Fears of the Now: Globalisation in Jonathan Franzen's Freedom and Zia Haider Rahman's In the Light of What We Know

Writing for The Observer in 2014, Alex Preston defines Zia Haider Rahman's debut novel In the Light of What We Know as "the novel I'd hoped Jonathan Franzen's Freedom would be (but wasn't) – an exploration of the post-9/11 world that is both personal and political, epic and intensely moving" (Preston 2014, n.p.). Preston's comparison of the two novels here is of course open to debate. However, lifelong fans of Franzen who have observed his transition from postmodernist to realist, or his movement from the experimental to the mainstream market (Burn 2008, x/xi) would no doubt argue that the author of the hugely successful 2001 novel The Corrections paints a disturbingly real portrait in Freedom (2010) of the emotions that embody both the US individual and US culture simultaneously. Furthermore, Preston's suggestion that Freedom is not 'personal,' 'political,' 'epic' or 'intensely moving' is surely a description that is open to some degree of criticism. If nothing more, Freedom encapsulates all of these things. At the same time, Preston is well within his rights to suggest that Rahman's In the Light of What We Know (2014) presents a far more illuminating picture of 21st-century culture. Rahman's novel manages to achieve similar effects to those of Franzen's Freedom through a thought-provoking critique of the power of writing and narrative knowledge. Whilst there is certainly an argument to be made as to which novel more accurately engages with contemporary culture, I would suggest that Preston's analysis of the two novels misses the point.

Authors are increasingly relying upon contemporary feelings of anxiety in order to portray reality through fiction. However, such anxieties are being misconstrued by critics and theorists alike as having grown out of the wreckage of the attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001. It cannot be overlooked that 9/11 was a monumental moment in Western history, the consequences of which are still being felt fourteen years on. Nevertheless, it seems to be the case that authors such as Rahman and Franzen are exploring and presenting the anxieties of contemporary culture not simply post-9/11, but in terms of the effects of globalisation in the new century, a framework within which 9/11 was more a surprising development than a defining influence. As a term, globalisation has been around for a considerable amount of time, but it has advanced as a rising force in recent years, and has become a topic of significant investigation in the world of academia, theory and cultural studies. Globalisation is best understood as a paradox and is a highly intricate network of fragmented cultural issues, including capitalism and finance, politics, economics, the rise of technology and the internet age, the environment and sustainability, war and terrorism, and multiculturalism amongst others. The relationships between these issues that aid and are affected by globalisation connect the world primarily for the purposes of trade and profit. According to Douglas Kellner's analysis in "Theorizing Globalization" (2002), there are positive and negative values of globalisation, where freedom, autonomy and wealth are met by the continued existence of hierarchical divides, spheres of poverty and exploitation. I argue here that Freedom and In the Light of What We Know (In the Light) are novels that draw upon the effects of globalisation on the human condition, and present in different ways the possibility for a globalised world where these oppositional structures

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can be removed. Franzen explores the effects of globalisation in the form of a realist novel which foregrounds the experience of the contemporary family dynamic, as a representation of a larger social culture, specifically that of the US. However, in writing exclusively about the US experience in regards to global culture, a problematic issue in itself, Franzen reinforces the hegemonic discourse of globalisation. The sense of closure in *Freedom* suggests a level of failure on Franzen's part to suitably articulate the complexities of the global experience. Rahman, on the other hand, manages to fathom these complexities through a narrative that is both epic and intricate. He achieves this through challenging the power of narrative knowledge and by questioning the strength of the novel to be able to fully articulate and express the unstable nature of truth. The lack of closure in the novel reveals the continued need in literature, theory and politics to actively engage with globalisation, and work towards a utopian world in which globalisation can be creatively utilised in order to overcome the oppositions it inherently keeps in place. Through dramatising the limitations of the novel, Rahman simultaneously reveals the strength and scope of the fictional space; its ability to imagine, improve, influence and alter the trajectory of an escalating global landscape.

**For and Against: The Paradox of Globalisation**

I am a pro-growth, free market guy. I love the market. I think it is the best invention to allocate resources and produce enormous prosperity for America and the world that's ever been designed. (Obama 2008, n.p.)

