensions of much obscure (or, today, self-styled

"indie") music, film, writing, etc. The bohemian artist and the leftist academic have maintained a

cozy relationship for much of the late twentieth century. Part of their distress in the novel is in

witnessing the states of their successors.

Katz and Walter both, at various point in the novel, are paired with seemingly like-

minded young people who offer themselves as students or surrogates—they present themselves

as the carriers of the leftist tradition. However, there is a problem: these replacement ideologues

are ill-suited for genuine leftist political action. Just after his affair with Patty, as if via some

karmic chain reaction, Katz finds himself, for the first time, commercially successful. He is as

confused as anyone; in fact, he is more than confused—he is positively distraught:

> Grimm situations were Katz's niche the way murky water was the carp's. His best
> years with the Traumatics had coincided with Reagan I, Reagan II, and Bush I;
> Bill Clinton (at least pre-Lewinski) had been something of a trial for him. Now
> came Bush II, the worst regime of all, and he might well have started making
> music again, had it not been for the accident of success. He flopped around on the
> ground, heavily carplike, his psychic gills straining futilely to extract dark
> sustenance from an atmosphere of approval and plentitude (205).

Katz makes music in response to political situations; almost comically, this seems to play out

literally in terms of presidential elections (this also recalls Franzen's own frequent avowal in

interviews that his novels are all meant to correspond to a certain presidential era). However,

Katz finds himself not merely sensitive to the social recognition of politics, but also to the

politics of social recognition. Pierre Bourdieu does us the service of laying out the critical

terrain:

> The literary or artistic field is at all times the site of a struggle between two principles of hierarchization: the heteronomous principle favorable to those who dominate the field economically and politically (e.g. 'bourgeois art') and the autonomous principle (e.g. 'art for art's sake), which those of its advocates who are least endowed with specific capital tend to identify with a degree of independence from the economy, seeing temporal failure as a sign of election and success as a sign of compromise (40).

Simply put: obscurity confides upon Katz two things. First, the perpetual drive toward

recognition that comes with being ignored. Second, the self-righteousness at "fighting the good

fight"—of being one of the enlightened few toiling righteously against the ignorance of the base

masses. This dilemma is, of course, similar to that of the highbrow-lowbrow distinction: that

commercial success and artistic authenticity maintain a precarious inverse relationship. Katz'

music is motivated by the emotional power of his general neglect and political frustrations and

thus it is successful insofar as it maintains a position in that register—"the press had finally

concluded that familiarity with The Traumatics was never going to be necessary for anyone's

cultural literacy or street credibility" (152). This is just the way Katz likes it. Freedom describes

at a show "die-hard Traumatics fans—white, male, scruffy, and even less young than they used

to be" (152). This catalogue of features strikes present day readers as uncomfortable: white,

male, middle-aged, presumably well educated and thus middle class—surely a recipe for an

invasive, elitist politics. Interestingly, the description of the Traumatics' fan base would seem to

fit the description of the stereotypical leftist academic (or at least an academic of the now old

New Left): in short, the Walters of the world (and indeed, in this instance, Walter *is* there in the

crowd). Commercial success literally threatens his artistic authenticity—but it would also

threaten his politics because his audience is recognizably a political audience, and what is more a political audience in a moment where politics itself is losing its epistemological traction.

Commercial success threatens to bring his artistic enterprise into communion with someone like Connor Oberst: after all, the fact that Zachary approaches him—that he even recognizes him—means that Katz shares an audience with Bright Eyes, a fact that must surely make him give pause and think. What Katz and Walter both have in common, then, is a terrain of struggle that turns in on itself, granting no sense of forward progression (nor even the promise of it). Katz is made popular in trying to disavow popularity just as Walter is brought to sell out his politics in order to enact them. Both of these characters are drawn into the conceptual arrangements of the emerging generation: Katz because the young like his music and Walter because of the infatuation of a young, starry-eyed co-worker. Lalitha and Oberst are sincere, optimistic, hopeful future versions of Walter and Katz; versions that threaten the efficacy of their predecessors. Troublingly, they are not simply faux versions: their similarities are difficult to shake. Lalitha and Oberst represent reconstructed versions of Walter and Katz: 2.0 versions of old political programs fitted to the contemporary era. They are metamodern versions. For a figure like Katz, his pessimism, cynicism and refusal to take anything seriously is founded on a very real sense of outrage: an outrage he puts to use artistically. As he observes during the Bright Eyes concert: the optimism of the crowd, its sincerity, its hopefulness—all of it terrifies him because it seems to him a phantasmatic mass of positivity rooted in nothing. The ethos of the crowd refuses the political antagonism of Katz' generation and in so doing adopts, *ipso facto*, a truly cynical platform that cannot be argued with. What, one is inclined to ask, is there to be optimistic about? This, then, is what figures like Mathis and Oberst have in common. Seemingly, they have little in the way of common ground (including ontological status: Oberst, for starters,

is a real person), but what they share according to this reckoning is ultimately a refusal of the political absolute. This attitude, rooted in a curious moment of postmodern development, reconfigures the relationship between the market and cultural production. The result is a culture-scape in which many conventional political categories, designations and divisions stop making sense. In such a terrain, the ground turns to quicksand for figures like Katz and Walter and both of them, ultimately, heed the call for retreat.

The Social Factor—**Freedom** *as a neo-Victorian Text*

In the final pages of *Freedom*, as if in retreat from its own narrative progression, family and familial reconciliation become an increasingly central concern. During the final sections of the novel, Patty is reconciled (to an extent) with her estranged New York relatives; Joey and his father start to see eye to eye; Jessica and Joey come to an uneasy understanding; and, most importantly, Walter and Patty are reconciled. For Franzen, this is not merely a private development, but a public one: "It was clear to everyone that day, and in the months that followed, that Patty's greatest warming influence was on Walter himself. Now, instead of speeding by his neighbors in his angry Prius, he stopped to lower the window and say hello" (596). Wryness aside, a real point is being made. The family, for Franzen, is a module of personal development which qualifies one for inclusion into the social. Each of these characters make their most foolish and ethically questionable choices when alienated from these essential social bonds. By the end of the novel, things are more or less in order between the family members, even though all is not well with the world in general.

Scholarly reactions have sought to reconcile the strange tendency of Walter's politics and the seemingly indeterminable stance on suburbia and domesticity evoked in the novel. For my

own part, as I have tried to express, Walter's politics are serious if misguided. With regard to

home and the family, *Freedom* ultimately answers with a resounding affirmation, even if

Franzen's endorsement is qualified. Critical analyses of the novel as well have, at the very least,

argued in favor of a reading which centers on an ethos of collectivity. Kathy Knapp argues that

Freedom "advances a neohumanist aesthetic that no longer privileges the alienated individual but

instead places a premium on the bonds of sympathy" (78). Knapp's careful study *American*

Unexceptionalism: The Everyman and the Suburban Novel After 9/11 (2014) examines the "new

suburban novel" as it "actually works to undermine the universal claims of white middle-class

heteronormative experience" (51-2). The thematic focal point of this analysis is the admittedly

unexpected return of the suburban novel in recent years. However, as Knapp makes clear, the

terms of thematic engagement have changed—after all, so too has the American social fabric and

its cultural presentation of living community spaces. *Freedom,* she argues, "does not indicate that

the suburbs have become more worldly; instead, the repellent values once associated exclusively

with homogenizing suburban culture—consumerism, possessive individualism sanctified by the

cult of the nuclear family, the fetishization of private property—have infected the culture at

large" (52). In a sense, this names Walter's conceptual terrain of struggle, though Knapp

assiduously prolematizes the veracity of his political commitments.

    Particularly suspect for Knapp is Walter's final retreat to Nameless Lake and his

continual antagonism toward his Cambridge estate neighbors: "when he kidnaps one neighbor's

cat…he betrays his own sociopathy" (78). Walter's disappearing Bobby is no doubt a point of

contention in the book; however, I maintain it is meant as a conscious provocation toward

Freedom's readership. Cats, after all, carry a set of symbolic resonances, none the least of which

involves Walter finally banishing cats—read *Katz*, obviously—from his life. However, cats have

come to be prominent features of contemporary culture. Jody Berland describes the "prolific dissemination of cat images in contemporary culture" in trying to come to terms with why they are "now so visible, and why they appear in the forms they take, as cute cyberphotos, cartoons and cinematic extras, calendars and kitsch…no other animal image is today as persistently and prolifically circulated across the terrain of commercial culture" (75). Berland is, of course, referring to the plethora of cat images on the internet, many of which have humorously been transformed into "memes"—the much touted "lolcats"—and other virtually-circulated material. Cats are, in a sense, the spirit animal of contemporary urban, tech living. In this case, I find myself somewhat more sympathetic to Walter than some other critics. Cats are symbol of American culture in its present state: by living in his cabin (as opposed to the housing developments across the way) and throwing his lot in with the warblers, the un-spoken for victims of these omnipresent pets, Walter is declaring war on the present age of American culture. Foreshadowing Keith Gordon's embrace of the political by turning his back on the social, Walter's retreat to Nameless Lake symbolizes his political last stand. Thus, when Patty arrives he is as much saved from the world as it is from him. Her presence helps him rearticulate the possibility of a more acceptable social position. In other words, she helps him renegotiate a position that otherwise would have seemed all but predetermined by his position vis-à-vis the Canterbridge Estates residents and his own convictions. Walter here is finally raising the white flag.

Walter's surrender effectively lands him in purgatory: the in-between-ness Natalie Blake faces in *NW* and Keith experiences in *In the Falling Snow*—Morris' "nowhere." At this point he is in the proper narratological position to re-enter the social, this time in metamodernist terms. In the introduction I argued that the political has become in the contemporary moment a competing

narrative to the family: alternative and mutually exclusive modes of social recognition. The reasons for this are easily enough ascertained: the family's material upkeep requires submission to an established order, while the political in the first instance takes aim at that order. In escaping to Nameless Lake, Walter isn't so much running from the difficult position of having to choose between these options, but from the fact that a decision has already been rendered. Patty, the harbinger of the social order, literally sits on his doorstep and refuses to go away. She brings with her the Victorian method of situating an analysis of the contemporary world within the interactions of a small, tightly-knit familial group. *Freedom* re-institutes the Victorian concern for domestic propriety and situates it as the enabling mechanism for Walter's re-entry into collective American social life. This is why he changes after taking Patty back; this is why Patty's presence has a normalizing effect. The neo-Victorian, in other words, isn't just an arbitrary aesthetic conceit Franzen has conjured in response to the perceived dead-end of postmodernism; rather, ostensibly Victorian themes offer a way of communicating the logic of sociality as it functions in metamodernism. This has not escaped his critics: as the *Time* piece on Franzen suggests: "In a lot of ways, *Freedom* looks more like a 19th century novel than a 21st century one…He remains a devotee of the wide shot, the all-embracing, way-we-live-now novel. In that sense he's a throwback, practically a Victorian" (Grossman 2). Gabriel Brownstein has suggested that *Freedom* is modeled on "great 19th Century fiction" (1) and Aniss Shivani characterizes it as a "Victorian throwback" and finds that, in particular, "George Eliot's *Middlemacrh*…is its guiding spirit" (1).

I will classify *Freedom* as neo-Victorian, though first I must clarify the manner in which I deploy this term and distinguish it from its more conventional usage. The term was first introduced by Dana Shiller in 1997 to describe recent works of fiction "at once characteristic of

postmodernism and imbued with a historicity reminiscent of the nineteenth century novel" (538).

Shiller is grappling here with an increasingly present (and increasingly studied) phenomenon: namely, the invocation of retrospectively perceived styles and textures of life in the Victorian era. Scholars today are addressing culture-wide manifestations of this in everything from Sherlock Holmes re-imaginings to steam punk aesthetics. For Shiller, this trend (in fiction at least) resists Jameson's logic of historical compression by "presenting a historicity that is indeed concerned with recuperating the substance of bygone eras, and not merely their styles" (540). However, for Elizabeth Ho, whose study *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire* (2012) has been very useful in helping me connect several key themes in this chapter, "neo-Victorianism is a deliberate misreading, reconstruction or staged return of the nineteenth century in and for the present across genres and media" (5). She argues, contra Shiller's optimism of its genuinely historicizing the past, that the neo-Victorian is unambiguously a self-consciously commodified cultural experience and thus "remains embedded in the poetics and politics of postmodernism" (7).

Ho argues that contemporary re-deployment of stylized depictions of the Victorian era do not constitute an impulse toward historicity per se, but rather serve as "a powerful shorthand for empire in the contemporary global imagination" (5). Rather than a highly-stylized depiction of the past deployed for purely aesthetic reasons, "neo-Victorianism can be viewed as a strategy with which to incorporate and work through persistent anxieties and uncertainties that emerge in the wake of the British Empire's dissolution" (7). In other words, Shiller tries to rehabilitate the category on false grounds. For Ho, it is difficult to defend neo-Victorian aesthetic tendencies in terms of historical efficacy, but then, that misses the point: it isn't about the past, but the present. Her invocation of "memory" rather than "history" identifies quite clearly a contemporary subject

position. Ho's reading of the neo-Victorian, then, isn't as some postmodern nostalgia, but as a

tool of engagement for evaluating the world in the present moment: "By fixing the Victorian to a

memory of empire, neo-Victorianism creates a useful fiction: one that questions the idea of the

emergence of postmodernism and transnational capitalism as the origins of globalization by

reinscribing the stubborn concept of nation" (14). Several things here are important to note: one

is that this neo-Victorian tendency in aesthetics re-signifies the importance in cultural

consciousness of national boundaries—this, of course, underscores the suggestion made in the

introduction that internationality is inherent to an understanding of the present moment.

However, another crucial idea to be drawn from Ho's analysis is simply the conceptual

alignment of, broadly speaking, international politico-economic constellations with the ethos of

empire. While this in particular is not Franzen's specific conceptual maneuver, a similar type

operation is being performed. *Freedom* as well utilizes certain formats drawn from the Victorian

novel ultimately to engage the world as it is lived now: a world characterized by the vast empire

of international politics and multinational capital (and the destruction they bring), unashamed

domestic consumerism and avowed nuclear family values (however much actually practiced).

What needs emphasis is Franzen's particular formulation of neo-Victorianism is one that

dispenses with the content of the nineteenth century for the present. What's "Victorian" about

this novel, in other words, is not its styles but its method of composition: its form rather than its

content—it's a modern-day Victorian novel as opposed to a contemporary novel set in Victorian

times. My suggestion for the remainder of this section is that *Freedom* represents a metamodern

alternative to the postmodern version of neo-Victorianism as Shiller, Ho and others have

developed it. Franzen takes to a set of literary formalities conspicuously identifiable with the

nineteenth century not out of some nostalgia or fad, but because they offer a suitable connection

with a domestic scene that is ultimately at the heart of this novel: they, as de Mul might suggest, allow sufficient space for teleological development.

This initial chapter—"Good Neighbors"—and Patty's first biographical writing make up the first half of the novel. The second half largely follows the professional and amorous exploits of the three principal male characters—Walter, Joey and Richard Katz. The latter half of the novel includes a second, brief biographical work by Patty in the form of a letter written for Walter, though she is otherwise a marginal figure in the novel's later portions. Patty's manuscript—which is "Composed at her therapist's suggestion" (29)—is entitled "Mistakes Were Made: The Autobiography of Patty Berglund," which seems to parallel to the nineteenth century fad for granting novels secondary, explanative titles (*Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, *Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Hero, Dealing With The Firm Dombey and Son: Wholesale, Retail and Exportation, etc.*) as if signifying that the act of explanation were central to the process of literary creation. Patty's narrative, consciously stylized as a form of self-examination, thus calls attention to the possibility of study, examination, and encompass-ability evocative of the nineteenth century literary method. The word "study" in the sub-title of *Middlemarch* conveys acutely the weight of such a literary project. In that novel itself, Eliot articulates a concern for "the history of man, and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time" (25). This notion of experimentation—of study—is crucial to Victorian literary creation. What Franzen seems to admire, and what I am arguing he most seeks to emulate, is the project of using the genre of the novel to conduct social analysis.

One of the most salient qualities that *Freedom* shares with the novels of the nineteenth century is a fixation on panorama: a concern for the texture of the social fabric itself. As Eliot's narrator in *Middlemarch* informs us: "I at least have so much to do in unraveling certain human

lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe" (170). Fiction in this mode inherits intellectual and empirical curiosity of the nineteenth century, focusing it on the minutiae of sociality and human interactions. Anne DeWitt has argued that in the Victorian era "men of science aligned the study of science with moral excellence, the novel provided a way to explore this alignment, to examine the interaction between scientific practice and…attitudes towards larger social obligations" (2). It can be argued that the novel tradition of the eighteenth century, by contrast, largely replicates the narrative logic of the epic tradition in its focus on the individual protagonist making his way through a series of trials/happenings; consider especially the comic novels of Fielding, Sterne and Swift.) The widening of focus found in Victorian fiction can be read as a function empiricist curiosity. Many Victorianists have advanced the "one-culture" theory in "rejoinder to C.P. Snow's 1959 lecture 'The Two Cultures'" which offers an account "of science and literature as fundamentally at odds with one another" (DeWitt 2). The "one culture" hypothesis argues:

> that, in the Victorian period, science and literature were part of one culture, as demonstrated by the accessibility of nineteenth-century scientific writing, the appearance in periodicals of scientific articles alongside fiction,…the use of literary quotations by men of science and, most importantly, the shared intellectual project of science and literature…that Victorian science and Victorian literature pursued the same questions (DeWitt 2-3).

The expansiveness of the nineteenth century novel thus reflects an attempt to bring everything into view: to try and account for as much as possible. This is reflected in the sheer physical size of most Victorian novels. However it is also reflected in the titles. *War and Peace, Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life, The Way We Live Now, The Battle of Life, Great Expectations, Born in Exile*—these titles themselves convey a sense of heft: of grandiosity, of largesse of focus.

Titles like these announce intentions to convey in literature an understanding of the events that shape human existence.

Fittingly, *Freedom*, a novel with a similarly encompassing title, entangles its characters between the wide-scoped level of the social totality and private, domestic desire. As Patty exclaims to Walter during their courtship, "'God…You really are quite amazingly worthy'" (104). Walter, as a figure of the political, is a figure of the universality: his attentions are externalized to the vast scope of the world. He's educated, seemingly interested in everything: he himself is something of a walking Victorian novel. It is he who perceives the repercussions distant both spatially and temporally of the American way of life. This, however, becomes a guiding logic for him: he cannot look past the world. This uncompromising worldliness, oddly, has the effect of making him naïve. He takes her mild affectations for a bit more than they are worth; certainly, for an aspiring lover, being esteemed "worthy" isn't the most suggestive sentiment—it's hardly a proverbial green light for amorous advancement. "…no equivalent symphony could be heard in Patty's head" (78) as she herself puts it. His friend Katz, on the other hand, is attentive to his own desires—he is aware of his own sexuality. Thus there is an aspect of him which is self-enclosed and private. He is potentially domestic, even if not domesticate-able. Walter is, then, the "miraculously worthy" (81) gentleman of the nineteenth century novel: the eminently worthy individual who lacks the erotic appeal of the Byronic hero; Katz on the other hand is pure physical drive. Walter is "in his natural element, his own personal fortress, when he [is] allowed to speak abstractly" (383) and is thus Edgar to Katz' Heathcliff; Dobbins to Katz' George. After Patty is subject to the "almost physical pressure" (116) of Katz' sex drive in the car trip to Chicago, he begins to speak about Walter. She learns of the "symposia he'd organized—on overpopulation, on electoral-college reform—that hardly any students had

attended. About the pioneering New Wave music show he'd hosted for four years on the campus radio station" (116). This scene recreates the ever-present romantic convention wherein the positive attributes of the prospective lover must be conveyed through the communiqué of another, impartial observer (much the way Darcy must be redeemed in Elizabeth's eyes indirectly via Mrs. Gardiner's letter in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*). This convention may in fact be what Katz has in mind—he may be seeking to structure the conversation in terms of this romantic convention in order to push Patty toward a certain outcome: her coupling with Walter. But this fails; it adds to her admiration of Walter, but the accumulation of this admiration merely adds to her guilt in failing to be attracted to him.

Patty and Walter share various interactions that seem suitably sentimental for tea room drama: "'Oh, Walter, I miss you!...I Miss you too!...I'd rather rent it to you!'" (114). There is no shortage of exclamation points in their otherwise mundane exchanges: "'I think you're a wonderful person!'" (132). Even later in the novel when their relationship sours considerably, this is still the case. As Lalitha peevishly observes late in the novel: "'You're still in love with her, aren't you?'" (499). One of the melodramatic tragedies of the novel is that Walter's attachment to Patty fails to dissipate. Like Heathcliff's Catherine, Patty remains the un-obscurable object of desire which he cannot blot out from his sight. The idea I would like to introduce at this point is the proposition that infidelity in the neo-Victorian mind frame is not antithetical to the ideology of the family, but rather, in Hegelian terms, objectively necessary. One of the stereotypical conventions of nineteenth century literature involves the "love triangle." Eve Sedgwick's observation that "in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved" (21) becomes problematized in *Freedom*. Walter and Katz begin their relationship as college roommates where

they began to share an unusually deep friendship. We are told "Eliza imagined a gay thing between Walter and Richard" (139). In fact, the queer intrigue these figures share permeates the novel: it is so extensive I cannot hope to adequately represent it briefly. Suffice it to say women throughout the novel, not the least of which is Patty, expresses outright jealousy of Walter's ability to be close to Katz. We are told, repeatedly, that Katz seems to care for no one in any great way with the sole exception of Walter. After conducting their affair, Patty even asks Katz: "'do you think it's possible you're a homosexual?'" to which Katz affirms "'Trust me on this one. I have no interest in kissing Walter'" (181-2).

My own reading will downplay potential queer readings of Walter and Katz' relationship; I do this not because queer readings aren't apt, but because they are *too* apt. Franzen is cautiously aware of the developments in the academy and, on this particular topic, I suggest he may be consciously, if I may say, writing for the reading—that is, theorists who explore the queer dimensions of Walter and Katz' interactions may not be uncovering self-contradictory aspects of heteronormativity that Frazen, the unaware writer, has unconsciously inserted into his text. Queer theorists who examine this dimension of *Freedom* will, I suspect, not be mining naturally-synthesized material but rather nuggets of ore put there for them in advance. However, what is fascinating about this threesome of desire is that despite the novel's Bush-era rhetoric of "the market" and "competition" there is hardly any competition for Patty at all. When Patty opts to ride with Katz to Chicago, he expresses "a strangely tender regret on Walter's behalf, as if he were wincing at the pain Walter brought upon himself" (116). Walter remains silent, passive. What's surprising in the light our modern perceptions of the love triangle is twofold: first, Walter doesn't fight for Patty. He humbly retreats, perceiving her true desire. It is *she* who comes to him (after Katz refuses to sleep with her) to culminate their relationship just as it is she who comes to

him at the novel's close. The second is that Katz is attempting to assist his own rival (Walter) in his erotic endeavor. What *Freedom* displays here, in other words, is, absurdly, a love triangle which functions through cooperation.

As a sexual couple, Walter and Patty are a bit of a sad affair: "The regrettable truth is that Patty had soon come to find sex sort of boring and pointless—the same old sameness—and to do it mostly for Walter's sake" (148). It is, ironically, Walter's goodness and worthiness that makes him a miserable sexual companion: "Walter tried everything he could think of to make sex better for her except the one thing that might conceivably have worked, which was to stop worrying about making it better for her and just bend her over the kitchen table some night and have at her from behind" (149). Years after their marriage—and years since either of them had seen Katz—Walter and Patty go to see Katz' band play. That night, "after checking on the kids, she put on a sleeveless top and little cotton shorts and came after Walter in bed" (154). It is clear what enflames her desire. When Patty and Katz inevitably develop an affair, Katz communicates to her a conversation he has had with Walter: "'He said things have been really good with you guys. "Happiest in many years," I believe was his phrase was'" (191). The uncomfortable fact is that Patty's affair makes Walter's experience of the marriage better (although she finds her own guilt magnified). These two figures—lover and husband—both have something to offer Patty; they both have certain components that Patty requires for a fulfilled life. They are thus united in their struggle to satisfy her, although the dynamics of the society Patty lives in renders her actions culpable. It is thus the social conventions themselves that come into purview. There is the terrible suspicion in reading this novel that the social conventions which are designed to regulate erotic affairs fail to encompass the complexity of their subject.

For Franzen, though, there are multiple directions of movement within the love triangle. There are several interesting moments where Walter displays the intent to compete: moments where Walter seems momentarily to *become* Katz. When prodding Patty about the possibility of her having slept with Katz in Chicago, Walter's personality shifts: "the violence with which Walter then grabbed her shoulders and rolled her onto her back and loomed over her, pressing himself between her legs, with an utterly unfamiliar look on his face. It was a look of rage, and it became him. It was like the curtains suddenly parting on something beautiful and manly" (135). That this interchange takes place in the wake of discussing Katz can't be lost sight of: "'I don't trust him. I love him, but I don't trust him'" (134). Walter indeed may be said to channel Katz: it is Katz that brings out of him his most potent sexual performances. Shortly before Walter is made aware of Patty's affair, and while navigating his own struggle with Lalitha's nearly irresistible desire for him, Walter again loses his admirable nature for the better:

> And he was sick of it, sick of all the reasoning and understanding, and so he threw her on the floor and fucked her like a brute. The look of discovery on her face then, which must have mirrored the look on his own face, made him stop almost as soon as they'd got started. Stop and pull out and straddle her chest and stick his erection, which seemed twice its usual size, into her face. To show her who he was becoming. They were both smiling like crazy. And then he was back inside her, and instead of her usual demure little sighs of encouragement she was giving forth loud screams, and this inflamed him all the more (489).

The sense in which Walter is altered is hard to miss; even the strange syntax of some of the statements seems to reflect it. ("To show her who he was becoming" is presented as a grammatically complete sentence though it is not. Neither is "Stop and pull out and straddle her chest and stick his erection, which seemed twice its usual size, into her face.") The sad fact is that the only successful sexual encounters (in terms of mutual pleasure) these two characters share are either with other people or with each other while desiring other people—the story of a modern marriage, perhaps. Rather than a modern, sex-positive outlook, I think this fact points to

a model of social propriety more ascribable to the nineteenth century. Despite Patty's guilt and the complications this causes, there is nonetheless the suggestion that affairs and extra-marital desire have a role in the proper functioning of the relationship (and thus the family) itself. The reason Joey moves out, after all, is because Patty does not allow him his sexual space. This suggestion seems to resonate at different levels and for different members of the family.

This question of propriety also points toward the novel's working model of social redemption: of reconciliation. When Walter withdraws (or, more accurately, kicks Patty out) he proceeds to ruin his career and then withdraw (again): he moves to the cabin on Nameless Lake. This separation, like so many in the novel, seems objectively necessary to their reconciliation. The affair, to put it in starker terms, though it temporarily ruins their relationship, becomes necessary in the long run to their union. Even while living alone at the cabin, he cannot explain to Jessica why he won't divorce Patty: "'…why don't you just get divorced? If you don't want to have anything to do with her? Because as long as you're not divorced, you're kind of giving her hope'" (587). When Patty appears out of the blue on his doorstep, he ignores her and, curiously, takes the opportunity to open a package from none other than Richard Katz (with whom he has obviously kept no contact). Katz had sent him the package some time ago and, analogous to his decision to separate from Patty but not divorce her, he keeps the package tucked away in a drawer but refuses to open it. It is a new album of music entitled *Songs for Walter*. Walter's reaction is dramatic: "He heard a sharp cry of pain, his own, as if it were someone else's. The *fucker*, the *fucker*, it wasn't fair…'God, what an asshole you are,' he said, smiling and weeping" (592). Walter's near misrecognition of his own sound—his nearly attributing it to someone else mirror's Patty's own narrative process of writing her own experiences in the third person. It is no surprise then that Walter, at this time, goes out and lets Patty into the cabin—that is, he addresses

her: he *acknowledges* her. The astounding fact is that it is ultimately Katz that brings about their reconnection. The novel closes with their "departure in a big rental truck, whose horn Walter tooted while Patty waved good-bye" (597). It closes, in other words, the way it opens: with Walter and Patty moving in together.

Chapter 2: "strange convergence"—Smith's *NW* and the Poetics of Reproductive Futurism

This chapter will focus on Zadie Smith's 2012 novel *NW*. Arguing that the novel ultimately orients itself around a gravitational center of what Lee Edelman calls "reproductive futurism," this chapter will trace its thematic trajectory in relation to contemporary attitudes and aesthetics. Unlike *Freedom* which becomes highly contemporary as though by mistake—Franzen's attempt to write in the outdated mode of the Victorian novel is exactly what betrays its unmistakable presentism—*NW* is a medamodern text quite directly. For Vermeulen and van den Akker, metamodernism is characterized at the base level as "the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detatchment" (2). Of all the narratives formats surveyed in this project, the form of Smith's novel fits this definition most directly. *NW*'s formal strategy gives way to a palpitating sense of back and forth between engagement and withdrawal; between ambition and deferral; between movement and stasis; between meaning and nonsense. In fact, the formal operational logic of *NW* may in fact suggest a means of abstracting meaning from nonsense (in apparent reversal of the postmodern tendency to reduce meaning to nonsense via redundancy). Smith's text adopts an experimental narrative framework no doubt inspired by the high works of modernism: its artistic approach is marked by a grandiose ambition which nonetheless is set to work illuminating the lives of everyday people. And yet, in an almost postmodern way, it seems to lack—or even eschew—any grand ordering scheme.

This oscillation is evident most dramatically in the characters themselves. Natalie Blake ultimately finds life affirmation in through a sincere appreciation of her maternal function—that is, in caring for the children she has had all along rather than motherhood itself as a social role, as though it were seriousness itself that she needed to learn to take seriously. She carries out in her very life experience the turn from postmodern cynical self-involvement (and all its stasis-inducing self-referentiality) to a sincere form of metamodern optimism. Natalie spends much of

the novel trapped in reconstructions of her own past; her sudden realization of maternal bliss entails immediately a visit to Leah Hanwell and their collective attempt, despite their considerable differences, to try and open a future for themselves. This is why, as Smith herself insists in an interview this chapter will quote from later, *NW* ends on a high note. There is reason for optimism—there are children! A future! Part of what I'm suggesting is that *NW* in part narrates the individual's capacity to conceptually reconfigure one's situation in resistance to overbearing circumstances. When Natalie first becomes a mother, it seems like the past coming to bear upon her: she accepts pregnancy ultimately to validate herself in the eyes of her family and the community she grew up with. Her recognition for better or worse is ultimately that children don't bind her to her past, but release her from it—they in fact point her toward the possibility of futurity. This is why even child-less (and likely to remain forever so) Leah ultimately finds some redemptive peace in the closing statement of the novel: it returns her and her old friend figuratively to moments of childhood—that is, it returns to them their futures.

Thus, for Smith, children and the apparatus of the nuclear family aren't just a convenient plot mechanism for a mid-life crisis novel, but speak to the central thematic mechanics of metamodernism as a cultural development. This novel will first explore the means by which *NW* articulates its logic of reproductive futurism. It will explore the crucial scene late in the novel in which its true story is told and argue that the sentiment is to be taken seriously as maternal propaganda and not some ironic *reductio ad absurdum*. This chapter will then anchor this theme in the text's formal features, thus positing the ethos of reproductive futurism as an emergent property of metamodernism itself. If the seemingly a-formal formalism of *NW* sends the reader on a meandering course toward some grounded epistemology, it is telling that such an orientation is one of familial centrality. If Smith's novel is so keenly attune to the unfolding of the

metamodern moment, then it is certainly worth following through with the novel's take on what it is all grounded on. Fittingly, then, the next section will explore connections between the text's thematics and the contemporary urban experience. This discussion will draw on contemporary scholarly accounts of the urban experience that detail its subtleties and the nuances of urban flows, arguing that *NW* itself as a formal object is engaged in replicating the meta-organized chaos of the modern city. It is worth suggesting, then, following this novel's conceptual trajectory, that reorganization of urban space (and all of the accompanying permutations in the social, economic and political processes that guide contemporary post-industrial life) plays some role in metamodernism as a cultural and aesthetic development. The final section of this chapter will attempt to fuse these levels of analysis into a single explanatory account of *NW* as inarguably a metamodern text. It will treat Leah and Natalie as accompanying, but competing, modes of cultural capital accumulation, arguing that the logic that guides how these two women construct their identities—and ultimately who adopts the family as a personal ethos and who doesn't—is bound up in these larger developments. *NW*, thus, whatever its success as an artistic object, serves as a potential account (not just in what it communicates, but in its very formal composition) of dominant cultural sensibilities today.

NW *as Centered on a Logic of the Nuclear Family*

Near the end of *NW*, the narrator presents us with a curious evocation of the maternal: "A child. Children. Not babies, not something to be merely managed any longer. Beautiful, unknowable, and not her arms or legs or any other extension of her. Natalie pressed Spike so tightly to her person that he started to complain. It was a knowledge as a sublime sort of gift, inadvertently given" (399). It's a strange passage, among other reasons, because it is far from clear just what

prompts this sudden realization of maternal bliss. Hither to this point, Natalie has functioned as an instrumental caregiver: she feeds her brood, hires good nannies and dutifully worries when her young son wanders off on his own in a pet store. Yet childbirth and children have been little more than a means for Natalie to assert, to herself and to the world, her status as mature adult: as a woman who has inarguably *arrived*. The children themselves are largely objects of ironic bemusement, even outright scorn: "It filled her with panic and rage to see her spoiled children sat upon the floor, flicking through past images, moving images, of themselves, on their father's phone, an experience of self-awareness literally unknown in the history of human existence— outside dream and miracle—until very recently. Until just before just now" (328). Natalie raises her children in an almost mechanistic way; child-rearing is a task to be approached with an air of professionalism, and like with any professional task it is to be carried out with efficiency and expediency.

Throughout the later portions of the novel, Natalie suffers a series of excruciating transformations. The young Natalie—still "Keisha"—has a mind of her own and is very driven to succeed: "Wasn't it possible that what others mistook for intelligence might in fact be only a sort of mutation of the will? She could sit in one place longer than other children, be bored for hours without complaint, and was completely devoted to filling in every last corner of the coloring books…She could not help her mutated will—no more than she could help the shape of her feet or the street on which she was born" (208). It is strange, then, that in the final quarter of the novel she should find herself berated morally at the hands of family and friends for not having children of her own. For instance, while on lunch break from her job, she encounters her younger cousin Tonya; "On these occasions—despite her status as a big lawyer lady—she experienced the same feelings of insecurity and inadequacy" (289). The text at this point closely

follows Natalie's voice and consciousness, thus demeaning references to her considerable

accomplishments—"big lawyer lady"—inform the reader in no uncertain terms that she has

internalized the critical gaze of her family and local community. Natalie, of course, has finished

university and become a barrister, achieving the goal she set out for herself while still a young

girl in secondary school. Having escaped the crushing poverty of Willesden and the

overwhelmingly self-righteous religiosity of her mother, Natalie by any reasonable standard is a

successful, financially-empowered woman. And yet, somehow, it is her cousin who has

genuinely achieved something. When it comes to the topic of children and family, her

professional confidence suddenly fails her:

> Despite the toddler and the baby in the double buggy Tonya retained the
> proportion of a super-heroine in a comic book. Natalie meanwhile was sadly
> "margar," as the Jamaicans say. To white people this translates as "skinny" or
> "athletic," and is widely considered a positive value. For Natalie it meant
> ultimately shapeless, a blank. Tonya's skin was never ashy but always silky and
> gorgeous and she was not prone to the harsh pink acne that sometimes broke out
> across Natalie's forehead, and was present today. Where Natalie's teeth were
> small and grey, Tonya's were huge, white, even and presently on display in a
> giant smile (289).

