

*ATLANTIS**Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*

37.1 (June 2015): 11-29

ISSN 0210-6124

Eastern and Western Promises in Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*

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This essay examines Jonathan Franzen's novel *Freedom* (2010) and explores the symbolic way in which this novel uses the urban and regional spaces/places of the United States. Franzen's use of space/place is related to Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), as well as to Franzen's previous novels, his well-known *Harper's* essay (1996), and other writings like "A Rooting Interest" (2012) or his memoir *The Discomfort Zone* (2007), where he scrutinizes his own position as a writer and his attitude towards nature. Franzen's environmental concerns in the novel are also considered from the perspective of ecocriticism. The conclusion is that following Fitzgerald's example, Franzen uses the East and West (and the urban locales of the inner city and the suburbs) as a backdrop to explore not only the meanings and interpretations of the word *freedom* (as has been repeatedly pointed out) but also the hopes and aspirations shared by the people of his country, the different dimensions and contradictions of the amalgam of promises and myths known as the American Dream.

Keywords: Jonathan Franzen; *Freedom*; American Dream; space; place; F. Scott Fitzgerald; *The Great Gatsby*

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Promesas del Este y del Oeste en *Freedom*, de Jonathan Franzen

Este artículo analiza la última novela de Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom* (2010), y explora el modo simbólico en que esta novela usa los espacios regionales y urbanos de los Estados Unidos. Este uso de espacios y lugares se relaciona con *The Great Gatsby* (1925), de Francis Scott Fitzgerald, así como con las novelas anteriores de Franzen, su ensayo "Perchance to Dream" —conocido como el "Harper's essay" (1996)— y otros textos como "A Rooting Interest" (2012) y *The Discomfort Zone* (2007) donde Franzen examina su propia posición como escritor y su actitud hacia la naturaleza. Las preocupaciones medioambientales de Franzen en esta novela se estudian también desde la perspectiva de la ecocrítica. La conclusión es que, inspirado por el ejemplo de Fitzgerald, Franzen usa el Este y el Oeste de los Estados Unidos

(así como los espacios urbanos del centro de las ciudades y las zonas residenciales) como telón de fondo desde el que explorar no sólo los significados e interpretaciones de la palabra *libertad* (como han señalado diversos críticos), sino también las esperanzas y aspiraciones compartidas por los habitantes de su país, las diversas dimensiones y contradicciones de esa amalgama de promesas y mitos conocida como el sueño americano.

Palabras clave: Jonathan Franzen; *Freedom*; Sueño americano; espacio; F. Scott Fitzgerald; *El Gran Gatsby*

I. INTRODUCTION

Jonathan Franzen's position, both in the American canon and among the general public, was established with the publication of *The Corrections* (2001) and consolidated with *Freedom* (2010): one only needs to remember his National Book Award for the former and his photo on the cover of *Time Magazine* (Grossman 2010) below the title "Great American Novelist" after the publication of the latter. His position within the canon in relation to other writers, however, is still debatable. In a recent essay in *The New Yorker* titled "A Rooting Interest" (2012), Franzen describes the existence of at least four "genealogies of American fiction: ... Henry James and the modernists, Mark Twain and the vernacularists, Herman Melville and the postmoderns," and then highlights that "there is a less noticed line connecting William Dean Howells to F. Scott Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis and thence to Jay McInerney and Jane Smiley, and that [Edith] Wharton is the vital link in it" (2012, 60). The question might be, then, to which of these traditions Franzen belongs, particularly if one contrasts *The Corrections* and *Freedom* (hailed as representative of a turn towards social realism in recent American literature) with the postmodern experimentation of Franzen's first two novels: *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988) and *Strong Motion* (1992).

Franzen himself has written about his close relation to Don DeLillo and David Foster Wallace (2010b, 12), and this certainly seems evident, particularly if one thinks of his first two novels. In fact, Stephen J. Burn has claimed (in the only book-length study of Franzen's works to date) that not only *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion*, but also the more "conservative" *The Corrections*, should be considered as post-post-modernist, that is, a response to post-modernism very similar to that of books by David Foster Wallace and Richard Powers (Burn 2008). However, it is my contention that Franzen's novel, *Freedom*, belongs to the 'less noticed line' to which Wharton and Fitzgerald also belong, and that Fitzgerald's influence on *Freedom* is crucial to understand Franzen's symbolic use of the American East and West. This essay examines *Freedom*, then, in connection with F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), a novel that Franzen admits to reading again every year or two, and that he feels "was the miracle of American Literature: In 50,000 words, he tells you the central fable of America ... and yet you feel like you are eating whipped cream" (Franzen 2010c).