This statement made by the current US President is extremely revealing when considering the ways in which globalisation as a concept is misconstrued from the top down. Advocates of capitalism and the market, Obama being an obvious inclusion, are invested in the advancements made through the rise of globalisation and the prosperity it promises. The free market is said to enable individuals to take hold of their own futures and create for themselves stability and security and an altogether better life. Jeffrey T. Nealon suggests that despite recent events in the world of finance and capital, or the global financial crisis of 2008, the market driven economy remains as strong as ever (Nealon 2012, 4). Nealon makes clear that for those who are in support of corporate-driven economics, there is a resounding "monotheistic faith that markets are the baseline of freedom, justice, and all things good in the world" (4). Douglas Kellner has also spoken of the benefits of globalisation:

[It is the continuation of modernization and a force of progress, increased wealth, freedom, democracy, and happiness. Its defenders present globalization as beneficial, generating fresh economic opportunities, political democratization, cultural diversity, and the opening to an exciting new world. (Kellner 2002, 286)]

Autonomy appears to be central to the argument for rather than against globalisation. Marko Ampuja further clarifies that for many, globalisation is at the core of an increasingly improved relationship between cultures: "Advocates of globalization theory argue that the world order today is non-hierarchical and de-centered, meaning for example, that the geopolitical struggles between powerful nation-states are fast becoming a thing of the past" (Ampuja 2012, 3). While globalisation is often viewed as central to prosperity and human advancement, it is also a characteristic of contemporaneity which maintains divisions within societies and "across borders" (Held 2005, 1). These divisions are still in place and not 'a thing of the past' as advocates have declared. In contrast to his discussion concerning the benefits of globalisation, Kellner
makes clear that "[i]t is critics see globalization as harmful, bringing about increased domination and control by the wealthier overdeveloped nations over the poor underdeveloped countries, thus increasing the hegemony of the 'haves' over the 'have-nots'" (Kellner 2002, 286). The opposition of globalisation, the prosperous and the downtrodden, and the subsequent continuation of hegemonic hierarchies are central to an understanding of the anxieties of the contemporary world.

The varying attributes of globalisation can be seen to have intensified, as James Annesley has suggested, with the advancements made in technology (Annesley 2006a, 93). With the birth of the World Wide Web and the developments made in global communications, the ways in which we experience time and space have become drastically altered. Such inventions have had implications regarding the arguments for and against globalisation, with the former announcing improved human connectivity, the freedom to exist and express choice for individual needs and desires, and the latter lamenting the loss of individuality, the rise of isolation and the increase of subjectivity to the demands of a consumerist culture. The internet and the rise of technology are vital to any understanding of the effects of globalisation in the 21st century. With the growth of the internet and the pace with which it has entered into homes and communities, work places and social environments across the planet, globalisation has grown at a substantial rate. Drawing on Urry (2003), Ampuja suggests that with the rise in global communications technology, globalisation as a "social and cultural paradigm," has changed "irreversibly" (Ampuja 2012, 3).

Furthermore, it must also be understood that globalisation is not a stable term. It has become a generic process for thinking about global connectivity, or as Kellner suggests, a "buzzword" (2002, 285). Discussions of globalisation are often voiced in accordance with notions of multiplicity, fragmentation and hybridity and as such, despite its prominence in theoretical persuasions concerning contemporary culture, globalisation as a term appears to resist definition. As Suman Gupta has argued:

The elaborations that surround these (and such) definitions both recognize the enormity of thinking about globalization and build upon that foundation of tractability and definitiveness that such a succinct definition-like moment makes available. And yet, even in offering such clear definitions and elaborating on them coherently, a kind of anxiety about the term 'globalization' – as a term – is often found. It is as if the scholars offering these definitions and elaborations by way of taming the concept and manifestations of globalization nevertheless feel that it has not been correspondingly tamed. The term seems to possess an autonomous momentum, an uncontrollable currency, which no amount of careful systematization and analysis of its connotations can cover. (Gupta 2009, 12-13)

With such an overwhelming degree of incomprehensibility surrounding globalisation, it remains something of a mystery as to how and why its use in analyses of contemporary culture has become so prevalent, because any attempt at understanding it is necessarily incomplete. Globalisation, it seems, remains a generic term which includes an array of cultural features that are interconnected (Kellner 2002, 286). If this is indeed the case, that globalisation is as Annesley comments, "a concept that is porous, unstable and increasingly overstretched" (2006b, 112), to formulate a decisive argument for analysing contemporaneity in relation to globalisation will prove a fairly inconclusive task. On the other hand, to do away with globalisation theory is to ignore the structures that maintain hierarchical divisions such as profit and exploitation. In the same instance, globalisation, despite having such an intricate and multivalent
framework which makes any understanding of it difficult if not impossible, is a reality that effects all of humanity, and because of this it cannot be ignored.

Concerning global capitalism, Annesley makes clear that "it is almost impossible to find evidence for an experience that has, in recent memory at least, ever actually been outside the market" (2004, 559). With this in mind, it is not a question of thinking about globalisation or not thinking about it. Any analysis of contemporary culture will relate to it in some way or another. The difficulties of mapping globalisation are not simply in attempting to come to terms with its complexities. In addition, there is also the fear of reinforcing an attitude or oppositional dialogue of for or against. (Kellner 2002, 289). Advocating for globalisation results in a deterministic approach that is built under the spectrum of power, which keeps the beneficiaries at the top and the exploited at the bottom. In contrast, those against globalisation fail to acknowledge the many important values and possibilities that coincide with its progress. Either position results in an unproductive reinforcement of determinist discourse.