Natalie is fascinated by her cousin's children; she examines them, holds them as though they

were uncanny objects of questionable ontology—"Neither child ever seemed real to her no

matter how many times Natalie felt their weight in her arms. How could Tonya be the mother of

these children? How could Tonya be 26? When had Tonya stopped being 12? When would her

own adulthood arrive?" (290). This becomes a familiar trope in Natalie's thinking near the end of

the novel: the notion that she, despite being an accomplished professional woman, has in her

pursuits neglected to grow up. It is fundamentally a crisis of accomplishment; Natalie is made to

feel that she is not really and fully there until she procreates. To be fully there requires

participation in the crafting of the future. To grow up, then—to reach a culturally-definable

marker of personhood—is linked closely with one's status vis-à-vis offspring production. When her husband finds out she has been soliciting strangers in online sex personals, he anchors his plea for her adulthood squarely in terms of their children: "'You have two children downstairs. You're meant to be a fucking adult'" (354). Indeed, Natalie is a fucking adult (as well as a fucking-adult) and this state of affairs seems to have something to do with a creeping apathy in the face of her status as a mother, which she believed would deliver upon her a certain degree of meaning. Tonya, after all, carries this sense of meaning, enough so to cower Natalie in a stooped sense of perpetual adolescence. Tonya herself "wore sweatpants with HONEY written across the posterior and a close-fitting denim waistcoat with a yellow bra underneath. Her fringe was purple, the hoop of her earrings brushed her shoulder. Her platform heels were red and five inches high" (289) and yet it is Natalie, the "big lawyer lady," that feels like a child.

Like so many in *NW*, this is a scene that doubles back on itself. It is tempting to read the situation ironically, suggesting that here Natalie is bearing the brunt of the societal pressure upon women to reproduce self-reflexively for the demonstrative benefit of a critical externalized gaze. It is Tonya who appears to be in the right: she is enviably maternal and thus suitably healthy-looking and properly social—"Underneath the smile, Natalie could see that her cousin was disappointed with the exchange, wanting, as usual, to make a deeper 'connection' with Natalie, who wished to avoid precisely this intimacy and as a consequence retained a superficial and pleasant exterior with her cousin as a means of keeping her at bay" (290). Tonya is disappointed that Natalie has not *produced* something: this cherished familial connection is offered by way of closing the conversation. After confirming that her cousin is childless, she exclaims to her: "You lot are leaving it late, innit…What's going on up there, Keisha?" (291) and closes the meeting with the suggestion to "have a good proper chat" (291). It's safe to say Tonya doesn't want

decorative advice: procreative status confers inclusion into the familial community. Natalie, who has empowered herself throughout the narrative by sitting outside the various communities open to her, now after having achieved the success she has always sought suddenly yearns for nothing more than inclusion. When Tonya praises her cousin—"'You're my inspiration'" (290)—it strikes the reader as a compliment that is offered platitudinously rather than as a tender admission made. Does Natalie exact upon herself the logic of feminist discourses wherein cultural imperative of what Edelman has called "the Ponzi scheme of reproductive futurism" (4) enforces the compulsion toward the disempowering sphere of the domestic? Does this scene offer the story of a working woman who shudders under the ideological weight of the impulse to have offspring in the interest of highlighting the outrageous power of an oppressive apparatus? The reading is tempting, for it would confer a diadem of progressive politics on the novel and place Smith in a politically recognizable position. This reading of Natalie as feminist martyr, however, ultimately is untenable: the text itself, as this chapter will show, appears to be complicit in enforcing this politics of domestic advocacy. The text ultimately moralizes Natalie, plain and simple. She is not a feminist martyr sacrificing career for family so the novel's audience can better grasp the pressure on women to have babies. On the contrary, *NW* casts Natalie, with her pallid skin and grey teeth, as Ebenezer Scrooge: the man who knows only material success to the point that he teeters on the edge of life itself. Natalie walks about Zombie-like, consuming to sate an appetite rather than sustain life: "As Tonya approached, Natalie was sure she, Natalie, had dumpling oil around her mouth" (289). The statement makes it difficult even to locate Natalie as a grammatical subject—the name has to be reiterated to clarify a pronoun as if oily Natalie is at risk of slipping away from the subjective function of language.

For Edelman, "the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order" (11) because it is "imagined as enjoying unmediated access to Imaginary wholeness" (10). Children hold a privileged space in our cultural knowledge because they are perceived as access points to a state in human development for which Freudians maintain we hold a lifelong nostalgia—a state of self-enclosed satisfaction (consider Tiny Tim's saintly contentment with his dire situation). For better or for worse, it does seem to be the case that children hold a unique position as our culturally-calibrated horizon of meaning. It is certainly the case that children hold a privileged, though admittedly complex, place in the morality of *NW*. When Natalie goes to see her sister, Cheryl (who's living with their mother), it starts off pleasantly. Natalie holds her sister's latest child: "The baby, seeming to sense her extraordinary competency, grew quiet and looked up at her aunt with admiring eyes in which Natalie spotted even a hint of wistfulness" (309). Significantly, the conversation turns sour when Natalie lowers the child to her lap, unable to make it giggle: "'You piss me off sometimes Keisha. No, but you do'" (310). Cheryl is reacting to Natalie's admission of pain (and guilt) at seeing her family live in urban squalor; she picks up immediately on her sister's intent to help financially and scoffs at the perceived condescension. Cheryl has been living at home, unemployed, and producing children, thus multiplying the family's expenses. Fantastically, Cheryl assures her sister she won't move out—"'I don't want to leave mum on her jacks'" (309). Cheryl attacks her sister swiftly, severing not only their present connection, but retrospectively dis-attaching their past connection as well: "'We ain't never been that close Keisha, come on now'" (310). Despite this, Cheryl seems to maintain the righteous edge at every turn in the conversation:

> "Excuse me I forgot: no-one's allowed to have friends in this fucking family."
> "Family first. That's my belief. God first, then family."
> "Oh, give me a fucking break. Here comes the Virgin Mary. Just because you can't locate the fathers, doesn't make them all immaculate conceptions."

> Cheryl stood up and stuck a finger in her sister's face: "You need to watch your mouth, Keisha. And why you got to curse all the time, man? Get some respect."
>   Natalie felt tears pricking her eyes and a childish wash of self-pity overcame her entirely.
> "Why am I being punished for making something of my life?"
> "Oh my days. Who's punishing you, Keisha? Nobody. That's in your head. You're paranoid, man!"
> Natalie Blake could not be stopped: "I work hard. I came in with no reputation, nothing. I've built up a serious practice—do you have any idea how few—"
> "Did you really come round here to tell me what a big woman you are these days?"
> "I came round to try and help you."
> "But no-one in here is looking for your help, Keisha! This is it! I ain't looking for you, end of" (311).

The absurdity of the passage indicates just how much there is to be sorted through. Certainly, the audience is meant to sympathize with Natalie on some level: the irony of Cheryl's demand that her sister stop uttering obscenities while simultaneously putting up her middle finger verges on the comic. But Cheryl controls the pace and tone of the conversation and when she gets the last word—"till you have kids you can't really chat to me, Keisha, to be honest" (312)—it starts to seem that Natalie is a bit out of her element. And, of course, Cheryl *is* being honest: her statements are direct while her sister, who makes a living through argumentation, somehow can't locate an adequate rejoinder. Her use of her children and motherly experience to effectively close the discussion illustrate that the familial matrix is fixed as the boundary of discursive meaning— once children are brought into the argument, the gears of the discussion must come to a grinding halt. There is no reproach that can maintain the moral high ground.

This encounter puts Natalie on edge; it's the very next section where she begins to check the online sex personals listings. Clearly her conversation with Cheryl and others from her past has done a great deal to unravel the persona she has spent her adult life constructing. When she meets her old friend Layla, she finds "Layla Thompson was now Layla Dean" (331) and so she

too has transformed her identity and escaped the poverty of the old neighborhood (and also, as

we're told a few pages later, she has three children). For lunch, Natalie has another berating:

> "You're exactly the same."
> Natalie was in the middle of texting Melanie to warn her she would not be in now until tomorrow morning.
> "Right. It's not like I have to become another person just because—"
> "You always wanted to make it clear you weren't like the rest of us. You're still doing it" (332)
> …
> "Even when we used to do those songs you'd be with me but also totally not with me. Showing off. False. Fake. Signaling to the boys in the audience, or whatever."
> "Layla, what are you talking about."
> "And you're still doing it" (333).

The text follows Natalie's point-of-view so closely that statements like this come as much a

shock to the reader as they do the listener. Here the charge is laid more directly: Natalie is a

fringe member of the community, an ex-Willesdener and as such inauthentic—"Natalie Blake

had completely forgotten what it was like to be poor. It was a language she'd stopped being able

to speak, or even to understand" (330). It becomes clear, however, that Natalie's exclusion from

her old community (and family) is not set in stone. While showing her mother around her new

house: "Natalie was opening the door to what she had decided would be her office when Marcia

said something probably quite innocent—'Plenty of space for a family in here'—and Natalie

manufactured a row out of it and wouldn't back down" (320). As Leah confides in her shortly

after regarding her mother: "'Trust me, Pauline's the same'" (321). The narrator then

communicates: "Natalie Blake and Leah Hanwell were of the belief that people were willing

them to reproduce" (321). Throughout the latter sections of the novel the evidence begins to

mount that Natalie's inclusion into the community (Leah is somewhat exempt for reasons this

chapter will address later on) is ultimately conditional on her taking part in a particular ethos of

childrearing.

Natalie, thus, becomes pregnant—"She welcomed, at last, the arrival of some shape to her dull straight lines" (323). It is clear that some of the anxiety first dredged up during her encounter with her cousin Tonya is mitigated somewhat. Pregnancy offers a temporary vitality, a sense of bodily presence. Like Tonya, Natalie experiences a sense of corporeal substantiality—of really existing. However, this new state comes with its own anxieties: it brings her "only more broken images from the great mass of cultural detritus she took in every day on a number of different devices, some handheld, some not. To behave in accordance with these images bored her. To deviate from them filled her with the old anxiety. She grew anxious that she was not anxious about the things you were meant to be anxious about" (323). Her condition appears to be a paradoxical one; pregnancy and the children that follow don't deliver the ontological emphasis, the budding sense of personhood that she is searching for. She gradually must come to terms with "the brutal awareness of the real that she had hoped for and desired—that she hadn't even realized she was counting on—failed to arrive" (323). Family life thus becomes a drama, a staged performance: "Naomi was screaming about something and Spike had woken up and Leah had missed a perfectly staged demonstration of the joy of life—of family life in particular" (345). Natalie, like Keith in *In the Falling Snow*, desperately seeks all manner of distractions. What is more she seeks to mitigate this agitation by reconnecting with some sense of the past: "She had a new urge for something other than pure forward momentum. She wanted to conserve. To this end, she began going in search of the food of her childhood" (330). Here she finds herself in curious alignment with Leah, who "does not want to arrive" (28). Natalie tries to forestall this anxiety, in typical postmodern fashion, by emphasizing the artificially produced human element of her domestic space: by trying to jam-pack her home with disconnected articles of culture— "Look at these African masks. Abstract of a Kingston alleyway. Minimalist table with four

throne like chairs. At other times—especially when the nanny was out with Naomi and she was alone in the living room feeding the baby—she had the defeating sense that her own shadow was identical to all the rest, and to the house next door, and the house next door to that" (326). The tactic does little to alleviate her uncertainty, though it has the effect of intensifying her friend's. During a dinner party Leah glances at Natalie's house: "Everything behind those French doors is so full and meaningful. The gestures, the glances, the conversation that can't be heard. How do you get to be so full? And so full of only meaningful things? Everything else Nat has somehow managed to cast off. She is an adult. How do you do that?" (73). It's an un-breachable irony. Both of these individuals unknowingly cooperate in enhancing each other's anxiety despite their fundamental unity in being ambivalent toward the phenomenon: "Natalie Blake and Leah Hanwell were 28 when the first emails began to arrive. Over the next few years their number increased exponentially. Photo attachments of stunned-looking women with hospital tags round their wrists, babies lying on their breast, hair inexplicably soaked through. They seemed to have stepped across a chasm into another world" (312). They share this sense of not knowing how to proceed into venture that they both would just as soon skip altogether.

The rest of the novel, roughly, is dedicated to Natalie's attempt to overcome this anxiety. Technology for her becomes a platform both for familial appreciation and her escape from it. It's a tool of management. Her frivolous husband she finds to be "a third child, a fourth child—if she included the nanny—to be managed and directed along with the rest of them so that time was maximized and everybody got to where they needed to be. Only Natalie herself was allowed to waste time, sitting at her desk, looking through digital images of her brood" (325). Natalie enacts upon her family the logic of labor discipline. The family and its affairs are to be conducted in such a manner as to maximize efficiency (in what manner is a family *efficient*?—efficient at

doing what?). As the boss, she is afforded her leisure time, but that leisure itself hides the family's true mechanism of stability: "Hidden behind the image of Spike was another window, of listings. Natalie submitted, irritably, to a hug" (325). Her foray into the world of sex personals is thus not in blunt opposition to her familial status, but part of its functioning logic. Like the constructive love triangle that ultimately saves the Berglund marriage, her solicitation of strangers enacts the very logic of her domestic life: the management of desire. These encounters revolve around the same notions of identity construction that lead her to get married and have children in the first place. It is in these encounters, after all, where she can become Keisha again: where she can reconnect with the persona she left behind—the persona she feels guilt at having discarded. These encounters themselves seem accomplish little for her; the value in the endeavor appears to be in the searching—in the hours and hours of browsing through the listings. Like a form of Facebook or some other social media platform, Natalie seems more fascinated in browsing the profiles of prospective potential partners than in the actual encounters themselves, which prove largely unsatisfactory.

When Natalie arranges a tryst with a married couple (and all of her encounters involve trios, as if enacting literally the principle of the love triangle, or perhaps the symbolic need for parents): "After much negotiation on e-mail, a day-time assignation was agreed" (246). She arrives adorned in her old persona, calling herself "Keisha" and dressed in "gold hoops, denim skirt, suede boots with tassels, the hair bobble with the black and white dice, and her work clothes in a rucksack on her back" (346)—easily recognized by the reader as a standard "euro trash" uniform, not at all dissimilar, incidentally, to the look Leah adopts at the end of her stint hopping from subculture to subculture. The couple appears to be well-off and they show it with ostentation that borders on gaudiness: "Farrow and Ball Utopia Green (matte) in the hall. African

wall sculpture. Modernist minimalist pieces. A gold record framed. A picture of Marley framed. Front page of a newspaper framed. A sort of terrible 'good taste' everywhere" (346-7). Sensing her tenseness, the couple tries to ease her—to comfort her: "Can you believe she's for real? Too good to be true. Come up here Sista so I can really take you in. Soul music playing upstairs" (347). The reader is then presented with a striking piece of dialogue: "The beautiful African woman kept talking. Where are you from? Are you in college? What do you want to be? Don't ever give up. It's all about dreaming big. Having aspirations. Working hard. Not accepting no for an answer. Being whoever you want to be" (247). This should strike the reader as a strange component of the seduction process. These are the sorts of statements we expect to hear from our high school guidance counselor or a corporate motivational speaker. However, what is especially intriguing about this passage is that is closely mirrors a scene that takes place just a few pages back, in which "Leah wished Natalie Blake would speak at a charity auction for a young black women's collective Leah had helped fund. She kept going on about it" (344). Natalie resists at first, but is eventually persuaded by her friend to take part. She gives a speech "about time management, identifying goals, working hard, respecting oneself and one's partner, and the importance of a good education" (344). Natalie has trouble maintaining focus while speaking; she can't concentrate—"she must have been reading out loud and making sense, there must have appeared to be an unbroken continuity—no one in the audience was looking at her like she was crazy" (344). Like Walter opening his package from Richard Katz, Natalie here speaks from a disembodied position: she is utterly unaware of what she is saying or even that it is she who is saying it. She can only deduce that it seems to make sense based on the way the audience is looking at her. At this moment, "she found her mind travelling to obscene tableaux. She wondered what Leah and Michel, who always seemed to have their hands on each other, did in

the privacy of their bedroom. Orifices, positions, climaxes" (344). Like her meeting with the couple, Natalie courts a head-to-head meeting of sexual fantasy and the platitudes corporate ambition. She closes her remarks to the young black women's collective: "'and it was by refusing to set myself artificial limits…that I was able to reach my full potential'" (344). The recognition in the latter scene that Natalie is subject to when she is forced to confront this logic—the logic of her own personal, domestic and professional development—leaves her feeling exposed. It is little wonder, then, why she cannot carry out the tryst. She excuses herself to the bathroom—"climbed into a reclaimed Victorian bath…she knew she was finished. She lay back. Acqua di Parma. Chanel Molton. Brown. Marc Jacobs. Tommy Hilfiger. Prada. Gucci" (344). Smith offers in these scenes a curious dialectic: a strange convergence between sexuality and the professional ethic of identity construction—a concoction one that proves unstable.

Though Natalie attempts to carry out this tryst in the thrill of momentarily adorning herself in her old persona, the presumably well-meaning advice offered to her has the effect of revoking the Keisha identity. That is to say, the hollowness of the advice resounds in the hollowness of her own identity as the self-invented (and self-proclaimed) Natalie. Dream big, just be yourself, work hard, go for it—the staples of advice from parents, friends, teachers and guidance counselors alike. Clearly, meaningful life activity has more substance to it. And yet Natalie Blake finds success precisely by acting in a manner consistent with these platitudes. Much of *NW*'s course follows Keisha's trajectory, her development into Natalie—"a marvel of self-made success" (Banks 2). For her sixteenth birthday, Keisha Blake receives from her best friend Leah Hanwell a dildo—"a vibrator, neon pink with revolving beads in its gigantic tip" (218). She, of course, hides the gift immediately from her religious zealot of a mother. What else to do with such a treasure? By the following section "she [had] had the dildo for only a couple of

weeks but in that time used it regularly, sometimes as much as several times a day, often without washing in between, and always in this business-like way, as if delegating a task to someone else" (219). Here again the internal contours of her erotic self-conception function like a Taylorist workspace. Her sexual ethic is a business-like ethic and the smooth, proper functioning of her private domestic space always seems to require the hiding of a seedy external (technological) component. Like with her smartphone, which she uses incessantly late in the text to access sex personals, technology helps her plug in to an aspect of herself where physical drives and identity-construction—where bodily nature and culture—seem to co-occupy the same space. Natalie is an ambitious character for whom trouble arises when she attempts to have things both ways: she wants the wealth, the rich husband, the mansion, the high-power job *and* the same social connections in her old neighborhood—she wants the static domestic bliss of a TV sitcom *and* the continuation of sexual novelty.

This may be why her strategy to access the prized gem of social inclusion via children fails. Natalie, in making it, has always fixated herself on something *outside*. In maintaining this dual position—in wanting it both ways—she has always had one foot planted solidly in her old neighborhood as well as one searching yearningly for something else. (Presumably, this is what Layla Dean means when she calls her "fake.") As one reviewer, Alexandra Schwartz, puts it: "We know what she's getting at: Natalie sold out! She stopped keeping it real! To twist the knife, Leah brings up a boy who 'sat next to Keisha. Back when she was Keisha.' This is a pointed revelation. Like Magid Iqbal, like Jay-Z (*aka* Shawn Carter), like Smith herself (who started life as Sadie Smith), Natalie, the reader discovers, decided to change her name on her way up" (3). Smith has been vocal about this dynamic before. In a 2012 piece written for *The New York Times*, "The House that Hova Built," Smith asks vicariously regarding the success of rappers

Jay-Z and Kanye West: "Didn't we earn this? Can't we sit back and enjoy it?…Who cares if

they're keeping it real" (2). It's a fair enough point; what's more, one that is applicable to Smith

herself. Like Jay-Z, and like Zadie Smith, Natalie is a figure that has succeeded in escaping the

poverty of the community that raised her; and, like these figures, she is brought to account for it.

Who cares if Natalie's keeping it real? This has been Smith's line steadily in recent years. It's

curious, then, to consider currents running opposite Smith's avowed position just below the

surface of *NW*:

> Beneath her optimism and certainty, there seemed to run a fissure of doubt.
> Something wasn't being said; some question wasn't being asked. After all, we
> may each be entitled to a 'fictional reality' in which the past doesn't have to be
> shed to make room for the present, and the fact of the present doesn't discount the
> truth of the past—but how to pull off that balancing act? It takes a superstar to
> transform the housing projects of his childhood into the gleaming victory of a
> Barclays Center, but what about everyone else? And if you do get to the top, only
> to find that the voice hounding you with charges of inauthenticity is your own,
> what then? ("House" 4).

I want to offer a similar observation regarding *NW*; the novel does, in my reading, ultimately

hold Natalie accountable for not keeping it real. However, the issues in play transcend the

wealth/fame/influence/poverty matrix of "The House that Hova Built." What keeping it real—

what maintaining status of inclusion in a community one has putatively left behind—in the

context of this novel requires is, of course, the ethos of family as it is constructed in this, the

metamodern moment. It isn't enough that Natalie maintains her family in an instrumental sense:

that she produces children, clothes and feeds them. What counts is that she authentically buy

into the ethos—the *feeling* must be there. This is why her method of outsourcing her erotic

encounters ultimately fails; she can't be Patty Berglund—Patty has no specific social nexus to

which she seeks inclusion. Natalie's faith in the family apparatus must be more than

demonstrative: it must be Pascalian in the sense that epistemological grounding is generated

through the repetition of behaviors which themselves already presuppose such a grounding. What she discovers at the end of the novel is that it isn't the act of having children that re-includes her into the social space her success has alienated her from, but rather her maternality itself: her contribution to the nuclear family as a conceptual-cultural device. It isn't enough that she produce offspring: she has to genuinely love them too. She has to *believe* it sincerely. That is to say, the physical act of procreative success must come secondary to the sincere adoption of its ethos as a meaningful life narrative. Natalie ultimately succeeds in this arena the same way she succeeds in university and at her job: through the logic of the now-worn business slogan "fake it 'til you make it."

This, then, is the meaning of the "sublime sort of gift, inadvertently given" (399) that comes at the end of the novel as she embraces her son. The effect of the realization comes on like a religious experience. Natalie heals her rift with Leah once and for all (or so it seems) by attempting to diagnose her friend's ennui. What is more, she determines that Leah's novel-long aversion to procreation is merely a symptom and not the disease: "'I'm trying to understand what's really the matter with you. I don't believe you're sitting here flirting with skin cancer because you don't want a baby'" (399). For the reader, this comes as quite a shock. Until this point, the reader has little trouble believing that Leah is in fact despairingly crumpled in her backyard hammock for that exact reason. The novel, after all, offers nothing to suggest Leah wants anything more than to bask perpetually in a non-procreative jouissance: her feminine version of what Edelman calls sinthomosexuality. Natalie's alternative explanation—and the quickness with which the text comes to a close after these statements, as if *NW* itself wants to foreclose all future discussion—rewrites much of the logic developed in all 400 preceding pages. A symptom and not the disease—and thus curable! Strangely, in this penultimate scene of

bonding there emerges a mother-daughter dialogue. Natalie again finds herself rehashing the same tired clichés of success—"'we worked harder…we were smarter and we knew we didn't want to end up begging on other people's doorsteps. We wanted to get out…I'm sorry if you find that answer ugly, Lee, but it's the truth'" (400). The conversation seems to accomplish little, and yet the final scene of the novel on the very next (and last) page seems to indicate that their relationship as friends is on track as if it had never been derailed; it is re-set in time as if they were children again: "Apart from the fact that she drew the phone from her own pocket, the whole process reminded her of nothing so much as those calls the two good friends used to make to boys they liked, back in the day, and always in a slightly hysterical state of mind, two heads pressed together over a handset" (401). Like Ebenezer Scrooge suddenly revitalized with child-like energy on Christmas morn, these two women are restored to life.

I rest my reading on the authenticity of this transformation at the end of the novel. As Smith herself has claimed in an interview with *Granta*: "I'm not a pessimist about those two: the novel doesn't end with the end of their lives and they have in front of them the same possibilities for change that we all have all the time" (2). The claim here is that the authenticity of the gripping revelation that closes the novel—of the preciousness and profundity of child-rearing—disqualifies ironic and progressive readings of Natalie's encounters with her sister Cheryl and her cousin Tonya. It is tempting to read these scenes as powerful evocations of the oppression of poverty and patriarchy that thrust an undue weight upon the consciousness of a person who is struggling ardently to escape it all. However, when Natalie embraces her son and is made to deeply appreciate her role as a mother, Cheryl's parting shot seems suddenly tenable. This, then, is what this chapter rests its central claim on: that the novel effectively moralizes Natalie for not

being a proper mother. She indeed has not kept it real, but not only by leaving the neighborhood

for a different income bracket: she has turned her back on the neighborhood's logic of family.

Where Franzen and Smith find alignment is in the connection to sexuality/hedonism and

corporatism—Joey Berglund, it should be remembered, finds sexual congress with Connie for

the first time in consummation of a joint business partnership (her selling his schlock watches at

her Catholic school early in *Freedom*). Family for these authors represents a potential stepping

ground for the outside social world: a point of initiation wherein one becomes introduced to the

social totality. By functioning as an instrumental familial manager—that is, in creating a family

as though it were a form of property—one simply replicates the world's many large-scale

anxieties in one's most intimate spaces. In emphasizing essentially capitalistic growth

(postmodern reproduction) in the present, it neglects, in other words, consideration for the future

where children as symbolic objects are at their most efficacious. For Smith, perhaps, children

represent the positing of an autonomous future freed from the binding presentism of

postmodernism. It is no surprise, then, that *NW* should take up such a thematic point of focus in

lieu of metamodernism's sensibilities and their increasing presence within the general cultural

consensus. What is interesting—and what next needs to be discussed—is the way in which Smith

develops this thematic leverage. *NW* needs, in other words, to be considered as a formal object.

NW*'s Formalism: Realism as Experimentalism*

To grapple with *NW* on formal grounds one needs to come to grips with the experimental nature

of the text. I will make the case that the ideology of the text is bound up in the formal features of

its composition. For a moment I will suffer Smith's reproach: "I think we should be a bit wary of

labeling certain techniques 'experimental' as if it's just a set of tools one picks up to lend

whatever you're writing a trace of hipster cool... it's like those superstores of 'alternative' hipster taste; American Outfitters and so on" (*Foyles* 2). In a sense, Smith has provided me with the central tenet with which I will read her novel: as an ironic pastiche of avant-garde experimentalism. "American Outfitters" appears to be an unintended portmanteau of *American Eagle* and *Urban Outfitters*, two youth-focused clothing brands that via the former's slogan— self-styled, "Live your Life" autonomy is conscripted into the imperative to consume. As Franzen's novel suggests, there is nothing more indicative of the contemporary ethos than the notion of "freedom": of doing what one wants, of the evasion of artificial constraints. Epithets along the lines of "follow your dreams" and "let nothing stop you" are planted in *NW* strategically as if to evoke groans and sighs from its readers. I'm suggesting that this corporatized ethos of self-invention and cultural absorption is ultimately the logic Natalie Blake internalizes, and which leads both to her material success on the one hand and marriage/children on the other. This relationship between self-invention and commercial success is, when followed through to its logical conclusion and deployed in society at large, ultimately a local, domestic logic. This logic of culture-based self-absorption leads in *NW* to the family. Thus a link can be established between the ethos of family and concerns of style, sophistication, and taste that register themselves on an artistic platform as experimentalism.

Formally, *NW* is an experimental novel, though the nature of that experiment has been subject to some discussion in the novel's critical reactions. Certainly, the novel displays a great deal more in the way of textual innovation than *Freedom*. If Franzen is, as I've suggested in the previous chapter, trying to write a modern-day Victorian novel, this is of some interest to the cultural critic that wants to assess his/her own position vis-à-vis the cultural milieu he/she is engaging with. It should not escape scrutiny, in other words, that for all of Franzen's vitriol

against the present moment, the form of his novel itself seems complicit with the present moment's sense of nostalgia, whether postmodern or metamodern. It may be a different sort of neo-Victorian artifact than those Elizabeth Ho engages with, but it is essentially neo-Victorian just the same. *NW*, on the other hand, not only resists this (or apparently any) formal method of composition, but employs narrative techniques that have a dizzying effect—unstable character-narrator speech boundaries, temporal instability, confusing grammatical construction, free indirect discourse, images instead of context used to describe a situation, unorthodox deployment of punctuation, strange syntax formations, etc—in order to illuminate the experiential chaos that characterizes urban life and sociality at the present moment.

The multitude of variations and language experiments used in *NW* resists any sort of easy characterization. Even extensively quoting from its various descriptions and what I would term stream-of-conscience narrative meanderings would illuminate only a portion of the book's compositional strategies. A real sense of Smith's formal method in this text, regrettably, is available only in reading the book. For my purposes, then, it will be most useful to call attention to the dizzying effect of reading this novel and some of the ways this is rendered. Consider a very curious misprint on the back cover of the original Penguin paperback edition. In the novel's description the reader is informed that "Zadie Smith's brilliant tragicomic novel follows four Londoners—Leah, Natalie, Fox and Nathan." An accurate list of the novel's *dramatis personae* would be: Leah, Natalie, *Felix* and Nathan. There is no character named Fox. However, that "Felix" should be replaced with "Fox" may signify more than a simple editorial oversight; the novel, after all, is replete with foxes and fox sightings. Early in the novel Leah reads an article in *The Standard* about a "NORTHWEST FOX EPIDEMIC" and sees an accompanying "photograph of a man kneeling in a garden surrounded by corpses of foxes he'd shot. Dozens

and dozens and dozens of them. Dozens and dozens! Says Leah, and that's how we live now"

(57). It is striking that this passage should bring us back so directly to Franzen's central

question—foxes, in part, embody a sense of precarity in modern living: of having one's space

continuously encroached upon. Foxes thus serve as markers, highlighting important moments in

the novel. If nothing else, this is suggestive of the extent to which the thematics of the novel are

bound up in their own chaotic presentation.

Any competent formal analysis of *NW* should draw a comparison to Woolf's *Mrs.*

Dalloway; indeed, "Several critics have already pointed out *NW's* debt to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs.*

Dalloway." (Kahn 2). Laura Miller further characterizes *NW* as "fluent, impressionistic and

Woolfian" (2). For Eric Banks, "This is a novel larded from its first page with portentous signs

and dangling leitmotifs (apple trees with bitter fruits, blurry photographs, an epidemic of gravid

foxes), all served up in restive, jarring sub-Woolfian prose" (3) and for Alexandra Schwartz,

Leah's movements in Willesden function as a conscious "homage to … Clarissa Dalloway

plunging into the throng of the Strand on the morning of her party" (11). Suffice it to say that the

general consensus among book critics is that *NW* owes something of its aesthetic development to

Virginia Woolf—I'm not offering, in other words, what is my own comparison. Part of what

generates this associative response is the narrative's persistence in making its point by

orchestrating certain coincidences. The narrative folds itself in various ways so that certain

scenes, events, happenings, revelations, etc. become situated in close proximity. Much of the

novel's symbolic play is generated in reading meaningful associations from the objects presented

in these situations. Foxes often play a key role in this strategy. For instance, just as Natalie is

about to set foot in her new home, the first home she has ever purchased, and in so doing

"[creep] into adult life" (293), she notices "in the driveway below a fat fox sat brazen as a cat,

looking up at them" (293). This image of a gravid fox is a metaphor that is, well, pregnant—

these animals by the end of the novel begin to bear the brunt of the novel's symbolic burden.

Foxes, with their disregard of boundaries and seeming ill-fitted-ness to city existence, carry the

sense of disconnected freedom that Leah and Natalie are so deeply fascinated by in characters

like Shar and Nathan Bogle (who, as his surname suggests, haunts the novel). When Natalie's

extra-marital activities are discovered by Frank and she goes out alone roving aimlessly in *NW*'s

amorphous, dreamlike urban sprawl, she "was making a noise, like a fox" (359). What does a fox

sound like? The comma suggests, strangely, that Natalie was like a fox in so far as she was

making any noise at all. It is these strange textual features carry the novel's pregnant weight—

and it is pregnancy that is very much at issue. Foxes seem to scurry through the novel like

twenty-first century storks delivering *NW*'s symbolic weight. (Or, perhaps, they are rivals to

Franzen's presentation of cats as the symbolic animal of the present.) They thus bring together a

strange association between non-constrained openness and children; between freedom and

family— between family-oriented realism and independent, artistic experimentalism. Meeting

Leah for lunch, Natalie

> saw herself slip from the bench to the ground and take the shape of an animal.
> Moving on all fours, she reached the end of the damp tarmac and passed over into
> the grass and mulch. Continuing on, quicker now, getting the hang of four-legged
> locomotion, moving swiftly across the lawn and the artificial hillocks, the Quiet
> Garden and the flowerbeds, into the bushes, across the road, and on to the railway
> sidings (322).

At that very moment Leah arrives, breaking Natalie's rather telling flight of fancy. As Leah sits

down, Natalie "looked up at the kids and chaos at every table and smiled neutrally at her friend

and wondered at what point during their lunch date she should give Leah her news" (322). Her

news, of course, is that she is pregnant.

NW is concerned with navigating the constraint of city living, the encroachment of technology on our relationships and the weight family brings to bear on these two registers of urban existence. Smith is certainly not writing any Franzen-esque modern day Victorian novel; modernism, interestingly, seems to be her compositional point of reference in this text. Smith herself in the *Foyles* interview cites Joyce as her primary influence: "For me, Joyce is the ultimate realist because he is trying to convey how experience really feels. And he found it to be so idiosyncratic he needed to invent a new language for it. All I was trying to do in *NW* was tell fewer lies then last time, and it came out the way it came out" (3). Metamodernism is the active aesthetic framework for Smith in its constant movement between the static chaos of a postmodern novel (the textual features which call attention to *NW* as a text) and the structured push toward hopeful futurity (reproductive futurism). The novel doesn't merely maintain both positions in some defiant postmodern love of paradox, but oscillates between them cooperatively: it negotiates both positions diplomatically, finding a place for both in the various spaces this labyrinthine text opens up. If as readers we take seriously Smith's reevaluation of modernist (particularly Joyce's) experimental poetics as ultimately a form of realism, then scholarly reactions to the novel have to consider the possibility that *NW*'s experimentalism as well constructs a reality as seen from a particular point of view. The poetics of this novel, in other words, are perhaps a direct artistic rendering of metamodernism as a cultural position.

NW begins: "The fat sun stalls by the phone masts. Anti-climb paint turns sulphurous on school gates and lampposts" (3). These opening statements deny to the reader the conventional grounds of narrative awareness. In fact, recognition seems to be not only marginalized, but disabled. To say that the "sun stalls" suggests a pattern of movement not immediately reconcilable with solar motion. In fact, "stall" seems to suggest the motion of automobiles, the

very nature of which involves the jutting repetition of stopping and going (particularly in city traffic). It is as though comprehension of the natural world has become subsumed in the bystander's apprehension of movement in the city. What the reader is confronted with in *NW*'s opening statement, in any case, is an aesthetic rendering of the clash in sensibilities between urban life and the natural world. "Phone masts" complicates the simple image of telephone poles lodged against the backdrop of a street. Ships anchored together are, after all, at rest in port—that is to say, at the boundary of a vast expanse. Leah, however, is looking into the milieu of Willesden's cramped urban labyrinth. These sets of opposed images are forced together: they are made to occupy a single narrative space and it is up to the reader to accommodate them. "Anti-climb," too, suggests stasis: a form of motion perhaps concomitant to Leah's own continual anxiety. Indeed, the operative metaphors in these early descriptions of Leah's surroundings manifest themselves in her later anxious musings: "She did not know they had set off, nor in which direction the wind is blowing. She does not want to arrive" (28). The paint turning "sulphurous on school gates and lampposts" seems a rather sinister image, bringing to our attention immediately ambivalence toward the proposition of children. In other words, the narrative's short bursts of poetic description are offered as more than flourishes of wordplay to enhance the reading experience: they in fact consciously reflect the apprehension of real world objects via Leah's state of mind. Here the modernist sensibility of the novel comes forward in full force; the narrative focuses on presenting the text phenomenologically: as a direct language rendering of "an object presented to her consciousness" (341), as *NW* itself phrases it. This has the effect of complicating the text's narrative function. It is unclear if, for instance, there even is a single, sustained narrative voice that carries throughout the text. There is an over-proximity of narrative function and narrated objects—that is, the extent to which the narrative follows the

contours of the characters' perceptions without revealing their thoughts suggests that the narrative is spoken from some intra-space between narrative function and narrated material. This has the effect of blurring Gérard Genette's distinction between hetero- and homodiegetic narratives. The latter term refers to a narrative in which its narrator appears as a character; the former, one in which the narrator speaks from a position outside the diegetic space. The effect of Smith's images is to complicate the relationship between author, narrator and character. The narrative is clearly spoken from a third-person position, presumably disqualifying Leah for the role; however, the extent to which these highly poeticized images conveys Leah's personal anguish—indeed, *speaks it* for her—suggests an intimate affiliation between them. Throughout the novel, the narrator-function will prove itself more attuned to the minds of the characters than the characters themselves. What is more, the sheer fact that this narrative confusion is rendered imagistically is itself something that needs to be engaged with. It must be asked: just what is the intended function of the images in this novel?