I am not the first to establish this genealogical relationship between Franzen and Fitzgerald, since Ty Hawkins has already connected *The Corrections* to *The Great Gatsby* in his essay about the American Dream in these two novels, as well as in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* (2007). According to Hawkins, these three works "all deal with the manner in which the advertised Dream debases the American spirit by entrenching the hegemony of materialism and thereby limiting the potential establishment of communal spaces that escape commercialization" (2007, 50-51). *The Corrections*, then, according to Hawkins, manages to bring up to date Fitzgerald's critique of the 'advertised' version of the American Dream through Alfred and Chip's relationship

and by positing “a combined awareness of one’s entrapment in a materialistic culture and dedication to the creation of *souled space*” (Hawkins 2007, 59; my italics).¹

This idea of ‘souled space’ seems to be particularly relevant for our purposes. As many contemporary thinkers have pointed out, questions of space and place are fundamental to our very existence, delimiting the Self from the Other, whether within the urban sprawl of the modern metropolis or within the postcolonial phenomenon of globalization. Hawkins’ remarks could be related to philosopher Yi-Fu Tuan’s concept of place as “humanized space”:

Space is a common symbol of freedom in the Western world. Space lies open; it suggests the future and invites action. On the negative side, space and freedom are a threat ... Open space has no trodden paths and signposts. It has no fixed pattern of established human meaning; it is like a blank sheet on which meaning may be imposed. Enclosed and humanized space is place. Compared to space, place is a calm center of established values. Human beings require both space and place. Human lives are a dialectical movement between shelter and venture, attachment and freedom. In open space, one can become intensely aware of place; and in the solitude of a sheltered place the vastness of space beyond acquires a haunting presence. A healthy being welcomes constraint and freedom, the boundedness of place and the exposure of space. (1977, 54)

Of course, the relationship between place and space is a very complex one, and many geographers and philosophers (from Michel De Certeau and David Harvey to Edward Casey, Edward W. Soja and Doreen Massey) have fruitfully developed a very interesting debate on the matter over the last few decades, particularly as to how these concepts relate to globalization, immigration, and gender.

Doreen Massey, for example, has suggested that it is both space and time that come together in place, and that, therefore, a particular place not only brings together local and global influences, multiple cultures and identities, but it also contains historical influences which shape its present and future (Massey 1955, 53-54). Political geographer John Agnew has summarized the many different approaches to space and place, and outlined three fundamental dimensions of place: first of all, it is a *location* or a site in space “where an activity or object is located and which relates to other sites or locations because of interaction, movement and diffusion between them”; second, it can be a series of *locales* “where everyday-life activities take place ... the where of social life and environmental transformation”; and, thirdly, place is related to the idea of *sense of place* or “identification with a place as a unique community, landscape, and moral order” (2011, 23-24). And finally, Lawrence Buell, from the perspective of ecocriticism,

¹ Hawkins corrects his analysis of *The Corrections* in his more recent essay, “Assessing the Promise of Jonathan Franzen’s First Three Novels: A Rejection of ‘Refuge’” (2010). In this essay, he says that he “underestimated the risk” that Franzen runs in this novel (2010, 63). Franzen risks undermining the power of the community of readers that he vowed to preserve in “Perchance to Dream” by his lack of commitment to “the effectuation of social change by way of the empathetic identification fiction engenders” (63).

has also stressed the human dimension of place, defining it as “humanly meaningful space through personal attachment, social relations, and physiographic distinctiveness. Placeness, then is co-constituted environmentally, socially and phenomenologically through acts of perception” (2005, 145).

Following this conception of place as ‘souled’ or ‘humanized’ space, I will be looking at the East and the West of the United States in *The Great Gatsby* and *Freedom* as ‘humanly meaningful’ places which have also become symbols, representations of ideas, or as Edwin Fussell said about the American West “expressive emblems for the invention and development of a new national civilization” (1965, 13). We must acknowledge that the American West in particular is obviously not only a place, but “an extremely powerful idea, one that has evolved over several centuries in the imaginations of countless people both in the US and abroad ... an idea that shimmers with abstractions such as frontier, opportunity, honor, individualism, and justice,” as Nicolas S. Witschi has noted (2011, 4). As we will see in the following sections, both Fitzgerald and Franzen have used Eastern and Western places not just as simple settings, but as symbols with powerful cultural and political implications.

2. EAST AND WEST IN *THE GREAT GATSBY*

At the end of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway realizes that

I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all—Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life. (Fitzgerald [1925] 1984, 183)

Edwin Fussell highlighted the symbolic meaning of this apparently casual sentence: “I am inclined to think Fitzgerald knew what he was about when he called *The Great Gatsby* ‘a story of the West’. Traditionally in American writing ‘the West’ means both the Western part of the United States and the New World, and especially the first as synecdoche of the other” (Fussell 1952, 292). Though the West has typically been seen as a land of promise and possibility, as the symbol of American ideals, Tom and Daisy travel East instead, representing a betrayal of the democratic ideals associated with their country by perpetuating a rigid class structure that excludes newcomers like Gatsby. The East in *The Great Gatsby* becomes, then, a symbol of the corruption of American values, a place that attracts people from the West because of its glamour and sophistication, but that has “a quality of distortion” (Fitzgerald [1925] 1984, 183). Since it is a place where material gain is the only thing that matters, people like Tom, Daisy and Jordan become corrupted, selfish and “careless” (186). As Robert Ornstein said, “the lure of the East represents a profound displacement of the American [D]ream, a turning back upon itself of the historic pilgrimage towards the frontier which had, in fact, created and sustained that dream” (Orstein 1956, 139).