Douglas Kellner engages with this problem through a discussion that includes challenging the idealisms of technology and capitalism. He suggests that in order to step out of the spectrum of power, which "empires and disempowers individuals and groups" (2002, 290), there needs to be a commitment towards articulating both the positive and negative aspects of globalisation: "I would advocate development of a critical theory of globalization that would dialectically appraise its positive and negative features" (290). For Kellner, there are positive and negative aspects of technology and capitalism, both of which need to be taken into account if there is to be a better understanding of globalisation, one which can work in the best interest of humanity and the human experience. He argues that we are in "a new stage of global capitalism," which consists of the intertwined constructs of technology and capitalism: "technocapitalism" (289). Globalisation, in a technocapitalist logic, is marked by a complex set of apparatuses which have both positive and negative effects, and for globalisation to be employed productively, its complexities ought to be challenged and represented in order to avoid a "one-sided" dialogue of for or against (289).

Returning once again to the example of technology, the internet is an innovative construct that provides an autonomous presence for the individual, but at the same time the individual is placed directly within a consumerist space, resulting in the collective experience of the freedom to choose and the pressure to consume. This paradoxical experience is something that Robert Samuels has discussed in his compelling account of 'automodernism.' Through "the power of new automated technologies," Samuels makes clear, "a heightened sense of individual control often functions to undermine the awareness of social and cultural mediation, and this lack of awareness can place the individual against the public realm" (Samuels 2008, 225). This surge in technology has created for the individual a heightened sense of anxiety, and the experience of globalisation has only intensified with it (Annesley 2006a, 93). My analysis of Jonathan Franzen's Freedom and Zia Haider Rahman's In the Light of What We Know will explore how these authors attempt to present the uncertainties and fears of globalisation.

**Jonathan Franzen's Freedom: Global Effects**

Jonathan Franzen's Freedom is a realist, social novel which embarks on a challenge to present the realities of globalisation. It is beset, however, by an underlying problem. On the one hand it is a novel that shows a willingness to engage with the globalisation
debate. Through the use of a complex narrative structure, Franzen's incorporation of the effects of globalisation through Walter Berglund's activism against population growth and Joey Berglund's profiteering during the Gulf War, Freedom is clearly a novel for which globalisation is a central concern. On the other hand, despite Freedom's social ambitions to accurately report on the complexities of globalisation, the author's political motivations overwhelm the text. As a result, Franzen totalises the notion of globalisation by taking a political stance against it, and as such the novel maintains the hegemonic discourse that keeps the positive and negative aspects of globalisation in a state of perpetual conflict.

Susanne Rohr's often cited declaration of The Corrections as being a "novel of globalization" (Rohr 1997, 103) is one that James Annesley takes issue with. While Annesley agrees that The Corrections is "heavily embroidered with patterns and themes linked to global economics, consumerism, and international politics" (2006b, 112), he also suggests that due to the fact that the idea of globalisation seems to "defy easy definitions" (112), defining the novel as being one of globalisation is problematic. Developing on Rohr's assessment of The Corrections, Annesley suggests that a reading of it requires not just "a simple process of measuring the accuracy of its representation of the realities of globalization, but an analysis of the ways in which it engages with the globalization debate" (113). With this in mind, Freedom goes a step further than his previous novel. It is concerned with the features of globalisation, but is primarily focused on presenting its effects on an individual level.

Franzen's use of the realist mode reveals his concern for the effects of globalisation on the individual, and his concern is presented through the members of the Berglund family. Globalisation, as David Held suggests:

\[\text{[\ldots]}\] is not only the violent exception that links people together across borders; the very nature of everyday living – of work and money and beliefs, as well as of trade, communications and finance, not to speak of the earth's environment – connects us all in multiple ways with increasing intensity. (2005, 1-2)

Freedom essentially reaches all of these concerns and presents them in a way that observes the effects of globalisation on an individual level. The characters are, for the most part, in some way estranged from one another, and are suffering from a kind of cultural dislocation and one of the ways in which Franzen conveys dislocation is through a series of alternating narrative perspectives. In the first chapter, we learn about the Berglund family from one of their neighbours, who describes the family as "not quite right" (Freedom, 3). Following this chapter, the novel takes on the form of Patty Berglund's autobiography, written by Patty at the insistence of her therapist. Through Patty's narrative, Franzen provides an extremely detailed history of Patty's life, spanning her childhood days, her friendship with the troubled character Eliza, her love for Richard Katz, her marriage with Walter and the birth of their two children Joey and Jessica. We return to Patty's narration much later in the novel, only after a series of plot lines involving the primary characters, whose individual storylines are told at times by an unknown narrator. The complex structure of Freedom's narrative in which the characters undergo their own personal experiences and situations reveals the novel's concern for the anxieties of living in a globalised culture. The reader becomes entangled within a network of several different stories which heighten an affective sense of dislocation from each plot. Through Patty's autobiographical history, Joey's involvement in a military arms trade, Walter's relationship with his assistant Lalitha, and Richard's unease about his celebrity status, the novel becomes saturated
with many overlapping narratives and plots contained within plots, conveying the multiple layers of the global paradigm.