Viktor Shklovky has argued that "poetry is a special mode of thinking…a mode of thinking in images" (1). For Shklovsky, "the artistic quality of something, its relationship to poetry, is a result of our mode of perception" (2). The distinction between poetic and quotidian speech is a prized one. What poeticized language does, along this line of thought, is to force a re-conceptualization of everyday objects and experiences that have been "automatized"—rendered so immediately accessible that meaning is lost—through mundane speech: "It is this process of automatization that explains the laws of our prose speech…The object passes before us, as if it were prepackaged. We know that it exists because of its position in space, but we see only its surface" (5). Shklovky's account takes the most automatic of human verbal exchanges—say, that of a greeting between mutual acquaintances: "hello," "hello," "how are you?"—and extends this

logic to all prose-oriented communication. For Shklovsky, this is how human communicativity as such functions. "The purpose of art," he suggests, "is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By 'enstranging' objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and 'laborious'" (6). "Enstrangement" is a creative method by which automatic apprehension and communication of objects is disrupted. By reading "the fat sun stalls by the phone masts" instead of "the sun went down," the process of automatic recognition is halted, forcing upon the reader a level of critical attentiveness. I offer Shklovsky's account because enstrangement appears to be the operating logic of "Visitation," as well as much of the rest of the novel.

This initial chapter is wildly disorienting, but not merely for the sake of literary provocateur-ship, but because contemporary urban life is itself an enstranging experience: "Juliet balcony, projecting for miles. It ain't like that. Nah it ain't like that. Don't you start. Fag in hand. Fleshy, lobster-red" (3). Passages like this seem to blend together various forms of narrative discourse, obscuring the rhetorical positioning of the narrator, who is merely presenting information as Leah apprehends it. A couple is arguing on a balcony above the hammock in which she is resting. Interestingly, the speech of the argument is not presented as dialogue, but gets rolled up in the description as part of the narrative conveyance. The various grammatical malfunctions force us to read the passage closely rather than passively accept its information, though more than anything its images enforce a sense of alienation—"Look up: the girl's burned paunch rests on the railing" (3). The enstrangement, in other words, conveys a sense of encroachment—of intrusion, over-proximity. This urban pastoral leads into the appearance of the ghostly and mysterious Shar, whose intrusion sets *NW* off on its whirlwind course: "Doorbell! She runs through the grass barefoot, sun-huddled, drowsy. The backdoor leads to a poky kitchen,

tiled brightly in the taste of the previous tenant. The bell is not being rung. It is being held down"
(5). The narrative presentation follows closely on the heels of Leah's experiential apprehension.
She is "sun huddled, drowsy"—the effects of nature are wrought upon her as she runs from grass
to kitchen tile. Even being informed as the reader is that the tile was the choice of a previous
tenant, a sense of intrusion is rendered. The previous tenant, as the marker-figure of the urban
home that draws Leah away from her (admittedly slight) enclave of nature, is an intruder.

Enstrangement then, for Smith, is not merely an instrumental aesthetic device as it
appears to be for Shklovsky, but a means of articulating the effects of the urban experience: "In
the textured glass, a body, blurred. Wrong collection of pixels to be Michel" (5). Pixels are, of
course, the units of a composite image, but here the metaphor is reverse engineered as though
real objects were mimetic representations of themselves. The intrusiveness, the over-proximity,
the sense of rapid motion and the threat of falling behind, the inability to maintain distance—all
of this amounts to a form of sensory overload and helps us account for *NW*'s overabundance of
alienating images: of images that resist passive accumulation with a-typical description or
description in terms of images that seem to be at odds with one another (the narrator's mention
of "the manic froth of cherry blossoms" (11) strikes me as a particularly Joycean example). This
sort of formal enstrangement may have an analogue in modernist fiction, but it is more aptly read
as a demonstration of metamodernist aesthetics. *NW* is indeed a modernist text, but a modernist
text self-reflexively functioning in a post-postmodernist landscape and thus it incorporates
aspects of both in a unique tapestry of mutual co-functionality.

NW thus employs a format of narrative progression which bears these developments out
quite starkly. This novel's trajectory, like that of *Freedom*, is one that starts with togetherness
and then cleaves—the novel tells a story in which the inseparable Leah Hanwell and Keisha

Blake become separated. The narrative conveys the logic of their separation and the conditions of their reconnection. What separates Leah and Natalie ultimately is what separates the Berglund generations: the cultural divide between postmodernism and the present metamodern moment, which is severe enough to recalibrate these familial participants' thinking to the point where mutual recognition is difficult to maintain. As this chapter will detail later on, Leah embodies postmodernism plain and simple. And like postmodernism as a formal aesthetic category, Leah, with her refusal to participate in a generative ethos, literally has no future. Such is her ailment in *NW*. Natalie functions according to a logic of oscillation, not at all unlike the logic of metamodernism. Natalie can entertain her deathly serious compunction toward social inclusion while (indeed as a function of) meandering cynically into online sex personals, as though it all meant nothing. This is undoubtedly what Layla Dean means in calling her "fake": what Layla doesn't perceive is that Natalie is acting in accordance with a logic that requires of her conciliation between hollow self-presentation and deeply meaningful human activity. Natalie learns to be postmodern, curiously, in the process of struggle toward a greater cause. This format in its unconventional deployment of postmodern ideas with a palpable sense of optimism does much to disrupt the postmodern, itself a field of meaning constantly in disruption. Natalie's life-scale projects are perhaps Smith's fictional corollary to her own efforts to locate new byways in the contemporary novel. However, before this can be examined this chapter must address some of the material circumstances that underlie these shifts in cultural consciousness. If the novel as a form is changing to address a shifting cultural scene, then it is incumbent upon critical efforts to at least highlight the dimensions in which these alterations are taking place. For Smith, as the novel's title suggests, this necessitates a look at the contemporary city.

Technology, Artistry and the City as a Possible Conceptual Foundation

NW is set in a decaying section of London*:* "Ungentrified, ungentrifiable. Boom and bust never

come here. Here bust is permanent. Empty State Empire, empty Odeon, graffiti-streaked sidings

rising and falling like a rickety rollercoaster. Higgledy piggledy rooftops and chimneys, some

high, some low, packed tightly, shaken fags in a box" (52). Smith conveys a sense of the city as a

mass of detritus: a jumble of objects, obstructions and barriers. *NW* in point of fact begins with

an image hauntingly similar to the one that closes Franzen's *Freedom*: that of a "garden…Fenced

in, on all sides" (3). The grammatically inexplicable comma of the latter sentence serves, like the

novel's multitude of fences, walls, barriers and boundaries, as an arbitrary divider: a signal that

even the very reading of the text is going to be an act fraught with regulation. The novel, in fact,

facilitates a reading practice that requires sensitivity to the movement, nuance, flow,

contingency, rupture and rhythm (in Lefebvre's sense) of the post-industrial experience;

formally-speaking, the early sections of *NW* are as much to be navigated as read (the novel in

fact features an entire chapter written in Mapquest.com-style directions). Smith is fascinated with

these modes of social engagement that are developed in the contemporary post-industrial city. Of

course, she is writing about London; however, it is important to underscore the extent to which

she is ultimately concerned with matters of urban organization that appear to characteristic of the

modern city as such. Smith has made it clear publicly that her decision to set *NW* in London does

not necessarily reflect the perception of something symptomatic of the London experience

specifically. As she explains in an interview for *Foyles*:

> It was obviously a pleasure to return to the old neighbourhood, writing-wise, but
> in another sense it was purely strategic: I knew I wanted to push the envelope
> style-wise and I thought, 'This is going to be hard enough without having to set
> the action in, say, New York, a place I barely know.' This book was so hard to
> write I felt the least I could give myself was a nest of streets I didn't have to
> Google or visit to describe. And I cheered myself with the thought of Joyce in

> Trieste writing to relatives back home in Dublin, asking after the name of this or that Dublin butcher's shop or side alley. You can be adventurous and deeply parochial at the same time! (1).

In other words, *NW* is not so much a "London novel" as it is an "urban novel." Smith's choice to set it in London reflects certain aesthetic ambitions and doesn't explicitly disallow readings that address urban concerns raised specifically in the novel as universal urban concerns.

The city has a conspicuous presence in each of the novels this dissertation takes up. Franzen, for instance, triangulates his narrative between New York (the center of culture), Washington DC (the center of politics) and the St. Paul (thematically, the Midwest more generally: the space caught in between). Homes and Phillips as well will make much of the interplay between urbanized and non-urbanized spaces. *NW*, however, of all the novels taken up in this project roots itself most firmly in the urban experience. For this reason, linkages between contemporary urbanism and metamodernism (and by extension, the poetics of reproductive futurism) will be explored here. This project, with its focus on literary analysis and cultural historicization does not seek to engage the construction of urban spaces sociologically; however, in the interest of building a workable analytic framework with which to historicize a work of literature, this section will call attention to some overarching readings of urban spaces and their concomitant social processes. If the city as it is organized today is potentially a key site in the development of metamodern cultural variances, then perhaps much can be gained in locating contact points between theories of contemporary urbanism and strategies of cultural analysis. My contention in this section is that such an approach is necessary to make sense of *NW*.

Alan Ehrenhalt offers a compelling theory of urban change in his work *The Great Inversion and the Future of American Cities* (2012), which describes the relatively recent cultural preference for urban environments by members of social groups one might historically

assume to privilege the suburbs. Simply put: "we are living at a moment in which the massive outward migration of the affluent that characterized the second half of the twentieth century is coming to an end" (7). The effects of this changing social attitude are difficult to overestimate. Ehrenhalt begins with what is today a sticky term in liberal discourse: gentrification. For him, the term is of limited usefulness—"A better term is 'demographic inversion.' Gentrification refers to changes that happen in an individual neighborhood, usually the replacement of poorer minority residents by more affluent white ones. Demographic inversion is something much broader. It is the rearrangement of living patterns across an entire metropolitan area, all roughly taking place at the same time" (3). Ehrenhalt suggests "that the most powerful demographic events of the past decade were the movement of African Americans out of central cities and the settlement of immigrant groups in suburbs, often ones many miles distant from downtown" (6). The reasons for this shift remain numerous and nebulous, and he cites several potential underlying factors. The price of gasoline is likely an important one (8). However, whatever socio-economic currents run below this shift in locale preference, the emphasis on city life among members of the more affluent segments of American society seems to have been thoroughly embraced. Ehrenhalt thus points to "the emergence of new adult cohorts with different values, habits and living preferences" (12). This seems to indicate a discernible shift in sensibilities, rather than a rational response to a specific set of conditions. As Ehrenhalt reminds us, "This is the generation who grew up watching *Seinfeld, Friends*, and *Sex and the City*, mostly from the comfort of their suburban sofas…it is striking how pervasive the pro-city sensibility is within this cohort, particularly among its elite" (11).

　　Young members of privileged segments of society are moving to the city to ride bikes, drink coffee and shop at farmers' markets not in response to a specific impetus (like the

continual upward trajectory of petroleum prices) but because of a dramatic reorganization of our values and aesthetics. What Ehrenhalt is contextualizing, in other words, is what I have been referring to as the politics of the local—the stylized engagement of ostensibly political ideals from the grounding of an affluent, localized cultural space: "We are moving toward a society in which millions of people with substantial earning power or ample savings will have the option of living wherever they want and many…will decide in favor of cities and against distant suburbs" (Ehrenhalt 12). Restating this point with an emphasis on the phenomenon's undercurrent of socio-economic privilege, Ehrenhalt offers pithily: "The strollers have reached Wall Street, and they are not leaving" (9). His choice of cultural marker here is telling. That the stroller should serve as the token signifying object of this new mode of bourgeois existence should signify that cities have thus inherited the suburban impulse toward reproductive futurism. This, perhaps, is an enabling factor (or at least a feature) of what this project has adopted the term metamodernism as a label for. Quite apt vis-à-vis *Freedom* is that this should all be linked to an emergent political impetus toward privileging locality. Part of what I suggested in the previous chapter is this push toward "the local" in contemporary activism and consumerism (and so strange in the present moment that these terms should be so aligned) is not unrelated to this thematic push toward the family in art representing the present moment, the family being a great cultural alternative to the political. What is interesting is that Ehrenhalt should identify almost by instinct that this population inversion should be one that has at its center the ideology of the nuclear family. In other words, Ehrenhalt is potentially offering a more fundamental explanation. If, as Franzen observes, the contemporary emphasis on the local is connected to a reversal of cultural and material capital, and if Smith shows that such a formation itself leads inescapably to the family as a logical endpoint, then Ehrenhalt shows that the origin point—the local—is itself a

contingent formation rooted in more fundamental rearrangements in urban spaces. For the

continuance of the project it will be worth keeping in mind the possibility that these hip,

fashionable young people flocking to America's many urban metropoles may have brought with

them to their new city homes the ideological baggage of the suburban enclaves they have sought

to escape. In seeking to escape the suburbs, the new youth culture that emerged in urban spaces

may in fact have brought, ideologically speaking, the suburbs to the city. For my purposes, it

important to highlight the connective nexus which links metamodernism (and its shifts toward

sentimentality and sincerity) and the re-ordering of cultural and material capital's functional

relationship—that is to say, the logic underpinning *NW*'s narrative development—is deeply

connected with the cultural-conceptual developments rooted in the observable shifts in urban

spaces. Though this engagement remains speculative, it is worth considering for the sake of

cultural analysis whether this large-scale demographic inversion doesn't play some fundamental

role in the enabling conceptions of what I am calling metamodernism. This is to suggest that the

fluctuations in population and usage of urban space has helped result in wider shifts in cultural

appreciation—shifts which themselves have concretized into the, admittedly fuzzy, but still

essentially recognizable aesthetics of metamodernism. Theoretical indeed as it may be, this

suggestion will inform my treatment of *NW*.

Such a model of the contemporary city stresses the importance of the social body in terms

of its (official or unofficial) districts. The metropolis functions thus not as an organic social-

civic and economic holism, but as "an archipelago or urban enclaves" (Stavrides 40). Districts,

zones and neighborhoods—like Smith's Willesden—are not merely places where one lives in a

state of affairs governed by contingency, but represent a critical territory: a mapping out in real

terms of the metropole's own work-economy-social organizational logic. As Stavros Stavrides

articulates the point: "In contemporary metropolises citizens are enclave-bound users, quasi-citizens enjoying suspensible rights. And a large number of people live even below this line of formal citizenship" (41). This, of course, is the critical point for my purposes. Where these zones touch represent points of frictive social contact. If this model of the metropolis is best understood in terms of Lefebvre's somewhat polymorphous term "rhythm," then it is perhaps wise to consider this in terms of Kevin Hetherington's observation that "rhythm promotes encounter" (28). Is this principle not the guiding logic that oversees the traumatic encounter which sets the narrative of *NW* into motion: Shar bursting in on Leah? Can the same not be said for Natalie's surreal rendezvous with Nathan near the novel's close? Leah's moment of freedom laying in her closed off garden? In fact, both Natalie and Leah (and Felix, and Annie, and Michel, and others) move continuously through the contact points of social zones, disturbing the tranquility of informational flows as they themselves are disturbed in turn. This is essentially Natalie's primordial sin, the one for which she must adopt maternalism to make amends: she moves about in accordance with her own wishes and not merely those dictated for her (whether by authoritative structures or her own family and community). More than ever, technology and social media foster the sort of movement that destabilizes this form of social organization.

Perhaps what Shar represents isn't a jarring shake-up of Leah's otherwise tranquil domestic setting (as the rear cover of the novel suggests), but the personification of the city itself. The cultural logic that emerges from this shift—the cultural logic this chapter will argue is at the root of Natalie's own character-trajectory—bares a relationship to the strange convergence between urban enclaves. Somehow, the boundaries between metropolitan zones and cultural and material capital are being reordered in such a way as to mirror the way urban spaces are developing at present. One possibility to confront is that metamodernism as an aesthetic

tendency may reflect the registering of these urban shifts within the logic of contemporary culture. After all, it is these major cities and their shifting urban zones where conceptions of art are being reorganized (thanks in part to the influence of the tech sector, but as well to cities as historical centers of art): it seems to me plausible that this is at least part of the story. Perhaps what *NW* dramatizes, then, is the human experience of these wider phenomena. If pressed to employ the novel in a utilitarian fashion—if we must make the novel "do" something—perhaps it can be said that *NW* offers a potential alternative to the theoretical renderings of the city as explicated above. Perhaps the best way to come to terms with the changes in culture that cities, themselves continually in compositional flux, render is not in terms of contemporary criticism's fixation on capital, class antagonism, and "others," but rather the various permutations registered culturally in social interaction. Perhaps, then, *NW* as a novel gestures toward something missing in the way we think about human beings in the city. In any case, *NW* isn't merely a novel of middle age and maternal distress: it is a story that tells more than the anxiety of women who fear for their independent lives in the wake of producing offspring. Smith's novel offers a complete paradigm of social development from within this new ordering of cultural and material capital, which itself is ultimately grounded in a logical impetus to perform the nuclear family.

Metamodernism or, the Poetics of Reproductive Futurism

As the narrator tells it, Keisha Blake had always been the odd one out—or perhaps the odd one *in*: "to the ravers and indie kids she knew for certain she was the wrong kind of outcast. It did not strike Keisha Blake that such feelings of alienation are the banal fate of adolescents everywhere" (225). That the latter sections of the novel should detail Natalie's dismay at finding herself on the outside of her old community is strange when reading them in close comparison with its early

sections. The initial portrayal of the Willesden community is one which gives the reader the

impression that it is composed of various groups and sub-groups. Keisha's social trouble seems

to stem from the fact that (analogous to what Keith Gordon eventually learns) she's *not* an

outsider—she has no particularized reservoir of social capital to draw from. Here the narrator

slights her own character, dismissing Keisha's social displacement as part and parcel of the

adolescent experience. However, not all of the characters seem to experience this. Certainly not

Leah Hanwell, who "befriended everyone without distinction or boundary, but the hopeless cases

did not alienate her from the popular and vice versa and how this was managed Keisha Blake had

no understanding. A little of this universal good feeling spread to Keisha by association, though

no one ever mistook Keisha's cerebral willfulness for her friend's generosity of spirit" (210). As

the narrator recounts Keisha and Leah's co-upbringing, it emerges that the dispositions of the

two friends differ dramatically. Leah, we are told, is:

> A generous person, wide open to the entire world—with the possible exception of her own mother. Ceased eating tuna because of the dolphins, and now all meat because of animals generally. If there happened to be a homeless man sitting on the ground outside the supermarket in Cricklewood Keisha Blake had to wait until Leah Hanwell had finished bending down and speaking with the homeless man, not simply asking him if there was anything he wanted, but making conversation (210).

Leah in many ways is identifiable along the lines of the contemporary multicultural progressive:

"your typical white middle-class Englishwoman, hounded by liberal guilt" (4), as Franklin puts

it. One imagines her getting on with Jessica Berglund quite well. Keisha, however, stands in

stark difference to her friend sharing only her reservations about parental authority:

> parental legacy meant little to Keisha Blake; it was her solid sense that she was in no way the creation of her parents and as a result could not seriously believe that anybody else was the creation of theirs. Indeed, a non-existent father and/or mother was a persistent fantasy of hers, and the children's books she had most enjoyed always began with the protagonist inheriting a terrible freedom after some form of parental apocalypse (211).

Here, too, the political coordinates of this line of thought should be quickly recognized. Her refusal toward gestures of openness puts her comprehension of the world at odds with that of her friend. For Keisha, apparently, we are not products of a "parental legacy"—that is to say, a context. Her persistent fantasy of the "terrible freedom"—quite apropos of Franzen—suggests that she understands herself (and presumably everyone else) not as a subjective node bound up in a social framework, but as an autonomous agent freely mobile in an open network. This essential feature of her outlook would seem to explain a great deal, including her inability to understand her friend's sympathetic gestures toward the homeless—indeed, her embracing of *others* in general. Their social outlooks correspond very closely to the Anglo-American political landscape. Keisha, with her individual will and insistence on personal self-determination, seems to reflect the attitude of "modern" conservatism. For her, we are not determined beings; this is why she struggles with Leah's gestures to the homeless. Her de-emphasis of the social totality and focus on individual determination make this logic clear. If the homeless, too, are self-determining agents and the social totality itself a thing of less than considerable importance, then it makes no sense to consider them others. For Keisha, there is nothing to be *other* in reference to. Leah's openness toward others and conscious self-positioning must strike her as a very odd thing indeed. This is why she struggles socially: this is why she does not join cliques and subcultures the way Leah does. She fails (or sees no need in trying) to grasp the nuances of sociality that act as a form of currency—that is to say, she fails to grasp the value of social capital. She insists on her own personal self-determination: "Maybe the world really was hers for the making" (207). It is not until the budding of her Natalie persona that she grasps the importance of this.

Leah Hanwell proves to be an expert in negotiating the subtleties of the social. Throughout the progression of "Host"'s vignettes, Leah shuffles from clique to clique, from subculture to subculture. Keisha recalls, not without some bitterness, when Leah first began to "mix with that Camden Lock lot" (216). She has little enthusiasm for her friend's new cultural interests:

> Baudelaire or Bukowski or Nick Drake or Sonic Youth or Joy Division or boys who looked like girls or vice versa or Anne Rice or William Burroughs or Kafka's *Metamorphosis* or CND or Glastonbury or the Situationists or *Breathless* or Samuel Beckett or Andy Warhol or a million other Camden things, and when Keisha brought a wondrous Monie Love 7-inch to play on Leah's hi-fi there was something awful in the way Leah blushed and conceded it was probably OK to dance to. They had only Prince left, and he was wearing thin (216).

Leah, adorned with "panda-eye makeup" (217)—clearly a gesture toward the "heroin chic" of the 90s—flits from group to group much to her friend's jealous chagrin despite the fact that Leah's friends prove less than enviable: "The boy who was sleeping with Leah was also awkward. If you did not keep asking him questions about himself, or about his short films, he stopped talking and stared into space" (237). And yet, we're informed that it is Keisha who is left "wondering whether she had herself had any personality at all or was in truth only the accumulation and reflection of all things she had read in books and seen on television" (216). Crucially, it is Keisha's fear of being a postmodern assemblage that propels her toward autonomous self-development.

Soon after, Leah shifts her persona to that of what today might pejoratively be referred to as an "eco hippie": "The person who gripped her by the shoulder could no longer be mistaken for a member of a riot grrrl band or a minor Berlin artist. She was now some kind of dirty blonde warrior for the planet, with hair that was dreadlocking itself, and army trousers that would not pass an inspection" (239). Leah, as she does throughout the text, attempts to enforce her ethics.

Rodney Banks, Natalie's family-preferred boyfriend, tells Leah "'We don't care about trees…That's your luxury. We haven't got the time to care about trees'" (240). And luxury enough it is—when Natalie (and, significantly, she has just been introduced as Natalie for the first time) asks how she knows these people, she responds "'Newbury!'" (240). Newbury, the idyllic Berkshire civil parish known for its castles and racehorses, scarcely seems an authentic hotbed of political radicalism. Natalie finds herself on Richard Katz' wavelength in registering "it more an aesthetic than a protest" (239). When Leah is described as wearing "Denim skirt, hoodie, furry boots, a thick gold hoop in each ear"—the same "euro trash" uniform Natalie goes to meet the couple in—the audience is informed that "The experimental period had ended" (264), as if all of this subculture-oriented involvement were steps in a predictable, logical arc of personal development.

Natalie's development is much more interesting. Keisha's development into Natalie, as the name change suggests, involves the transformation of her identity. As Keisha, she has been living with Rodney Banks, the son of her mother's friend. The relationship is orchestrated by her mother after the discovery of the dildo, fearing the potential recklessness of her daughter's sexual impulses. Rodney is a dry, bookish character. He goes about his business on campus continuously in possession of the King James Bible and Machiavelli's *The Prince*. "They were like siblings in every way," the reader is told, "aside from the fact that they occasionally had sex with each other. The sex itself was cozy and familiar, but without any hint of eroticism or orgasms vaginal or clitoral…when he finally allowed Keisha Blake to have sex with him it turned out to be a technical transition" (238). The reader is informed that, at the time, Keisha thought "life was a problem that could be solved by means of professionalization" (238)—a way of thinking that seems to have developed during her time with Rodney. It is interesting to

consider, then, that her personal transformation into Natalie may not the shucking of an old persona but rather her own way of thinking carried out to its logical conclusion (consider her parenting style apparently modeled after methods of professional environment management). At this point, "Natalie Blake was crazy busy with self-invention. She lost God so smoothly and painlessly she had to wonder what she'd ever meant by the word. She found politics and literature, music, cinema. 'Found' is not the right word. She put her faith in these things, and couldn't understand why" (247). Politics, literature, music, cinema—this is tradable culture, Leah Hanwell's domain.

Natalie, in proper experimental mode, dabbles in political radicalism:

> For the next several weeks Natalie threw herself into the organization of this trip, and made love to Imran, and thought of this period, years later, as representing a sort of pinnacle of radical youthful possibility. Of sex, protest and travel, fused. That she never actually went on the trip seemed, in memory, some how, less important than the fact that she fully intended to go (249).

Interestingly, this isn't Leah's aesthetic politics—it's an inverted version: pure pragmatism. Leah's politics represent a drearily familiar phenomenon: the "serious" political activist who maintains a vision of radical change that ultimately reflects a personal stylistic ideal. This sort of politics reflects in the end one's personal need to be affiliated with a certain set and/or personal aesthetic. It is precisely this aesthetic factor that allows those involved to ironically overlook the politics itself. What Natalie is doing, it must be stressed, is completely different. Leah and her clique have authentic aspirations, but ultimately do little more than amass a form of cultural capital that gesture toward their realization. It is this realization that must be staved off. The slightest hint that this may be the case—that one's politics or artistic commitments are anything less than authentic—leads to the dreaded label of "poseur." The compulsive disavowal of non-politics has the continual effect of re-centering the political as the necessary object of orientation.

For Natalie—as for the kids at the Bright Eyes show that Richard Katz so disparages—this conceit is effectively dropped. If one is trying to maintain the façade of a serious political commitment, the last thing one would do is self-consciously narrate one's rhetorical position—it would ruin the effect. However, Natalie does exactly this much like Dr. Zoidberg in Mike Judge's syndicated television series *Futurama* who, in a running gag whenever sitting with his cohort, exclaims "look at me! I have friends!" The comedy rests on a cynical reordering of values: it blatantly takes for granted that in a friendship-relation the friends themselves are of less importance than the cultural property that comes with being someone who maintains a social coterie. The notion of having friends and having a social life, in other words, are more important than the friends themselves. For Natalie, something very similar is true: the reader is told quite directly that the experience of youthful radicalism—that is to say, the cultural capital—*is* the important factor. For Leah, this is effectively true, but painfully disavowed; for Natalie this is an unabashed fact. Dr. Zoidberg utters this line out of naiveté of the subtle nuances of social exchange to render a comic effect, but Natalie takes this line as a matter of principle. It is the cultural capital that matters, period. The difference, then, between Leah and Natalie is that the latter has adopted the metamodern ethic wherein the logic of the alternative is commensurate with, and indeed reorders, the logic of that which it is supposed to be alternative to: commercialism.

Leah and Natalie's relationship thus highlights a similar rift evident between Katz and Zachary. Katz would likely scoff at someone like Leah, but he would at least recognize her protocol of socio-cultural participation. Natalie ultimately has more in common with someone like Zachary, who directly strives to obtain the cultural property that Leah obtains indirectly, as if by a mistake or a waver in her political resolve. Leah, in other words, has to at least pretend to

take the whole thing seriously; cultural capital is an element in a wider system of exchange.

Natalie however adopts cynical the logic of the short-circuited form of consumerism Lipovetsky

calls hyperconsumption: a market orientation wherein the drive to consume is re-directed inward

toward its own processes. There is, then, no need to artfully conceal the impulse to consume

behind some façade of necessity; the pleasure of consumerism in these conceptual coordinates

can now be located directly in the act itself. Natalie enacts a strange cultural logic: that cultural

capital divorced from a particularized context (as it is now directly marketable) can be applied to

virtually any cultural domain. Her process of self-invention, for instance, is itself a viable

commodity on the professional and cultural marketplace:

> Natalie Blake took out a large student loan and made a point of spending it only
> on frivolous things. Meals and cabs and underwear. Trying to keep up with 'these
> people' she soon found herself with nothing again, but now when she put the
> debit card in the slot and hoped that five pounds would come out, she did it
> without the bottomless anxiety she'd once shared with Rodney Banks. She
> cultivated a spirit of decadence. Now that she had glimpsed the possibility of a
> future, an overdraft did not hold the same power of terror over her. The vision
> Marcia Blake had of such people, and had passed on to her daughter, came
> tumbling down in a riot of casual blaspheming, weed, cocaine and indolence
> (249).

Natalie enacts once again a Pascalian logic, obtaining belief so to speak through the repetition of

behaviors meant to signify that she *already* believes. One can hardly imagine Leah pulling off

such a self-transformation, not because of its phoniness but, rather because of its *sincerity*—

Natalie's name change isn't a superficial change in fashion statement or artistic taste (which is to

say postmodern) like Leah's constant shifts in attire. Natalie genuinely changes the way she

views her own position: Leah couldn't hope to maintain fidelity to such a deep-rooted

commitment. Having removed the guilt that comes with political convictions and located cultural

capital directly as a field of social participation, she suddenly is care-free, open to the world: she

for the first time is optimistic. This, then, dramatizes the logic wherein metamodern attitudes

resume an aesthetic of hope, sincerity and optimism: Natalie herself puts into motion this re-conceptualization of the present and demonstrates its possibilities. For instance, she ultimately achieves wealth and status by playing the part. She in effect becomes a barrister by acting like one; she marries a rich man, Frank de Angelis, by associating with his set as though she were rich already—"Many of the men Natalie Blake became involved with after Rodney Banks were as socio-economically and culturally alien to her as Frank was" (247) . Rodney himself observes this and takes the opportunity to write Natalie a snide letter: "'Keisha, you talk of following your heart, but weird how your heart always seems to know which side of its bread is buttered.' Frank De Angelis took this letter from Natalie Blake and kissed the side of her head. 'Poor old Rodney. He's not still trying to become a lawyer, is he?'" (254). This is a revealing question. Not still trying to become a lawyer—why not? Surely he's a capable, intelligent young man. Frank's rhetorical question points to a sobering reality: that the professional world runs on a steady supply of social and cultural capital.

When Natalie stops taking part in the social affairs—trips to the bar—of her fellow lawyers-in-training, she is approached by her residency's higher ups: "Some people upstairs—unnamed—were 'concerned.' Why had she stopped participating in the social life of the set? Did she feel isolated? Would it help to talk to someone who'd 'been through it'?" (282). She has stopped participating temporarily because she has been working menial tasks to offset her living expenses. This possibility is never even considered by her superiors; her absence from the barrister bar scene is automatically assumed to be linked with some sense of social dissatisfaction. The importance of the social set is paramount. The social relation between professionals is no longer an incidental consequence of situation-enforced interactions, but itself a core component of the job function. What Natalie learns is that becoming a lawyer in the

technical/professional sense entails *becoming a lawyer* in the sense of self-presentation—of learning how to act like a lawyer: the academic and intellectual work performed along the way are only part of the process of entering the legal profession. One must engage with the profession at the social level in order to accumulate the necessary social capital. This is what Rodney Banks doesn't understand (or refuses to do); this is the subtext implied in Frank's question.

The predominance of social capital in the market space of material capital guides the logic of professionalism in *NW*. Frank himself is a unique embodiment of this phenomenon. Leah's first impression of him is that he "is from a different slice of the multiverse" (69) and that he "smells expensive" (68). When Natalie first sees him he is arguing with a professor in a lecture hall. After the professor makes a point: "The young man gave a slow, approving nod, the kind a man gives to his equal. His confidence seemed unwarranted, not following from anything he'd said or done" (243). One could extend this metaphor to Frank's later career—in high-tech finance. Frank is a character of variegated texture—a person seemingly stitched together from different social fabrics. He seems to reflect, like Leah, a postmodern assemblage of seemingly incompatible cultural materials. He's described as "made of parts Natalie considered mutually exclusive, and found difficult to understand together…He wore chinos with no socks, and those shoes that have ropes threaded along the sides, a blue blazer, and a pink shirt. An indescribable accent. Like he was born on a yacht somewhere in the Caribbean and raised by Ralph Lauren" (241). Natalie and Frank however do have something in common: they represent the horizon at which monetary professionalism and it's supposed opposite, hipness/style/culture, elide. Like the generational chasm that rules the social logic of Franzen's *Freedom*, the developmental progression in the novel from Leah to Natalie dramatizes the coming together of cultural and material capital.

Richard Lloyd argues apropos of this elision: "Individuals who have invested time and energy into mastering complex cultural conventions become exceptional consumers of culture" (176). Again, we see the immediate relation to this emerging ethos and hyperconsumption: the notion that art is not the object of the purchase, but embedded in the very act of purchasing. Shopping itself becomes an art form because the purchased objects bestow cultural capital, which now in a metamodern relation leads to significant grounding in the material world. Natalie and Frank are meant to demonstrate the corollary push by those in materially rewarding, high-power professions toward sophistication and cultural capital. What is most significant is that in *NW* this logic should culminate in, of all things, a discernible thrust toward the ethos of the family. Natalie's realization at the end of the text that the true meaning of her life may be located in her children—that being a mother is perhaps realized in *acting* as a mother—is thus worth contemplating. Natalie's maternal conversion (if it can be called that) at the end of the novel is not a shallow attempt at compensation: grasping at some semblance of meaning to compensate for her ostensibly hollowed-out corporate persona. As I've argued here, maternalism, Natalie discovers, is not at odds with her high-power, social capital-raking professionalism, but rather contingent upon it. Metamodernism, then, seems linked to this reversal of the roles of cultural and material capital wherein cultural capital is what enables its material counterpart, rather than the other way around (even postmodernism, which did much to confuse the two, ultimately respected this boundary). Interestingly, this reordering of terrain seems to generate (or, at any rate, plays a crucial role in generating) Natalie's maternal consciousness: a consciousness which, for all its seeming contingency, is ultimately teleological. It is this ideological constellation that this project in broad sweeps is attempting to come to terms with. To help solidify this argument I will turn to another character. If the new high-power professional functions today as an inverted

version of the modern politico-bohemian figure, then it is only fitting that Natalie's thematic

mirror-image is the novel's literal bohemian character: Annie.

Annie is in many ways the perfect inversion of Natalie: Natalie grew up an ambitious

poor black girl who achieves wealth in an instrumental, technical profession while Annie is an

impoverished, hedonistic and dissolute white aristocrat with intellectual-artistic pretensions and a

genuine eye for style. At around the time Natalie purchases her mansion, Annie is on the verge

of being thrown out of hers. Her presence in the novel is confined to one long, volatile scene in

which Felix goes to see her with the intention of ending their relationship (the details of which

the audience is given little of). She's a fiery, tempestuous character—"a large life contracted into

a small space" (161). When Felix asks her how she's been, she responds: "'How have I been?