In contrast, the West represents the moral roots to which Nick returns in the end, summarized by the advice his father gives him at the beginning of the novel: “Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone ... just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had” (Fitzgerald [1925] 1984, 7). But the West is also, and fundamentally, associated with Gatsby’s dream, which Fitzgerald equates with the American Dream of the first settlers, through the identification between the “green light at the end of Daisy’s dock” (188) and the “green breast of the new world” (187) which the first settlers would see on their journey westward towards their desired destination:

I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. (Fitzgerald [1925] 1984, 187-188)

Fitzgerald reinforces these associations with the location of his characters’ houses in Long Island: Gatsby and Nick (who represent the real values of the West) live in *West Egg* (Great Neck in reality), whereas Tom and Daisy (the careless Westerners corrupted by the East) live in *East Egg* (Manhasset Neck).

Like Tom, Daisy, Nick, and Gatsby, the characters in *Freedom* also keep moving between the East and the (Mid)West. Patty goes West to St. Paul (like Nick Carraway at the end of *The Great Gatsby*) to escape from the corrupted East (her family of spoilt bohemians) in search of her moral center, which she finds in the shape of Walter Berglund, a Midwesterner that represents the innocence and ethics she was looking for. Patty ends up marrying Walter and having two children with him, Jessica and Joey. Later on, when Walter, Joey and Patty travel East, the result is disappointing; for them, once again, ‘the lure of the East’ represents a ‘displacement of the American [D]ream’ which brings nothing but moral and personal failure.

In fact, on the first page of the novel, Patty and Walter Berglund are portrayed as “the young pioneers of Ramsey Hill” (precisely, and significantly, the area of St. Paul where Fitzgerald was born) who start the process of gentrification of the “old heart of St. Paul [which] had fallen on hard times three decades earlier” (Franzen 2010a, 3). Like Walter’s Scandinavian ancestors they “kill themselves for ten years” to improve their neighborhood, to “relearn certain life skills that [their] own parents had fled to the suburbs specifically to unlearn” (4).

3. FRANZEN AND THE URBAN MIDWEST

Walter and Patty's efforts to gentrify and reclaim the inner city can be easily interpreted as a metaphor for the recuperation of the true American values represented by the pioneers, and lost by a generation of suburbanites, but they should also be related to another metaphor used by Franzen in his essay "Perchance to Dream: In the Ages of Images, a Reason to Write Novels" (1996), usually referred to as "the *Harper's* essay" and republished in 2002 as "Why Bother?" In this piece Franzen compares "the institution of writing and reading serious novels" to "a grand old Middle American city" (1996, 39). A city which has seen the flight of "white male" writers to the "clonal suburbs of mass entertainment," while the "depressed literary inner city" remains home to "black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, and women's communities, which have moved into the structures left behind by the departing straight white male" (1996, 39). Patty and Walter Berglund's efforts to gentrify the inner city are probably then not very different from Franzen's own attempts to recover the space of serious literature previously abandoned by white male writers.

In this essay Franzen also articulates some interesting ideas about the role of literature in general and, more specifically, about the role of place and space in literature. First of all, in an "[a]ge of [i]mages" and a society where writing novels has become "a subsidiary of Hollywood," (1996, 38) he finds his "[r]eason to [w]rite [n]ovels" in the use of a "tragic perspective" that he calls "tragic realism": "any fiction that raises more questions than it answers: anything in which conflict doesn't resolve into cant" (53). Later on, he stresses the importance of regionalism and quotes Flannery O'Connor when she insisted that "the best American fiction has always been regional" (O'Connor 1969, 58). Finally, at the end of the essay, he frees himself from his obligation to "Address the Culture and Bring News to the Mainstream" (Franzen's own capitals), and decides to "ignore the bigger social picture" and "take refuge" in "the things closest to me, to lose myself in the characters and *locales* I loved" (Franzen 1996, 54, my italics). Accordingly, after *Strong Motion* (set in the East), Franzen corrects his literary course (first with *The Corrections* and later with *Freedom*) in such a way that his next two novels share not only a more realistic perspective and solid characters (as was repeatedly pointed out by critics and reviewers), but also their Midwest setting: St. Louis (slightly disguised as St. Jude) in *The Corrections*, and St. Paul in *Freedom*. Of course, the Midwest has traditionally been considered the "American heartland" (Poole 2008, 265), or "the real body of America," in Sherwood Anderson's words (1969, 241-242), but, at the same time, it has been used by writers as a "backdrop for depicting the tragic version of contemporary American life" (Poole 2008, 263). Ralph J. Poole describes the myth of the Midwest as the American heartland like this:

This myth envisions a territory consisting of families, who for generations have owned their farms, as well as of small towns whose inhabitants are provincial, ingenious, and generally

optimistically inclined and function as the moral and social mediators between the otherwise culturally much more diversified regions in the U.S. (2008, 265)

But then Poole asks the question “What is wrong with St. Louis?” and uses an answer from Midwestern novelist Willa Cather (263): “we must face the fact that the splendid story of the pioneers is finished, and that no new story worthy to take its place has yet begun ... The generation now in the driver’s seat hates to make anything, wants to live and die in an automobile” (Cather 1923, 238). This “fall from pioneer perfection,” as it is described by Ronald Weber (1992, 17) prefigures the Berglunds’ fall in *Freedom*, and is also perceived by Alfred Lambert in *The Corrections* when he wonders “if we’re depressed because there’s no frontier anymore” (Franzen 2001a, 347).