For example, the story of Joey Berglund is centred on his involvement in a profit making scheme which requires him to travel to Paraguay, to source spare parts for shipment to Iraq in order to sell them on at a profit. However, this plot becomes entangled within another involving his relationship with Connie Monaghan and his infidelity with another girl, Jenna, the sister of his college roommate Jonathan. Joey's story is also focused on the disconnected relationship he has with his father Walter. The complexities of the chapters that focus on Joey represent the uncoordinated and multiple fragments that make up globalisation. Marko Ampuja's discussion of globalisation theory as being "a wide constellation made up of different themes and sub-topics" (2012, 9) is methodically depicted in Franzen's characterisation of Joey. Right from the offset, Joey is given by his parents the independence he desires. He refuses to live at home and spends most of the time living with the Monaghans. Such freedom provides him the autonomy to live life as he sees fit. He is able to be as free-floating as he wishes with Connie, and is initially under the belief that it is alright to sell faulty military parts at a premium, subsequently putting lives at risk: "The world had given unto him and he was fine with the taking" (Freedom, 247). However, this sense of freedom also places Joey within the contemporary setting of anxiety and flux. During his college years in which Joey lives in a dormitory in Charlottesville, his subjectivity to the paradox of globalisation is clearly articulated in regards to the way Joey experiences his personal freedom:

Almost everybody in his dorm communicated with their parents daily, if not hourly, and although this did make him feel unexpectedly grateful to his own parents, who had been far cooler and more respectful of his wishes than he'd been able to appreciate as long as he lived next door to them, it also touched off something like a panic. He'd asked for his freedom, they'd granted it, and he couldn't go back now. (Freedom, 257)

This passage essentially sums up the contemporary feeling of living in a consumerist driven society. On the one hand, the individual is free to choose how to live, and on the other they are faced with an increased sense of isolation as a result. Through the characterisation of Joey, Franzen articulates the anxieties of globalisation, as the individual experience is lost in the stampede of a consumerist culture of capitalism and profit. The freedom of Freedom is up for scrutiny, and Franzen's characters are persistently navigating through spaces of isolation and dislocation.

The effects of globalisation are also explored in Freedom through Walter Berglund's commitment to tackling the problem of population growth and its environmental consequences through the creation of an activist movement called 'Free Space.' "I say we go with Free Space,' he said finally: 'I like how it steals the word 'free' from the other side, and appropriates the rhetoric of the wide-open West. If this thing takes off, it can also be the name of a whole movement, not just our group. The Free Space movement" (Freedom, 387). Walter's collaboration with Richard, Jessica and Lalitha concerning what to call this movement and how he will orchestrate its operation becomes the central concern of the novel. Franzen's choice to foreground population control within the novel is paradoxically productive and problematic. It reveals his personal commitment to observing the effects of globalisation. However, it also dwarfs all the other narrative plotlines. Furthermore, the topic of population control acts in a metaphorical vein for the purpose of articulating Franzen's political and anti-capitalist agenda. Because of this, the novel becomes caught up in the hegemonic discourse against globalisation; the voice of Franzen himself overshadowing those of his
characters. While they discuss population growth and its connection with capitalism, it is Franzen's political and anti-capitalist voice that the reader is forced to engage with. As Margaret Hunt Gram suggests: "Unstable population growth […] arrives in Freedom not as part of the story but via passages of monologue or dialogue or thought, each characterized by a kind of discursive excess or overflow" (2014, 296). The individual plots and intertwined narratives which engage directly with the paradox of globalisation are consumed by Franzen's anti-capitalist intrusion.

The world's population is on the increase, and with this increase comes the potential for environmental decline. Alongside other problems facing humanity in regards to the negative aspects of globalization, such as increased divisions in wealth and poverty and the threat of global nuclear proliferation, are the anxieties concerning the environment (Held 2005; Bridge 2002). Walter Berglund's desire to tackle the population problem reveals the need in reality to engage with environmental issues. It also portrays Franzen as a willing and enthusiastic author who is attempting to use the fictional genre to narrate what Held refers to as "a better kind of globalization imperative" (2005, 5). Walter declares, "The final cause is the root of pretty much every problem we have. The final cause is too many damn people on the planet" (Freedom, 233). Walter, in this way, engages with the need for activism in tackling what Gavin Bridge discusses as the "problems commonly associated with globalisation, such as persistent poverty and hunger, the sustainability of communities, heightened inequality and environmental degradation" (Bridge 2002, 364). However, the underlying problem of the novel, for all its population and environmental rhetoric, is the overwhelming influence of Franzen himself. Population control acts in the novel as a tool for voicing his own anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist position. Looking back in time to Franzen's essay "Why Bother?" in the collection How To Be Alone (2002), the author provides an extremely negative outlook on capitalism and consumer society:

The world of the present is a world in which the rich lateral dramas of local manners have been replaced by a single vertical drama, the drama of regional specificity succumbing to a generality […] technological consumerism is an infernal machine […] Rudeness, irresponsibility, duplicity, and stupidity are hallmarks of real human interaction: the stuff of conversation, the cause of sleepless nights. But in the world of consumer advertising and consumer purchasing, no evil is moral. The evil consists of high prices, inconvenience, lack of choice, lack of privacy, heartburn, hair loss, slippery roads. This is no surprise, since the only problems worth advertising solutions for are problems treatable through the spending of money. (Franzen 2002, 69)

Following this abstract, there is a degree of irony to be seen when Richard Katz refers to Walter as "an angry crank" (Freedom, 232). This evidence points to the idea that Freedom's concern for population growth and the environment actually comes secondary to Franzen's desire to voice a political perspective or attack on capitalist growth through a fictional format. The character of Richard, as Gram makes clear, acts as Franzen's fictional 'other': "That Freedom might be interested in more than one sort of growth is most explicitly proposed not by Walter but by Franzen's other and arguably more wholly authorized mouthpiece, Walter's punk-rock friend Richard Katz" (Gram 2014, 305). The similarities between Richard's dialogue and Franzen's approaches to capitalism in "Why Bother?" are clearly on show in the novel, and Richard exposes Franzen's intrusion:

Capitalism can't handle talking about limits, because the whole point of capitalism is the restless growth of capital. If you want to be heard in the capitalist media, and
communicate in a capitalist culture, over-population can't make any sense. It's literally nonsense. And that's your real problem. (Freedom, 383)

The 'real problem' in the novel is capitalism and not population growth. Richard's outbursts mirror the thoughts of Franzen in his essay, and in this way, the other plots and narratives are superseded by authorial intervention. The key issue here is that while the novel clearly engages with globalisation as a collection of complex themes and interrelated issues via the individual narratives of the characters, Franzen's political intrusions try to impose moral closure on the narrative flow of the novel. The various arguments about the environment, capitalism, population growth, and the war in Iraq end up (paradoxically, perhaps) undermining the novel's concerns about globalisation, because ultimately they reinforce the simplistic approaches that try to view globalisation in terms of a moral discourse of positives and negatives – the reductive binary of for or against – rather than critiquing such limited conceptions of globalisation. In other words, Franzen's need to take a stand on these issues is precisely what prevents him from engaging fully with the complex nature of globalisation. His novel builds up to the kind of moral closure that is simply not available in the world of globalisation.

As the novel enters its final stages, there is an overwhelming sense of resolution. All the characters manage to find the freedom they have been searching for. Patty and Walter, after a long separation fall back in love (the death of Lalitha making this possible); Joey's relationship with Connie finally materialises after many stop-start moments; Jessica and Walter reconnect and Richard comes to terms with his celebrity status. All in all, the novel ends with the promise that they will all live happily together in (where else) New York, the capitalist capital of the world. With such resolution and closure, Franzen's Freedom presents itself as a novel that articulates the totality of globalisation, believing that it succeeds. Not only does it fail, it misses the point that success of this kind is not possible. As Walter resumes "regular shaving with the return of his wife" (Freedom, 596), the anxieties of "the global-endgame" (Freedom, 590) are supplanted. The intricacies which are so promising in the despair of Patty's autobiography and the isolation of Joey's character halfway through the novel are replaced in no uncertain terms by an embrace of overwhelming finality of conflict resolutions. Franzen conveys the notion that fiction can articulate the complexities of globalisation despite the fact that the realist genre is, as Gram suggests, limited in its capacities to speak of the "invisible" aspects of culture, such as growth (2014, 311). In addition, while Freedom sharply captures the essence of anxiety in contemporary American culture, it does so without offering any explanation of globalisation outside the US; the borders of America are as far-reaching as the novel is willing or able to travel. Pieter Vermeulen voices the same concern for The Corrections: "[I]f we only had The Corrections to go by, we might be forgiven for thinking that globalization is essentially about the 'suburban neuroses' of the American middle class" (Vermeulen 2012, 381). Franzen goes to such lengths in Freedom to explore the effects of globalisation in the US that he overlooks anywhere else. Essentially, Freedom articulates globalisation through a deterministic approach. Gram insists that narratives that might be better suited to the problem of articulating growth would be "open-ended stories" (2014, 312). Zafar Haider Rahman's In the Light of What We Know is a primary example of an open-ended text that exposes the obscurity of globalisation. Through its problematisation of narrative knowledge, the novel both engages with globalisation, as Franzen has done in Freedom, but also highlights the limitations of the fictional space and its inability to accurately illustrate globalisation in a complete and coherent whole.
Zia Haider Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know*: Dramatising Limitations