How have I been. Well, I've been fucking desolate, really'" (163). A true bohemian derelict, she

lives on the top floor of a degenerating building owned by her very old, aristocratic family. As

Lloyd is quick to point out, nineteenth century bohemian and Romantic social experiments were

"largely carried [out] by declining aristocrats" (51)—and as *NW* points out: "Her great uncle, the

earl, owned the ground, beneath this building, beneath every building on the street, the theatre,

the coffee houses, the McDonald's" (167). Her apartment is properly disheveled, filled with "the

yellowing old playbills and photos on the wall, the boxes full of sheet music for a non-existent

piano, sold to a pawnshop before even Felix's time. The old-school everything. He knew it all

too well. The grimy sameness, the way nothing was ever refreshed. She called them antiques.

Another way of saying there's no more money" (160). Like Natalie struggling to come to terms

with Leah's Camden circle interests, Felix is relieved at the thought of breaking off their

relationship—"He would never again have to pretend to be interested in things in which he had

no interest. Ballet dancers, novels, the long and tortuous history of her family" (161-2). Her own

presence—her own body—too seems to reflect this sense of dishevelment: "She had a dancer's frame, with all the curves at the back. What he was now confronted with had only a pale utility to it: breasts, like two muscles, sitting high above a carriage of stringent pulleys and levers, all of it designed for a life that never happened" (163-4). She plays the part of the literary bohemian extravagantly: she recalls existentialist figures with genuine ease; she integrates lines of poetry into day-to-day speech—"'They flee from me that sometime did me seek'" (173)—and even names her cat Karenin. She enunciates in such a way as to imitate great nineteenth century wits. When she mock-ponders: "'Hard to believe a whole nation going bankrupt. It happened to my aunt Helen, but of course she was really asking for it. A whole country seems rather careless'" (166-7)—she clearly has in mind Lady Bracknall's quip to Jack on the carelessness of losing both parents in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Annie puts on a dazzling display of linguistic drama and literary references for, as is the case with any true neglected artist, no one in particular: Felix grasps none of it. When her guest explains his intention to start a family with his current girlfriend, Annie makes her own feelings known with her characteristic rhetorical flourish: "'The weak should take advantage of the strong, don't you think? Better that than the other way around. I want my friends to take advantage. I want them to feed off me. I want them drinking my blood…What else am I to do in this place? Raise a family?'" (172). Felix describes his desire to reach the next stage, the next level, of life, but Annie cuts him down immediately: "'Life's not a video game, Felix—there aren't a certain number of point that send you to the next level. There isn't actually any next level. The bad news it everybody dies at the end. Game over'" (181).

However, after climbing to the building's roof and having sex, the scene changes drastically. Felix asks her: "'You still taking your thing?'" (183) at which point he "saw a flash

of fury pass over her face…'No need. More chance of being struck by lightning. The blood just about still runs, but trust me: the well is almost dry'" (183). This is a curious interchange. The reader is immediately struck by her defensiveness—"'I don't want your babies, Felix. I can assure you I'm not sitting up here like some tragic fallen woman every night dreaming of having your babies'" (184). Even more interestingly, she begins to praise Grace, Felix' current girlfriend: "'Next time bring your Grace lady. I like conscious types. They're so much livelier. I find that most people are in a semi-vegetative state'" (185). She tells him in no uncertain terms that she is not interested in the bliss of conventional domestic life. Again, Annie offers a flamboyant presentation: "'You know, Felix…not everyone wants this conventional little life you're rowing your boat toward. And when it's time for me to go I fully intend to roll off my one-person dinghy into the flames and be consumed. I'm not afraid! I've never been afraid. Most people are, you know. But I'm not like most people and I don't need you to do anything for me'" (185). Like Caliban conjuring a spoken storm in imitation of Prospero, Annie speaks tempestuously to obscure what she lacks; she offers some of the most vivid rhetorical flair *NW* has to offer—her diatribes are wildly extravagant, but erratic. As the scene continues it becomes increasingly clear that she is trying to get Felix to see something. Like someone with a guilty conscience, she addresses points that her interlocutor has not made. Her final thrust in the conversation effectively pushes Felix out the door for good:

> "What a mealy-mouthed pathetic word, 'relationship.' For people who haven't the guts to live, haven't the imagination to fill their three score and ten with anything other than—…It's what people do these days, isn't it? When they can't think of anything else to do. No politics, no ideas, no balls. Get *married*. But I've transcended all that. Long time ago. Eons ago. This idea that all your happiness lies in this other person. This idea of happiness! I'm on a different plane of consciousness, darling. I've got more balls than are dreamed of in your philosophy...I was engaged at 19, I was engaged at 23, I could be moldering in some Hampshire pile at this very moment , covering and recovering sofas with

some Baron in perfect sexless harmony. That's what my people do…you can count me the fuck out!" (187).

The extravagance of this tirade gives away her true position; she *does*, in plain fact, want what she excoriates—exactly what Felix doesn't want with her. This is her version of Natalie's realization at the end of the novel. Annie, of course, is withering by her own admission. The text informs us "the lines under her eyes seemed to have lengthened and deepened, fanning out beyond the shades. The powder she'd doused herself in gathered lumpenly here and there and made everything worse" (162), like grey, lifeless pre-child Natalie. Annie lives as the embodiment of the contemporary bohemian ideal, yet this over-made-up woman gliding quickly into spinsterhood reminds us of no one so distinctly as Dickens' Ms. Havisham (albeit a very hip Ms. Havisham). The extremeness and over-the-top bitterness of her critique makes clear exactly what it is she really wants. No wonder, then, that when Felix goes to leave, "he heard this woman quietly weeping. It was his cue to turn round, but he didn't, and at the threshold the weeping became a sob. He hurried to the stairs and was a few steps down when he heard a thud on the carpet above as she went down on her knees" (189).

Annie and Natalie are thus curiously aligned, parallel figures in this crucial aspect. They both represent the opposite poles of a child-centered ethos linked together through the increasingly discernible coalescence of cultural and material capital. Both the corporate sphere and bohemian realm of artistic production have had to reckon with the increasing sense of co-functionality between these two forms. The enigma that *NW* offers for readers to ponder is why these two very different communities—professional and bohemian-artist—locked in a mutual conundrum should find themselves on common ideological ground with regard to the family and babies. It is hard to imagine two more different people that Natalie and Annie, and yet these two representatives of these very different social enclaves both find themselves in their final

appearances in the novel confronted with an inescapable existential orientation that posits

children and family as the horizon of meaning ascribable to a human life. What is more, both of

these figures do so in the wake of their respective failed attempts at navigating the changing

relationship between cultural and material capital. Natalie ultimately fails to balance the two, the

latter costing her connection to the former; Annie's money trouble comes knocking literally and

as she resists her growling stomach she is forced to consider whether *la vie boheme* requires

access to the very wealth she has been swindled out of by her brother. These two figures have

spent the majority of their adult lives combating the nihilism rendered by this condition and both

seem to have hit upon children as a point reference. This raises the question of Smith's own

position: after all, Smith, too, as a contemporary writer of literary fiction is working in a cultural

space that allows for both artistic distinction and commercial success—that is to say, she is

laboring in the same overlap of cultural capital and material capital that Natalie and Annie

dramatize.

In "Two Paths for the Novel," published in 2008 in *The New York Review of Books*,

Smith lays out what she considers the two essential modes possible for contemporary fiction:

> the American metafiction that stood in opposition to Realism has been relegated
> to a safe corner of literary history, to be studied in postmodernity modules, and
> dismissed, by our most famous public critics, as a fascinating failure, intellectual
> brinkmanship that lacked heart. Barth, Barthelme, Pynchon, Gaddis, DeLillo,
> David Foster Wallace—all misguided ideologists, the novelist equivalents of the
> socialists in Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*. In this
> version of our literary history, the last man standing is the Balzac-Flaubert model,
> on the evidence of its extraordinary persistence. But the critiques persist, too. Is it
> really the closest model we have to our condition? Or simply the bedtime story
> that comforts us most? (1)

Smith is arguing that, roughly, contemporary Anglo-American fiction largely follows one of two

trajectories: realism and (vaguely) postmodern experimentalism. Of the former, she suggests that

it "sits at an anxiety crossroads where a community in recent crisis—the Anglo-American liberal

middle class—meets a literary form in long-term crisis, the nineteenth-century lyrical Realism of

Balzac and Flaubert" (1). Realism appears, however improbably, the cultural frontrunner. Her

critique is aimed at the limited nature of realism's scope: "Most practitioners of lyrical Realism

blithely continue on their merry road, with not a metaphysical care in the world...I have written

in this tradition myself, and cautiously hope for its survival, but if it's to survive, lyrical Realists

will have to push a little harder on their subject" (7). For Smith, it is the realists who have

triumphed and the postmodern experimentalist provocateurs who have been relegated to the

dustbin of obscure academic studies. It is realism that matters—that is a potent social force—for

Smith: in an over-attachment to formal concerns some essential aspect of the human

experience—to "those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race" (1506) as

Matthew Arnold puts it—is lost in contemporary literary efforts. Smith makes perhaps the same

point in a different way in an essay on *Middlemarch* published in her 2009 volume *Changing My*

Mind:

> That nineteenth-century English novels continue to be written today with
> troubling frequency is a tribute to the strength of Eliot's example and to the
> nostalgia we feel for that noble form. Eliot would be proud. But should we? For
> where is *our* fiction, our twenty-first century fiction?...What is universal and
> timeless in literature is *need*—we continue to need novelists who seem to know
> and feel, and who move between these two modes of operation with wondrous
> fluidity (52).

Franzen is certainly a figure she has in mind in this observation. Smith, on the other hand,

attempts to provide an answer to this quandary on the literature of our time: her answer is *NW*.

Part of the argument "Two Paths for the Novel" puts forward is that realism, while certainly an

apt literary modality, is nonetheless missing something. Smith sees in the attachment of writers

like Franzen to the abstract formalism of genre-specific narrative creation as structurally self-

defeating. Can one really depict "the way we live now" with a self-consciously antiquated form?

NW represents an attempt at a new approach to fiction. As she describes her process in the interview with *Foyles*: "Everything I do is an attempt to get close to the real, as I experience it, and the closer you get to the reality of experience the more bizarre it SHOULD look on the page and sound in the mouth because our real experience doesn't come packaged in a neat three act structure" (3). Regarding this stated attempt to get to the *real*: it should strike the reader that this very principle is the central theoretical preoccupation of literary experimentalism—this is, to reiterate a point made by Smith quoted earlier, Joyce inventing a new language to represent reality as he himself grasped it. *NW*, then, represents a fusion—a most strange convergence—between the "two paths" available to novelists today. The novel indeed attempts to offer a degree of experimental literary innovations to provide that extra *something*—that extra intangible *je ne sais quoi*—that, by consensus, realism as a fictive modality appears to be missing.

Chapter 3: "it would seem my effectiveness is coming to its conclusion"—or, Homes' *May We be Forgiven* and the Return to Childhood

The focus of this chapter is A.M. Homes' 2012 novel *May We Be Forgiven*. Its central figure is a bumbling failed academic named Harry Silver and, as his name suggests, he is perennially in second-place. His older brother George is a high-powered TV executive: a self-absorbed and bullyish stereotype of the corporate strongman. Unsettlingly, George is given to paroxysms of violence: outbursts that tragically leave a local family and then Jane, his own wife, dead. Harry, having just commenced an affair with Jane and thus dissolving his own marriage and rendering himself virtually homeless moves into his brother's house to care for their kids. The rest of the novel—the vast majority of it, in fact—details the efforts by which he comes to love the children (and they him) and find a place for himself in the world. By the novel's close he has filled his brother's house with all manner of people he has bonded with in order to foster some form of personal development. As with all of the novels this project engages with, *May We Be Forgiven* presents a narrative whose gravitational pull is toward social conciliation. Harry begins the novel as all the protagonists taken up in this project do: as a misfit, a strangely disconnected individual floating weightless in the ether of postmodern stasis. Homes' novel tracks his progress toward obtaining a place in a meaningful social milieu; tellingly, ground-zero for this effort is the domestic space of his immediate family. However, as this chapter will demonstrate, the process by which the novel accomplishes this task is highly suspect.

Each of the other novels studied in this dissertation presents a social logic that its narrative must adhere to. Smith's *NW*, for instance, reconnects her alienated central figure to the social tapestry that she has escaped from and yet longs for bitterly; her reintroduction to the social group via the epistemology of the child, or as Lee Edelman simply terms it "The Child," is the culminating event of the novel. However much this revelation may seem to come out of the

blue, it at least maintains a consistent logic: the total frame makes a kind of sense. What's

curious about *May We Be Forgiven*, on the other hand, is that Harry's conciliation with the social

doesn't appear to take place in reference to any sense of conditionality. *May We Be Forgiven*

doesn't provide any sort of central dilemma or challenge—or conflict at all—to be worked

through. The goal of this chapter is to determine the logic by which Homes' novel is functioning.

In the introduction I suggested that metamodernism in part reflects not so much an overtaking of

postmodern irony, but an intensive inversion of it. My contention has been that the sincerity and

optimism identified as major currents in contemporary cultural production may in fact derive

from a deeply embedded cynicism. In subsequent chapters I have observed this idea in relation to

cultural capital as an objective social function, wherein it comes to serve as an ordering principle

in the market: objects that bestow cultural status are not only purchasable (and freely

disseminating) but also, in an ulterior context, come to serve literally as currency. As

contemporary life is depicted in these novels, the relationship between cultural and material

capital is no longer a zero-sum game: there is constituted a cooperative relation between them.

Thus a short-circuit occurs: a rewiring of a complex network into a single, directly self-

referential relationship. This, furthermore, is what characterizes the political landscape as Walter

Berglund and Richard Katz perceive it. The locality of politics has become a politics of the local:

culture, the language and enabling medium of politics, has instead become its endgame.

What's curious about *May We Be Forgiven* is that it is a work of fiction which posits the

centrality of familial love and community, but then goes about undermining it. The novel is

marked with an almost compulsive need for motion, as if the narrative will simply not sit still: as

will be discussed later, so many scenes of social interaction have the potential to blossom

genuine social engagement between Harry and others people, but the effect is foreclosed by the

novel's interminable sense of jutting forward. So many of this novel's scenes find Harry making

deep connections to other characters, but all too often this is done with such brevity—with such

haste toward closure—that for any attentive reader the social interaction itself is undermined;

threads are picked up and dropped before they can be developed. The resulting array of

interactions in the novel display what we might term Teflon sociality. Here, metamodernism's

influence is most recognizable. The novel's sociality is presented as deeply meaningful—there is

no reason to doubt Harry's various proclamation of satisfaction at the novel's close. And yet

these un-ironic relationships seem to emerge out of a vacuous process of anti-development. It's

as though these scenes are staged more for the benefit of Harry's own recognition of his sociality

than for the sake of actually having these experiences. The novel, while lionizing social

connectivity, rushes through it: it goes through the motions of sociality hastily as though trying

to maneuver away from actually depicting meaningful social connections. As this chapter will

argue, many (if not all) of the social connections Harry makes in the course of the novel are, the

like the metamodern optimism and sincerity of the present moment, grounded on essentially

nothing.

It is this logic of narrative progression that I suggest is symptomatic of contemporary

cultural formations. *May We Be Forgiven* in its relatively direct narrative presentation of

contemporaneity perhaps speaks more frankly to the condition of Anglo-American culture in the

present moment than some of the other texts discussed in this project. Homes orchestrates a

series of bogus social relations around Harry that have the effect of mimicking a web-work of

kinship relations. The spurious social connections that Harry forges throughout the course of the

novel allow him to indulge his truest fantasy: to return to a state of self-enclosed, homeostatic

nurturation. Harry in effect builds what Natalie and Walter must rediscover: a family. His access

to the social is thus dependent on a figurative object he himself has a hand in creating. What is more, Harry doesn't stop at social connectivity, but complete personal reconstruction. He organizes a grouping of people that symbolically function as a family within which he can return to a state of childhood. With this come all manner of cultural associations: most tellingly, this chapter will argue, Harry's character logic demands the return of the suburbs as the symbolic center of American life out of the increasingly prevalent milieu of urban spaces and amorphous sprawl. *May We Be Forgiven*'s narrative protocol is thus one of nostalgia, though not simply a postmodern nostalgia for a present-crafted conception of some imagined past. Rather, as if playing out Jameson's logic to the nth degree, Harry recreates *literally* a seemingly improved version of a time gone by and embeds it in his present situation. Jameson's notion of "nostalgia for the present" is a critical term for a perceived conceptual incongruity in postmodern aesthetics; for Harry, though, it is a literal rendering of his situation.

Harry's personal ambitions mirror the Teflon sociality that the novel ultimately produces: it is all in the service of carrying out the essential metamodern task of developing wider public sociality via the private sociality of the family. Thus whatever hiccups or malfunctions can be read into *May We Be Forgiven*'s narrative logic are perhaps indicative of more deeply-seeded issues at work in contemporary culture itself. This chapter will present this reasoning in several stages. First, it will contextualize Homes' novel in the literature and history of the American suburbs. It will place the novel into conversation with analyses of the white male suburban patriarch, as well as more recent work on suburbia in the post-9/11 age. This chapter will then analyze Harry's Teflon sociality, arguing that his means of social connectivity are, like the present run of the "American way of life," ultimately unsustainable. His method of connectivity isn't, as his friends suggest to him in an ego-stroking manner, evidence of personal development,

but carried out for the sake of assembling an ad hoc familial structure within which to symbolically de-mature into a recreated experience of childhood. Finally, and concomitant to the previous section, this chapter will show how it is the children of the novel which take on the symbolic weight of adulthood. Nate and Ashley in effect switch places with their adult counterparts, and in so doing assume full responsibility for the course of a world their elders have relinquished responsibility of.

Harry's Suburban Nostos

In recent decades, many iconic critiques of suburban living have emerged in both the novel and film. Films like Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* (1999) present a picture-perfect image of everyday life that quickly betrays its own plasticity; thus destabilized, the film ends in spasmodic violence. What is fascinating about *May We Be Forgiven* is that it runs this format in reverse: George and Jane's suburban world is *a priori* a monstrous place:

> I kept watching him as I went back and forth carrying plates into the kitchen—the edges of my fingers dipping into an unnamable goo—cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes, a cold pearl onion, gristle. With every trip back and forth from the dining room to the kitchen, I hated him more. Every sin of our childhood, beginning with his birth, came back. He entered the world eleven months after me, sickly at first, not enough oxygen along the way, and was given far too much attention. And then, despite what I repeatedly tried to tell him about how horrible he was, he acted as though he believed he was a gift from the gods (1).

No one is taken in by the grotesquerie of the opening scene. Unlike later depictions of food as abstractly assembled objects, food in this scene is disquietingly corporeal—it's all a matter of bodies. The gristly bird carcass, George's mal-formed infant body, food stuffs that maintain no formal efficacy as though they were some nebulous set of innards scattered around Harry's plate: the violence of consumption reveals itself not as a regrettable side effect, but as a central component of suburban life. When George murders Jane, then, he is enacting literally the

situational violence embedded in the suburban American way of life. The novel offers a narrative that functions like watching *American Beauty* in reverse: the literal and symbolic violence are offered matter-of-factly up front, only to give way with time to a curious form of community and family.

May We Be Forgiven stages a curious return to suburbs in a moment of suburban disenchantment. It is interesting to note that Harry's regression back into childhood mirrors Ehrenhalt's observation (detailed in the previous chapter) in reverse. Just as middle class young people today are growing up and leaving the boredom of the suburbs behind for the excitement and cultural relevance of the city, Harry, in growing down, leaves in the course of the novel both an enviable city apartment and an academic position for the quietude of a suburban domestic setting. Though a component in the lifestyle space of countries all over the world, the suburbs have always held a prominent place in the American social mythos. Post-war America saw the development of the suburbs and the shifts it brought to work organization and leisure as an entirely new modality of economic participation. As many scholars have elucidated, the American suburban experience, especially at its midcentury highpoint, has been both the cause of prosperous celebration as well as existential malaise. Robert Beuka, in his textual-cultural history of the suburbs, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (2004), outlines the dubious weight suburbia has come to bear in the contemporary consciousness:

> Mere mention of the word 'suburbia,' after all, will call to mind for most Americans a familiar string of images—the grid of identical houses on identical lots, the smoking barbecue, the swimming pool—loaded signifiers that, taken together, connote both the middle-class 'American dream' as it was promulgated by and celebrated in popular culture in postwar years and that dream's inverse; the vision of a homogenized, soulless, plastic landscape of tepid conformity, an alienating 'noplace.' That such images seem drawn from an increasingly distant past, with 'suburbia' and 'the 1950s' occupying a shared space in the collective

cultural imagination, is neither accident nor coincidence; as a culture we retain a detatched view of suburban place, relegating to the past a psychologically troublesome landscape that is nonetheless increasingly the dominant terrain of the nation (4).

Beuka is cataloguing an ever-growing laundry list of unsavory associations of the suburban experience made by the culture at large, even as these structural aspects are being standardized across the American experiential landscape. So much so, in fact, one cannot help notice the disappearance of the term "suburbs" from discourses of critical human geography and its steady replacement with the term "sprawl," which designates the enmeshment of mass commercial spaces with domestic spaces that maintain the appearance and "feeling" of suburbia even though they aren't geographically-speaking suburban.

Certainly the present moment evaluates the stereotypical suburban experience in a specific set of terms. Suburbia, as Beuka clearly emphasizes, marks as much a contemporary set of imagined circumstances as it does any actual configuration of living arrangements and social relations of a suburban environment. The suburbs, then, are re-imagined through a particularized historical account of midcentury American life. The realities of suburban life aside, the cultural perceptions of a suburban existence are perhaps best encapsulated in the innumerable sitcoms of the 1950s. As Beuka illustrates:

> To see this point, one need only consider the visions of suburbia offered on popular television sitcoms in the late 1950s through the early 1960s. Standing in for their real-life counterparts, the suburban communities pictured on such programs as *Father Knows Best*, *Leave it to Beaver*, *The Donna Reed Show*, and others provided American culture at large with what would become its prevailing vision of suburbia; centered on harmonious family and community life, such programs envisioned the suburbs as both an idealized and insular landscape. In this sense the fledgling medium of television helped to invest the emergent landscape of suburbia with what turned out to be an incredibly durable symbolic meaning, one that retains a least a residual resonance today (10).

One show omitted by Beuka, *Ozzie and Harriet*, is nonetheless an oft-pointed to example. Theorist of human geography Mike Davis, in effecting a common cultural rendering of the suburbs for the purposes of an academic study, tellingly refers to contemporary suburban sprawls as "Ozzie-and-Harriet Land." In fact, his contribution for a recent volume, *Sprawl and Suburbia* (2005), is entitled "Ozzie and Harriet in Hell." Harry himself, ever astute in noticing "ephemera from another era" (267), visits George in his first state-mandated stay at an insane asylum—once there, Harry nervously observes the institution's décor: "everything is red, white or blue—or brown. All of it conspiring to seem entirely Yankee, Norman Rockwell and good for one's health…It's all like a flashback to an America that never existed, America as it was dreamed by Ozzie and Harriet" (158). The post-war development of television enabled the production of many ideal suburban depictions, of which *Leave It to Beaver* is in common discourse perhaps the most pointed-to encapsulator of what contemporary urbanite Americans take to be the collective ethos of the 1950s suburban American experience. When Harry rents out Madeline and Cy's house to the Gaos, Mrs. Gao, with a fitting slip of the tongue, exclaims: "'It is an American dream house…It is *Leave It To Believer*'" (451). Mrs. Gao fittingly addresses this house, which has been vacated in the wake of the shattering of its inhabitants' family, in terms of the American dream. The tracing of this connection in *May We Be Forgiven* and other texts could go on indefinitely. The point, however, is that the central stereotypes of the suburban experience as Beuka and others trace them through American media—the two-car garage, well-watered, prize-winning lawn, 2.5 children, the white picket fence, etc.—persist doggedly in the contemporary imagination and thus form part of the background against which Homes' novel must be read.

In the current Anglo-American moment, it is the city that is the place of young adulthood: the city as the place of culture, connection and opportunity. It is perhaps the case the collective

American outlook is refocusing. In the current moment, we may be in the process of culturally renegotiating our interpretation of the qualities of the suburban era as they persist in our thinking. The conventional post-war American experience, as expressed films, novels, comic strips and, above all, television sitcoms, is one that positions suburbia as the conservative bastion—as the place of family: the suburban model of relations that Millennials encountered in popular culture, stylized as *the* definitive American account, is one in which young (generally white) children grow up in the protection of their suburban enclaves only to pass through what has become a virtually mandatory phase of rebelliousness, typically during teenage years. American clichés of angsty teenagers with multi-colored hair listening to self-indulgent music are so worn they have come to represent a virtually codified stage of development in the American consciousness. It is telling, then, that the children in the novels studied here rebel against their parents with a ruthless ethos of conformism.

The centrality of domesticity—of the child-centered experience—forms a large part of the logic according to which cultural apprehensions of the suburban play out. For Beuka, this is all conceived of as having an emasculative effect, marking "the vulnerability of the suburban male" (107). Beuka notes that, for the various male social critics of the 1950s, the suburban male is presented "as a regressed figure trapped in a childlike state, the pathetic target of scornful humor, or an ineffectual, symbolically castrated victim dominated by an all-powerful matriarch," which, as he points out, sounds "a decidedly Freudian ring" (109). In other words, as Beuka determines, part of the sense of plasticity that *post-facto* characterizes the suburban experience is tied closely to a self-perceived sense of male impotence. Catherine Jurca, in her study *White Diaspora: The Suburbs and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (2001), offers an incisive critique of this conceptual orientation. "White Diaspora" is, of course, intended ironically: her

study "examines the tendency in twentieth-century literary treatments of the American suburb to convert the rights and privileges of living there into spiritual, cultural and political problems of displacement, in which being white and middle class is imagined to have as much or more to do with subjugation as with social dominance" (4). To delineate this conceptual foundation she reinvigorates Harriet Beecher Stowe's term "sentimental dispossession," which for Jurca designates the "affective dislocation by which white middle class suburbanites begin to see themselves as spiritually an culturally impoverished by prosperity" (7).

Jurca proceeds to trace the self-conception inherent to the white suburban experience as one meandering oddly toward a position of rhetorical victimization: "One effect of ubiquitous complaints about mass production, standardization, dullness and conformity, which novelists have developed and refined in the context of broad-based intellectual resistance to the suburb, is to generate a twentieth-century model of white middle-classness based counterintuitively and, incredibly, on the experience of victimization" (6). As Mari Matsuda once quipped: "The cluster of African-American or Asian or Latino students huddling in the corner of the cafeteria is seen as excluding the roomful of Anglos, not vice versa" (14-15). This psychical enterprise isn't merely an orientation to a self-enclosed world, but an inversion of subjective interpellation in a colonial context: "The practice of self-segregation is not represented as unmotivated exclusion, however, but as a necessary retreat from and defense against a colonizing presence that is metonymically figured as the city" (7). Thus the gap between suburb and city is inscribed within the configuration of suburbia itself. This, of course, plays out literally in the large-scale development of sprawl as a contemporary living condition, but it is also that gap that Harry crosses: a gap not only of the racial/class line, but of the temporal and ideological divide.

This model of 1950s suburbia, however, holds a dubious place in the consciousness of Millennials today (even if, as Jurca might insist, that dubiousness itself is dubious). It depicts the nativity scene of what Edelman calls our "secular theology," which is substantiated (or perhaps *tran*substantiated) via the "fetishistic figurations of the child" (12) and summarized pithily by the chorus of USA for Africa's 1985 benefit single "We Are the World" (written by Michael Jackson): "We are the world/ We are the children/ We are the ones who make a brighter day." The message is familiar enough: children are the future. However, the midcentury suburban experience as it is rendered in our contemporary cultural imagination represents a very particularized sort of futurity. The "future" in this vision of sociality is one in which contours of the present are mapped onto the future, hitherto a *tabula rasa* awaiting cultural inscription. "The Future," in other words, in the conception of the post-war suburban experience, is "the future" merely in the sense of facilitating a continuing extension of the present *ad infinitum*—a temporal progression to fit a "landscape flattened by an inexorable, desultory standardization" (Beuka 240). This ideology of moving on but not necessarily forward saturates suburban cultural artifacts. Cartoons, for instance, the beloved pastime of suburban youths, create a narrative of human existence that posits the suburban experience as the foundational logic in human development: the fact that the way of life depicted in *The Flintstones* is, with regard to social relations, familial development and work organization, virtually identical to that seen on *The Jetsons* conveys this quite palpably. All human civilizations across all eons are essentially identical, following this reasoning. And yet, more relevantly for my purposes, this logic also finds resonance in the aesthetics and processes of postmodernism. The stasis of historical progression (if the past becomes a fabrication, so too must the future: this is why Jameson insists

"nostalgia for the present" entails the dislocation of the utopian impulse) expressed through the irony of artistic self-referentiality suggests the closing off of temporal motion.

This conception of futurity as a sort of static process of self-replication is one that has become central to American thinking in many registers. Its political lineage, in any case, seems to have come to a head in 1992 the publication of Francis Fukuyama's much debated *The End of History and the Last Man*. As Fukuyama argues quite candidly: "the experience of the twentieth century made highly problematic the claims of progress on the basis of science and technology" (6). Fukuyama's claim that global political and social futurity can come to rest, at last, on a reliable ideological bedrock—namely, capitalist liberal democracy—would seem a clear theoretical correlative. Intriguingly, even this notion of a "final" entry in humanity's catalogue of political experiments seems to presuppose a certain degree of skepticism leveled at the very historical processes that brought it about. Yet it was, strangely enough, at this same historical junction that the narrative of future-as-extended-present began to experience turmoil, as if the very act of proclaiming history closed had the effect of reopening it—as if the very act of proclaiming the endpoint of history itself came to serve as an historical event. The Gulf War and Samuel P. Huntington's proposed notion of a "clash of civilizations" forced open up a new dimensionality of historical progression; similarly, the emergence of the global justice movement (called the anti-globalization movement at the time) with their heavily publicized anti-NAFTA protests and the storied "Battle of Seattle" (considered, rightly or wrongly, an ideological precursor to the Occupy movement) and their accompanying global consciousness put a foot in front of an ideological door that had been closing at least since the 1950s.

In any case, reading contemporary suburban sprawl raises questions about the future, both as a sense of cultural progression and physical, material continuity. As Walter Berglund

continually reminds the reader of *Freedom*, the processes which allow for the "American way of life" in its present state are precarious and require a level of international military dominance (and domestic production, such as the increasingly visible horrors of factory faming and slaughterhouses) which undermines the very liberal democratic teleology Fukuyama finds at the end of our collective historical trajectory. Mark Fisher develops this notion in his study *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009) in which he echoes a sentiment widely attributed to Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson (though not in print): that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine an alternative to capitalism. This principle is what Fisher refers to as "capitalist realism": "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (2). This understanding has found a burgeoning presence in contemporary media in recent years. Dutifully, the sphere of cultural production has followed through with this conceit: global destruction appears to be one of the most palpable and salient cultural narratives available to us in the present moment. From apocalyptic and zombie-themed films and television shows to global warming, disease, possible comet strikes and international tensions between entities in possession of nuclear arsenals—some anxiety over the outlook of the collective human future is understandable. One fact that Harry tries rather successfully disavow late in the novel is that his own domestic bliss is headed for an apocalyptic end:

> "How long is he in for?" I ask.
> "Five to fifteen," Walter Penny says. "We compromised."
> "No trial?"
> "Trust me, it's better this way."
> "When's the soonest he'll be out?"
> "Figure three years" (366).

Astoundingly, the reader is informed that George in all likelihood will leave prison and reclaim his domain (and Harry's new life) in as little as three years. Harry never addresses this fact

beyond this exchange with Walter Penny and simply continues on as if the peculiar connections

he has built will last forever. It is tempting to read the whole situation as an exercise in comic

irony. However, Harry doesn't brush off the issue with ease, but suppresses this realization like a

traumatic memory: "I lie there thinking of George…and I wonder: Is there pumpkin pie in

prison? If there is, does it have any flavor at all?" (480). It is telling that his meandering thoughts

should come to his brother just before the novel's close. Fitting that Harry's thoughts concerning

his brother would completely fail to address the looming domestic crisis. Harry's swift

movement into an abstraction of the present—a hypothetical of the present moment instead of a

pondering on the future—enacts Fisher's logic. It is easier for Harry to contemplate his brother's

alien existential state then contemplate the alteration of his own life. This functions quite clearly

as a corollary to the increasingly visible anxiety over the continuation of the American

consumerist endeavor in the coming years. Perhaps one way to engage the present moment is to

grapple with the possibility that the present (post-war suburban-centric) run of life is, like

Harry's domestic arrangement, not infinitely extensible. Numerous global crises have arisen to

view, many of which appear to be in part resultant of American post-war political habits and

"lifestyle" sensibilities. Pollution and global warming, regional instability, militant radical

religion—much of it has bubbled up from underneath the American narrative, forced plainly into

view like dust swept out from under the proverbial rug. Today, the world has entered a

developmental gridlock: the environment, politics and international relations, economy: the

present moment is such that no one seriously seems able to conceive of a future.

  May We Be Forgiven, then, is consciously functioning as a suburban novel in an era of

skepticism toward the suburban project. The suburban domestic space Harry folds himself into

throughout the novel is nonetheless meaningful for him despite its foreclosed future. What it is,

then, that may be operating at the core of cultural objects like *May We Be Forgiven* is a negotiative process wherein futurity and nullity reconfigure one another. The novel orchestrates a large-scale interaction between two emergent archetypes: an adult generation regressing to fantasies of childhood to escape the deadlock of a non-future, and an idealized generation of ambitious super-children who with eerie deftness assume responsibility for the burden of futurity to escape the repetition of a present their parents would foist upon them. Emphasis on this archetypal formation is prevalent in contemporary media; humbly, this project will dub the relationship between these archetypes as "Lisa Simpson Syndrome." This relationship is meant to denote one in which a startlingly intelligent and responsible youth takes on the symbolic weight of parenting from an incompetent and/or unmotivated caretaker. Obviously, I take the name from the Lisa Simpson and her continuous attempts to mitigate her father's various incompetent fumblings in Matt Groening's syndicated animated sitcom *The Simpsons*, arguably the contemporary moment's most definitive response to the family-centered sitcoms of the 1950s. In a sense, depicting a situation where children have the moral authority is hardly a modern invention. As was detailed in the last chapter, such a situation can be easily traced back to the nineteenth century with Dickens' Tiny Tim as one easily-identifiable figure of reference. However, Lisa's sheer intelligence and her capacity to act rationally in her father's stead often have the effect of her being positioned *de facto* as the parental caregiver.

Thus Harry embodies a contemporary response to suburban white patriarchy: the white male authority figure who willingly (indeed, eagerly) divests himself of moral authority. For Kathy Knapp, this is a condition of the post-9/11 suburban novel, which "introduce[s] a new specimen altogether: the middle-class, middle-aged white male who holds himself accountable both for his failures and his failure to act" (xxvi-ii). In Knapp's reading, the suburbs take on a

wholly new resonance in post-9/11 fiction: "If the postwar suburbs have historically provided a suitable stage for a glittering master narrative of American prosperity built around the care, feeding and sheltering of the fetishized nuclear family, the same suburbs now tell a story of American decline. Thus, the cohort of writers who have returned to this beat do not offer the postwar suburb as a retreat from the larger world but suggest instead that the world has come to the suburbs" (xvi). The suburban novel after 9/11 thus rewrites the meaning and processes of the post-war suburbs (and suburban fiction). Most importantly, for Knapp these post-9/11 suburban novels "advance an aesthetic of contingency that inaugurates a new suburban literary tradition, the basis of which is connectedness rather than alienation" (xxx). Moving into the next section, it is connectedness which is most at issue: the following section will explore the logic which guides the social connectivity Harry experiences in the novel.

