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LEOPOLD LIPPERT

Performing America Abroad

Transnational Cultural Politics
in the Age of Neoliberal Capitalism

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1 Introduction

Consider the following scenario: It is a scorching hot early afternoon in June 2010, and I am attending a free concert by the Austrian singer and entertainer Waterloo. The concert is open-air, and it takes place in a run-down food market in the Meidling neighborhood of Vienna, close to my apartment at the time. Like all public appearances of Waterloo, the concert is informed by a peculiar cross-racial fantasy: Waterloo is an 'Indian' persona invented and played by the white Upper Austrian performer Hans Kreuzmayr, who regularly dons redface in order to entertain his audiences. During the Meidling concert, Kreuzmayr-as-Waterloo not only relies on visual markers that connote Indianness (such as feathers, a leather necklace, long coarse hair, or his exceptionally well-tanned skin), but also relates various kinds of purportedly Native American wisdom, and performs his signature Indian song "Heya," a repetitive five-minute 'war chant' complete with clichéd howling and stomping. As Waterloo, Kreuzmayr stands in for an elusive and to some extent illusional, yet ultimately paradigmatic American figure: the Indian. As he performs this fantasy of Native Americanness in a Viennese food market, Kreuzmayr curiously plays with, and ultimately reinvents a national character abroad.

Kreuzmayr's nonchalant impersonation of an imaginary Indian persona in Austria constitutes a complex cultural practice: Obviously, the easy adoption of a racialized national character reminds us that America, as an overarching and contested set of cultural ideas, circulates among various populations and publics, and does not coincide readily with the geographical and institutional boundaries of the U.S. nation-state. As the example of Kreuzmayr-as-Waterloo indicates, America routinely transgresses these boundaries, as it is imagined, accessed, adapted, modified, reworked, or hybridized from abroad. But the Waterloo persona also raises a number of more specific questions about how exactly America is deployed beyond the (variously configured) boundaries of the U.S.— questions that recent cultural theory has discussed under the heading of

liberal governmentality poses to American studies informed by the politics of transnational difference.

2.5 American Exceptionalism and the Geopolitics of Neoliberalism

Ever since its global rise in the late 1970s and early 1980s, neoliberal capitalism has altered decisively the dynamics of a large number of cultural, social, and political processes. While philosophically, neoliberalism has been articulated and debated since the 1930s (and is commonly associated with the writings of the Austrian economist Friedrich August von Hayek and the Chicago School of Economics), its political rise to a globally dominant economic and cultural logic is commonly linked with the presidency of Ronald Reagan in the U.S. (1981–1989) and the tenure of Margaret Thatcher as Prime minister of the United Kingdom (1979–1990).²⁷ Crucially, neoliberalism has never represented merely an economic formation, but rather has evolved as an overarching geopolitical and biopolitical technology invested in producing, reproducing, and maintaining particular forms of life.²⁸ Importantly for this argument, neoliberalism has relied heavily on technologies of management and control such as diversity, choice, autonomy, self-realization, as well as the crossing and recalibration of boundaries and borders; consequently, it has challenged seriously the critical potential and historical legacy of various politics of difference, which have depended on similar tactics. Like many other differential politics, the politics of *transnational* difference—despite its aspiration to circumvent or break free from the limiting confines of nationalism, metaphorical and physical border policing, and

American exceptionalism—has also faced the challenge of co-optation by such neoliberal techniques as mobility, free trade, and cross-border flexibility. Indeed, transnational difference represents a particularly complex problematic, since it is positioned at the intersection of the geopolitical and the biopolitical dimensions of neoliberal capitalism.

The ‘geopolitical challenge,’ on the one hand, revolves around the disconcerting alignment of neoconservative discourses of American exceptionalism with the neoliberal U.S. nation-state, and the postulation of transnational differences as ‘exceptional’ in order to rationalize the neo-imperial project of U.S. global dominance. The ‘biopolitical challenge,’ on the other hand, is constituted by the increasing co-optation, commodification, and normalization of transnational subjectivities and cultural formations, a process enabled by the transformation of formerly resistant differentials into normative markers of biopolitical control. As a result of these challenges, I argue, the notion of ‘difference’ is always fraught with political ambivalence; in order to conceptualize transnational difference, thus, we need to elaborate theories and methodologies that account for these ambivalences. While American studies scholarship has often recognized and critiqued the effects of both geopolitical and biopolitical neoliberal challenges, a systematic description of the structural entanglement of neoliberalism and transnational difference is still lacking.