Zia Haider Rahman's debut novel is a contemporary example of fiction that sets out to question the power of narrative knowledge. Salman Rushdie has heralded Rahman's work as an "everything novel" (qtd. in Wood, 2014, n.p.). It is certainly that. The novel is concerned with almost every conceivable fact about globalisation, including investment banking, 9/11, the 'War on Terror', racism and class. At the same time, it is a contemporary portrayal that envisages the limitations of presenting the realities of globalisation. Pieter Vermeulen reflects upon the trend in contemporary fiction of sensationalising the end of the novel in order to reflect how "modern forms of life" such as "interiority, individuality, domesticity, and community" remain elusive to the fictional space (2015, 2):

> Contemporary fiction's dramatization of the end of the novel conveys a sense that neither of these modern forms of life nor the novel's cultural power are quite what they used to be. Instead, it paradoxically draws on the novel's perceived impotence as a resource for figuring forms of life that cut across the distinctions between individuals and communities, between the self and the social. (2015, 2)

By dramatising the end of the novel, Vermeulen makes clear, contemporary authors are exercising a "far weaker cultural power" in order to re-imagine new ways of thinking about the emotion of human experience (2015, 2). In accordance with Vermeulen's critique, I suggest here that Rahman's novel seeks to convey the limitations of knowledge in order to create a renewed faith in the possibility that globalisation can be productively harnessed in the real world for the benefit of working towards a utopian landscape of human activity.

The novel, set in 2008, is highly informed by the processes of globalisation. It explores the effects that globalisation can have on the individual, but reveals that the experience of globalisation cannot be articulated through the fictional space of the novel in its entirety. The eccentric protagonist Zafar has remarkable similarities to that of Rahman. They come from the same place in the world, and their lives have followed similar paths and as such, the text engages with the process and challenges of articulating one's personal history. It tells the story of Zafar, whose background is one of immeasurable poverty, having come from the rural village of Sylhet, in "a corner of that corner of the world" (*In the Light*, 551). Zafar and the narrator, friends who met during their days studying at Oxford, spend almost the entirety of the novel conversing about Zafar's life. The setting of Oxford University which places both characters within the same academic space is presented in sharp contrast to their historical backgrounds. The narrator, the son of an Oxford physicist, was born into a family of wealth and status. He was born in Princeton and is legally a citizen of Pakistan, the US and England. Zafar, on the other hand, comes from a poverty-stricken family from Bangladesh. At the age of five, he came to England where his father worked as a bus driver and subsequently as a waiter. It is later explained that the parents who raised him were not in fact his biological parents. Both characters are geographically displaced, but what sets them apart is the distinction of class and their sense of belonging, or in Zafar's case, a lack of it. During their time at Oxford, Zafar and the narrator studied mathematics. However, as the narrator makes clear, their academic interest is as far as their similarities go: "Like Zafar, I was a student of mathematics at Oxford, but that, to put it imprecisely, was the beginning and the end of what we had in common. Mine was a privileged background […] To him, Oxford
must have seemed, as the expression goes, a long way to come" (*In the Light*, 3). Their class difference is a recurring theme in the novel, alongside the theme of homelessness. Zafar is a man who does not belong to any particular place or walk of life and the description of him at the start sets the foundations for how he can be understood throughout the rest of the novel, particularly when he is admitted into a mental hospital. His anxiety and anger towards the world becomes the centrepiece of the open-ended conclusion.

At the beginning of the novel, after arriving at the door of the narrator's London home, Zafar, who has not been in touch with the narrator for forty years or so, is at first unrecognisable:

He wore a Berghaus jacket whose Velcro straps hung about unclasped and whose sleeves stopped short of his wrists, revealing a strip of paler skin above his right hand where he might have once worn a watch. His weathered boots were fastened with unmatched laces, and from the bulging pockets of his cargo pants the edges of unidentifiable objects peeked out. He wore a small backpack, and a canvas duffel bag rested on one end against the doorway. (*In the Light*, 2)

The sense of homelessness in the narrator's initial description of Zafar marks him as an individual who belongs to nowhere. This, combined with his historical poverty and his lower class status centres Zafar within the text, subject to the negative aspects and hierarchical divides of globalisation. His story of isolation, exile and anger – "the story of the breaking of nations, war in the 21st century, marriage into the English aristocracy, and the mathematics of love" (*In the Light*, 2) – is told through the use of Zafar's notebooks and recorded conversations he has with the narrator. *In the Light* reveals the human desire to tell stories and to use what we know to understand the human condition. The story of Zafar and the text as a whole is one of global isolation. The crux of it, however, is that knowledge is just as questionable as the narrative that informs it.