Everybody Loves Harry

For Smith and Franzen—as I daresay for most people—entry to a social order is predicated on the maintenance of a set of values (or social capital) and the exertion of effort toward a stated or tacit set of ends. This is how Patty and Walter ultimately rejoin near the close of *Freedom*. Patty makes an effort; she follows Walter to his secluded cabin and refuses to leave until he takes her in. She is, in effect, paying back his years of neglect and wasted effort—the scale is being evened out. Natalie, too, in trying maintain both the social prestige of opulence and connection to her local roots gives one the sense that she is trying to charge more than her social credit line can balance. These novels offer a structured account—that is, their respective narratives—in which these conciliatory negotiations can take place. This is largely the source of tension and identificatory pleasure involved in reading these texts. All of the novels surveyed in this project

track the progress of liminal figures like these: characters caught between recognizable social spaces and struggling for inclusion. Natalie, of course, is not deprived of sociality altogether while working as a high level barrister, and yet she continually weathers the nagging sense that she is missing something crucial. Patty Berglund is from two different incompatible worlds: the elite world of New York politics and the humble life of a Midwestern housewife. Contemporary social-realist fiction isolates the ineffable substance of a proper social tie (whatever that may entail in a given work's context) and offer it as an *objet petit a*, thus making it locatable in an object, person, place or situation. This is why Natalie suddenly comes to cherish not just her children, but the very *idea* of children, though she can't quite say why. This is furthermore why Patty Berglund comes almost spontaneously to realize that she utterly, viscerally needs to be with Walter, though she can't explain why (even in the text she has ostensibly authored).

Contemporary realist fiction thus dramatizes the underlying mechanics of human sociality in a culturally contextualized format. They map the murky laws of exchange—the, shall we say, terms and conditions of human connectivity. What is astounding about Homes' novel is that terms and conditions seem not to apply. *May We Be Forgiven* maintains the framework of what this project calls a social novel: it is essentially about a strange and lonely man that finds happiness by locating a place for himself in a social group. Harry speaks the hefty language of bonding and the importance of sociality. He describes the warmth of connecting with others: of finding his place in the world. This is all well and good; however, there is something amiss in the progression of the text. *Freedom* and *NW* are structured to facilitate a teleology of social reconciliation; *May We Be Forgiven* moves toward an ultimately phony one and does so haphazardly. Like the previous two novels, Homes' has something of a definable structure. *Freedom* takes place roughly over the course a whole generation, as does *NW*. *May We Be*

Forgiven too takes place within a conventional temporal cycle. The novel opens and closes with two proximate Thanksgiving dinners. It follows the course of exactly one year: "It has been a year—a lifetime" (474). However, the novel is essentially plot-less and unlike the many masterworks that dispense with conventional storytelling form, from *Tristram Shandy* to the high works of postmodernism, it does not revel in its formlessness. The narrative moves swiftly from event to event, as if guided by some Freudian death drive—some nervous, fidgety energy that pushes the reader forward to the next scene every time she is at risk of an in-depth identificatory experience. The novel, in other words, while speaking the language of connectivity, moves at a pace that seems almost consciously to undermine character identification. The characters, and especially Harry, by the end of the novel behave as if they have learned something penetrating—as if something transformative has reshaped their lives when really in the course of the novel *nothing* of any substance to prompt such an epiphany has occurred.

Smith and Franzen are both quite clear that specific forms of tension push one toward social reconciliation. It's difficult to say what the equivalent substance in Homes' novel is. As will be discussed later in this chapter, Harry hardly seems to act of his own accord at all; everything is taken care of for him by others. And yet, by the end of the novel, he is master of a house filled with surrogate family members. Harry, the outsider, has reconnected to the social; he has made meaningful (to him, at least) social ties. However, what this section will argue is that this model of social reconciliation is one that is deeply, deeply suspicious. It is not at all clear what these social ties that Harry enjoys at the end of the novel are predicated on. What is the foundation for the inexplicable kinship he experiences? The novel embeds its reader in a miasma of melodrama meant to mask the fact that the novel's sociality lacks any sort of meaningful foundation. Rather than having actively negotiated the social field to bond with others, the basis

for the sociality which emerges uproariously at the close of the novel is only referenced indirectly. Throughout the latter sections of the text, several comments by different characters in various instances offer that Harry in some capacity has become a "real person," though it's far from clear in what sense this is to be understood. What was he before? Though the proposition is vague, it suggests that the development is meant to be taken seriously: the text is suggesting in this prospect of development that it isn't all an ironic meandering, but the proposition of tangible social development. But development toward what? *May We Be Forgiven* is a novel that goes through the motions of social connectivity—it maintains the formal qualities of a social novel— but it achieves it as if by a magic trick wherein the raw material of Harry, the social failure at the novel's start, is covered by a silk handkerchief that Homes the magician slowly pulls away through the course of the novel to reveal a character mysteriously and inexplicably transformed. Harry achieves his social group by going through the motions, but everything he undertakes with Nate and Ashley, his wards, is planned for him by others. This means that, like Natalie's attempt to gain wealth and prestige, his attainment of social connectivity is predicated on him already having it, and thus instead of a developmental teleology there is present instead a redundant circularity—thus, the metamodern format of meaning constructed out of irony. Thus, *May We Be Forgiven* is metamodern in a more literal and direct way than the other texts. A key term in the equation used by Franzen and Smith is missing. This opens up a cavernous gap in the logic of the novel that Homes never addresses, but rather sweeps away with an excess of melodrama at the novel's close. The intention of the following pages is to offer an account explaining this development.

By the end of the novel, Harry has surrounded himself with the aging, senile parents of an idiosyncratic paramour, the elderly married proprietors of a Chinese deli, another set of elderly

married proprietors of a different Chinese restaurant, Ricardo: the surviving child of the family

George killed in a car accident, Cheryl: his (to put it politely) occasional lover and her husband,

and Nate and Ashley, his niece and nephew who are in his legal custody. From this list the nature

of Harry's social recognition becomes apparent. The social reconciliation that this novel posits is

one that sees Harry position himself within a self-infantilizing social web-work. These people

that Harry continually brings into his (his brother's, technically) house are figurative parents.

Here we see the metamodern logic most strikingly at work: this novel in fact intensifies the

thematics which guide the other texts discussed in this dissertation. It isn't merely that Harry

builds a family structure with which to access the social, but rather he organizes a familial group

that *acts as* the social. Rather than engaging his family as a means of self-development to

meaningful go out into society at large, he constructs an *ad hoc* family that in effect pulls the

social totality itself into his comfortable domestic space. Harry by the novel's close can access

the social without leaving home. This effect is related Harry's logic of self-infantilization; after

all, it is in the early stages of childhood where the social whole and the immediate family are one

and the same. As this chapter will discuss in detail later on, this logic hold especially with regard

to Nate and Ashley, over whom he holds legal guardianship. Nate and Ashley allow him to grow

down, as it were, byfunctioning in the novel as *his* adoptive parents. They are both *wunderkind*

who embody the fast-paced, ambitious professional paradigm that figures like Joey Berglund and

Natalie Blake aspire to. Nate, for example, has founded (and supports financially) his own

village in Africa (called Nateville), studies microfinance and, by the end of the novel, is planning

his memoirs despite the seeming drawback of being a 12-year old. Harry, on the other hand, is

continuously infantilized in the text, rendered increasingly helpless and in need of care as the

narrative progresses. This chapter will argue that the jutting sense of plot layout is fundamentally

a reflection of the inversion of these familial relationships. This strange generational reversal

leaves this novel's readers with a plot that is not a smooth progression but a rough, grinding and

jerking motion: back and forth like stalling out a car by letting up the clutch too fast. Thus, *May*

We Be Forgiven is a social novel with the curious malady of deficit-sociality. The first step in

this analysis is to offer a detailed layout of how the relationships created in the novel appear to

function.

One prominent happening in the novel is the proffering of kinship by seeming strangers.

The reader can be forgiven for suspicion. While in New York, for instance, parsing through a

newly-discovered cache of Richard Nixon's personal papers (including, fantastically, a trove of

hitherto unknown creative writing authored by the former president), Harry finds himself as he

often does: pondering what to eat for lunch. He begins going to the Chinese deli owned by the

parents of his transcriber:

> Every day Ching Lan eats lunch with her parents in the deli. All morning they
> wait for her to come and restock the shelves beyond reach—she is the ladder. Not
> wanting to intrude, I stop going to the deli and start getting lunch from a place
> two blocks away, but I feel like a traitor and go back to the deli.
> "We are good, clean place, we have letter 'A' from Board of Health," Ching
> Lan's mother says. "You get parasite if you eat somewhere else."
> "I didn't want to intrude on your family time."
> "You are part of our family," she says, ushering me behind the counter to sit
> where the family sits, on the pickle barrels, eating food brought from home in
> colorful Tupperware containers. "Pok ball?" she asks, lifting up a small round
> meatball with chopsticks.
> "My sister works at dumpling house, she brings home leftovers," Ching Lan says.
> I eat the pok ball, translating only after swallowing: pork ball.
> "Good boy. You eat turtle?" the mother asks.
> …
> After lunch, the mother slips me another Hershey bar—it has quickly become our
> tradition. "Chocolate is keeping your spirits up," she says (376).

The swiftness of his inclusion into this kinship circle is rather stunning. "Good boy," she says to

him as though speaking to a child who has just finished his vegetables; it's not hard to picture her

hoisting him onto her shoulder and burping him. The narrative doesn't offer an exact timeframe,

but it can be approximated that Harry has only been examining the collection of papers for

several weeks, months at the most. In any case, he certainly isn't a lifelong patron of the

establishment and it's difficult to see why he should be on such close terms with its proprietors.

And yet, they readily consider him family, ushering him behind the counter "where the family

sits" and feed him their home-prepared food. What is the logic by which a customer, seemingly

indistinguishable from any other except that he is co-employed for the moment with their

daughter, is so readily considered kin? The humor and hominess of the exchange seem to make

the social role more valid, distracting from the question of what it's all based on. The dynamics

of this paradox are evident, in condensed form, at the close of the exchange. When Ching Lan's

mother (who presumably should merit her own name in the narrative of a man she readily

considers family) "slips" him a Hershey bar, the reader is informed that it has "quickly become"

a "tradition." There are several contradictions evident here that would seem to encapsulate the

larger contradiction of essential strangers spontaneously forming familial ties. For instance, the

notion of a tradition developing "quickly" or the idea that covertly offering chocolate (the

quotidian nature of the act is reflected in the slang employed to describe it: "slips") as

substantiating a "tradition" bears this out. Ching Lan herself adopts this kinship, mirroring her

parents' affections:

> Ching Lan cries when I tell her the project is over. "I try to be no one when I
> come here. I am a blank for you to write your books on."
> "Don't worry," I say, "I will write you an excellent letter of reference."
> She sobs.
> "And I will hire you to copyedit my book."
> "That's not why I am crying," she says. "My career will be fine: I have been
> offered full-time position on volleyball team, but I told them I had to finish this
> first. I am crying because I see you love President Nixon very much—despite how
> he behaves. You work hard, you are so brave. Because of you, I have been

studying all about China. I learn so much more about my country than I ever knew. I learned about myself through you" (441).

As she herself makes clear, this character is in tears over the loss of Harry's project. She is explicit that she is not grieving over her own loss of work, but on his behalf. She tells him that he's "so brave"—for writing a book? The final comment of the passage gestures toward the sense of self-development that is essential to the logic of the social novel. It comes so abruptly, however, that it is difficult to take seriously. After all, these two characters have shared precious little in the way of conversation during the course of the novel (and this is their final exchange) and there is even less in the text to suggest believably that Harry has influenced this young woman's worldview. And yet, here it is. This bond of kinship manifests as if by magic allowing the reader to experience along with Harry the benefits of a long-crafted social relationship in the insta-gratification format of an American TV dinner: quick, satisfying and with minimal preparation.

Though an exhaustive presentation of all the relationships Harry develops in the course of the novel would be an unnecessary (and unnecessarily long) exercise, suffice it to say that many of the relationships he establishes appear to be as baseless as the one with Ching Lan and her parents: Cheryl's unconditional help and loyalty; Madeline and Cy's trust and unwavering loyalty to him (they fail to even ask where their daughter has gone); Nate and Ashley's ultimate acceptance of parental authority—it is not clear on what it is all based. By the end of the novel, "the house is filled with life. There are people coming and going constantly" (462). This is Harry's persistent fantasy: to be at the center of the social web, rather than at the periphery. At the final dinner scene: "I am at the head of the table, bearing witness" (477). Like any male child what Harry longs for most is to be the man of the house. Social inclusion and unqualified love and acceptance—Harry manifests all of this in his narrative:

> The night before we leave, everyone is outside playing Wiffle ball. Nate and Cy are coaching Ricardo. Madeline is cheerleading. It is twilight—the lightning bugs are blinking, and except for the mosquitoes, it is sublime. Ashley and Nate's embrace of Ricardo is unqualified—one never has the sense of the two of them apart from him or competing with him. He is their brother; he has been left to us and we to him (407).

Among other things, it is curious that Harry should grammatically align himself with the subject position of his two wards at the end of this excerpt. However, this passage is also noteworthy as a prime example of a literary modality that becomes increasingly prevalent near the end of the text: sentimental melodrama. There is a continual emphasis, especially in the final sections of the novel, on how perfect the situation is; in this case, the unwavering brotherly love wrapped around young Ricardo should ring suspect. What two siblings never fight or compete with one another?

May We Be Forgiven's melodrama is thwarts the temptation to read the text ironically: to treat mass of baseless social relations as an ironic reflection on the hollowness of contemporary sociality as such. As a metamodern text, it blends postmodern irony with a seriousness that ultimately reifies the sociality, however absurd, as sincerely desired and earnestly attained. Thus the sentimentality that permeates the novel, though most evident at the close, is employed like a set of narrative booster rockets which propel the text forward after it has exhausted its own momentum. The narrative on its own terms fails as a social text: these instances of sentimentality are meant to elicit from the reader a level of identification that otherwise would be thwarted by the vapidity of the relationships. For instance, the night before the second Thanksgiving dinner— the scene that closes the novel—Harry, Nate, Josh, Ashley, Ricardo, Madeline and Cy all go to Manhattan to watch the Macy's Day parade. Cy speaks briefly to an a police officer and, incredibly, gains them street-access to the floats as they are being inflated—"'I've still got a card or two up my sleeve'" (473) is all that is offered by way of explanation. The remark functions as

a *deus ex makina* that enables Harry and the other characters to magically, as it were, undergo

another extraordinary experience for the sake of fulfilling the criteria of social development—to

be added as ballast weighing down a set of relationships that, like the parade's balloons, are at

risk of floating away:

> "This is the coolest thing ever," Ricardo says. "Thank you."
> It is magical, almost fantastical, and what I'd call the good kind of melancholy—
> as sweet as it is, it's also sad. We linger until it is dark and cold and our bones
> have begun to ache (474).

This may read like narrative fluff, but it's hard to brush off. Furthermore, these moments of

intense emotional response are hardly rare. It reinforces the idea of connectivity by serving as a

potential ground of common experience. If one could hypothetically interrogate Harry and argue

to him that his social connections are based on little actual sociality, he would likely point to

experiences like this scene and say "look at all the things we've been through together; we've

bonded through these experiences," and so, following this logic, the narrative in its latter sections

does much to pack sentimental scenes together, rapidly one after the other. This has the strange

effect of reifying the importance of the social even as it seems to ironically undermine it. For

instance, before leaving the surprisingly idyllic Nateville—"It is about as wholesome and bucolic

as you can imagine" (419)—all of them suffer outbursts of emotion:

> We go. The village recedes into the distance—we watch for as long as we can;
> I'm sure everyone there is still outside waving. The children begin to cry, first
> Nate, then Ash, and finally Ricardo, who says "Why am I crying? I am happy and
> sad at the same time."
> "It's like when it's raining and there's a rainbow," Ashley says (421).

Ricardo's statement manifests a sense of situational irony—he has to announce that he is crying

as if to validate it. And yet, Ricardo's emotive expression is sincere. The narrative seems to

suggest that Harry's newfound happiness needs confirmation; it requires the cooperation of the

reader. Earlier in the novel, Harry and Ashley make cookies to bring to the retirement home:

> We make the cookies, and when the kitchen starts to fill with a wonderful warm chocolaty smell I feel deeply accomplished. We immediately eat too many and drink the milk, and Ash was entirely right when she said it was all about the milk's being fresh. It's amazing—a truly sublime experience. We start laughing for no reason, and the cat comes out and rubs my leg for the first time since I gave away the kittens—I pour her a saucer of milk (314).

And everything was very much agreeable indeed! *May We Be Forgiven* seems to be aware that some level of development is necessary to foster the sort of change that turns the gears of a social novel, but its narrative runs the hazardous path of complacency. The novel, in other words, attempts to have it both ways: to present the emotional fulfillment that comes with constructing meaningful social ties while at the same time allowing the characters the domestic comfort of remaining in developmental stasis. Thus the sentimental additives function as the narrative correlative to the intoxication of food in the novel. The passage above which grounds a bonding experience in food consumption is hardly unique. When Harry and the children arrive home after the trip to Nateville, they find "Cheryl, Sofia, Cecily, the pet minder and his sister, Madeline and Cy, Tessie and the cats and a few people I've never seen before stand in a reception line" (433). These people have gone through a great deal of trouble to orchestrate this picture-perfect presentation: fantastically (with an emphasis on *fantasy*), even the animals have been made to stand in the reception line. Harry makes the essential remarks in his narrative, describing how touched he is, but interestingly he ultimately anchors his emotional response in food:

> Yesterday, in Durban, I was dreading coming back to the house, falling into the same routines, but this is incredible, a wonderful welcome home. For the first time I'm part of a community. I stand there, eyes watering, and raise a giant glass of diet orange soda. "My heart is full."
> There is pizza, soda and cake so teeth-curdlingly sweet and richly American that I can't stop eating it. I have one slice then another then another until I am high. I cut the high with coffee and am shaking and dizzy (433).

These are not the alienating, raw, bodily foods of the novel's opening scene; the food Harry enjoys throughout the novel is processed and artificial. The foodstuffs he prefers are formless

and abstract: pizza, soda, burgers, cookies, etc—things that bear no trace of the bodies and practices which produced them. One curious element that results from this consumptive tendency toward over-produced food objects is a thematic linkage between compulsion and intoxication. The narrative frequently presents the reader with the paradox of eating as an act that is both pleasurable (and thus freely engaged in) and yet compulsive, as if these chemically-packed foods were akin to drugs:

> We eat, we gorge, we stuff ourselves, greedily devouring everything. Plates are passed for seconds and thirds. Aunt Christina's ambrosia is oddly addictive; after my third helping, she tells me the secret ingredient is heavy mayonnaise. I skip a fourth serving and load up on turkey. We eat until we are sated and still we keep going, eating until we are in pain, until we are suffering, because that is the new American tradition.
> "I don't even like sweet potatoes and I had two helpings," Ashley says, pushing herself away from the table.
> "The bird was perfect," Madeline says (479).

Again, the notion of compulsion, even addiction, is quite palpable—Harry is like a junky that needs his fix. What is interesting is that this consumptive habit seems to encapsulate the thematic dimensions of metamodernism: his enjoyment of food sincere despite its element of compulsive, repetitious irony. It is as if this food enables him to anchor himself in something vital—his very real enjoyment is thus not in spite of, but on account of, his addict-like compulsion to consume. It is the temporary sating of this repetitive compulsion that generates his pleasure. This food also brings with it a series of thematic ties which are relevant in this regard. There is, once again, the suggestion of a "new tradition." There is the insistence of colloquial slang—"load up on turkey"—as if food becomes a fulcrum point for positing generational relevance, thus putting him on equal footing with his wards. The implementation of slang in regards to food is, in fact, a persistent device. Earlier in the novel, Harry and the children on the way to bury Jane leave the funeral train and "slip into a McDonald's" (52)—"She dips the hotdog into the Dijon mustard

and pops it in her mouth" (255)—"I bought two seven-layer bars…and on my way over here I just powered right through both of them" (300)— "There is also marmalade and tea, which Ashley declares the best ever" (414), etc. Food becomes the object upon which Harry's narrative grounds the sentimentality and thus the lynchpin for the entire text.

These moments of consumption cannot be matter of fact; they have to sell the very notion of change, of alteration because that is the core mechanism operative in the novel of social conciliation. Where *May We Be Forgiven* trips up as such a literary project is in its failure to have the main social actors change; these characters, in fact, insist that the world change for them. The "addictive" food that gets them "high" acts as a literary fetish: as an object that contains the agent of change that never gets enacted, but seems rather to transfigure the world. Moments of group food consumption, such as the one that closes the novel, threaten to expose the anti-foundation of the relationships because it is these very relationships that have brought them all together. Aunt Lilian serves as the reality principle in the final scene: "'Is he running a boarding house?' she mutters. 'It's like a freak show, a random collection of people'" (477). Her remark hangs in the air, closing the section immediately preceding the description of their gorging-feast, as if prompting it. Harry and the others eat this intoxicating food as if it will substantiate the relations and construct a foundation. There is a compulsive, nervous element to their consumption—Harry throughout the novel cannot help himself from eating at every available opportunity. The nervousness of the feasting is the nervousness of the narrative trying to stave off Aunt Lillian's pronouncement, like Wile-y Coyote running off the edge of a cliff and remaining in logic-defying mid-air suspension so long as he does not look down and realize there is nothing below his feet.

The Kids Are Watching

If *NW* is any indicator of future material success for children with professional and entrepreneurial drive, then many of the children populating *May We Be Forgiven* might well end up on Wall St or at Google. Although there are moments of child bewilderment and confusion, these seem to be largely for comic effect; the general portrayal of the emerging youth generation in the novel is as startlingly worldly, ambitious and intelligent. Children in this novel are frequently presented as more intelligent and worldly than their parents, and indeed often seem to know more about parenting. As Cheryl scolds Harry for his presumption of ignorance on the part of Nate and Ashley: "'What planet are you on?... These kids are sharp; they're not going to let on what they're up to'" (305). At the same time, adults in this novel, particularly Harry, are infantilized: they come to bear the vulnerability and need of care that we otherwise might ascribe to children. Harry has met Cheryl through an on-line sex personals web site, most certainly one not unlike the one Natalie Blake scours throughout the latter sections of *NW*. He visits numerous women early in the text, until he slips up:

> "Look at you," the girl says, "You're not exactly scary."
> "Do we need more restraints?" The boy asks his sister. "Should I tie up his legs? I have bungee cords."
> "No," she says, "He's not going anywhere."
> The boy yanks my arm hard. "Sit down," he says, pushing me, and I'm surprised by his strength.
> "Hey," I say, "Go easy" (89).

Harry's first real brush with the next generation is physical and threatening. While going to meet a woman he met online for sex, he is ambushed by her two young children who, it turns out, had lured him there by posing as their mother online. It is, as we shall see, the children of the novel (and the elderly, who as I will argue function as alternate children) that appear to be the most

comfortable and frank with sex. It is the adults of the novel, by contrast, who seem squeamish on

matters of intercourse:

> "Did you fuck my mother?"
> I don't answer.
> "She was into you; she used to tease my father by talking about you."
> Again, I say nothing (35).

These two children, too, confront him with what makes him uncomfortable even though it is

precisely this act that he has shown up for:

> "How many times have you done it with her?" the boy asks, cutting his sister off.
> "Done it?" I say. And then I realize what he's asking and blush (90).

He tries to reason with them by assuming the rhetorical position of a parent. He inquires, as any

suburban parent might at an afternoon's close, how school is going.

> "Do you like school?"
> Both kids look at me blankly. "Do you have friends?"
> "It's more like we know people. We're not friends but we know them. Like, if
> we're out somewhere or something and see them, we might wave or nod but we
> don't talk or anything" (91)

Interactions like this make clear Homes' intention: the reader is made to eerily realize that what

these two figures represent is the future of human interaction as it develops vis-à-vis the current

model of technological solutionism. This idea of sociality based on knowing people without

being friends—on sociality with little that underpins it—recalls immediately, among other

things, Facebook's "like" function, wherein a relationship is established on the pure basis and for

the simple reason of establishing a relationship: in other words, a relationship for the sake of

being able to say that one is in a relationship. This in turn points to a model of sociality that is

based on what is essentially cultural capital, rather than on the various other forms of human

attachment we might (with perhaps a touch of naiveté) term "meaningful." It suggests, in other

words, the same metamodern inversion of postmodern irony.

Harry's inexplicable sociality may carry with it not an old form of familial and social connectivity that seems outdated in the present world that he nonetheless will fight to maintain, but on the contrary, the cultural logic of social media. As Alan Kirby has argued, it is increasingly digital platforms which are conceptually reconfiguring contemporary sociality— though from my vantage point it is unclear which one is exerting influence over the other. In any case, critics from Edward Snowden to Cullen Hoback to Aaron Schwartz have been quick to point out social media doubles as a grand, almost Pynchon-esque tracking mechanism.

> "We have an electronic minder. Every day at three p.m. we have to check in; if we don't it beeps us, and if we don't respond it calls a list of names, and if no one can find us it calls the police."
> "How do you check in?"
> "You dial a number and type in your code."
> …
> "We have chips," the boy says, standing up.
> "Thanks, but I'm trying to watch what I eat," I say.
> "Not chips you eat—chips implanted under our skin so they can track us," he says (91)

Wittingly or not, the passage offers the reader a potentially crucial insight. One of the most trenchant critiques of social media (and much of the emerging tech sector itself) is that the information that users provide (knowingly or not) is collected and used in ways that are far from transparent. However, what the passage above suggests—and what terrifies Harry throughout the remainder of the text—is another possibility that has not to my knowledge been widely expressed. This passage suggests that the personal tracking which has generated such paranoia may not be merely an Orwellian misuse of overseeing capacity by those in the position to do so, but rather two endpoints of a single, circuitous cultural logic. In other words, the tracking of these two children is not the unfortunate choice of two parents that might in other circumstances have chosen to love and care for their children directly, but instead the very means by which their social bond is expressed. It is the result of a parenting model that functions through both

absenteeism and hyper-attentiveness at the same time. Here the reader comprehends a sinister re-

working of this project's central theme: in the instance of these children, engagement with the

wider world of sociality is mediated by the family, but so in turn are the familial relations

themselves mediated by the wider, anonymous social gaze that is surveillance technology.The

novel, in one of its more carefully conceived insights, is prompting the reader to consider if

surveillance isn't part of what the Facebook-model of sociality, with its constant Tweets, updates

and status changes, presupposes already. Though speculating on the repercussions of this goes

beyond the parameters of this project, for the sake of wider inquiry it is worth posing the

question of whether the hysteria surrounding the NSA and domestic surveillance doesn't carry,

indirectly, the resonance of a collective anxiety originating with more socially acceptable forms

of tech-mediated connectivity.

What is being suggested in this novel, then, is the uncomfortable possibility that

surveillance perhaps ought to be considered a form of sociality. Harry, of course, panics when

confronted with this brave new generation and tries to play negotiator:

> "…What about offering your parents a Get Out Of Jail Free card? Offer them
> their freedom and ask them to give you up for adoption? Do you know how many
> people would love to have housebroken—I mean potty-trained—white, English-
> speaking children?"
> "Wow, I never thought of that," the girl says.
> "You could find a nice family where they'd make sure you went to school, did
> your homework, and flossed your teeth" (91).

The passage is extraordinary: Harry in effect sells these children on the notion of reconnecting

with their parents precisely by divorcing them. One line of cultural critique that has remained

persistent in Euro-American culture since at least the nineteenth century, from *Madame Bovary*

to Virginia Woolf to feminism to *Desperate Housewives*, has been the notion that children, while

perhaps a blessing, are also a burden that closes off many experiential possibilities. Cheryl is

Homes' version of the dissatisfied domestic woman literary archetype. She performs fellatio on Harry while simultaneously shouting downstairs to her teenage son details as to where he can find his hockey equipment. Another encounter finds her dragging Harry to a swingers party at, of all places, a laser tag gameroom—"All of it reads like porn gone wrong" (274). The adult men comically betray their boyish dispositions by finding more interest in the laser tag than in the naked women. In other words, the dissatisfied domestic woman figure has been reduced in Cheryl to a jokey, self-mocking and hyperactive character-type who has herself lost any sense of what she is rebelling against; she too ultimately comes to believe (if she ever really doubted it) in the preeminence of the nuclear family as an organizational social strategy. The more compelling frustration, here, is that of the two children. In this novel, it isn't the dissatisfied domesticate that rejects the children as a burden to his/her self-actualization, but rather the children that reject the parents as an obstacle to theirs.

After his various sexploits, Harry echoes the public fear of internet surveillance and is fearful of his electronic footprint: he is concerned about his "trail of electronic crumbs" (94) having, after all, just met the twenty-first century Hansel and Gretel. It is the children, on the other hand, and particularly Nate, that seem to be at home in this brave new world: "we studied wiretaps in my Twentieth Century Political Scandals course—it's a history elective. If you want to tape a call you must first ask permission, and acknowledge that the call is being taped" (193). Much like Gary Lambert's children in Franzen's 2001 novel *The Corrections*, Nate displays a sense of comfort with surveillance, even a fascination with it. Nate, and the children of *May We Be Forgiven* more generally, represent a departure from the ideological mainstay of children as the reproduction of the present: they are, rather, the future incarnate. Nate represents Silicon Valley's fantasy of the future as a radical, traumatic departure from the state of affairs someone

like Harry would term "the present." When Harry visits Nate's expensive, elite private boarding school for parents' weekend, he remarks, upon leaving, that "these future captains of industry, titans of banking, orthopedic surgeons, and accountants all have homework to do" (154). It sounds so ordinary, but nonetheless Harry is aware that children like Nate will be the inheritors of the world (whatever they choose to make of it). Nate is active, engaged—a thoroughbred go-getter with a combination of liberal conscience and entrepreneurial spirit that is particularly recognizable as the *persona ideal* of Silicon Valley: "There's no reason the world is in as bad a shape as it is, except that people are so fucking passive and immobile and focused on what can't happen instead of what can" (145). Not far from the political milieu Frazen outlines in *Freedom*, Nate sees poverty and global injustice not as issues of oppression and economic inequality, but problems of a technical nature: problems to be solved with the right thinking, knowhow and a can-do attitude. Thus, strangely, his desire to help the third world is bound up in the sort of entrepreneurial ambition that American political conservatives laud. It is not hard to imagine a hypothetical friendship between Nate and Joey Berglund (or many well-to-do students of elite colleges eager to solve global problems). He is a figure that exhibits symptoms of the political re-mapping that Franzen has identified (and that my first chapter has addressed).

Nate's statement may well contain truth, but what should strike the reader is the nature of the statement rather than its content. Even if many oppressed people are struck with ennui and inaction, this nonetheless should be recognized as the sort of realization that comes with a certain degree of self-consciousness: with years of studying and acting. One must go through a process of idealization and disillusion: without idealism where does the energy to act in the third world come from in the first place? Nate is able to assume the subject position of someone far beyond his years looking back at a failed struggle even before he has launched it. Like the two children

that capture Harry and insist on parents that put them to bed on time and discipline them: a step

is being skipped. These children presuppose an adult consciousness. It is by growing up and

experiencing the adult world that one is able to make decisions about what could have been done

to improve a stage of life one *has already passed through*. These children, in other words,

maintain the impossible self-reflexivity of a subject-position that has proceeded beyond

childhood while somehow still being children—they exhibit, in other words, a most ironic

sincerity. Harry, while visiting Nate's school, attends church with Nate (despite them both being

Jewish): "I see what Nate likes about it: the quality of the talk, the parental good counsel he's

otherwise not getting" (152). Again, there is a sense of self-consciousness on the part of children

that they should be parented, and yet there persists the question that if children are adult enough

to know they're not yet adults, doesn't that make them, in some sense or other, adults? Certainly,

this is a higher level of self-knowing than Harry possesses. Of course, the effect of all this is

absurdity: it contributes greatly to the humor of the book, but it also reinforces the notion of

children as the functional adults. The strange world of technology and alienation that Harry

identifies is Nate's natural habitat: it is the beginning of a future that children like Nate are meant

to grow up and create.

Nate holds a peculiar level of moral authority over Harry: "…then I hear Nate say

'You're disgusting, just like my dad.' It stings, hurts deeply. I don't want him to think George

and I are demented doppelgangers, I don't want him to have a clue about what goes on in my

head" (143). One might be inclined to inquire: who cares what a twelve-year-old thinks?

Nate functions as the placeholder of morality, though in Lisa Simpson's sense rather than Tiny

Tim's. Part of the authority he wields comes from the fact that he just seems to know and

understand more about the world than his guardian.

> "Your mother had an accident," I say, wondering if I should tell him how bad it really is.
> "Was it Dad?" he asks
> I'm caught off guard by the directness of his question. "Yes," I say. "Your father struck your mother with a lamp. I tried to tell your sister, but I didn't get very far."
> "I'll call her," he says. I am grateful for not having to go through that again (24).

Once again, Cheryl's rejoinder proves itself prescient: Harry is caught fumbling his words, trying to put delicately a matter he discerns to be too overwhelming for a child only to discover the child more capable of directly confronting the *real* of the situation than he himself. ("'When are you going to pull the plug?'" (42)—Nate later asks, again verbalizing what Harry is utterly incapable of expressing.) What is more, Nate outrageously usurps the parental responsibility of breaking the hard news to Ashley, which Harry is, spinelessly, all-too willing to relinquish.

> "Where is Dad?" Ashley asks when she gets back to the table.
> "He's here."
> "This hospital?" Nate asks.
> I nod. "Do you want to see him?"
> "Should we see him?" Ashley asks.
> "Entirely up to you."
> "I need to think he's dead," Nate says. "That's the only way I can make sense of it. He did this and turned the gun on himself."
> "There was no gun," I say.
> "You know what I mean (35).

Here Nate assumes a level of tragic persona that seems completely overwhelming. He seems like a trauma patient negotiating with himself; he does not in any way seem to require Harry's sympathy or care. In fact, Harry's remark—about there being no gun—seems to presuppose an almost childish innocence of the gravity of the situation. Only Nate appears to be grappling with the situation in its true immensity.

However, Nate also proves himself the more worldly in somber matters:

> "There's still no sign of activity. Have you thought about organ donation?" the doctor asks.
> "Would that help her? A donation?" Jane's father asks.

"He means Mom being a donor," Nate clarifies (36).

Nate, here, appears to understand the situation more completely than his grandfather. His grandfather, like a child who stubbornly holds on to hope of the impossible, still has the impression that his daughter might return to him when in reality only Nate perceives the true situation in all of its grim finality. Clearly, his grandfather's hope against hope stems from the emotional inability to accept that his daughter is truly and finally gone. Nate somehow has no trouble accepting this, as though he has had years of emotional struggle to thicken his skin, though it is clear he hasn't. More importantly, Nate seems to understand the processes, procedures and situations of everyday life in a fuller sense. When Harry complains to Nate over the phone that Tessie, the dog, does not willingly leave the property, it is explained:

> "There's an invisible fence" Nate says.
> "Must be—she's very well trained. Only goes out of the yard if I pull on her. Like I have to fight her to leave."
> "That's because the fence gives her a shock."
> "What fence?"
> "The invisible fucking fence," Nate says.
> "An invisible fence is a real thing?"
> Nate sighs, painfully. "There's a small box on the dog's collar, that's the transmitter; if you take her out of the yard, take that off; otherwise she gets a shock. Even if you go out in the car with her, you have to take the box off" (77)

Who is the child here? Nate is an extremely accomplished youngster: ridiculously so, in fact.

Absurdly, the reader is informed he has a town in South Africa named after him:

> "I have a school in South Africa," Nate says. "I'm pretty proud of that."
> "You mean you raised money to help build a school?—I think your mom mentioned something about that."
> "I built it," he says, flatly.
> "With your hands?"
> "Yes, with my hands, and with the villagers who live there, and some wood and nails and sheets of metal—all the things you build a school with. And I set up a water filtration system for the town. It's named for me. It used to have another name, but everyone who lives there calls it Nateville" (145).