Not to acknowledge the structurality of this interweaving, however, leads to an overemphasis on the resistant or counter-hegemonic potentialities of transnationalism in American studies, and valorizes what Johannes Voelz calls “utopias of transnationalism” (356)—the critical celebration of transnational difference as subversive of narrow national identities, which often results in credulous accounts of uninhibited flows of culture and capital across borders, and which deeply underestimates the ambivalent entanglement of transnationalism and the neoliberal nation-state. “[T]ransnationalism,” Voelz warns, “is in danger of overlooking the extent to which it actually interacts with economic globalization” (367). The following sections, then, examine this interaction: Aiming at a fuller and more balanced understanding of the potentials and dangers of the ‘transnational’ in current American culture, I anatomize the ambivalences of transnational difference, discuss the challenges presented by the geopolitics and biopolitics of neoliberal capitalism, and speculate about the possibilities of transnational critique.

²⁷ For a perceptive history of the economic and philosophical rationales of neoliberal politics, see Lars Gertenbach’s *Die Kultivierung des Marktes* [The Cultivation of the Market], 37–83.

²⁸ I rely here on a Foucaultian understanding of biopolitics, which refers to a form of rational governmental management of the vital and social functions of whole populations, and thus, to a struggle over power that affects the basis of social life itself. In his 1978–79 lecture series, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault describes biopolitics as “the attempt, starting from the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems posed to governmental practice by phenomena characteristic of a set of living beings forming a population: health, hygiene, birthrate, life expectancy, race...” (317).

The *geopolitics* of neoliberal globalization is characterized by a structural paradox: Despite the rhetoric of global market deregulation and a general trend towards the privatization of public institutions, the environment, and social relations, the nation-state has played a vital role in supplying governmental technologies in the interests of global capital. While the policies of neoliberal globalization ‘officially’ propagate uninhibited global economic flows and a minimum of state interference, the nation-state has in fact routinely served as crucial resource of interventionism. Resorting to a number of measures such as direct and indirect investments, public-private partnerships, legal regulations in the interest of capital, free-trade agreements and selective protectionism, police and military interventions, or the recent bail-outs of large banks and companies, the nation-state has hardly disappeared or decreased in relevance, but rather has reconfigured itself as a neoliberal entity. Increasingly, the neoliberal nation-state’s role as a harbinger of free market liberalism and facilitator of global capital accumulation and redistribution is also a transnational one: It has enabled the rise and reign of deterritorialized finance capital and multinational corporations, and continues to empower global financial institutions such as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, or the World Bank. Economist Joseph E. Stiglitz, for instance, points out that in concert with the World Bank and the IMF, Western nation-states and in particular the U.S. “have pushed poor countries to eliminate trade barriers, but kept up their own barriers, preventing developing countries from exporting their agricultural products and so depriving them of desperately needed export income” (6). Neoliberal geopolitics, accordingly, is far from the disempowerment of nation-states at the hands of transnational corporations; rather, it centers on the rhetorical effacement of the troublesome alliance between the neoliberal nation-state and transnational capital that drives the globalized economy.²⁹

In the U.S., the rise of neoliberalism is associated with the Reagan presidency and its radical deregulation of domestic and international mar-

kets paired with military state interventionism in the context of Cold War U.S. neoimperialism. In particular, Reagan facilitated and endorsed a long-lasting alliance between extreme economic liberalism and cultural conservatism, between *laissez-faire* capitalism and a moral righteousness centered on supposed ‘family values’ and cultural nationalism.³⁰ This association of neoliberalism and neoconservatism has gained in strength in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center buildings, when the so-called ‘Global War on Terrorism’ set in motion what Amy Kaplan has called a “coming-out narrative” (“Belongings” 4) of neoconservatives on the issue of U.S. imperialism. After 9/11, Kaplan argues, neoliberal neoconservatives have begun to “aggressively celebrate [...] the United States as finally revealing its true essence—its manifold destiny—on a global stage” (“Belongings” 4). The routine disavowal of the imperial character of U.S. world domination in public discourse, she claims, has become a thing of the past, replaced by a renewed and unapologetic pride in American global power.

Ideologically central to the current alliance of neoliberal capitalism and the neoimperialist geopolitical project of the U.S. nation-state that Kaplan describes is the concept and discourse of American exceptionalism. While the vocabulary of American exceptionalism has historically varied and included such notions as democracy, republicanism, liberal individualism, free markets, meritocracy, or lately, racial, gender, and sexual equality, it is important to note that its cultural and political efficacy has hardly depended upon its veracity. On the contrary, as Pease argues, American exceptionalism represents a differential desire that manufactures its own truth, a self-evident fantasy of national distinction. In Pease’s formulation, “Americans could not be deceived about American exceptionalism because [...] they articulated the truth of their nationalizing desire in and through this deception” (*Exceptionalism* 21).³¹ Obvi-

³⁰ For a succinct overview of the so-called “Reagan-Revolution,” see Thomas Biebricher, *Neoliberalismus zur Einführung* [An Introduction to Neoliberalism], 111–123, but also Colin Crouch’s *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism*, 16–23.