Halfway through the novel, the narrator and Zafar discuss the possibility of writing down Zafar's story. The narrator suggests that Zafar could write a memoir or an autobiography, or even a novel. In response, Zafar argues that "[a]ll novels are autobiographical." The narrator counters this position by suggesting that "[a]ll novels are fictional" (*In the Light*, 307).

This exchange questions the function of the novel. Rahman's similarities with Zafar suggest that *In the Light* is contextually autobiographical. However, Rahman presents the problematic nature of fiction's inability to fully articulate true experiences, and he illustrates this by conceptualising the limitations of narrative knowledge. The unnamed and faceless narrator for example, acts in the novel as a gateway between Rahman and Zafar and persistently questions the power of knowledge. He continuously thinks about writing Zafar's story himself, and yet he is also met by the difficulties of how to articulate it: "I don't know what story I should write to account for Zafar, to provide the buttresses of cause and effects that support the structure of human life, as it could be described, as it might be understood" (*In the Light*, 138). Here, the narrator articulates the incomprehensibility of fully accessing and giving voice to the global subject. Despite the problems that he might be faced with in writing about Zafar's life, the narrator becomes consumed by the possibility of putting it down on paper. Earlier in the novel, a similar conversation occurs:

Why not write about your father? You could write about Bangladesh, you could teach people about a part of the world they know little about. Of course, replied Zafar. Yes, it's very important that people learn about that, very important. Never mind the finan-
cial crisis, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, never mind global warming and the imminen
peak oil crisis. Did I miss anything? (In the Light, 310)

Here, through an itinerary of globalisation, Rahman typifies the problem facing
the contemporary novelist. Like the narrator, Zafar is a faceless man, "an alien in his
own land and interloper among his hosts" (In the Light, 310). While the narrator
wants him to tell his personal history, Zafar suggests there are more important things
that need voicing, and on top of this he lacks the authority to bring the story of Bangla-
desh to a Western audience (In the Light, 310). This is the very dilemma that Rah-
man himself faces. He is a Bangladeshi-born, British writer, but he is expected to tell
the Bangladeshi story and bring it to the West. In this exchange, Zafar becomes the
fictional embodiment of his author. Zafar asserts that he lacks the compulsion to write
his story, and suggests that the narrator should write "something about yourself [...] 
Or invent someone to tell your story" (In the Light, 317-8). Never-
evertheless, Rahman’s
text evokes and imagines its own failings to comprehend the finality of the story. The
experience of globalisation through narrative and characterisation is in this way deli-
erately made obscure and incomplete.

In the Light is structurally made up of a combination of different features: the
recorded conversations between the two characters; epigraphs from other novels, or
philosophical quotations that begin each chapter; notebooks belonging to Zafar – which
include Zafar's footnotes; mathematical diagrams, and the inclusion of the narrator's
own footnotes which correct Zafar's historical inaccuracies. With such an array of
information, the novel sets out to be as 'truthful' as possible. Take for instance the
discussion of maps, for which Rahman also includes dia-
grams. Zafar suggests that:

Maps, contour maps and all maps, intrigue us for the metaphors that they are: tools to
give us a sense of something whose truth is far richer but without which we would per-
ceive nothing and never find our bearings. That's what maps mysteriously do. They
obliterate information to provide some information at all. (In the Light, 21-22)

Despite the factual material and the tools which Rahman uses to structure the no-
vel and Zafar's story, the truth about Zafar, his relationship with the aristocratic Emily
Hampton Wyvern, his journey across borders and his military involvement are pre-
se-
tioned only ever in an incomplete state. The novel is loaded with digressions and
philosophical musings – from Edward Said to Saul Smilansky – which persistently
challenge the accuracy and presentation of Zafar's history. Like a map, the novel has
hidden remains that can never be fully realised. A map can never provide a complete
picture, and this novel highlights the notion that it can never provide the whole story.
The novel's concern for such incompleteness is also presented through Zafar's love of
mathematics, particularly that of Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, "which tells us
truth is not always to be found and that we cannot know ahead of the search whether
the truth itself is of a kind that can be uncovered" (In the Light, 545). Zafar is a global
outcast and "a social non-entity" (In the Light, 148) in the wake of globalisation, and
he finds comfort in Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, as the narrator makes clear:

I felt compelled to ask what he considered the most beautiful mathematics he had come
across, and perhaps that is what he intended, that I ask this question – I cannot tell. Gö-
del's Incompleteness Theorem was his unhesitating answer, and though I remembered
the statement of the theorem well enough, I nevertheless failed to perceive why he re-
garded it as particularly beautiful. Within any given system, there are claims which
cannot be proven to be true. So states the theorem. (In the Light, 10)
Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, which according to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2013) is concerned with the limits of provability, is utilised as a guide in the text for presenting Haider's true intentions: to draw upon the incomplete nature of storytelling. The theorem provides Zafar with some kind of a home, however, this home and Zafar's story will be forever incomplete, and the inclusion of Gödel's Theorem persistently reminds us of this.