Franzen’s interest in the Midwest, and more specifically in the urban Midwest, is in fact evident from his very first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988) as we shall see later, but one could date the origin of his interest in Midwestern cities and suburbs even earlier than that. He was born in Western Springs, Illinois (a Chicago suburb), but raised in Webster Groves, a suburb of Saint Louis which became quite well-known in the U.S. because of *16 in Webster Groves*, a CBS documentary filmed and broadcast in 1969, when Franzen was ten years old. He describes this TV special in his memoir *The Discomfort Zone* as an “early experiment in hour-long prime-time sociology” (Franzen 2007a, 60). The program initially described Webster Groves as “6 square miles of the American Dream,” but later criticized it “as a nightmare of mind control and soulless materialism,” according to Franzen (61). The show also included a scathing portrait of Franzen’s future high school, Webster Groves High, shown in the documentary as being rife with conformism:

...ruled by a tiny elite of “soshies” who made life gray and marginal for the great majority of students who weren’t “football captains,” “cheerleaders” or “dance queens.” Interviews with these all-powerful soshies revealed a student body obsessed with grades, cars and money. (Franzen 2007a, 60)

Franzen, however, talks about his native suburb as a “friendly, unpretentious town ... an unusually congenial community” (61), and recalls trying “to explain that the Webster Groves depicted in [the TV documentary] bears minimal resemblance to the friendly, unpretentious town I knew when I was growing up. But it’s useless to contradict TV; people look at me with suspicion, hostility or pity” (60). Franzen’s comments (and, arguably, his fiction) not only contradict the perspective offered by this documentary, but also the commonly held view of life in the American literary suburbs. As David Brooks said in a review of *Freedom*, “if you judged by American literature, there are no happy people in the suburbs” (2010).

In “House for Sale,” a different piece also collected in *The Discomfort Zone* (2007a), Franzen describes Webster Groves as the epitome of *middleness*, associating it both with the Midwest and with the middle class:

I grew up in the middle of the country in the middle of the golden age of the American middle class. My parents were originally Minnesotan, moved south to Chicago, where I was born, and finally came to rest in Missouri, the country’s cartographic linchpin ... and our town, Webster Groves was in the middle of this middle ... Webster Groves was, my mother liked to say, echoing Goldilocks “just right.” (Franzen 2007a, 13)

Of course, this middleness of the Midwest and the American middle class, rather than ‘just right’ could be considered “dullness made God,” as Sinclair Lewis wrote in *Main Street* ([1920] 1984, 258). However, despite the negative connotations of middleness as vagueness (the region lacks precise borders), dullness or mediocrity, middleness can also have many positive connotations, as Jon Gjierde says in “Middleness and the Middle West”:

... the region is associated with middle-class values and a middle way. It is midway between the coasts that seemingly are more important to the nerve centers of the media and government. Even during the era of Middle Western ascendancy early in the century, the qualities that distinguished the Middle West were associated with middleness. The “pastoral ideal,” in which the region was midway between urban corruption and the dangers of wilderness, and the “yeoman farmer ideal” ... powerfully reflected images of the advantages of the middle. (2001, 186).

Judging from his comments in *The Discomfort Zone* (2007a), Franzen probably felt a moral obligation to describe this middleness in all its complexity. At any rate, whether it was because of the CBS documentary (as Sam Tanenhaus claims) or for some other reason,² it seems that life in Midwestern cities has become the central preoccupation of Franzen’s novels. As a matter of fact, although he describes himself as “a grumpy Manhattanite” (Franzen 2001b, 1), he considers himself “a Midwestern writer” (Franzen 2007b), maybe signaling the most crucial difference between the man and his fiction.

Franzen’s first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988), in fact, refers to a Midwestern city in its very title and focuses its attention on St. Louis’s corrupt municipal politics and crooked real estate schemes. The novel includes a map, an oblique reference to *16 in Webster Groves*—when a *Time* magazine reporter comes to town to interview city fathers, he notices how reluctant they are to speak with him, and his conclusion is that “CBS really traumatized this area” (1988, 411)—and a short history of the city: from

² According to Tanenhaus, Franzen “may be the only major novelist whose idea of the East-Midwest divide was shaped profoundly by a single television program” (2010a).

the 4th city in the country in 1870, to the 27th in 1984. This decline is related to the administrative secession of the city of St. Louis from St. Louis County (which includes Webster Groves and other suburbs) in 1875, as well as to a phenomenon common to all American cities after War World II: “the migration of whites to the suburbs” (1988, 25), which was followed by “the Era of the Parking Lot, as acres of asphalt replaced half-vacant office buildings downtown” (1988, 26).