Harry dotes on him the way a son dotes imitatively on his father, informing us that he is "his biggest fan" (414). "I'm falling in love with Nate;" the reader is told, "he's the boy I wish I had been, the boy I wish I was even now. I'm in awe of him and terrified. He's more capable than any of the rest of us and yet he's still a kid" (146). This feeling appears to be common among the parents of Nate's classmates: "It's truly a power struggle, and I get the feeling the parents are the ones desperate to prove something" (154). This notion that parents feel the need to prove themselves to their children suggests that Nate is not unique as his household's placeholder of morality. Homes, unlike Franzen, whose tendency to treat progeny like Joey as unfortunate occurrences in the course of a parenting career that could have been more blessed, understands that figures like Nate reflect a change in generational sensibilities. Furthermore, when Harry finally heads back to his lodging, *he* is asked to check in: "'Let me know you get home safe,' [Nate] says. 'Will do,' I say" (154). It is as though Harry were the teenager being handed the car keys for the first time by a reluctant parent—"It is as though I am the child and I left the grown-up" (148).

Ashley as well is depicted throughout the novel as increasingly mature, as though her entire adult development were squeezed into the year-length narrative. However, the process of this transformation is very mysterious. At one point, as Harry observes: "Ashley, suddenly looking like a young woman, texting as she walks up the driveway" (375). Moments like this make it clear just how much of the narrative's crucial developmental logic takes place in Harry's own head. This passage is very interesting when put into conjunction with the narrative's first presentation of Ashley and Nate: during the Thanksgiving dinner that opens the novel, the two children "sat like lumps at the table, hunched, or more like curled, as if poured into their chairs, truly spineless, eyes focused on their small screens, the only thing in motion their thumbs—one

texting friends no one has ever seen and the other killing digitized terrorists" (2). Both of these

passages offer completely different evaluations of Ashley despite the fact that she is conducting

the very same activity: texting. There are no grounds provided for what it is about Ashley that

has changed. Ashley's character-logic mimics the developmental logic of the novel in

proclaiming some alteration that is neither evidenced nor accounted for. Near the end of the

novel, we're informed that she experiences something of a spiritual crisis:

> In the middle of it all, Ashley descends the stairs wearing her dress from Colonial
> Williamsburg along with the shawl and head covering that Sofia got her for the
> bar mitzvah. She has become increasingly religious, defining herself lately as
> "Orthodox." I accept the notion as a phase, a heartfelt adolescent identification
> offering her comfort, and, I hope, part of the progression toward a healthy sense
> of self (476).

Leaving aside for the moment the apparent fact that an eleven-year-old seems to be having a

mid-life crisis, Harry's reaction to this state of affairs is, in its very dimness, quite illuminating.

Harry is attempting to express a proper sense of parental distance: remaining aloof to let a child's

development take its course. However, his attempts to brush off the presumed seriousness of the

situation fail to maintain any sense of logical consistency. He describes the religious conversion

as a "heartfelt adolescent identification"—but an identification with what? As for "progression

toward a healthy sense of self," Harry hardly seems a fit exponent of such an idea, vaporous as it

is. In other words, Harry is attempting to posture by mimicking what he perceives to be the

proper behavior of an experienced parent even though he isn't one, much like the children of this

novel who are capable of thinking from an existential position that logic suggests should be

unavailable to them. Concerns with religion are presumably the material of an adult advanced in

years and beginning to grapple with mortality. She is not the only child to assume a pseudo-adult

position by pontificating on religious matters. "'I used to pray…I always believed there was

something larger—some bigger idea. I'm not sure what I think now; my relationship to belief has

changed'" (331). It seems extraordinary that Nate can speak with such a sense of self-reflexivity, speaking not only of his beliefs but of the nature of his relationship to his own beliefs. Ashley's religion appears something of a fashion; she begins the scene descending the stairs in an elaborate getup like a character in a Jane Austen novel making her social debut at the first ball of the season.

However, it is crucial not to dismiss Ashley's religiosity as superficial on these grounds; part of what these characters represent is an emerging ethos wherein human relationships to abstractions are mediated via cultural objects. Again, we encounter the proposition central to the present moment of seeming sincerity built upon nothing. Her attachment to religion follows the trajectory of the cultural logic that we have hitherto associated with metamodernism; it may be absurd, but it is nonetheless sincere. The reader is meant to take it seriously as if Ashley actually were having a midlife crisis. The novel manages to pack a great deal of life experience into a single year for this character. As Harry summarily exclaims, attempting to exert parental authority, "'Ashley, it has to stop…We have to get you back on track—lesbian love affairs, tribal warrior marks—it's all a little out of control'" (351). Ashley here almost seems like a grown celebrity whose out of control stunts land her in the tabloids. In the course of the novel, this eleven-year-old Ashley has a lesbian love affair with a teacher (which is ruined by jealousy—incredibly, a classmate threatens to expose them if she is not included in their bedroom affairs and then proceeds to a suicide attempt), tribal scarring rituals, navigating progressive school yard gangs (each at war with the other to include Ashley, the newly discovered lesbian), and other exploits. Ashley's experiences are themselves the stuff of soap operas, a point which is not lost on her. When she is taken out of that school she is put in charge of designing a curriculum for herself, she undertakes to study theatre and, of course, soap operas:

> "Yeah, and then, like, if I'm really stressed, sometimes I come back in the middle of the day and watch, like, *All My Children*, *General Hospital*, *One Life to Live*, and then all is good again—it's like they really help me to understand the world and get some perspective. Also, my life is more like the people on the soaps than most of the people here" (311).

The extraneous instances of "like" are meant to enhance the dialogue, reminding the reader that Ashley is eleven. This is an attempt to counterbalance the serious nature of her speech: to make it more plausible. What other eleven-year-old goes in search of perspective on the world? Perhaps the most uncanny bit of dialogue *May We Be Forgiven* has to offer takes place between Ashley and Harry:

> "Did you love my mom?"
> I nod.
> "'I'm asking because when you're a kid it's really hard to know anything. Maybe I don't even know what I'm talking about—I feel so weird…'" (322)

Of course, the dialogue is beyond improbable: what child would say this? It is as though Ashley were helping him conduct his own internal dialogue. This is the sort of statement that requires a knowledge position beyond what her character has experienced, much in line with other examples already discussed. However, it is worth thinking through the end of this exchange carefully. What is different about this exchange is that Homes is trying to cover her tracks. Ashley here is speaking a little *too* far beyond her years; the dialogue is a little *too* improbable; the effect is being rendered a little *too* visibly. There is a slippage here. The narrative is at risk of losing sight of the fact that Ashley is, in the end, still a child. The ideology of Lisa Simpson Syndrome at this moment is threatening to overrule the consistency of the text. Homes has to make Ashley back down: "I don't even know what I'm talking about—I feel so weird…" Why does she feel weird? The extremeness with which Homes is inclined to portray the children as *de facto* adults puts the narrative at risk of being rendered absurd and so readers have to be reminded that Ashley *is* a kid. In other words, the novel is at risk of collapsing into postmodern

irony: sincerity must be reestablished: "I feel so weird…" is a device for allowing the conversation to trail off without inviting any penetrating questions. It effectively cuts off any line of inquiry that might begin with recognizing of how uncanny her remarks are and raises questions about the compatibility of this cotemporary ethos and well-wrought fiction.

My suggestion is that Homes is trying to minimize the extent to which a certain effect leaks through the narrative: an effect of characterization that is determined by the logic of Lisa Simpson Syndrome that this chapter has been exploring. This narrative maneuver is symptomatic of the novel's approach wherein children, who are *de facto* adults, are nonetheless integrated back into the suburban nuclear family structure. What develops when this logic is implemented, in the cases of both Nate and Ashley, is the assumption by these characters of phony-sounding corporatism. There lurks in these characters the quality of a slyly self-mocking corporate motivational speaker, whose self-deprecation is carefully calculated to affirm authority. Ashley, too, offers something similar when she addresses the table in the novel's final scene:

> I do not think of all the misery, but of the glory that remains. Go outside into the fields, nature and the sun, go out and seek happiness in yourself and in God. Think of the beauty that again and again discharges itself within and without you and be happy (479).

She attributes the quote to Anne Frank, though Cy tellingly mistakes it for Longfellow or Whitman. One could imagine this printed and hung in the window of a Starbucks or a Whole Foods. Here, as strongly as anywhere, the negotiation of childhood and adulthood makes more visible the logic of Homes' text. Ashley somehow is intelligent and worldly enough to have a midlife crisis-esque religious epiphany, yet is unable to discern the vapidity of her message.

Growing Down

Thematically, it is clear what *May We Be Forgiven* is doing: the children are being represented as figurative adults and so the adults are being infantilized. Since the correlative phenomenon—Lisa Simpson Syndrome—has been discussed already, it is now this secondary, and arguably more central, feature of Homes' characterization that has to be theorized. I suggested earlier that part of the collective social energy that Homes is taking note of and attempting to register in the novel has something to do with a deep-seeded cultural anxiety regarding futurity. In order to piece together what is guiding Homes' depiction of children in *May We Be Forgiven,* it is crucial to understand how Harry and the other adults are portrayed. On the trip to Africa, Harry purchases a carved wooden doll that Ashley and, tellingly, Amanda's mother care for as though it were an actual child. This functions as a metaphor for the way parenthood functions in *May We Be Forgiven*. Homes' depiction of adults caught in stasis, or even a process of figurative regression, has, in the context of the novel at least, everything to do with personal struggles for what is proving itself a non-future. Amanda, Harry's would-be lover who ultimately finds some semblance of personal freedom by escaping her parents (and him), offers him a crucial piece of insight: "'When I'm taking care of my parents, I live in the bedroom where I always grew up, with my same books and toys on the shelf, and it's like I'm still in junior high, like I just got home from school and happened to find them there, sitting on the living room sofa, but maybe now my dad has his wet pants'" (327). While spending one evening with her (camping out in her front yard—what suburban child has never done this?), Harry recognizes "a reversal of the children being checked on by the parents" (343) as Amanda peers in on Madeline and Cy with a screen receiving footage of them from a video surveillance feed she has set up. It is a security apparatus that, strangely enough, seems to recall the one set up by the absentee parents of Harry's child-captors earlier in the novel. *May We Be Forgiven* presents a terrible counter-

anxiety surrounding the fact that it is the children today, tech-savvy as they are, who are watching the parents. As with Harry's continual need throughout the novel to impress Nate and win his approval, there is the eerie sense that the children are watching. However, the novel at this point suggests a peculiar twist in this narrative. While watching Amanda's parents,

> we see her father on the grainy black-and-white monitor, leaving his room. Seconds later, we watch him enter the mother's room, pull down the sleeping woman's blanket, push up her nightie, and mount her…On the small monitor, it looks like her mother is trying to fight him off in her sleep. She swats at him as though he is an oversized nuisance, an enormous fly, and he is holding her down, forcing himself on her (343-4).

Amanda herself verbalizes the audience's reaction: "'Is my father raping my mother?'" (344). If the children are watching, there may be trauma in what they see. Harry, as he so often does, attempts to deflate the upheaval of the scene, downplaying the event by re-contextualizing it: "'Maybe this is how they do it, the way they've always done it. Remember, you're spying on them; they may be senior citizens, but they have rights, and at least one of them still has feelings of a certain sort'" (344). Spoken like a true Nixon-man; the passage is breathtaking in its application of ethics—I will refrain from further comment. However, Harry's response is of interest not for its strange logic, but for its refusal to acknowledge the gravity of the situation. Harry's key tendency through the novel is to avoid the recognition of conflict:

> "You and your brother were always too busy trying to kill each other."
> I stop—cold.
> "We were trying to kill each other?"
> "You were always fighting."
> "Really? I don't remember that" (374).

This logic applies writ large to the adults of *May We Be Forgiven*. In fact, the age-function of the novel intensifies generationally. Figures in this novel as well appear to age backwards. The older the characters in this novel are, the more child-like they are depicted as. Like Amanda's parents,

Harry and George's mother is a stark example. When Harry calls the senior care center where

she resides, he is

> incredulous. " Not only is it nine-thirty at night, my mother is bed-bound."
> "Not anymore."
> "Really," I say, genuinely surprised.
> …
> "Is she walking?"
> "Crawling," the nurse says, with pleasure. "She's down on the floor, crawling
> everywhere, and seems to be loving it. We have to be careful not to trip over
> her…and I've put my son's hockey pads on her knees and elbows" (127).

The nurse's pride suggests that Harry's mother has made real progress toward something, as if

she has reached a real milestone. A process of development toward what? Harry's mother has

assumed the position of a toddler who has just taken her first steps, figuratively, toward maturity.

Of course, in order to walk about his mother is equipped with a geriatric diaper, leading to a

comic furthering of the trope: "'Big babies, we call them,'" as a nurse at the facility explains,

"'because of all the diapers'" (249). While visiting her in the pool, "I notice that her body is thin,

sinewy, more like that of a grown child than a woman" (252). Later in the novel, a social worker

informs Harry: "your mother is up walking. She's been dancing. She may not be the woman you

remember, but whoever she is now—she's doing very well" (365). Like a teenager reveling in

the continual change of self-invention, his mother, far from living out her final days, appears to

be headed into an entirely new arc of development. She even re-enters the world of romance; she

becomes engaged to another resident at the nursing home—"Marriage is something to take

seriously" (364) Harry attempts to chastise her. The daughters of the gentleman in question

further complicate matters soon after: "Your mother is a nursing home slut. She persuaded him

to cheat on our mother, who took care of him night and day for fifty-three years…I repeat, your

mother seduced our father. We heard that happens in places like this—so few men, so many

women" (318). References to nursing homes aside, the dialogue might well come from a soap

opera. As though progressing further into adolescence, Harry's mother is engaged in the sort of

amorous entanglements we ascribe to youthful, pre-marital life. Having moved from crawling to

walking and dancing, and furthermore entering a kind of defiant adolescence, his mother

occupies the developmental position in the novel that has been evacuated by the children, who in

turn function as the adults. Harry, on the other hand, appears to move thematically in a distinctly

counter-developmental way, as does his brother. When George is placed in the experimental

criminal rehabilitation facility (which, incredibly, entails living like a woodsman in an enclosed

section of forest in upstate New York), Harry makes the mistake of sending him an iPad. Walter

Penny, the family lawyer, castigates Harry harshly: "'These guys are on Amazon Prime and have

stuff coming every day'" (353). When Harry agrees to meet with George on Penny's behalf, he

sees that his brother and his prison cohorts have "used the Amazon boxes to build themselves

some sort of fort" (355). When Harry opens a tin of the family's enviable butter cookies: "'How

many?' George asks, looking at me expectantly like a child" (359). When the authorities rush in,

Harry finds himself shot in the buttocks and rushed to the hospital, where they reassure him that

they're "'going to put some numbing medicine on your tushy'" (362). When Harry confesses to

Cheryl that he isn't sure what he feels for her, she warns him by way of reply: "'You better

figure it out, buster, or there's going to be some hurty feelings around here'" (86). Throughout

the novel, there ensue strange instances where other characters feel the need to speak to Harry, a

middle-age man and a former university professor, as though he were an infant. Thematically,

this may well follow the trajectory set forward by his mother.

　　　After being hospitalized for a stroke, Harry has a new and unwelcome life-perception: "I

never thought of myself as elder. A few minutes ago, I was a guy in the middle of his life; now,

suddenly, I'm elder" (120). He describes how in "physical therapy I am given a walker—mine to

keep—fitted with green tennis balls to make it slide easier" (121). He is "surprised at how my fingers no longer seem to belong to me" (121). In other words, Harry, in a single unfortunate bound, has leapt drastically in age at precisely the moment his mother seems to have grown down into a child. Harry too, then, in being read as elder must concomitantly be read as one of the "big babies." And indeed, as this section will now lay out, infantilism is Harry's persistent fantasy—"I have a moment of clarity. I am a grown man who has hardly grown. I am like Oskar in *The Tin Drum*, refusing to grow" (151). If this character has a single thematic preoccupation, it is to orchestrate a situation where he can return to the comfort and care of being a child. A crucial insight to this can be obtained by examining Harry's trip to Nate's school for parents' weekend. Harry learns that Nate expects him to participate in a strange ritual of sport wherein all the parents are equipped with harnesses and expected to take to the school's rock climbing wall in search of prizes at the top. "'How about I stand at the bottom and watch you?'" (139) Nate proposes, suggesting a reversal of the parental spectatorship that is a staple feature of suburban youth sporting events. Harry reluctantly agrees. Nate coaches him the whole way through—"'use your feet…push yourself up, don't pull. It's easier'" (140). Nate assumes the position of the suburban father, shouting instructions from the bleachers to his child nervously at bat. Harry, surprising himself, manages the feat; upon returning to ground level, he finds himself embraced by his ward: "He's hugging me and crying" (141). However impressive this feat may be for an out-of-shape man in his middle years, Nate's tears seem unnecessary. His extreme pride at Harry's climb suggests the role of the over-doting parent who will assure the child's self-esteem not go untended.

After the climb, Nate informs him that they have to have dinner at a local eatery, the Ravaged Fowl: "'We always go there, but you have to have a reservation'" (141). Needless to

say, Harry is completely ignorant of this and has not made a reservation. There ensues a comic

scene where Harry tries unsuccessfully to make a reservation from a men's room stall in that

very restaurant. Desperate, Harry tries to bluff his way in, but the hostess sees through him. He

retreats, as he so often does, to his internal world:

> There's a thing or two I have half a mind to say: Don't tell me you can't manage a reservation I made months ago; what's the point of making a reservation if you can't keep track of it? And then I remember that I never made a reservation, and then I imagine turning over her little bowl of crème mints, tipping her toothpicks, telling her to shove her creamed spinach up her cunt, and then whisking the kid off to some lousy dinner twenty-five miles from here (143).

Harry is in a rage and as his rages often are this one is self-directed. It is the children of this

novel that direct their up-surging emotions to real-life concerns, like microfinance, religion or

villages in Africa. It is adults like Harry who, on the contrary, as if lacking any meaningful

foundation for engaging with the world around him, must retreat internally to negotiate his

emotional impulses, like an angsting suburban teenager. However, just at this moment another

server approaches and informs him that their table is ready. Harry is nearly incredulous. Nate, no

doubt having discerned the true nature of the situation some time ago, is genuinely surprised:

> "Did you really make a reservation?" Nate asks.
> "Your mother must have made it long ago," I say, "She was very organized" (143).

Harry, in fact, later finds that Jane has made all the necessary parents' weekend visiting

reservations (and hotel accommodations) for the remainder of Nate's career at the school years in

advance. Jane, it seems, is taking care of Harry even from beyond the grave while Harry himself

is caring for the wooden doll, so to speak: he is caring for wards that require no care.

Much the same can be said for the group's trip to South Africa. The trip is planned in

honor of Nate's Bar Mitzvah—of course, they are going to Nateville: "Cheryl has arranged for a

party planner and a travel agent to come to the house and discuss Project BM South Africa.

Everywhere we go, Cheryl keeps saying 'BM' loudly—it gives me flashbacks to my mother

asking, 'Did you make a nice BM?'" (380). Harry's mental associations are perhaps not as

random as he would like to believe; the situation carries a palpable sense of harkening back to

his childhood—to a time when he could be cared for unconditionally. Sofia, a friend of Cheryl's,

serves as party planner and proceeds to take care of every detail:

> "They can make a paypal donation—I'll find out how you do it. Meanwhile, can
> you get a quote from Nate about his visit there and why this place is important to
> him?"
> "Sure."
> "Write it down," she says, tapping the blank pad of paper in front of me: "This is
> your to-do list" (382).

Sofia proves accommodating not just in planning the mechanical logistics of the trip, but also in

formulating its purpose and meaning as if she were the parent. She taps the blank pad in front of

Harry like a teacher irritated slightly at her student's daydreaming. Beyond packing his bags,

Harry can be counted on for almost nothing:

> "What's the biggest city?"
> "Durban"—I think.
> "We're going to need a caterer, a rabbi, a band, and probably a refrigerated truck
> to get everything to the location, maybe a tent and air conditioning. What's the
> temperature there in July?"
> "I think it's their winter."
> "I'll find out." She jots a note to herself (382-3).

Every detail of this trip is planned out by others around him, as if he himself were a child

awaiting the commencement of a family vacation. Like at the Ravaged Fowl, Harry finds every

contingency planned out for him in advance: "Johannesburg is like a transfer station for all

humanity; fortunately, once again, Sofia arranged for a people minder to shuttle us from one

plane to another" (430). Harry frequently becomes lost in the volume of details he uses to

describe a situation he finds agreeable, as if cataloguing details and objects could prolong the

experience. Interestingly, this tendency in Harry's narration seems to begin at this stage of the novel: the planning of the South Africa trip.

> Sofia sends out the invites, each addressed in her beautiful calligraphic script. She gives me a computer spreadsheet to track the RSVPs…Shopping heavily from both the Oriental Trading Company and Vernon catalogue, Sofia ordered pencils, notebooks, and backpacks for every kid in the village. She's packed giant plastic tubs with soccer jerseys, school supplies, musical instruments, sheet music, a cassette player, and a copy of all the songs she wants them to learn, along with devil's-food cake mix, chocolate frosting, sprinkles and candles (397).

Of course, Sofia is a professional planner: this is what she does. However, this character doesn't merely take care of the logistical work: she enters her client's domain and customizes the experience. She picks gifts for the African children that reflect upon Harry in a way that *she* has chosen, and this of course has the effect of getting him off the hook of having to exert any responsibility whatever. What is more, Sofia ultimately never charges Harry for her services; instead, she proclaims, however improbably, that she is in love with him. With ease (and some help from Cy), he politely dismisses her and that's the end of that. Poof!—even the need to engage in a monetary transaction disappears. Everything is done for him unconditionally and without cost. Upon their return home:

> "The house looks so different," I say, pleasantly surprised.
> "You bet it does," Cheryl says. "we gave you a makeover—painted the kitchen, living room, and dining room, rearranged the furniture, got a few new things like chairs that are easy for Cy and Madeline." I follow Cheryl through the house with my hand over my mouth, awed, saying, "I can't believe it. I just can't believe it," over and over again (433).

Everything is simply provided for Harry—just given to him. It renders a curious effect on the novel, prompting readers to consider, as this chapter has done already, the foundation of these relationships. As a final note, it is important to reiterate the very real sense of meaning attached to the sociality generated by these means in the text, even if the means themselves appear to be spuriously ironic. What I hope to have made clear isn't that the novel is deadly serious and

devoid of any potential for ironic readings, but rather that the irony of the presentation doesn't detract from the sincerity of what Harry ultimately gains. For Harry at least, absurdity and irony do not negate genuine sociality, but can function as its precondition. Moving into this project's final text, it is worth thinking about just how the weight of social engagement can be made to operate alongside irony. Caryl Phillips will ultimately explode the conjunction of irony and sincerity and in the process call into question the ideological coordinates of the present moment.

Chapter 4 - "we were free, whatever that means"—Re-Encountering the Political in Phillips' *In the Falling Snow*

The subject of this project's final chapter is Caryl Phillips' 2007 novel *In the Falling Snow*. The earlier chapters have laid out a discursive terrain: they have outlined a developmental tendency on the part of the novels discussed. Each of the three previously discussed narratives utilize the family as a platform for social re-integration. Franzen, Smith and Homes, for all their differences in social observation and literary procedure, each detail a roughly similar process toward social inclusion. Walter Berglund, Natalie Blake and Harry Silver are very different characters for whom sociality carries different valences of meaning. Nonetheless, each of them develops according to a similar thematic trajectory: each of them is an interstitial character caught between established formats of identity construction and thus stranded in their own self-enclosed spaces cut off from within the greater social field. Each of them conciliates his- or herself, and is thus made recognizable to the collective social gaze, only after internalizing the family as the core episteme around which their subjectivity is organized. Emergent in this constellation is the dominance of what Lee Edelman terms the logic of reproductive futurism; indeed, as I have argued, the recent turn toward an aesthetics of seriousness and sincerity may in part be the cultural expression of an increasingly prevalent concern for "the future" as it exists in our cultural imagination. The instability of the system which supports our national consumptive habits, climate change, and international tensions: it seems less and less likely that the current run of the American way of life can go on for a great deal longer. Thus in my reading of the contemporary cultural situation The Child doesn't merely symbolize futurity as the abstract death drive compulsion toward an endless repetition of a hetero-normative state of affairs, but indeed the historical future itself: the continued progression of Euro-American modernity as a cultural project.

Part of the social tension these novels explore is generated from the increasingly cleaved nature of Anglo-American social relations. Alan Kirby at least argues that technology and social media have in recent years facilitated a widespread preference for sociality via clusters of micro-groups rather than engagement as a singular, grand social tapestry. For Kirby, sociality itself is reorganizing in response to these developments. This may help to explain the perceived shift in recent years away from world-level concerns and a focus on an ethics of community and a politics of the local. If Kirby is right, this would make a lot of sense: the white light of politics is being refracted back onto the social field as a full spectrum of colors—that is, as a series of individual causes embedded in specific social milieus. This might as well serve as a conceptual foundation for Lipovetsky's notion of hyperconsumption. Each of these novels depict inversions of the logic which guides social capital wherein it becomes situated in a closed circuit of market relations. Each of these novels, in other words, depicts social situations in which the social capital accompanying the weight of a potentially meaningful culturally-calibrated activity cynically usurps the causative agency of the interaction. The commoditization of social capital itself, even if that social capital gets expressed as or through material capital (or the things material capital buys), would also seem to presuppose closed social circles. It doesn't seem logical for social capital, which obtains value through exclusivity and nuance, to generalize itself on a large social scale. My use of the term metamodernism has been to take Vermeulen and van den Akker's social analysis and apply it to this backdrop: my use of the term is meant to designate a conceptual relation between this anxiety over the future as it is reflected in these changing modes of sociality. After all, this relation bares a crucial common theme: the family. What, after all, could be simultaneously more local *and* more symbolic of the future than the nuclear family?

Each of these novels interprets the total cultural situation in different ways, but they each nonetheless present the family and its inherent symbolic weight of futurism as an ideological prerequisite to social inclusion—each of them except *In the Falling Snow*. Phillips is writing in the same vein as the other three: he is following a similar conceptualization of the cultural situation as Franzen, Smith and Homes and accordingly crafts a narrative that is similar in many respects to those examined so far. Keith Gordon as well is something of a bumbling outsider; he has become embroiled in a family scandal and is living on his own trying to make sense of his life. Just prior to the novel's close he is offered his golden ticket: his estranged wife Annabelle invites him to stay the night in his former marital bed. The real meaning of the offer is unmistakable: she is inviting him to rejoin the family. Here, the situation seems primed: the audience hitherto this point is convinced that the novel will replicate the pattern I have just delineated. Like Walter, Keith is plagued with a son who isn't turning out as he would like, and also like Walter he is unhinged by the suspicion that his own conduct is in some way to blame. Thus, the familiar binding of familial participation and proper social development is put forward as the orienting social logic of the narrative. Here is Keith's chance to repair this breach. However, something very curious happens in the novel's final passage: it all goes off the rails. In the final moments, Keith, for reasons not made explicitly clear (he himself doesn't seem to fully know why), defers—that is, he resolves to reject this offer of familial re-conjoining.

Keith, like the other central characters discussed so far, is also something of a social outsider, though in a qualified sense. He is the son of Caribbean immigrants who nonetheless is educated in England and obtains a good job and social standing. He marries a white Englishwoman and has a son, Laurie. Central to his thinking is the weight and meaning of his Caribbean heritage, an ultimately fetishized conceptual object which he spends the novel trying

to grasp only to realize ultimately its immateriality. Laurie, on the other hand, becomes increasingly embroiled in gang-oriented street culture (or perhaps soccer hooliganism, which is likely worse). Keith is thus caught inconveniently in a gap of generational meaning. Both his father and his son are and were engaged in recognizable experiential struggles, however brutal. Keith doesn't suffer the threat of violence that his father faced and that his son, or so he fears, is at risk of experiencing, however neither does he grow up and form an identity along the lines of a pre-established narrative. Keith is a social worker serving in a managerial role: a white-collar paper pusher in a council office specializing in race relations. He struggles to determine an existential protocol, a *raison d'être*. Keith comes to realize that being an outsider is complicated business. Following Kirby, there is no totalizing social-ideological system for one to be outside of. Rather, Keith comes to understand that the social space is increasingly populated with micro-groups and sub-systems all functioning with infinite recourse to division and nuance. Thus, to be an outsider in a conventional sense—to be a struggling first-generation immigrant, subject to racial violence—would activate an enabling narrative and effectively push him to (or allow him to access) the center of a different group. To be an outsider in such a sense would, interestingly, make him recognizable to himself: to be an outsider in one sense would make him an insider in another. Keith is an *outsider* in a more perplexing way; he is a genuine outsider in the sense that he is between recognizable sub-sections of the social field: he is neither this nor that.

Annabelle offers him a chance to change this state of affairs: a chance to access the full meaning of the social field via reconvening with his family ("father," after all, is a group-transcending social universal in this particular cultural system), but he declines. This chapter will attempt to explain why this occurs and what it means. I have chosen to close my project with a discussion of this text because it serves as a hypothetical alternate: a what-if scenario against

which the other texts can be read. In not following through with the logic of the other novels, something is left unresolved—something is left open: such an aperture can be peered into, revealing the conceptual mechanics at work behind the total aesthetic presentation. My contention, of course, is that Keith's refusal does not signify an oversight on the part of Phillips, but a negation of the metamodern cultural matrix. Keith doesn't fail to see the possibility of social connectivity, but outright refuses it. What this character ultimately discovers is nothing less than the circularity of social capital: he comes to understand, in other words, that the Caribbean—or, more precisely, his dream of drawing personal meaning from an encounter with it—is a phantasmatic preoccupation. What is more, his encounters with his son convince him that the same logic effectively constitutes the glue which holds together the very frames of sociality he struggles to understand. And so in a supremely ethical act he refuses the entirety of the metamodern cultural arrangement sitting symbolically in the palm of Annabelle's extended hand.

This chapter will first unpack the symbolic meaning of the Caribbean in an attempt to come to terms with Keith as an unwitting agent of institutionalized cultural exchange. It will explore how this distant, orientalized object comes to hold for him the subjective potentiality for a genuine existential engagement with the world (whatever that would entail). This promise ultimately plays itself out in defeat when Keith goes to see his dying father. Undoubtedly hoping for some familial reconciliation or motivational talk beseeching him to recognize his cultural heritage, he gets nothing of the kind. His father's story, though gripping and by far the best storytelling of the novel, offers nothing for Keith to latch onto: it is all as foreign from his experience as it is from the reader's. Having established that Keith is not a prototypical struggling multicultural agent—a character who owes a deep catharsis to a newfound realization of a meaningful personal history or heritage—this chapter will offer an account of what does

make Keith tick. It will explore his job, his relationships and his ever-evolving book project to try and work out what drives this figure. The novel, of course, ends in *aporia*: whatever Keith wants, he never finds it. However, the lucidity and finality of his closing decision signals something hopeful for him—and potentially something hopeful for the novel as a genre. This chapter will contend that Keith's turning away from his family signifies potentially a re-claimed attentiveness for the prospect of the political. In turning away from his family, he embraces a potentially precarious existence. Relieved of both his high-maintenance lifestyle as well as his ideologically-mystified conception of his own history, Keith becomes a potentially authentic political agent. I will close this chapter—and this project—by using Keith's act (and its cultural repercussions) as a device to prompt discussion on the future direction of the Anglo-American novel. It is a chance to re-consider the ways and means (and institutions) by which the contemporary realist novel of social relevance has located itself within the metamodern framework. Perhaps Phillips' radical decision to have Keith decline his family's offer (and thus the whole impulse to meaningful social inclusion!) may be read as Phillips' own disavowal of certain aspects of contemporary poetics.

Paradise Mislaid

What this section will seek to do is to frustrate the boundary that Keith continually erects between himself and the omnipresence of pop cultural logic. He covets more than anything an outsider status that he only marginally possesses. The crucial trauma this chapter will seek to uncover isn't that Keith is a tortured outsider longing for inclusion—the book's conclusion forecloses that possibility. Rather, he is an insider who wants out; furthermore, Keith requires the full course of the narrative to figure this out. He shares Richard Katz' lamentable position of

maintaining a life narrative that is only fully functional when powered by the righteous energy of underdog status. His struggle is with *ennui*: the malaise of tortuous action and thinking that amounts to nothing, like his book on black music which remains a stack of written pages that never grows any closer to completion for all the volume it accumulates. Needless to say, it isn't as though Keith doesn't face racism or various obstacles; of course, as a second-generation Caribbean immigrant, racism is a palpable force in his life. Nor, however, does he find himself running for his life from nationalist thugs as his father did. Laurie, too, is engaged in a particularized race-based narrative. Whatever Keith and the novel's readers make of Laurie's attitude, activities and friends, he at the very least seems to know what he's about: that is, he has, for better or worse, a narrative of himself and his place *vis-a-vis* a given race-based social milieu. Keith, on the other hand, is ultimately place-less, coveting both the brutal race-based struggles of his father's generation (and especially their American counterparts) and a never actualized promise to himself to relocate (or at least visit) the idyllic Caribbean where he might presumably discover who he is (or, more aptly, where he might discover that he is not who he fears he is). Keith, troublingly, is caught in a sort of indefinable stasis: not entirely an insider and not entirely an outsider (either of those subject positions would offer the possibility of obtaining the other), Keith lacks any real *raison d'être*—any real cause or meaning or even definable place in history. As Kasia Boddy, reviewing the novel for *The Telegraph* articulates it: "what seems like a standard mid-life crisis soon reveals itself as more fundamental alienation" (2)—but alienation from what? In a proper Kierkegaardian sense one might say he is alienated from himself, but this isn't the whole story. This chapter's central contention is that what Keith is separated from isn't some vague history or narrative of heritage, but the dream and legacy of political action as such.

Keith's concern for exploring his heritage is an attempt to make his current life mean something rather than an attempt to discover a latent Caribbean self that British culture has perniciously covered over. He essentially orientalizes (in Edward Said's sense) the Caribbean. His lineage functions strangely as a piece of property that can, in theory, be cashed in on; it offers him the possibility of an alternate home and the implicit right of movement thereto. Applicable here is Graham Huggan's term "postcolonial exotic," which he develops in *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing in the Margins* (2001). Huggan's analysis traces the development of the "exotic" within postcolonial discourses, locating the root of this impulse in a set of commercial interests and institutions who have much to gain in structuring the discourse (as does Aijaz Ahmad, who will be discussed later in this chapter). Huggan asks candidly: "is it possible to account for cultural difference without at the same time mystifying it? To locate and praise the other without also praising the self? To promote the cultural margins without ministering to the needs of the mainstream?" (31). These questions are quite apt: the demarcation between white Euro-American citizen and colonial other/foreigner is a boundary that comes with its own logic of passage. Huggan is engaged in exploring the terms of such interactions. What his analysis isolates is a formal ground for engagement that resembles Jessica Berglund's interactions with Lalitha in *Freedom*: it will be recalled that Jessica's embrace of the other comes with a catch. One can only embrace an other that is *other*. Strangely, then, this form of de-orientalizing engagement has the effect of subjective distanciation: Jessica effectively sets up discursive boundaries (which work to her own benefit, Huggan might add) between her and Lalitha as an inherent consequence of getting to know her.

For Huggan, the exotic designates this mode of cultural exchange, but it also captures something of Keith's personal struggle with his identity. In trying to discover who he himself is,

he in effect fetishizes the parameters of his own supposed identity and so alienates himself

further: "exoticism describes…a particular mode of aesthetic *perception*—one which renders

people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively

manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery" (Huggan 13).