Margaret Hunt Gram's suggestion that novels of an open-ended nature might be better suited for the purpose of the articulation of growth is applicable to Rahman's *In the Light*. Towards the end of the novel the limitations of narrative knowledge are presented vividly through Zafar's anxiety and anger towards Emily Hampton Wyvern. Zafar's arranged meeting at Café Europa with Crane, a fellow soldier working alongside Zafar in Afghanistan, is put on hold by Emily, who has asked Zafar to wait for her in his guesthouse room. Zafar comes to the realisation that he has been 'waiting' for Emily throughout their entire relationship, a factor which stirs in him a particular anger and resentment towards her: "In that AIDARI guesthouse, I thought of all the waiting I had done and felt something rising in me" (*In the Light*, 526). Emily stands for everything English, and a sense of belonging that Zafar can never possess, and this anger fuels the final stages of the text. Her message forces him to wait for her, during which time an explosion at Café Europa that kills several soldiers, Crane included, sets Zafar into a deep seated rage. His waiting for her has saved his life and at the same time he is then confronted with the question of fate. Did Emily know about the bomb prior to the explosion? Or did Emily's selfishness save him by accident? This second question, which would place him at the mercy of her neglectful treatment of him over the years drives him to confront her. However, the narrator never learns of what happened during this confrontation and as such, neither does the reader. The tone to this chapter's conclusion suggests an act of violence: "I wanted to tell you something, I thought I would be explicit, make it clear what I did, leave no room to hide. But now I know I can't [...] I don't know how to speak the unspeakable" (*In the Light*, 548). In this instance, Zafar's presence at the narrator's home at the start of the novel is exposed. Zafar has come to articulate this very moment in his life; in the end he is unable to do so. His anxieties concerning his location as a 'non-entity' in a globalised world – which has subsequently led to the 'unspeakable' moment between Emily and himself – has thrown him into a position of instability. In his conversations with the narrator, Zafar attempts to totalise his experience as a global subject who symbolises the negative aspects of globalisation; he is at the bottom of the hierarchical divide, and his relationship with Emily is a constant reminder of his subjectivity. Rahman's lack of closure in the novel exposes the complexities of globalisation. Zafar is a globalised character who persistently strives to belong to somewhere, to find a home. Ultimately, he will always remain oppressed in the workings of globalisation. In the narrator's failings to articulate the "emblem of totality" (*In the Light*, 527) through fiction, Rahman has voiced the need for action in the real world; he recognises fictions' limitations, and through playing out such limitations through his characters, he shows an awareness for the fact that the fictional space can only imagine working towards a positive and negative understanding of globalisation. The novel envisages the need for future progression. A utopian existence for all of humanity can only be attained by a process of working through the pitfalls of globalisation without conforming to a hegemonic discourse of for or against. For all the novel's narrative knowledge, its epigraphs, its diagrams, its digressions and its footnotes,
"[e]verything new is on the rim of our view, in the darkness, below the horizon, so that nothing new is visible but in the light of what we know" (In the Light, 320).

Conclusion

Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* and Zia Haider Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know* are contemporary works of fiction which explore the effects and experiences of what it means to live in a globalised world. Both novels foreground the multiplicity of globalisation through the use of complex structures of plot, narrative and characterisation. However, where Franzen's novel is unable to transcend the hegemonic discourse that maintains the division of the positive and negative aspects of globalisation through his political and anti-capitalist intrusion, Rahman dramatises the limitations of narrative knowledge in order to highlight the need for the continued evaluation of globalisation. By challenging the power of the narrative space, Rahman's work reveals the instability of fiction and in turn the instability of globalisation as a concept. *In the Light of What We Know* engages with both the positive and negative aspects of globalisation without falling, as Franzen's novel does, into the undesirable and unproductive realm of determinism. Jeffrey T. Nealon has suggested that "innovation" is the tool of the humanities, and that the humanities has the capacity "to think, to transcend, to approach, to imagine" (2012, 191). Fiction certainly has these qualities, and Rahman's novel is one that invites its readers to take action in the landscape of global capitalism by working with its oppositional structures rather than against them. This tactic requires cooperation between authors, readers, politicians, critics and theorists alike, as Lambert, Beziudenhout and Webster suggest: "It will be a journey where each of us will have to imagine that another world is possible" (2009, 226). *In the Light of What We Know* approaches contemporary feelings of anxiety with one eye on the future, imaging not just what the novel can do, but what needs to be done outside of it.

Works Cited


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