The novel’s plot includes a Pynchon-like conspiracy of a group of Indians trying to take control of the city,³ led by an S. Jammu chosen as police chief as a Trojan horse of sorts. Compared to the later *The Corrections* (2001) and *Freedom* (2010), the novel feels like an uncomfortable combination of a middle-class Midwestern family portrait (the Webster-Groves-native Probst family, who are not unlike the Lamberts from St. Jude in *The Corrections* or the St. Paulite Berglunds in *Freedom*) with a “conspiranoid” thriller that makes the evolution of the plot rather hard to swallow.⁴ In fact, it is probably due to the thriller elements that the family portrait and the character description do not work as well as in the later novels. As Dorothy Sayers said, writing about detective stories and realistic description of characters, “there is the whole difficulty about allowing real human beings into a detective-story. At some point or other, either their emotions make hay of the detective interest, or the detective interest gets hold of them and makes their emotions look like paste board” (Sayers [1946] 1992, 105). In *The Twenty-Seventh City*, it seems that the conspiracy thriller elements push character development and plot far away from the social realism that is later to be found in *The Corrections* and *Freedom*. Besides, although St. Louis is often considered the “Gateway to the West” because of its historical and geographical position (and, in fact, *The Twenty-Seventh City*’s protagonist, Martin Probst, is the contractor responsible for the real Gateway Arch, which commemorates St. Louis’s position), the novel does not really explore the western (or Midwestern) dimension of the city.

The situation is similar in *The Corrections*, which, as mentioned before, substitutes fictional St. Jude for the real St. Louis, maybe because the focus is less on specific places and more on character relationships. Franzen has called it “a family novel about three East Coast urban sophisticates who alternately long for and reject the heartland suburbs where their aged parents live” (2001b, 2). One could actually say that, from a spatial point of view, the center of attention of this novel is the suburbs, rather than the Midwest. In fact, Keith Wilhite has defined the suburbs and suburban fiction as “the endgame and final outpost of US regionalism” (2012, 617), and offers *The Corrections* as an example. According to Wilhite, the suburbs are a “uniquely problematic and

³ There is even a reference to Pynchon and his convoluted plots in one of the dialogues of the novel. When one of the characters complains about the things that have happened to him lately (in fact, provoked by the conspirators), he says: “My life’s gotten kind of weird lately ... Do you know Thomas Pynchon?” (Franzen 1988, 55).

⁴ Although the novel’s reviews were not bad, the publishers probably did not know how to market it, and tried to sell it as a dystopia: “It’s 1984 and Big Brother is a Woman,” it stated on the original paperback cover.

potentially transformative cultural and geographic region,” and in this novel Franzen “locates the political subject within the competing ideologies of privatism and globalization” (2012: 617).

4. SPATIAL DIMENSIONS IN *FREEDOM*

In contrast with the previous novels, *Freedom* seems to deal not only with the urban dimension (present in *The Twenty-Seventh City* and, to a lesser extent, in *The Corrections*) but also with a regional, Midwestern dimension, with likely origins in *The Great Gatsby*, as has already been mentioned. By shifting the focus from the suburbs to the abandoned center of the city, or from “suburbanization to gentrification,” as Carissa Turner Smith has noted (2011, 308), having his characters move between the East and the West, and identifying them as pioneers, Franzen connects both spatial dimensions (the inner city vs. the suburbs, and the East vs. the West) and adds a more symbolic dimension to the novel. Patty and Walter may fail in their, probably naïve, dreams of gentrification of their neighborhood and the recovery of pioneering values, but Franzen seems to be giving them credit for trying, just like Fitzgerald (through Nick’s voice) underlines the *greatness* of Gatsby’s dreams, despite their disappointing end.

Having failed in their (Mid)Western pioneering experience, both Patty and Walter decide to go East. Patty falls into depression and adultery, and Walter (like Tom Buchanan and Daisy) becomes corrupted by the spoilt version of the American Dream, in his case the corruption represented by political tycoon Vin Haven and global companies like LBI (a disguised name for Halliburton, the Texas-based oil company closely connected with the Bush administration and the Iraq war). Walter’s son Joey, like a new Jay (Gatsby), makes quick money in the East, but in both cases the money they accumulate has dubious origins: Jay’s comes from bootlegging, Joey’s from selling defective truck parts to military suppliers in Iraq. Franzen actually describes a similar case of displacement in *The Corrections*, where Chip Lambert tries to escape from his problems in the East (after being fired for having inappropriate relations with a student) by moving further East. He goes in search of an impossible Eastern Dream in the emerging neocapitalistic jungle of Lithuania, where, by fabricating press releases and phony investment sheets, he manages to make a lot of illicit money, only to lose it all on his way back home.