Keith, in other words, exoticizes the Caribbean: "the Caribbean" designates for Keith not an

actual place (and thus not an actual heritage, identity, history, political struggle, etc.) but an

aesthetically-rendered fantasy created out of the same objects that liberal English whites draw

their own understanding of the Caribbean from. Consumptively-speaking, Keith finds himself

sharing an uncomfortable common ground with the society he feels at odds with. Huggan goes

on to describe exoticism as "a kind of semiotic circuit that oscillates between opposite poles of

strangeness and familiarity" (13). Certainly, this is an apt description of Keith's own subject

position, however the structural resemblance it shares with metamodernism as well is hard to

miss. This deployment of oscillation as a conceptual mechanism to connect to opposing

tendencies is one Huggan shares with Vermeulen and van den Akker. This, of course, is

suggestive: in its transmutation of international political struggle into what is effectively social

capital mirrors closely that political development that I have suggested is most characteristic of

the metamodern moment: the powerful need to be two things at once. Huggan articulates this in

his own way: "Exoticism describes a political as much as an aesthetic practice. But this politics

is often concealed, hidden beneath layers of mystification" (15). This effectively constitutes a

split in Keith: he imagines himself a Caribbean subject trapped in an English landscape, but what

he comes to learn is that his true position is far more difficult. He is ultimately a British subject

trapped in a fantasy of identity manufactured, ironically, by European commercial interests and

academic institutions.

Keith's difficulty arises from his adoption of this phantasmatic identity as though it constituted a genuine historical and experiential inheritance. This identity, already manufactured for the sake of domestic culture, slides neatly into Keith's middle class life. For instance, it merges with his professional life to the point that, while looking for a new job late in the novel, Keith begins to wonder which one facilitates the other. He seeks to locate an authentic personal history somewhere at a convenient remove from his own mundane existence. In actualizing such a palpable history (and concomitant political weight), he would claim via inherited significance the jolly position of being a genuine political actor while nonetheless enjoying the creature comforts of a well-located flat, a good middle-class income and all the imported wine he can drink. In other words, Keith like Natalie wants it both ways: he wants genuine social relevance from within a sphere of domestic comfort—a sphere which logically would preclude a radical existence. As the previous chapters have outlined, such an untroubled coupling of ostensive politics and material comfort is a hallmark of the politics of the local, of which I have asserted metamodernism is a cultural expression. In so far as this, despite his antipathy toward the younger generation, Keith nonetheless has a good deal in common with the youths that populate *Freedom* and *May We Be Forgiven*. As this chapter will show, *In the Falling Snow* closes with a daring embrace of the political: an embrace which would see Keith risk his life of comfort. Hitherto that point, however, he tries to locate ostensible political meaning in culture itself: in his troubled book on black music and his Caribbean heritage. His engagement with the ethos of Afro- musical traditions and the ever present possibility of returning "home" to the Caribbean (though what he expects to find there is never articulated) are the objects, the cultural accouterments, that Keith wears and attempts to draw meaning from in a process of avowed political fidelity. The Caribbean fascinates him: he obsesses about his father's life there and his

experiences after having emigrated to Britain. He tries to tap into this narrative of disconnect and cultural obfuscation: throughout the novel he seeks out advice from his father, beseeching him to talk to him—to share his experiences and communicate to his son their shared history. However, his father proves to be a silent oracle. He will not indulge in what he keenly perceives to be a fantasy of meaning that his son has developed. Keith suspects an experiential gap separates them: he fears he may be out of joint with the very narrative he has conceptually aligned himself with. This traumatic realization that he may, for better or worse, be something of an insider separates him from the righteous rhetorical power (and the capacity to craft a coherent identity drawn from it—we perhaps become defined selves most in responding to struggle) inherent in the repressed émigré experience.

The trouble, of course, is that such experiences are his father's narrative, not his. The discrimination Keith faces in his lifetime is certainly nothing to sneer at, but it is also true that he doesn't spend the novel running from right wing thugs intending to lynch him as his father had. His pain is not one of acute anguish, but rather like a dull ache: not debilitating, but ever present—just enough to disrupt concentration. It is enough to unhinge his feeling of national belonging, but his endeavor to turn it into a mobilized political effort falls flat like a mis-delivered punch line (Annabelle literally interprets his suggestion to relocate Laurie to the Caribbean as a joke). Severe pain can at least be medicated, but Keith languishes in his protracted doldrums: enough to disrupt the progress of his life, too insubstantial for treatment. Thus, this critical response places the novel not squarely within the literary tradition that explores the difficulty of the English émigré experience (though much is to be made of the text in this line of thought), but within a category of fiction that addresses more universal cultural concerns. Keith's attempt to establish a personal history as a means to ground himself

epistemologically indicates ironic common ground with metamodern figures like and Natalie and Zachary. As different as they are, they nonetheless share this curious logic of lineage as a weighted commodity—that is, as an object that can provide meaning not in its own history and inherent cultural significance, but through the process of social exchange it facilitates. The notion that commodity objects can bestow cultural capital is similarly at work in all of these instances. It suggests that one of the prime mechanisms at work in contemporary aesthetic attitudes involves the nostalgic recreation of an idealized past moment in order to usurp its ideological freight and slide it inconspicuously into the cargo hold of the present moment to act as ballast to stabilize for a trip on the roughs seas of contemporary culture.

In the Falling Snow is of interest to historians of contemporary culture for its position as a stone sitting impertinently still amidst the coursing waters of the present ideological stream; however, as a literary urn it is not well-wrought. Phillips' novel is admittedly a "disappointingly average offering" (McDowell 1) leaving much to be desired in the way of conception and even language-level execution:

> most of the dialogue is fairly wooden…as is a lot of the writing …which also slips inappropriately into American English …By around page 250, the reader starts to worry that Phillips plans to offer Keith an easy redemption, set up some artful symmetries between fathers and sons, and call the whole thing a day (Tayler 2).

Critical reactions to this text are pretty well agreed that the novel comes off as tin-eared, the dialogue awkward: its prose unfortunately maintaining the playful wiggle room of on-setting rigor mortis. While discussing travel plans with his son:

> "Do you want me to come with you to Barcelona?"
> "What for? You don't like Barça. Anyhow, I'm going with some mates."
> "No adults?"
> "You're not worried about me, are you?"
> "Should I be?"
> "Get real, Dad. I'm nearly eighteen" (122).

Moments later, "He sees his son throw up a quick hand signal that elicits a chorus of 'Yo!'s" (122), not unlike Nate in his ghostly walk with Natalie near the end of *NW*. Keith's narration puts him at an odd remove, like a foreigner who engages in a domestic ritual that he basically understands, but lacks the nuance to execute properly and thus calls painful attention to himself as an outsider precisely in the attempt to pass as an insider. The dialogue is illogical: Laurie, who talks in slang and drops cultural references, speaks in polite, full sentences here. What sort of a hand signal does he "throw up"? A gang sign? A simple wave? Embedded in this supremely culturally-specific situation, Keith cannot abandon his formalistic tone: contradictorily, the "Yo!"s are "elicited." Much the same criticism might be leveled at Phillips himself. When Laurie tells his father: "You don't like Barça," he is referring, of course, to Barcelona's Liga soccer team, FC Barcelona. The implication would be, of course, that Keith follows another team, but there is little sense of this in the novel; in fact, whenever he is confronted with the prospect of sport in any form, he treats it the way one would a mild contagion. In other words, the dialogue appears visibly structured for the sheer purpose of allowing Laurie the chance to utter the fan-favorite nominative rendering of the Barcelona team for the sake demonstrating the proper pronunciation: for the sake of offering proof that this speaker—that he, Phillips—is indeed a cultural savant. However, the forced nature of the exchange is precisely what makes the reference so suspect. When Laurie says "I'm going with some mates," it comes off a bit unnatural. It sounds like Keith describing the situation to Annabelle. One imagines Phillips flipping through a hypothetical dictionary of pop cultural references in an attempt to breathe relevance into the text, unaware that this very effort betrays itself and makes the text seem all the more rigid like a parent uttering youth slang to a teenager who cringes through the effort.

However, it is the text's strangely stodgy, rigid sensibility that tells us the most about Keith: it complements his persona in an oddly fitting way. "How could he be such a wimp, so caught off guard by hooliganism? And could England truly be as bleak as the narrator suggests? It's almost like one of those Apocalypse-in-England movies" (2) wonders Paul Devlin writing for *SF Gate*. However, what is of significance for this chapter's purposes is the fact that most critics are in agreement on the point at which *In the Falling Snow* starts to offer a compelling narrative: "Keith's ailing father, as some British reviewers have noted, saves the novel… he tells the story of his migration to Britain in 1960 and his subsequent travails. His discourse of ideas and anecdotes is gritty, brilliant, remarkable and worth picking up the book for" (Devlin 2). Much critical attention has been poured onto this scene. Keith's father who, belatedly and begrudgingly, pours forth the details of his post-emigration life to his son offers a narrative that most critics of the novel have pointed to as the text's thematic, moral and even aesthetic center of gravity. This is it! This is the moment Keith has been waiting for. The majority of the critical reactions to the book, in fact, have singled out this aspect of the novel for considerable praise:

> Keith's father, Earl, delivers a monologue that stands up as a self-contained story, improbably long and writerly from a narrow point of view, but also more powerful than anything else in the book…Earl's story of psychic dislocation and emigrant distress both recharges Phillips's writing - Keith's story is subsequently brought to a delicate, impressively handled conclusion - and casts a new light on Keith's maundering activities and self-protective remoteness (Tayler 3).

Zipp as well lauds the "soliloquy that's a stylistic tour de force of revelations. While Keith may never achieve much self-awareness, by the end of *In the Falling Snow* a reader will understand him very well indeed" (2). She then adds: "Keith's analysis of his father will have readers snorting with recognition" (2). Boddy argues "Earl's deathbed narrative provides a jolt both to the book and to Keith. Returning to his wife and son, he shows the first signs of relinquishing his controlled self-sufficiency" (2), adding that "It is only when Keith is forced to acknowledge first

his memories of his mother and then his father's story, that he, and therefore, the novel, loses its rather uptight quality" (2).

What strikes me about these reviews is the insistence that Keith himself is re-written, re-cast and re-constituted subjectively in the wake of hearing his father's story. There is the insistence on the part of critics that this figure has altered: that he has opened up in some way— that the reader somehow understands him more thoroughly in the novel's post-soliloquy sections. Perhaps with a nod to Harry Silver these critics postulate that Keith in these final sections of the novel becomes a "real person." I for one find no grounds for this interpretation whatsoever. On the train ride back to London after his father has passed: "The iPod-playing youth has now located yet another shoot-em-up film and he seems to have increased the volume on his iPod to maximum" (303). Here Keith maintains the same sense of icy gentility in the face of irritation as always. The reader will also notice the same insistent repetition of some culturally-salient buzzword, as if to prove cultural familiarity—as if to reassure a hypothetical listener (perhaps himself) that he has a grasp on contemporary culture and should thus be listened to. Not much, in other words, seems to have changed with him. Critics of this novel seem quick to attribute some essence-changing realization to Keith; counter to this I assert such a critical maneuver is conducted as if from autopilot, interpreting by habit rather than engagement with a particularized situation.

My argument here is that these critics have leapt to their quite singular conclusion. They largely read *In the Falling Snow* too directly into the cannon of immigrant fiction. Novels that chronicle the struggles of the immigrant experience have, at least in American popular literature, practically become a codified (not to mention frequently bestseller) genre. The novels of, say, Amy Tan, Khaled Hosseini, and Jhumpa Lahiri, just to name some particularly recognizable

figures, have gained wide appreciation for their documentation of the conscious disparities between first- and second-generation immigrants: between parents who struggle to hold on to their own heritage while raising offspring who become all-too-American or British. The crux of such novels frequently comes when the young generation learns the meaningful weight of the cultural past they have hitherto neglected. *In the Falling Snow* is a deceptively simple novel: while there is little enough for critics who revel in the depths of language-play, the novel nonetheless is capable of throwing even careful readers for a spin. As I suggested, the *In the Falling Snow* is structured to facilitate a narrative of social conciliation via familial inclusion only to refute this logic after having set it in motion. The same is true of the novel focusing on the generation gap in immigrant families. For a time the strife between Keith and Laurie suggests the plausibility of this genre-identification. The trouble with this reading is that Keith is not the immigrant parent, but the immigrant son all grown up. What is more, the immigrant parent, his own father, could care less what cultural attitudes he adopts. As the Anglicized child of a foreign (and colonially subordinated) nation he has been ostensibly separated from a body of cultural knowledge that postcolonial critics would assert his task is to rediscover. The trouble is he's already there: he already from the outset is not only attentive to, but positively obsessed with, his own cultural heritage. This narrative trajectory, too, in other words, is frustrated and if this narrative is one that unfolds according to a teleology of self-discovery, than a careful reading of this text must approach that possibility in this novel with skepticism.

It is difficult to maintain that Keith becomes an enhanced subject after learning about his father's life in the Caribbean and his experiences in Britain. Like with Harry Silver, this claim to such character development is one that can only be made by passing over a severe gap in the text at haphazard speed: slowing down to examine the text, one plunges into the disconnect head

first. Returning to London, "He feels exposed and vulnerable. Small. That's it. Small. An accelerated lorry blasts by, and then another. So that's it then?" (304). That may, indeed, be it— Keith is not only as lost as ever, but he himself seems to be aware of what reviewers of *In the Falling Snow* have missed: he is conscious of having come away with nothing. The novel's critics, with astounding unanimity, presume that its protagonist must have come away from his father's gripping narrative with some new sense of self: an enhanced, empowered self-knowledge that will in the best liberal multicultural tradition lead to a more meaningful existence. What is so shocking is that they should overlook Keith's meandering thoughts upon returning to London. As the snippet above demonstrates, Keith himself seems to have gone into this encounter with that very expectation—with the assumption that he would come away with some significant sense of self-knowledge. Instead, he goes home with palpable disappointment. Keith returns to London—and his old house—as lost as ever. The most significant event of *In the Falling Snow* is a developmental vacuum. To paraphrase Sherlock Holmes' classic rejoinder that closes "The Silver Blaze," the curious aspect of Keith's hearing his father's story is that *nothing happens*. That's the curious thing. A nuanced reading of the text shows a different point at which Keith's consistency breaks down. The key moment of the novel comes not in his moment of listening to the celebrated soliloquy, but, fittingly, afterwards in his own quiet thinking.

The anticipated reconciliation between Keith and his estranged but nonetheless ever-present wife does not come out of nowhere. As the novel starts to lump toward its finish, readers are thrown for a loop: Annabelle suggests that Keith join her and Laurie for a vacation in mainland Europe. Keith is genuinely surprised—"'You know, spending some time with Laurie might help straighten you out too,'" (218) she tells him. This reads almost like a form of loving blackmail: perhaps a close as any of these texts come to articulating directly the contemporary

rationale for social conciliation. Like Walter's becoming suddenly tolerable after rejoining with

Patty, Annabelle is frankly telling Keith that familial inclusion is a component of proper

citizenship and personal development. Indeed, the assertion that his boozing and womanizing (as

genteel a treatment as Phillips offers, this is what much of Keith's activities in the novel consist

of) are somehow a contributing cause of Laurie's delinquency appears to be a conversational

staple of his interactions with his estranged wife. Keith for his own part seems unsure of what to

make of the mess that is fatherhood: "At the very least, he owes his son the courtesy of trying to

play the part" (238)—a lukewarm endorsement of the role, to say the least. It is perhaps

unsurprising, then, that Keith should in the final lines of the text defer from resuming the

function full-time. He goes to his former home immediately upon return to London after

receiving word from Annabelle that Laurie has gotten his mysterious girlfriend (Annabelle had

never met her; Keith was apparently oblivious that his son even had such an attachment until

Lauris's arrest) pregnant. Keith, after a brief, anti-climactic meeting attempts to leave. Annabelle

persuades him to stay, offering him food which he reluctantly accepts. Again, he suggests

leaving: "'What's that supposed to mean? Are you expecting somebody?...Well, you don't look

like you could make it to the end of the street, let along back to your flat. Just give me the tray

and go to sleep, all right?'" (307). She persuades him to rest upstairs in his old bedroom: "'Just

give me the tray. I'll take it downstairs and I'll be back up in a minute. We can talk about

everything else in the morning'" (307). It's suddenly as if she won't let him leave. Like a

triumphant Leopold Bloom, Keith finds himself in his former marital bed awaiting his wife to

bring him a meal.

But all is not well—the narrator in the closing lines of the novel conveys Keith's sense of

discomfiture:

> It is not his bedroom. He belongs at Wilton Road. When she comes back up he will tell her this. He should get dressed and go home and then tomorrow he can come back and they can talk. He is not ill or incapable. There is no reason for him to spend a night here in this small terraced house with all these people. He will tell her this when she comes back upstairs. He lies back on the pillow and listens as downstairs Annabelle turns off the lights and closes all the doors. Then he hears her footsteps as she begins to walk slowly up the stairs (308).

Keith's own sense of alienation becomes quite visible: he describes his family members as "all these people." Here, Keith seems to have made an interminable decision away from the conciliatory social politics displayed in the novels which are the subjects of the previous chapters. The stage is set for social re-integration via family-sanctioned futurism, but something definitively settles his resolve in the other direction. Keith spends much of the novel in a state of chronic indecision. It isn't clear, even to a reader who is granted narration that follows his thoughts directly, just what he wants. He regrets having lost his wife over "betraying [his marriage] one solitary time…Jesus, it just didn't seem fair" (236). And yet, at other points, he is positively disdainful of the woman: "during the past couple of years…she has developed a tendency to behave with that mean and slightly smug, green bellied, middle-class sense of entitlement that he was so surprised, and pleased, to find her devoid of all those years ago" (216). Annabelle, too, has betrayed something. In other words, the decision that is finally rendered in the novel's closing passage is not one that emerges from some transformed sense of self after hearing his father's harrowing narrative; Keith's decision, rather, represents the acknowledgment of the struggle that he has been carrying on the whole time—the struggle to define his own anti-position.

His decision to leave his family for good reflects the ultimate failure of his fantasies about returning to the Caribbean, his father's birthplace—"your imaginary homeland" (206) as Annabelle scoffs. Keith's desire for this is bound up with his progressive politics, which

becomes engorged when his father's friend Baron describes his twin still living in Jamaica: "'My

pension just about work here, but back there the pension can't pay for my pills. I don't have no

choice but to be here and I know I never going to see my twin again'" (246). However, the same

enthusiasm fails to carry forward another generation:

> "The Caribbean?" Laurie pushes a particularly large piece of pizza into his mouth,
> and he speaks through the food as he chews. "Why there?"
> "What do you mean 'why there?' Your grandparents come from there. Are you
> saying you're not interested?"
> "Whatever."
> "What's that supposed to mean? You're supposed to know something about
> where you come from. Or at least be curious. I'm not asking you to go and live
> there or anything, but at least just take a look. It's the Caribbean, Laurie. How bad
> can it be?" (119-20).

Even his final, most compelling argument fails to intrigue his son who instead makes tentative

plans to travel with friends to Barcelona, Spain to watch his favorite soccer team work out.

Keith here finds himself profoundly at odds with his son and his son's generation: "'The

thing is, Dad, I don't know if things are the same now as they were when you were my age…It

isn't just about discrimination and stuff. I know that's important, and that's your job and

everything, but it's also about other things'" (158). When he inquires, his son responds that

"respect" is today the much-coveted object of struggle. Baron himself will go far to articulate

what is quickly becoming Keith's own take on the young generation: "'Man, the kids don't give

a damn'" (184). The final straw comes after Laurie has been taken in by the police for

questioning about a stabbing.

> "Did the police abuse you in any way?"
> Laurie looked up at his father, "What?"
> "I'm talking about racial abuse. Did the interviewing officer verbally abuse you in
> any way?"
> "What are you on? The copper who interviewed me was black" (213-4).

Like Walter, Keith slowly finds the ground underneath his feet to have shifted. The basin of symbolic meaning from which he draws his status as an outsider struggling against the status quo has begun to pour forth a new mixture: a substance of racial and national identity now indecipherable to Keith amid the rapidly changing terrain of struggle. As his son ages, he is forced to examine the emerging youth culture more closely, and the more he looks the more he realizes that foundational assumptions of his own identity are gesturing toward irrelevance. With the failure of his book project, he is forced to confront the real of his professional efforts. With the Caribbean a fading dream, he is as likely to see it with his own eyes as Baron is. Leading to his final visit with his father, the mechanisms he has employed in his life to help convince himself that he is and forever will be an outsider fighting the good fight—fighting for inclusion into a hostile society for whom he will always be an indecipherable other—one by one begin to break down.

What the critics have wrongly ascribed to that experience is what Keith himself no doubt hoped to gain from it: the reification of his adopted home and identity (the Caribbean). What he gains from his father's story is not an historical narrative telling who he really is, but a harrowing tale of a hellish crossing to a cold land which offers little to strange newcomers. A narrative, in other words, that has essentially no bearing on Keith's own life and thus it changes nothing. His father's story is a powerful one, but then how could it not be? Reading the novel, one has to ask how such a listener as Keith—educated and politically conscious as he is—could possibly have expected his father's story to be any different. What *was* Keith expecting? Riding back from on the train, enlightened in some respects though still essentially lost as to his role in society, he is plagued with the sense that he did not get what he wanted from the interview. Keith starts to come to terms with the possibility that he is more included within the matrix of British society

than he was previously keen to admit. It is this unsettling realization: that he is ideologically

placeless, that the grounds of radicalism beneath his feat were illusory, that finds him at the end

of the novel willing to slough off the promise of marital reconciliation and with it the

achievement of the standard writerly exercise of the metamodern fiction. In doing so, he is

simply acknowledging a subject position that was his all along.

Man in the Middle

Ultimately, what Phillips offers his readers is not a character who finds out who he is, but one

that finds out he is no one. As was suggested, some insight into the state of affairs leading up to

the close of the novel can be garnered by examining Keith's meandering train of thought on his

return ride to London. Prompted by the young man obnoxiously watching loud films on his iPod,

Keith spontaneously recalls an experience of watching a film with his father. He has been under

the care of Brenda, his father's former domestic partner, while his father meanwhile has been

away at a mental hospital. His father, recently released, takes him to a film for the afternoon (he

hasn't yet regained legal custody of his son). Keith leaves the theatre and recalls the surprise of

finding that it has turned dark and begun to snow:

> He looked behind him and saw two sets of footprints where they had walked, a
> large pair and his own smaller ones, and then he gazed up at the sky where a
> sudden surge of wind buffeted the flakes so that the snow began to swirl
> feverishly. As they turned a corner, he tugged at his father's hand. His father
> looked down at him and smiled. He pointed to the sky. 'Look at all the snow!' His
> father continued to smile.
>   Brenda opened the door and quickly beckoned him inside (299).

Despite the heavy-handed symbolism, few critics have drawn attention to this scene or made

ledger of its thematic cargo. Obviously, this moment is what the novel's title references—this

solemn, touching moment of father-son understanding, rendered literally by their parallel sets of

footprints. Brenda, who is for Keith a superbly maternal figure, selfless, and endlessly caring, is also the force that disturbs this moment of father-son quietude. The rapidity with which she ushers the young boy inside is a telling gesture; there ensues a brief argument between her and his father. Keith, however, is so fixated on the snow he hardly registers the disagreement until he sees his father leaving: "As he walked, his father left behind a single set of footprints, and he remembered lingering by the doorstep and watching closely as the falling snow steadily erased all evidence of his father's presence" (300).

Brenda functions in the novel as a close thematic corollary to English society as a whole for those brought up in it, but not of it: it is nurturing, but encompassing; caring, but enclosing, supportive, but possessive. Brenda is a sacred maternal figure for Keith, but her care is totalizing and absolute. There is little room for anything else—she covers him up and whisks him away. As she declares indirectly earlier in the novel: "Nobody was going to take 'her Keith' from her" (181). Such an avowal entails a double-bind: it is, of course, a declaration of deep affection, but also one of ownership. Brenda in a sense serves as a dialectical counterpoint to the nationalist brutes that threaten Earl's life and claim that of his friend (Brenda works as a hairdresser and as such is recognizably cut from the same blue collar cloth as the skinhead nationalists contemporary Londoners might recognize on their own streets). Their stance, too, is totalizing and all-encompassing: be English or else. British society offers palpable benefits, but it must claim your identity. Both these figures, Brenda and the nationalist, are thematically referenced in the cover-all whiteness of the falling snow that erases his father's footprints—the visual metaphor of their connection. The snow fascinates the young boy and transfixes him, but it serves as a backdrop for a white English life. It distracts him from this crucial fissure between father and son: the traumatic breakage that ultimately ignites his political consciousness and gets

relived at the novel's close. This separation from his father is one which he spends the entirety of

the novel trying to mend, all on account of that falling whiteness. This scene, in other words,

points to an uncomfortable fact: the very fact that he ultimately takes away from his final

exchange with his father. Keith *is* an Englishman. He *is* an insider, perhaps not completely so,

but certainly one the likes of which his father could never be.

Keith, of course, faces obstacles and racism in his life. I in no way mean to suggest that

he somehow enjoys a unique post-racial existence. He suffers the terrible and undue disapproval

of Annabelle's rapacious father when they begin to see each other; Keith weather's the tears of

his mother-in-law as she sobs at the reality of her daughter carrying a black child. The novel

ominously begins with him trekking through "one of those leafy suburbs of London where the

presence of a man like him still attracts curious half-glances" (3). He is, however, on his way to

see his lover who lives in the neighborhood; she too is black. What *In the Falling Snow* presents

is the status of the English identity as a strange process of negotiation (perhaps we may say

oscillation) taking place atop a layer of bedrock that shifts about without warning. Midway

through the novel, he finds himself accosted by Rolf, Danuta's tall, blonde, blue-eyed, Baltic

would-be suitor who has soured considerably after learning the hard way that the Polish cleaner

was stringing him (and Keith) along just to rob them. The grounds and nature of his complaint

against Keith seem improbable to the point of comedy:

> "I will tell you the truth, English attitudes disappoint me. Do you know what it is
> like to stand in a shop with money in your pocket and discover that nobody wants
> to serve you? Telling you with their eyes before you are even asking for anything.
> Do you know what this is like or how it feels?" The man points to his head, "Can
> you imagine this?" (198).

It is possible to imagine that Rolf's gesture of pointing to his head serves as a dramatically ironic

pantomime of what for Keith must be a developing headache. This is an astounding passage for

British and American readers alike; it's as though Rolf were a black victim of discrimination in the Jim Crow American South struggling to articulate the nature of his grievance to an uncaring white audience. And yet, the situation is suggestive. Rolf undoubtedly has some kind of legitimate grievance. Despite being black and suffering the quite palpable drawbacks this condition entails, Keith nonetheless possesses something this blonde white man just might, based on the aggressiveness of his gestures, kill for: citizenship. Not just citizenship in the formal sense—that is, that Keith has legal papers—but also in the wider cultural sense. He is educated, established and in every sense of the term respectable; he holds a promising career with a good income; has a family and a respectable residence (and an even more respectable former residence). Keith may not enjoy total equality, but it is also true that his most articulated anxiety leading up to the firestorm Yvette rains down on him involves his forgetting to order more of his favorite Chardonnay.

Keith, thus, occupies a strange position. He is a black man in a very white-privileging society, but one that is nonetheless sufficiently inclusive as to prevent him from laying a convincing claim to outsider status and all the moral underdog rigmarole which that would entail. Like Richard Katz, the realization that one is accepted into the fold, conditionally or otherwise, is a difficult morsel to swallow down. Like many pseudo-artist figures in contemporary fiction, Keith anchors his perceived self-position, and the cultural politics ensuing therein, in art: music, specifically, is the only thing (besides wine) that elicits anything like a passionate response from this figure. As he describes attempts at conversations with Yvette early in the novel:

> He tried to talk to her about the social significance of soul music, and he did confess his desire to one day write a book about music, but he quickly recognized that their conversation was rendered positively one-sided, and somewhat

> uncomfortable, by the undeniable fact that the music he was enthusing about was recorded before Yvette was born (12).

Music isn't just an object of aesthetic taste for Keith; as with Katz, music comes with social significance. Listening to (and more importantly, knowing about and being able to talk about) ideologically-freighted music is a way of demonstrating a subjective affiliation with a given political, historical, economic, and social position. Keith maintains for the bulk of the novel a rhetorical stance which ascribes to him the position of an unwanted outsider, and thus a devout sufferer like the first wave of immigrants whose struggle made his now relative comfort possible. The problem with such a position, as Keith learns, is twofold: first, as the encounter with Rolf suggests, the interpersonal dynamics by which nationalities and borderlines determine a given body's access to wealth, education and status have complexified considerably; the simple narrative of black outsider vs. white Englishman is not the full extent of the story. Second, Keith's attempts to register the rhetorical position of the outsider are, ironically, inherently social. This has the effect of putting him into a similar sort of leftist deadlock that Walter Berglund faces in Franzen's *Freedom* wherein adherence to a radical position strangely entails pandering to a mass audience one is ideologically at odds with. On the train leaving Yyvette's residence, and already ruffled considerably from that encounter, he watches two teenage males snatch the cell phone of a girl approximately their own age. They toss it back and forth over her head, as if playing keep-away, until it lands in the lap of an elderly woman sitting across the walkway who then returns it to directly the girl. To Keith's surprise, the girl chastises the old woman for handling her property:

> "You better keep your fucking hands off people's stuff, all right?"
> The girl turns now, and as the doors begin to close she quickly jumps and joins her friends on the platform. Through the window she gives the lady two fingers and mouths "fuck off" (15).

Hardly the revolutionary youth of May '68, Keith throughout the novel has no clue what to make

of the emerging youth generation (and so has that much in common with his father-in-law), let

alone any notion of how to think of them as a potentially radical class. How does a figure with a

social consciousness like Keith's assume radical, outsider status when this is who he has to talk

to?

Keith does, as he says, attempt to write a book on music. He spends much time early in

the novel sketching out plans for a vast work and then self-reflexively commenting on it, as

though at work on some postmodern masterpiece of fiction. He contemplates what should be

included; what should be focused on. He expends considerable effort trying to determine, for

instance, whether or not Jazz music ought to be a focus until "he finally convinced himself that

there were already hundreds of respectable volumes on the subject and, quite frankly, he didn't

need the hassle of adding his opinions into the mix" (62). He then contemplates a "three-part

study of the music of the sixties, the seventies and the eighties" (63). His manuscript appears like

a jumble of schematics—increasingly detailed blueprints for an intellectual work that seems to

come to fruition only as more and more plans:

> The first part of the book, "Motown and the Suburbs," will specifically concern
> itself with soul music, the middle section, "Rebel Music," will address itself to the
> rise of reggae as a global phenomenon, and the final third of the book, "Whose
> World?," will look at the implications, musically and culturally, of the emergence
> of so-called "World Music." This new structure seems more manageable to him,
> but he still has the problem of not being entirely sure of how one actually starts to
> write a book (63).

Keith, in other words, has worked out a meticulous structure and method for composing a book,

all that's left is to actually do so. The final remark of the passage quoted above is unwittingly

funny. It is little wonder then that "in two days he has barely set down a word that he has not

immediately scratched out with his cheap blue Biro" (64). Keith finds himself stumbling into the

same deadlock—the same impossible position of having to accomplish a task with heavy ideological stakes from a place that is not ideologically grounded.

What Keith doesn't grasp is that one can't write such a text from his position of cultural in between-ness. The result is a horrific mashup wherein Keith struggles to represent the fluidity, vibrancy and pulse of a free-floating, ever-changing art form with an explanatory mode that is, like him, rigid and overly formal. He suggests frequently that he merely needs time to work on his project to complete it. When Yvette exposes their affair and he is placed on paid leave he finds himself, almost as if by magic, in this very position. However, forced to put his money where his mouth is, he confronts his project and finds that the stretches of time now available to him bring the project no closer to fruition. It is no surprise, then, that he should later find himself repudiating the project altogether: "This book will never be written. He hears himself say the words out loud. This stupid book will never be written" (199). Sadly, his only written project that will achieve a mass readership is his bulk of amorous e-mails written to Yvette. Like his protest music, this book functions for him as an enabling object so long as it is kept at a distance; it operates as a device wherein he can reify the identity of a proper adherent to this music so long as he never presses himself to actually write it. The book stays alive in his thinking by his ability to put it off and say "if only I had more time, then I could complete it." Ironically, what for most prospective authors would be the godsend of salaried free time is for Keith a recipe for disaster. Forced to confront his project in all its impossibility, it tumbles down.

What continually frustrates his authorial efforts is, as I've suggested, precisely his interstitial position—his in between-ness: not an authentic outsider, but neither a full-fledged Brit. For all his cliché academic theorizing, he refuses to classify his own efforts along these lines and indeed holds academic work up for ridicule: "academic articles…tend to involve either

a colon or parenthesis, as though the writer is trying to signal his or her cleverness before the

piece has ever begun" (101). He is poking fun at the admittedly predictable, repetitive format of

many academic articles (not to mention this project's own chapter headings). What he fails to be

struck by is the obvious question his choice of target poses. If he is not writing as an academic,

then what is he writing as? Curious observer? He is not writing from an insider position: he isn't,

after all, a musician. The academic would serve fittingly as a rarefied outsider, but he is no

academic—in fact, earlier in the novel he explicitly rejects the possibility of getting a PhD,

deciding instead to enter a line of work that has more social relevance. Keith is a social worker;

far from an outsider, he is both professionally and personally very much in the proverbial mix.

How does one contemplate a book of cultural-aesthetic analysis written by a social worker? Even

Keith's profession mirrors this sense of an indefinable middle position that seems to disable any

clear cut sense of identity and rhetorical positioning. Working for the race relations board of the

local council, Keith covets the idea of advocacy for the minority community. When the situation

with Yvette deteriorates even further he fears for his job and is forced to start perusing social

work job listings, giving him his first glimpse of just how messy the British identity landscape

has become. What is more, he finds himself in the awkward position of navigating not only

prospective jobs but also what he imagines to be their embedded dynamics:

> Without even looking at jobs that are available he knows that with his experience
> and complexion, and given the national push toward more racially polarized
> community monitoring, he will undoubtedly find it hard to land a job that doesn't
> place him in the firing line of the press on race issues (232).

Again, we find the strange scenario of a desired outcome ruined by its very plausibility. The

problem with jobs like the one described is that he would be made an advocate serving in the

cause of race relations, but one in which his rhetorical position would align him with British

society at large. Would this not in some crucial sense be antithetical to his efforts in the first

place? He would in effect find himself the organization's spokesperson. This is a difficult

negotiation for Keith. Like the book, his line of work functions to uphold his imagined outsider

status as long as it remains idealized. This sort of a job would see Keith the boss.

Like his book, Keith himself is a contradiction: he is caught between the brutal struggles

of mid-century first-generation immigrants and the more idyllic, possibly "authentic" life

experiences in the Caribbean. Both, however, are fantasies that he will never experience. The

terrain may have changed again for his son who experiences his racial identity through the

internecine quarrelling of various groups, who in turn experience their own struggles through the

lens of the fetishized, media-enhanced specter of street culture. However, at least one has to

concede that whatever drawbacks to this development there may be (and Keith has no trouble

identifying them) Laurie nonetheless is consciously engaged in some kind of an emerging ethos.

However paltry street culture may seem to Keith, even he must admit that his son self-identifies

from within a narrative of who he is and how he must be. Unlike his father, Laurie does not feel

the pulling force of an interstitial identity; he maintains no fantasies of his past and no illusions

of his present. He doesn't need them. For better or worse, Laurie knows exactly who he is. This

is why Keith has so much invested in developing a cogent narrative: a narrative of himself, of his

history, of music, etc. The development of a readable lineage for his book project isn't merely an

academic whimsy, but an impulse that speaks to his central character logic:

> Keith wants to be a writer. His long-planned history of black music is concerned
> with the way in which "black cultural heritage is passed on from one generation to
> the next". He draws flow charts connecting the music of Nat King Cole to that of
> his daughter, Natalie Cole, or that of Dionne Warwick to her niece, Whitney
> Houston. It takes Keith a long time to recognize that generational legacies also
> play a part in his own story (Boddy 2).