In *Freedom*, Joey finds himself at a moral crossroads: he needs to choose whether to keep or return his own dirty money, and whether to go back to the Midwest (represented by his girlfriend Connie) or stay in the East (represented by rich, careless Jenna). Like Nick Carraway, who had left his Eastern girlfriend Jordan, he leaves Jenna (once again, similar names) as well as the money in order to return to his Western roots. I think it is significant that the place where Joey makes this decision is Argentina, which is “so similar to Western Montana that Joey had to wonder why [he’d] flown eight

thousand miles for it” (Franzen 2010a, 425). In a rather grotesque soul-finding scene, after looking for the wedding ring he has accidentally swallowed, he discovers “he was a different person ... He was the person who’d handled his own shit to get his wedding ring back” (432). In an age of globalization, the mythical role of the West as regenerator of identities is here performed by South America; in a postmodern age, heroes find their identity ‘handling [their] own shit.’

Joey’s parents seem to have a harder time finding themselves, but both try the West again. After her disappointing attempt at adultery, Patty needs to travel to Wisconsin to find her new identity as teacher’s aide, before returning to the East with her family. Walter tries to find himself in unspoiled nature, in the Nameless Lake where as a teenager he had “taken refuge” with a movie camera and “a second-hand paperback copy of *Walden*” (454). Nameless Lake had actually worked for Richard Katz, the object of Patty’s adulterous love, who had found his own “Western roots” at the lake cabin: the country and *western* record he made in contrast to his previous punk-rock music, and which he named after the lake, made him popular and rich, though not particularly happy. But Walter’s attempted escape into open nature doesn’t work: suburbanization, low interest rates and the middle class follow him to Nameless Lake, which becomes Canterbury Estates Lake.

The American West has traditionally been associated with open, unspoiled, but protected nature. Let us not forget that National Parks and the environmental movement were born in the West, the “unpopulated and pristine West” (Franzen 2007a, 168). Franzen describes his search for just such open spaces in his essay “My Bird Problem” (included in *The Discomfort Zone*, 2007), where rather than the wilderness he seeks, he keeps finding “new vistas of irrigation-intensive monoculture, mining-scarred hillsides, and parking lots full of nature lovers’ cars” (2007a, 168). This environmental dimension of the West and Western literature has recently started to be explored by a critical movement known as ecocriticism, which stresses “how human relationships to the natural world [are] in fact not at the margins, but at the thematic core of so many texts” (Crimmel 2011, 369). An example might be Hal Crimmel’s analysis of Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia* (1918), which considers the plow key to the settling of the lands of Nebraska not as a symbol of a heroic era, but as “an instrument of ecological devastation” (Crimmel 2011, 373). In a similar vein, Edward Abbey had already critiqued the idea of the pioneer in *Desert Solitaire* (1968):

In my book a pioneer is a man who comes to virgin country, traps off all the fur, kills off all the wild meat, cuts down all the trees, grazes off all the grass, plows the roots up and strings ten million miles of wire. A pioneer destroys things and calls it civilization. (1968, 208)

Franzen’s own ecological consciousness is described in detail in “My Bird Problem” (2007), where he writes about bird-watching as much more than a hobby. He actually moves back and forth in the essay between his love *affair* with birds and his relationship

with his first wife, his new partner and his own mother. At one point he, rather humorously, relates his own mother with “mother Earth” (“whoever imagined that LOVE YOUR MOTHER would make a good environmental bumper sticker obviously didn’t have a mom like mine” (2007a, 177) and, more seriously at another he connects his ‘bird problem’ with his own wish (and inability) to have his own children:

But then it was New Year’s and I faced the question of what to do with myself for the next thirty childless years; and the next morning I got up early and went looking for the Eurasian wigeon that had been reported in south Santa Cruz County. (Franzen 2007a, 180)

He also examines the contradictions of the environmental movement: its “cult of wilderness,” the scarcity of parcels of “empty backcountry for every worshipper” (173), and the misanthropy inherent in the ‘cult’:

For Edward Abbey, who was the rare green writer with the courage of his misanthropy, the appeal of southeastern Utah was, frankly, that its desert was inhospitable to the great herd of Americans who were incapable of understanding and respecting the natural world. (Franzen 2007a, 173)

This leads Franzen to his own paradoxical relationship with nature: “Always in the past, I’d felt like a failure at the task of being satisfied by nature’s beauty” (184). It is only when he finds a form of animal life he can relate to, “when nature had become the place where birds were,” that this relationship “made [him] happy like nothing outdoors ever had” (185).

The perspective of ecocriticism associated with the West, as well as Franzen’s ideas as expressed in “My Bird Problem,” are particularly relevant in *Freedom*, where both Walter and his assistant (and lover) Lalitha pursue an ecological dream (their own ‘green breast’) in Western Virginia. The location seems pertinent, since, on the one hand, Walter looks for his western dream in *Western* Virginia, but, on the other, Western Virginia represents nature spoilt by human activity (like the West he encounters in “My Bird Problem”): “logging ... mining-damaged streams ... paintless houses ... [and] ... trailer homes”; in short, “the nation’s own banana republic” (2010a, 337). This association with Latin America is also important since it becomes part of the ecological dream pursued by Walter and Lalitha. If Walter has already been described as a ‘pioneer,’ Lalitha is a true pioneer, a contemporary migrant from India in search of her American Dream.⁵ The couple’s pioneer dream involves the creation of two forest preserves in Colombia and the United States to facilitate the free movement and

⁵ It is worth remembering that the earlier *The Twenty-Seventh City* also includes Indian characters. Not only the improbable police chief S. Jammu but also some of her even more improbable collaborators (her own multimillionaire mother and a fabulously wealthy Indian princess among others). The East/West coordinates in this novel would be Western as in Euro-American, and Eastern as in Asian.

settlement of migrant birds (the cerulean warbler in particular) between the Americas, but the description of the birds' migratory journeys makes it hard not to think about human migrants:

... a few ... grew restless and left behind the several thousand other[s] ... that were content to stay put... High-rises and power lines and wind turbines and cellphone towers and road traffic mowed down millions of migrants, but millions more made it through... migrants exhausted by their five-thousand-mile journey competed with earlier arrivals for the remaining scraps of territory. (2010a, 485)

Their dream, however, seems to have been perverted from its inception. First of all, as Richard Rodriguez says, protection is truly a form of intrusion:

Wisdom and a necessary humility inform the environmental movement, but there is an arrogant self-hatred too, in the idea that we can create landscapes vacant of human will. In fact, protection is human intrusion. The ultimate domestication of Nature is the ability to say: Rage on here, but not elsewhere! (Rodriguez 2003, 178)

But what is shocking about their dream of preservation is that it involves complete initial destruction: they work for a coal mining magnate who wants to strip mine a section of Western Virginia forest before turning it into a songbird preserve of future environmental value. Obviously, 'a pioneer destroys things,' as Edward Abbey said, but in this ill-designed project, probably far too many. Besides, and more importantly, Walter and Lalitha's dream is perverse, because it is not an honest dream. It conceals another objective, the fight against overpopulation, which they expect to fund through the Western Virginia project. Besides, this second objective hardly seems honest itself, since Walter keeps dreaming about having kids with Lalitha. It is no wonder that their dream, flawed from the start, becomes a nightmare of political corruption, ethnic bias, radicalism, and death. Lalitha's death in a car crash, as a probable victim of racial prejudice, seems like the only possible ending for such an ill-designed dream.⁶

5. FREEDOM AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

Almost all the reviewers of the novel have made a comment about the title and the different interpretations of the word *freedom* in the novel. Rodney Clapp, for example,

⁶ The fact that a car crash brings about Lalitha's death and the destruction of Walter and Lalitha's dream can also be easily connected to Gatsby's death as a result of a car crash in *The Great Gatsby*, and to Willa Cather's comment that "the generation now in the driver's seat ... wants to live and die in an automobile" (1923, 238). Though cars and movement are often used as a symbol of freedom, Walter's hate of SUVs and their "compensatory gigantism" (Franzen 2010a, 290), Lalitha's death in a car crash, and Joey's dirty scheme involving truck parts, all use vehicles as a metaphor of a dream gone wrong.

says that the main characters in the novel “are as cursed as they are blessed by a surfeit of freedom” (2010, 36). And Sam Tanenhaus—who called *Freedom* “a masterpiece of American fiction” in *The New York Times*—discusses the implications of “freedom ... a word that has been elevated throughout American history to near-theological status” (2010b). However, reviewers have probably not stressed strongly enough that freedom is just one dimension of a more general theme whose mythical possibilities and contradictions are examined by both Fitzgerald and Franzen through the movement of their characters between the East and the West of the United States: the multifaceted, everlasting myth of the American Dream. *The Great Gatsby* deals mainly with two dimensions of the Dream, the strictly material dimension of making money, and a more spiritual dimension, which for Gatsby involved his search for eternal youth, the possibility of recapturing his and Daisy’s past.⁷ Franzen deals with the material dimension as well (as exemplified by Joey), but he also explores the implications of the concept of freedom as part of the American Dream: “People came to this country for either money or freedom. If you don’t have money, you cling to your freedoms all the more angrily” (2010a, 361). Jenna’s father associates the word with immigration and offers the more conventional view of the myth: “my great-grandfather ... came over here with nothing. He was given an opportunity in this country, which gave him the freedom to make the most of his abilities. That’s why I’ve chosen to spend my life the way I have—to honor that freedom and try to ensure that the next American century be similarly blessed” (2010a, 270). Walter, in turn, offers a more critical interpretation: “the American experiment of self-government [was] statistically skewed from the outset, because it wasn’t the people with sociable genes who fled the crowded Old World for the new continent; it was the people who didn’t get along with the others” (444), and later, “the personality susceptible to the dream of limitless freedom is a personality also prone, should the dream ever sour, to misanthropy and rage” (445). When the dream ‘sours,’ it becomes a real nightmare, as Walter states: “You may be poor, but the one thing nobody can take away from you is the freedom to fuck up your life whatever way you want to” (Franzen 2010a, 361).