Again, the critical response largely misses the point; what Keith finds is that his lineage, his

heritage—none of it plays any active role in his life. His attentions ultimately seize upon the

painful absence of these things. His history, the history of immigrant struggle in England: it exists in his thinking as a shadow—some part of himself that needs to be actualized in order to transform his thinking and offer him some *raison d'être*. His father's story drops a curtain of experiential finality between them, evaporating this shadow of possibility and effectively telling him: "drop the act, you are nothing like me." This painful realization that would thwart his attempts at escaping his sense of groundlessness is avoided at every turn and thus functions as a complete inversion of the identificatory logic which the previously discussed novels ultimately hinge on. What he gains from listening to his father haunts him retroactively, even while writing his book early in the novel as if some part of him understood this all along:

> He would still like to write a few paragraphs on Gil Scott-Heron, but he wonders how much, if anything, his potential British readers will know about the chocolate cities and vanilla suburbs of the United States. If they don't know anything then it will be impossible for him to develop his thesis about how black cultural heritage is passed on from one generation to the next. After all, he can't illustrate the principle by pointing to Liverpool or Birmingham (90).

He bears the terrible anxiety that the black experience in England somehow cannot stand up on its own; it requires the surplus element of the American black experience to bolster it. His thinking meanders: he can't quite put his thumb on the origin of the black experience in Britain, nor on any specific element within it from which to draw meaning. From there, it is a small step before making the analogous political observation:

> Okay, so the Romans brought black soldiers to build Hadrian's wall, and there were black trumpeters and pages in the sixteenth-century courts of England and Scotland, and everybody knows that eighteenth-century London was full of black people, but that was then. He is trying to write about a deeper and more substantial tradition of cultural inheritance, and this means he has to look across the Atlantic for his models. Of late he has found that the same is also true in the race relations business. Increasing numbers of social policy papers seemed to cross his desk arguing that one can only understand Bristol or Leicester or Manchester by looking at Oakland or Detroit or Chicago (90).

As Keith observes, the presence of black people on the British landmass predates the contemporary English identity: in a sense, black people have been in England since before there was England. He finds, however, the history too tortuous for a singular historical narrative: the polarities of the black experience in America are more suited for this. This is a burdening realization, the weight of which stops him in his tracks. Immediately after the segment quoted above: "He switches off his computer and admits defeat for the day" (90). It is as if he has encountered a possibility to hot to touch. To assuage this anxiety, Keith reaches out to the Caribbean and to the past of his father: when these attempts to ground his own experience fail, he resolves to withdraw and the novel comes to its solemn close.

Politics Found

Keith at the close of *In the Falling Snow* avoids the logic of social conciliation that the narrative up until that point seems to have been building up to and instead withdraws unsteadily into an uneasy, uncertain solitude. The question of how to read this act is *the* central question of the novel. Essentially jobless and with familial relations that are, to say the least, shaky, Keith at the close of the novel perhaps obtains the status of outsider that he had been searching for all along. In closing the novel this way, Phillips maneuvers away from the seemingly mandatory gesture of social conciliation that virtually defines the other novels discussed in this project. Franzen, Smith and Homes all portray characters that are cast out of defined (generally familial) social groups only to be reabsorbed; only Phillips depicts a character cast out only to be cast out again, this time by his own volition. This suggests an interesting reading of contemporary literary efforts: that authors of metamodern fiction in general tend to adopt the family as a ready-made frame of thematic reference largely for the sake of establishing the importance of that allusive commodity

that is a sense of history and lineage—of establishing an undeniable sense of presence from within the larger field of social meaning. Keith is perhaps Phillips' correlate to the contemporary author: ambitious, yet genteel; concerned with family and yet obsessed with infidelity; loyal to the struggle of the outsider, but equally so with the balance of his bank account and the location of his flat. Most especially, Keith, like contemporary authors, is grappling with the existential need to validate incompatible tendencies in terms of one another. For the characters involved, this results in a kind of unmistakable sense of nervousness. This manifests in Keith, as it does for Harry and Natalie, in a continuous compulsive gambit of amorous pursuit. Interestingly enough, as I've suggested in the previous chapters, it is precisely this compulsive sexuality that thematically reifies the logic of reproductive futurism and familial centrality (as with, for instance, the cooperative love triangle in *Freedom*). It is family that can ultimately be counted on, these novelists all suggest, and so it is family that these novels incorporate as a base of operations. It is the micro-level of familial relations where information is really passed on: where culture is really actualized and thus it is this level at which negotiations for entry into the macro-level social body can take place.

What seems to me extraordinary about this ending is that Keith makes this irreparable decision *after* a thorough disillusionment. That is, he declines the promise of entry into the social even after coming to understand the full extent to which he is already configured within it. His decision, then, must be read as an intentional exit: a conscious act of throwing his chips in a betting pile that he has already come to understand sits on the losing side. His wager is thus an impossible one. In other words, Keith, after witnessing what Walter and Katz witness—the re-formation of the political situation such that politics itself becomes a sidelined minor commodity—nonetheless in a stupendous act of ethical defiance turns in the hopeless direction

of the political and in so doing turns his back not only on his family but on the cultural logic of metamodernism itself. The key question, of course, is why? Part of the answer is certainly that Keith's situation has altered. What he discovers is what Natalie discovers: that he can't have it both ways, but where Natalie chooses to retain her lifestyle and embrace her children with the fullness of her being Keith with quiet determination makes a choice in the opposite direction. His trouble throughout the text is in trying to define a meaningful political identity from his position of comfort: an act symbolically represented in trying to write a book on the music of oppressed populations via the subject position of well-paid social work. One can't maintain the political status of an agent countermanding with one hand the ideological efficacy of the globalized systems of commerce that, with the other hand, one enjoys the benefits of. One would be resisting and supporting these constellations of power and capital at the same time. It is only now, possibly un-employed and not-so well off, that the terrain of meaningful politics is suddenly open to him—now when he is less sure than ever just what it is he has to lose.

However, Keith has something else working in his favor. Of all the protagonists surveyed in this project, he is a uniquely international figure (even though he's never left Europe). In this I mean to say that his perspective—his choice of political orientation—however fetishized nonetheless brings into view a crucial element of difference that particularizes our reading the of the previous comparatively domestic, nation-oriented novels. It is necessary, then, to ground my reading of this text in a framework of understanding which might allow for a fuller meaning to be ascribed to Keith's decision and what leads up to it. In this section I want to offer two critical byways in approaching *In the Falling Snow* that will help contextualize the developments which precede the text's seemingly out-of-nowhere close. Specifically, this section will address the tensions between internationalist identities and larger cultural institutions which play a role in

proliferating the meanings ascribed to them as analyzed by Aijaz Ahmad. Also, taking advantage

of Keith's own musings concerning the reverberations between the American and British black

experience, this section will draw on an understanding race as a mediating factor between

cosmopolitanism and domestic nationality developed by Robert Reid-Pharr. It is through these

analyses that I will show there is much sense to be made of Keith's decision: that, indeed,

through these approaches the political becomes re-visible. Perhaps it is only through a globally-

inflected lens that we can at the level of domestic cultural viewership re-imagine that which is

presumed to have been collapsed in the metamodern moment: the political.

In this project's third chapter it remained a constant (though not explicitly stated) theme

that much Americans *a priori* consider "American" as a functioning identity category as having

international component parts. Discourses of neoliberalism, globalization and "McWorld" apply:

their parameters are sufficiently well-understood for me to refrain from a general restatement of

what these terms entail. Rather, for my purposes, it's important to note that the street runs both

ways, so to speak. When Harry takes the children to Africa he finds, much to his delight, his own

social mores replicated and reflected back to him. In other words, when he leaves America to go

to Africa, he finds America again. A similar but inverse observation is made by Walter who

seems to perceive the hidden internationality (and its equally hidden ecological cost) in the items

that drive American consumptive behavior. Keith certainly is aware of this double-bind that is

the American commercial enterprise: America in its unique position as a central node on a wider

grid of capital flows has the privilege of being both constituted by and having a determinate

influence over the labor power and consumptive capacity (both materially and culturally) of most

populations external to it. America holds a looming cultural influence that strikes Keith as

something akin to the smothering whiteness of a snowy winter evening. The United States offers

a necessary ground for thinking through Britain's own domestic experiences (or so Keith

asserts), but this in turn threatens to obscure the importance of the British minority experience as

if it were second to or an imitation of the American minority experience.

What's fascinating about this extended musing is that it occurs on the tail end of a train of

thought wherein Keith is trying to tease out the structure of his book. It is as if this line of

reasoning which concerns his own presence and identity follows directly from his assumption of

black music as a form of intellectual property—as if directing his own attention to something he

himself had missed. What he immediately realizes *vis-à-vis* America-Britain's conceptual

relationship is immediately applicable to his identification with Afro- musical forms. What Keith

begins to understand here is part of a crucial thesis put forward by Aijaz Ahmad in his insightful

(and incisive) *In Theory* (1992): that internationally-inherited meanings are only ever transmitted

via processes of institutional and commercial refraction. For Ahmad, cultural transmission is

never conducted on a one to one basis—in order for cultural objects (ideas, languages, works of

art, novels, customs, etc.) in the contemporary neoliberal economic constellation to pass through

the international membrane into a different cultural context, they must traverse sets of circuitous

informational pathways in which those objects themselves become contextually reconfigured.

Thus, there is never (at the large-scale commercial level, anyhow) an unimpeded process of

cultural exchange, but rather processes of cultural production and mediation by various

intervening interests and institutions. This, of course, is where Keith gets trapped; his conception

of the Caribbean is second-hand. He has never been there and his father up to his dying moment

has nothing to say about it: his line of thinking regarding the importance of his own history, as I

suggested in a previous section, is indicative of a literary category—a category which Ahmad

and Huggan would suggest bears the highly visible markings of its own commercial production.

Ahmad furthermore suggests that acting within this framework has the potential to alter the framework itself; however he is less celebratory of this fact than other of his peers (notably Spivak and Said, whom he excoriates). As Marx famously argues in "The Eighteenth Brumaire": "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past" (595). Ahmad applauds the sentiment.

For Ahmad, cultural transmission entails the construction of markets and established institutions of cultural dispersion: in his famous analysis of contemporary Indian writers he describes the construction of a market on both ends of the process. He describes the creation of a metropolitan literary class in India and the cultivation of a market demand for these texts on the part of European and American consumers. He asserts that such developments have problematically established English as India's de facto national language. On this topic, Ahmad has something very insightful to say:

> One cannot reject English now, on the basis of its initially colonial insertion, anymore than anyone can boycott the railways for the same reason. There is reason to believe, in fact, that even the linguistic formation that was eventually shaped into Sanskrit came, in its own time, from elsewhere, as did, wave after wave, the ancestors of the vast majority of the people who now inhabit at least the Gangetic planes. History is not really open to correction through a return passage to an imaginary point centuries ago, before the colonial deformation set in, or before the insertion of Islam before that, or, earlier still, before the invasion of what are generally called the 'Aryan' tribes…English is simply one of India's own languages now, and what is at issue at present is not the possibility of its ejection but the mode of its assimilation into our social fabric, and the manner in which this language, like any other substantial structure of linguistic difference, is used in the process of class formation and social privilege, here and now (77).

Ahmad here in no uncertain terms disavows what Keith gives into: what we might call the nostalgic impulse. The draw of the Caribbean is its promise of meaning, heritage and resistance in Keith's mind, but for Ahmad such a project presupposes a naïve understanding of the

processes that actually shape historical progression. If Keith turns his attentions to a hypothetical

Caribbean experience to countermand the cultural dominance of an imposed English identity,

then he is merely trading one situation-specific conceptual formation for another. The political,

however, as I've insisted, refers genuinely to a world-level consciousness; the best strategic

option is what Hegel calls, in a term revivified by Jameson and Žižek, a concrete universal. This

reading suggests that it isn't ultimately identity and heritage that matter per se, but the means by

which these ideological objects get configured in broader structures of power. For Keith, his

identity as an immigrant-citizen is bounded up in this nostalgic longing for the Caribbean:

without this other pole—this *other* place he could feasibly return to and call home—there is no

formal grounds upon which to claim separation. The Caribbean is like his book: to call his

bluff—for him to actually go there—would likely be a disaster for his identity. As Ahmad

comments: "Immigration…has had its own contradictions: many have been propelled by need,

other motivated by ambition, yet others driven away by persecution; for some there is really no

longer a home to return to; in many cases need and ambition have become inextricably linked"

(86). Again, we immediately realize a crucial aspect of Keith's adoption of the Caribbean as a

figurative home ignores the very real fact that his father left there to travel to England for a

reason. Keith in effect fetishizes his father in the act of trying to discursively empower him: his

sincere, visceral longing for the Caribbean, put starkly in this light, makes us realize the extent to

which his fantasies ignore the very real conditions his father sought to escape. Ahmad's

suggestion of a theoretical alignment of need and ambition recalls the metamodern conceit of

political evacuation and its replacement by an unmediated stream of cultural capital. This, then,

is the value of the Caribbean in light of Ahmad's comments: for the professional salaried

managerial class, "exile, immigration and professional preference become synonymous and,

indeed, mutually indistinguishable" (86).

Keith, then, in his desire for a Caribbean alter-identity does not resist the homogenizing

power of the British identity: the Anglo-American cultural reach extends globally. Rather than an

attempted nostalgic re-appropriation, Ahmad suggests that the true terrain of struggle is over the

means by which one's own local cultural configurations are developed and deployed. To resist in

the terms Keith has selected risks self-conscription into the very ranks one is struggling against.

Speaking of the United States in particular, Ahmad describes the "historically unprecedented

capacity to absorb domestic challenges by incorporating into the margins of its own institutions

the more professionally inclined elements of the radical intelligentsia" (88-9). The applicability

of this statement to the life and profession of Keith Gordon hardly needs commenting. Ahmad is

not gun-shy on this point:

> The most radical phase of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Nationalist
> Movement in the 1960s had coincided, paradoxically enough, with the phase of
> the most dynamic growth and expansion of American capital, thanks to the long
> wave of the postwar boom, the expansion of the military industrial complex
> because of the Vietnam War, high rates of employment and spending, the still-
> existing US hegemony over its own capitalist partners as well as the world market
> generally (88)

Ahmad is propending a dialectical relationship between capital and its own opposition (think of

how vin Haven *absorbs* Walter only to reincorporate him). Though it is possible to contest

Ahmad's reasoning here (and certainly many have), the point he is trying to make is certainly

applicable to Keith: his adopted mode of resistance has the effect of reifying his own position

back into the parameters he seeks to escape. If politics for Ahmad is located in the present

moment, then perhaps it is only after Keith's nostalgia is deflated by his father that he finds

himself genuinely embedded in the here and now. It is, in other words, at the moment when he

feels most politically defeated that he is able to locate the politics which have hitherto evaded him. It is only through deferral—by saying and doing nothing—that the gears come to a halt.

Ahmad's reasoning offers a great deal in explaining just how Keith's adopted ideology fails—as an orthodox Marxist Ahmad, if directly commenting on *In the Falling Snow*, would surely recognize the thwarted attempt at universality in its main character's outlook. However, my own reading posits that in the closing passage of the novel Keith quite possibly locates a byway to an authentic politics. But how does this happen? The close of *In the Falling Snow* radically shifts away from the logic of the other texts discussed, each of which feature protagonists who are stuck in the middle so to speak. It isn't merely by virtue of his interstitial subject-position, in other words. Keith possesses something different: his racialized body. As Robert Reid-Pharr argues that "only the black subject might be recognized as the universal subject…her universalism is itself always channeled through the reality of her particularity, the fact of blackness" (44). In his multi-faceted study *Black Gay Man* (2001), he offers the archetypal figure of the cosmopolitan Afrocentric mulatto in order to read cosmopolitanism itself as historically grounded in a form of racial and cultural interstitial identity: "To put the matter bluntly, the specter who hides just below the surface of much of the discourse of Western intellectualism (German, American or otherwise) is indeed the mulatto" (49). For Reid-Pharr, it is important to "understand blackness not as a thing carried about in the bodies of persons, but instead as a rather complex set of social and discursive processes" (78). Race isn't merely a marker of identity as even Keith seems to presuppose, but a key component (and in the case of blackness, the lynchpin) of a larger cultural system of semiotic recognition—a system Reid-Pharr tellingly anchors nowhere else but in the (black) family:

> The black in America has the maddening tendency to reveal in her eyes, skin,

> hair, in her body a history of contact and conquest, of slavery and rebellion, in which the African is certainly central, bit never alone…The work of the black family is precisely to enable the maintenance of a coherent structure of American racialism. Blacks, browns, yellows, reds and whites are given in black families access to a white body, the original body stolen from Africa, the innocent body, the body imagined as the site of revolution (66).

For Reid-Pharr at least, blackness serves as an inflective device: blackness, not whiteness, serves as the backdrop against which other racial identities become interpellated into coherence. Whiteness itself, he insists, becomes legible only when read against blackness. Thus the black other, necessarily disavowed in the ideological construction of a white-privileging historical narrative, comes to serve as its unspoken foundation.

Blackness is thus positioned in a unique way to access the universality, but not merely by virtue of blackness as an existential orientation (and ontological reality). Rather, such a possibility is made apparent in the act of realizing that one's own present situation, though ostensibly uprooted, nonetheless carries immanent the very cultural inheritance thought to be lost. Reid-Pharr lays this out in a brief discussion of the "still widely held notion that black intellectual movements such as the Harlem Renaissance represent a return to a black and African originality that somehow has been lost by earlier generations of Black Americans. Specifically, it insists that the expression of black identity, even putatively Afrocentric expression, was always a cosmopolitan (that is to say, interracial, transnational) affair" (46-7). Just as Ahmad suggests regarding the use of English as the formal "literary language" of India, there is no going back—changes in a domestic setting cannot be effectively untangled: one simply has to move forward. The key for the black subject, Reid-Pharr seems to suggest, lies in the capacity to locate within the present American situation the very sense of self one hitherto has assumed to have been robbed of. If blackness is the ultimate determining agent, it can't be effaced; far from erasing black history, American history in this regard is written entirely within it. American history *is*

black history. He understands that attempts to reclaim a lost cultural object initiate a mythical hunt—it's all so much grasping at straws.

This does not, however, foreclose possibilities, but opens them: Reid-Pharr is not suggesting that African Americans have no genuine heritage, but rather that there is much heritage to be found embedded with the American historical situation. This is what opens up the potential for universality: realizing that what one has been searching for while glancing in the distance has been right out in front all along. For Reid-Pharr, empowerment is activated in locating the means by which one's historical presence is and has been central to the continued progression of the larger historical enterprise. This is a crucial element for understanding Keith's position at the close of the novel: in looking to the Caribbean he has neglected to understand that his heritage extends to his own current home. Caribbean immigrants are configured within British history, but so too is Britain configured in the history of Caribbean immigrants. What Keith comes to understand is far from an obstacle to realizing his own veiled history, British history is also his own. What this means is that Keith's seeming anti-position can be recognized not as a foothold in nowhere, but as the grounds of everywhere. Though not explicitly of mixed race, Keith nonetheless inhabits the coordinates of the mulatto (in Reid-Pharr's deployment) in his cultural hybridity. Also, however, in his family: he has a son with a white Englishwoman and so "challenges possession of the center—the very metropolis itself" (72). The whiteness of the snow which covers his father's tracks may be all-embracing, but it is also true that from within the blanket of white one becomes an agent that can effectively determine it.

The Way We Write Now

Keith's final deferral from familial (and thus by extension social) inclusion is, in my estimation, a highly meaningful act. Though Phillips doesn't quite re-write the contemporary novel, the context this project has established allows me to read this disavowal in a particular way. *In the Falling Snow* offers a unique glimpse at a potential alternative path for the novel in the present moment. This final section explores the possibility that perhaps togetherness and familial intimacy are not the only possible bedrock on which to construct serious, culturally-relevant fiction in the current moment. Perhaps, *In the Falling Snow* seems to suggest, there are other ways to get at "the way we live now." My suggestion is that the contemporary novel with literary aspirations faces a specific insecurity. If novelists, as Franzen suggests, are at work attempting to discern "the way we live now," how does one write great fiction in and for an era so quotidian, so relentlessly banal (in terms of day-to-day experience) that history for the ground-level observer seems to have ceased motion? Does one turn literary attentions to the various human struggles outside of the American psyche? Could such an endeavor be "American" (or, for that matter, British) literature—would such a project engage the question of "the way we live now"? It would certainly complicate the question of what is meant by "we," but of course *In the Falling Snow* is ultimately dedicated to assaulting the surety of such boundaries.

The anxiety that this speaks to, and that the authors are trying to work against, is the unnerving possibility that in the United States the contemporary moment may not be worth depicting at all. One strange quality of the fiction in the present moment has been the lapse of technical innovation, as if suggesting the social processes from which the novel emerges entails yet more of the same. Changing various elements and literary modalities has been a method European and American writers and artists have used for centuries to mark boundaries and signify perceived shifts in their contemporaries' collective ethos. It is telling today that, as critics

have remarked, novelists with literary aspirations who most strive to encapsulate some critical

features of the present American existential moment continuously produce texts in a plainly

realist tradition, or else fashionably hearken back to specific literary modes. If there is anything

like a technical innovation in contemporary social fiction it is the self-conscious dismissal of

technical innovation as such. Even Smith, who is deeply concerned with ostensibly non-

standardized textual presentation, unabashedly constructs her texts from already-stylized modes

of composition. As was suggested in the second chapter, each of her novels represents a self-

conscious attempt to recreate an already-existent (and already past) mode of narrative

presentation.

Obviously, textual innovations respond to their time in many varying ways, but how does

one depict directly an era obsessed with nostalgia?—a hyper-postmodern era which is suddenly

nostalgic for the latter decades of the twentieth century: that is, nostalgia for nostalgic times?

How does one depict an era that fails in its cultural procedures to depict itself? As I argued

earlier, each of these novels adopt alternate historical frames as if the present moment is not a

sufficient engine to propel the vehicle of literary creation. How, for instance, does literary

language constitute itself in terms of quotidian speech acts? Franzen has continually suggested

that social media, and technology more generally, have hollowed out human interactions. While I

dispute this claim in such a generalized form, it is worth pointing out that these technologies

have deeply influenced the way a generation (pushing two generations, in fact) has learned to

express itself. The cynicism of contemporary fiction may involve a hesitance to craft fiction that

incorporates tech-mediated modes of communication that generally, due to the haste of their

execution, preclude the cadence, explication and depth of meaningful human communication. If

human interaction in the present moment (and the affairs that characterize human existence, now

often tellingly bundled in youth-speak with the singular term "drama"—as if to say tech-mediated communication and social media have threatened to usurp the place once held in human affairs by art) has been so mediated and if a generation of young people have learned to articulate their concerns, feelings, emotions, uncertainties, etc. in so highly regulated a domain, where does there emerge the possibility for compelling representation in fiction?

There is no easy answer for this question. Many contemporary writers have attempted to simply absorb the formal qualities of communication in the modern moment, though this seems to amount to a process of mimetic replication rather than aesthetic re-presentation. Smith, for instance, attempts this; there is in *NW* an entire section of dialogue between Leah and Natalie that is carried out via AOL's Instant Messenger service: the text literally displays a series of lines alternating normal and bold face to indicate an exchange of dialogue. Though the boldface screen names are omitted, for anyone who's ever used the service the format of the passage is unmistakable. It's a novel innovation, but also a novelty and like most novelties one that is there largely for the sake of being looked at. The dynamics of the medium itself would seem to structurally orient the conversation to the quotidian—to the surface level:

> Hello hanwell DARLING. What brings you to the internets this fine
> afternopn
> noon
> **woman next to me picking nose really getting in there**
> **tried to call you but no answer**
> delighteful
> cant take private calls in pupilf room what's up
> …
> l**ady jesus I am getting married**
> …
> Does this mesn
> Mean procreation??
> **FUCK OFF WOMAN**
> ☺
> **FUCK OFF WITH YOUR SMILEY FACE** (285-6).

This passage represents the deadlock for contemporary fiction in its starkest form. Here one finds "the way we live now" authentically transcribed into a literary format and, quite unfortunately, falling flat. But if the formal reproduction of modern speech fails aesthetically, is bad craftsmanship or an inherent anti-aesthetic valence attached to contemporary speech as such to blame? The novelty of presenting tech-mediated dialogue directly would seem to have the effect of reducing the exchange to a series of humorous jabs, as if the means by which the conversation is compressed to meet the medium's requirements entails a thematic evacuation wherein the information is made trivial. While structuring a dialogue thusly enhances *NW*'s status as a multi-modal text, the dialogue itself falls somewhat short of compelling; the unfortunate fact is that it is more interesting to take note of the fact that Smith has introduced such a dialogue than to actually read it. All the more significant is the nature of the information being shared. Leah is announcing to her lifelong friend that she is getting married: all sorts of anxieties about age, love, parents, etc. come into view, but the technology-enforced superficiality of the conversation removes any existential heft from these topics. It isn't as though these characters actually take the matter lightly; Leah seemed to her friend the perennial youth. This announcement of marriage must strike Natalie as a monumental surprise. Leah has her doubts, her fears—she ends the novel slumped in her back yard hammock in a sort of immovable anxious-boredom—a troubling mix of despondency and exasperation at the state of her life. And yet this exchange would seem to filter out this existential heft: it's all the stuff of jokes. The conversational path to a truly human exchange—that is to say, a revealing dialogue that offers some insight to the various intimate complexities these characters share—suffers a short circuit. The momentum and weight of the existential matters this exchange puts on the table: issues of parental obeisance and fidelity to tradition (which in turn opens questions of one's own status in time and history); of

knowing whether one is emotionally tied to or just sexually attracted to another person; whether one wants at all to reproduce—they all remain conversational potentialities that are never actualized. As Franzen has argued vociferously and publicly, these sorts of tech-mediated forms of information exchange necessarily, by their very formal logic, allow for a bare-bones communiqué: a model that allows for users to give in to a strong (contemporary or otherwise) impulse to avoid self-engagement. Anything of any real existential seriousness remains extraneous. No wonder Harry Silver is so keen on the internet.

The question modern fiction is struggling to address is how this development in human communication is to be discussed. How does one get at the depth and complexities of human feeling as well as the deep-seeded anxieties of the present moment utilizing the contemporaneous nuances of modern communication? I suggested in the introduction that if irony was the prime mechanism of aesthetic recognition during the height of postmodernism then it was because irony and cynicism betray a deeper seriousness which has been blunted or carried out to the point of malfunction. Irony, after all, is what exists between aesthetic modes: it is what one gets when one aesthetic mode plays itself out to a logical endpoint, much the way a tacky Halloween costume can conjure even the fiercest of cinematic monsters in a presentation that is impotently comic. The metamodern aesthetic suggests that there is no way out of this deadlock—that artistically, culture today must content itself with a self-conscious dwelling on the mundane. However, there is a counterpoint to be made: it may not be the case that tech-mediated forms of communication inherently trivialize the information transmitted. Social media serves as a platform for conversation—but conversation as a compulsive exchange of information. As creative writing teachers have expounded for generations, so much of literary power is realized in what is *not* said. Certainly, so much in the way of confession, deep avowal, personal

revelation, etc. requires a conversational dynamic, but in actuality realizes a soliloquy function. This, of course, is the case when Keith goes to see his father for the last time. His father's critically celebrated soliloquy is technically a conversation. Part of what failed experiments like the above passage from *NW* suggest is that literary engagement with the modern moment needs to discern more carefully which forums of speech matter the most. Transcribing a supposed dialogue from a social media account into a literary text, then, represents a similar theoretical shortcut as Natalie's sudden unqualified embrace of motherhood or Harry's multitude of social connections: it is meant to function via the sheer fact of its very being there and nothing more. Smith's experiment with such dialogue is meant to reassure the reading public that social life and literature are co-operating in the normal way, the way great literature and public space are propounded to co-operate. It's as if to assure us all that the large-scale system of literary production is alive and well; there is little need for fret because the meaning-bestowing power of literature continues on untroubled, even if one has to resort to aesthetically fruitless tactics to keep the thing moving.

What is fascinating about *In the Falling Snow* is that this novel, clumsy as it may be in terms of narrative development, nonetheless conceptually opens up a different possibility for contemporary literary fiction. After all, its close depicts Keith's internal dialogue as the ultimate arbitrator of communication. So much of the novel's dialogue, wooden and awkward in its cultural references, nonetheless mirrors strangely the status of human communication via media technology. So many of his conversations with Annabelle and Laurie, for instance, end with the rejoinder that the conversation will be settled another time. If anything of significance does transpire, its importance is generally not acknowledged (at least not by Keith). When he breaks off his relation with Yvette, she is angry and in disbelief—she clearly wants a discussion. Keith,

however, quite cavalierly dons his hat and coat and remarks coolly: "'Listen, let's just leave it. We can talk about it later, okay?'" (37). This is in stark contrast to his silent willfulness at the end of the novel. I suggested earlier that the text's closing before he has the chance to speak his mind to Annabelle makes the ending more potent because it necessitates a sense of unknowability. Indeed, what makes Keith's internal meandering at the very close of the novel so effective is precisely that *he remains silent*. Locked in his internal voice, he starts to discover what he really thinks about his family—"all these people"—and his former home: "this small terraced house…" In other words, cut off from the stream of culturally-mediated promises about his supposed history the novel begins to offer a compelling dialogue. His world is suddenly enstranged to him, though without *NW*'s modernist poetic flourishes; suddenly he seems to be the foreigner he always wanted to be. Though he couldn't finish a book earlier in the novel, at this point I'd hazard to guess he's capable of a sustained statement if he chose to make one. This maneuver away from the family, in other words, thematically necessitates a formal narrative shift: a move toward internal speech. Up until this point, Keith's thoughts have read much the same way his literal speech has. At the end of the novel, Phillips gets at the complexities of thought and human experience that sit safely behind the polite, formalized chatter of social media (and the real life conversation that structures itself in much the same vein.) This is perhaps something literary critics can hope for: not more portrayals of instant messaging, but the thoughts of the characters as they are shaped by (and indeed trapped within) such language exchanges.

If the standard maneuver of the social novel is to evade the encroaching ethos of the emerging tech-driven youth generation (and its politically-effacing embrace of the local), engaging it only on the safe mutual ground of family, then Phillips suggests an alternate strategy

for fiction attempting to come to terms with the contemporary moment. If novelists today have established a fashion for gesturing toward the family as the symbolic center of sociality, then perhaps Phillips, wittingly or not, offers an allegory of the travails of writing fiction under such conditions. Perhaps then Keith demonstrates the ostensible literary virtue of self-isolation; what Keith learns at the end of the novel is, to reference a collection of essays by Franzen, how to be alone. If each of these social novels is engaged in the project of figuring out "the way we live" today, Keith by the end of the novel is posing another question: *why* do we live today? Admittedly, *In the Falling Snow* doesn't make a great deal of headway. Keith, after all, is hardly a character that the reader understands intimately by the end of the novel, but then this denial of the identificatory effect may ultimately be purposive. Perhaps Phillips is consciously denying us something. None of the dialogue in the novel reproduces the format of social media, though much of it might as well have—much of the conversation in the novel has the depth of a Hallmark greeting card. In every literary sense the novel is far from a success: however, in this one crucial respect, Keith's self-imposed isolation, the novel opens up a new possibility. Perhaps the contemporary novel in English could stand to explore the thematics of alone-ness—the singularity of experience that sits counter-posed to the "social" of social media. Perhaps reflecting the tone and cadence of quotidian conversational exchanges isn't the immediate task of literary representation. It would have been far more interesting for *NW* to convey Leah's thoughts in the process of their expression, scattered as they may be, about her momentous life change.

Perhaps the effort to ground oneself conceptually in an idealized past has the effect of fetishizing the social bond itself, much like Keith's compulsive need for company, sexual or otherwise, to truly feel lonely (we can say much the same for Richard Katz and Harry Silver). So

much of the trajectory assumed by the American novel, from *Moby-Dick* to *Gravity's Rainbow*, has involved the efforts of unscrupulous individuals (and their maddening thought patterns) to sort through the miasmas of worldly information they find themselves in. Like the left in the wake of the impenetrable rhetoric surrounding the financial crisis, the complexity, incomprehensibility and sheer severity of world events today seems to have helped foster a shift in consideration toward internal social concerns. The contemporary social novel and its concern with "the way we live now" act like a stabilizing block, slowing down the light speed processes of the contemporary world so that readers might mimetically see their own world reflected back and thereby recognize it. This is certainly a possible function for the novel in this present moment, but in the case of *NW*'s social media exchange aesthetics is reduced to a secondary concern. In this, then, the contemporary novel risks adopting the parameters of a genre like the biography, which is nice to read when written with aesthetics in mind, though it's ultimately beside the point. Franzen in particular has rebuffed both the avant-garde-ist literary mode of high postmodernism as well as the frivolous triviality of social media, curiously, as though they were somehow linked. While, in some capacity I find myself sympathetic to Franzen's distrust of social media (particularly Twitter), I nonetheless concede that only services specializing in shorts bursts of information are best suited for addressing in real-time the immense complexity of the world-system. Franzen's retreat from this fact has seen him produce essentially polite social novels that depict but nonetheless fail to respond to (that is, present rather than re-present) "the way we live now" save to indicate that it's all a damn shame. This, of course, is no response at all, but a retreat. The terribly ironic fact that Franzen doesn't see is that literary writers today are attempting to perform the very tasks tech-mediated communicative platforms with their admittedly impoverished versions of communication might actually be better suited for. What,

after all, is more suited to depicting the world as we live in it than streams and feeds of constant updates in real time? For my own part, the development of increasingly complex narratives of interior consciousness offers the unique capacity to both encompass complexity and foster character development.

I argued earlier that Keith's final thoughts perhaps orient him to the political: that fleeting category of human orientation obfuscated in the previous novels. Franzen, Smith and Homes configure their texts in terms of a logic of social conciliation, though I might re-term such logical progression a teleology of social complacency; one of the core issues this project has sought to elucidate is the troubling fact that social complacency as a novelistic enterprise does not make for an aesthetically transcendent experience. In closing it is worth posing the question of whether in this most unusual contemporary context a renewed aesthetics might not be found in the political itself. In the final moments of *In the Falling Snow*, Keith falls silent; the novel doesn't extend to his anticipated exchange with Annabelle. This is because there can be no exchange—at least not as the novel has hitherto offered them. I suggested earlier that Keith's dialogue is generally constituted by annoyed snippets, clichés and sentiments fit for sound-bites: his dialogue, in other words, is entirely compatible with the social media formats of communication that Leah and Natalie utilize, and Franzen excoriates. Keith's retreat into internality is perhaps constructive: if what he encounters at the close of the novel is the political, then it is the political which must be explored as the basis for an alternative aesthetics.

This may seem an amusing suggestion, however as this project has explored, politics as a world-level concern has become a conceptually marginalized category. As I have argued, an orientation toward a politics of the local is, *ipso facto*, no politics at all but a form of deployed cultural capital (however well-intentioned). My conception of the metamodern is as an enabling

(or perhaps resultant) cultural formation wherein the processes associated with postmodernism are intensified in a curious way such that the values ascribed to postmodern culture are re-arranged as if to signify a general, collective turn away from it. However, my analysis has strived throughout this project to show that metamodernism in large part presupposes the very postmodern condition it simultaneously disavows. This in part reflects wider societal developments and anxieties about art and poetics as they have developed under the postmodern banner. The return to what is effectively social realism (even in ostensibly experimental texts) reflects a need to get a grip on an increasingly fast, slippery age. This, however, entails crafting art that follows the contours of cultural attitudes emergent from such an age: an age which is, following the self-folding logic of metamodernism, contradictory. The result is an emphasis on sociality that never quite functions with real coherence (with my analysis of *May We Be Forgiven* I rest my case). The earlier-discussed dialogue between Natalie and Leah that takes place over the internet fails precisely because the structure and format of the conversation doesn't allow for anything transcendent—anything outside of that immediate context—to emerge. It stands to reason then that what is excluded from the centrality of the present cultural context—the political—could potentially serve this function. Consider what the political does for Keith: at the end of the novel he becomes quiet and meaningfully troubled—both he and the novel, in other words, become *interesting*. The novel becomes suddenly freighted; Keith as a character is no longer self-enclosed but becomes a figure that poses qualities we can identify with and yet simultaneously seems to bear a superhuman weight. He becomes a figure reflective, in other words, of the universality. Perhaps the political, in its moment at the sidelines, may be more necessary than ever to help us rethink the grounds of such humanistic enterprises. Certainly, stranger things have happened.

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