We have therefore seen how Franzen explores the contradictions behind the settling (and consequent degradation) of open spaces, the problems of immigration, or even the idea of the Melting Pot (let us not forget that Lalitha suffers, and probably died, because of racial discrimination) linked to the myth of the American Dream, and how they are associated with the idea of the West as a spatial metaphor for the Dream. Walter even associates their project’s name with the West: “I say we go with Free Space ... I like how it steals the word ‘free’ from the other side, and appropriates the rhetoric of the wide-open West” (Franzen 2010a, 365). But there is another implication behind the myth of the West and the American Dream: the old idea of Manifest Destiny as

⁷ Edwin Fussell related Gatsby’s search for the past to the historic myth of Ponce de León and Turner’s use of the image of the “magic fountain of youth” to evoke the creative and restorative powers of the unexhausted Western frontier (Fussell 1952, 292).

an excuse for imperialism and interventionist foreign policy, expressed by a friend of Joey's in this simplistically naïve form: "We have to try to bring freedom to all the Arab countries" (253). It is worth remembering that Joey's, as well as Walter and Lalitha's, ill-conceived projects are related to dishonest oil companies and the Iraq war, and that they are developed in the Latin-American *backyard*: Joey buys the defective truck parts in Paraguay, and Walter's projected reserve for the cerulean warbler has a counterpart in Colombia. Walter even questions his love affair with Lalitha as a form of 'romantic imperialism' in a globalized, consumerist world: "he saw himself ... as another overconsuming white American male who felt entitled to more and more and more: saw the romantic imperialism of his falling for someone fresh and Asian, having exhausted domestic supplies" (318).

In the end, the lesson learned by both Walter and Patty is that individualism, isolation, the misanthropy associated with one (mis)interpretation of the American Dream (the 'statistically skewed experiment,' as Walter describes it) does not work. Walter had misread *Walden* as a teenager, because Thoreau was not just retiring into a refuge, he was a social activist who was not escaping society but very much involved in it. Walter and Patty find this truth, of course, in the West, at Nameless Lake; but what they find out is that the answer does not lie in isolation in empty *spaces*, but in cooperation and in the active creation of meaningful relationships in a space that, when 'humanized' or 'souled' becomes a warmer *place*, a real community. After all, as Yi-Fu Tuan said, space is "a common symbol of freedom in the Western world," but both "space and freedom are a threat" (1977, 54) since they can easily lead to misanthropy and isolation. This lesson is not very different from the one learnt by Franzen himself both as a birdwatcher and, more importantly, as a writer, as he described it in his *Harper's* essay: "you are a socially isolated individual who desperately wants to communicate with a substantive imaginary world" (1996, 46). It was probably the realization that he was a writer in search of a *community* of readers and writers that led him to depart from the post-modern games of his first two novels and write two novels of social realism like *The Corrections* and *Freedom*.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it is my contention that, probably inspired by Fitzgerald's example in *The Great Gatsby*, Jonathan Franzen uses in *Freedom* the East and the (Mid)West of the United States, as well as the locales of the inner city and the suburbs, as a backdrop to analyze not only the meanings and interpretations of the word *freedom* but the hopes, aspirations, and frustrations shared by his fellow countrymen. After the more post-modern experimentation of his first two novels, Franzen decided to 'take refuge' in the places he knew best and set his next two novels mainly in the urban Midwest. The inner city (as opposed to the suburbs), the Midwest (as opposed to the East), and the forests of Western Virginia are used as symbolic places with powerful cultural and political implications which become 'humanly meaningful' when settled by 'young

pioneers' Walter, Patty, and, later on, Lalitha. The dreams and efforts of these characters are, in fact, very similar to Franzen's own, which were outlined in his *Harper's* essay of 1996: to recover the space of serious literature that had been abandoned by straight white males like himself and to connect with a large community of readers.

After this analysis, we are probably in a better position to answer the question posed at the beginning of this essay about Franzen's genealogy. Franzen's novels (and *Freedom* in particular) seem to belong to that 'less noticed line' that he mentions in "A Rooting Interest" (which, as we can remember, included writers like Howells, Lewis, Fitzgerald and Wharton), but whose features had been defined almost two decades earlier: from my point of view, both Fitzgerald and Franzen (and probably the rest of the writers in the 'less noticed line') are "tragic realists" as understood by Franzen in his *Harper's* essay (Franzen 1996, 53). They both write a type of fiction which, through a symbolic use of 'humanly meaningful' places (the Midwest and the East, the suburbs and the inner city), "raises more questions than it answers," highlights "its distance from the rhetoric of optimism that so pervades our culture," and "preserves access to the dirt behind the dream of Chosenness" (Franzen 1996, 53); in short, a type of fiction that explores the different dimensions and contradictions of that amalgam of Eastern and Western promises and myths known as the American Dream.

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Received 28 November 2013

Revised version accepted 18 November 2014

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