³¹ In his 2009 book *The New American Exceptionalism*, Pease argues that American exceptionalism is not just a self-fulfilling promise, but represents a national fantasy that has emerged first and foremost as a fantasy of disavowal—disavowing precisely the countless exceptions the U.S. state takes from the gran-

ously, the self-fulfilling truths of American exceptionalism have a history older than neoliberal capitalism; however, the belief that the U.S. represents an exceptional nation-state, which others should hold as an exemplary model, has gained particular relevance in the current incarnation of the U.S. as a transnational neoliberal state. The discourse of American exceptionalism adds a strongly ideological qualitative dimension to transnational differentials, as it transforms attributes that allegedly make America 'different' into politically and ethically loaded 'unique,' 'exceptional' or 'exemplary' characteristics, which then serve as yardsticks against which other, non-American phenomena or practices could and should be measured. The subtle overlapping of differentials and distinctions enabled by American exceptionalism not only serves as the conceptual justification of U.S. neoimperialism, but also troubles transnational practices which rely on similar differentials, and are thus particularly susceptible to reiterate, perhaps unintentionally, the exceptional logic.

This dynamic also registers on the level of critique: That transnational scholarship on the ideological confines of the American nation-state can still get caught up in exceptionalist hermeneutics has been recognized, for instance, by Bryce Traister, who argues that scholars often merely construct new exceptionalisms in order to release themselves from older versions. Traister identifies one such trope of transnational critique as the "desire to release the present from the burden of the past in order to create unanticipated possibilities for a new community of scholars and Americans, freed from the carceral narratives of that past" (13). In fact, he claims, this trope "reanimates one of the oldest and most familiar narratives of American national self-fashioning, a story told from the American Revolution to Civil Rights and beyond by, literally, a legion of American authors, thinkers, activists, and politicians" (13). While attempting to take transnational exception from American exceptionalism, Traister asserts,

those assertions of American exceptionalism. For instance, to believe—as good neoliberal U.S. citizens do—in free markets as an exceptionally American feature that should be spread across the globe, necessarily means to disavow the many interventionist and protectionist policies the U.S. enacts to further its own interests. While American exceptionalism continuously produces these structural contradictions, they do not register on the fantasmatic level or trouble people's investments in their desire for the nation; quite the opposite, Pease claims, the fantasy of disavowal constitutes a productive and pervasive practice of asserting American citizenship.

scholars often only update a well-known exceptionalist trope, a motion which hardly classifies as a critical and field-renewing gesture. This reiteration of an exceptionally American narrative in transnational guise is particularly problematic for scholars in the U.S., as they are often inadvertently entangled in the geopolitics of the U.S. university, which has co-opted much of the rhetoric of the transnational turn in order to aggressively expand on a global scale. Relying not only on the 'exceptionality' of American higher education (plus the 'brand' status that certain institutions enjoy) but also, and crucially, on a transnational critique of the limited horizon of the nation-state, institutions like NYU's Global Network University, among many others, build and maintain satellite campuses and other academic infrastructure around the globe and thus complement the neoimperial geopolitics of the transnational U.S. state with the increasingly managerial and profit-oriented politics of higher education.³²

However, my point here is that the imbrication of transnational difference and American exceptionalism is not only a matter of particular flawed narrative tropes or institutional constellations (which can be remedied, theoretically), but rather a structural characteristic of neoliberal geopolitics that informs any conceptualization of transnational difference from the American nation-state. By turning something *different* into something *exceptional*, the hermeneutics of American exceptionalism provides a mechanism which folds the transnational critique of a narrowly conceived national culture back into the exceptionalist national logic. The more stable the transnational differentials are, it might be argued, the more compelling is the double bind of exceptionalism. In the context of the relatively strong differentials of molar adaptation or circulation, American exceptionalism rather effortlessly absorbs transnational critique in order to further the interests of the neoliberal state. For instance, an analysis of Facebook that transcends the U.S. national imaginary in order to study the transnational adaptations of the social networking site in non-American localities (such as Egypt or Tunisia), is likely to advance Facebook (and its forms of subjectivity, interactivity and critique) as an exceptionally American application in which other, different cultures are eager to become competent in order to solve their political problems.

³² For the controversy that surrounded NYU president John Sexton's global expansion plan, see Nick Pinto, "As Growth Shifts Into Overdrive," and Rachel Aviv, "The Imperial Presidency."

2.6 Neoliberal Biopolitics and the New Spirit of Capitalism

Although related to some extent to its geopolitics, the *biopolitics* of neoliberal capitalism poses a separate challenge to transnational difference from America. Less concerned with American exceptionalism, neoliberal biopolitics produces a governmentality of difference, that is, a particular mode of subjectivation and rationality of self-conduct tied to differential practices. Central to an understanding of such governmentality is Michel Foucault's discussion of the idea of 'human capital,' outlined in his 1978–79 lecture series *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Foucault argues that neoliberalism has extended the logic of the market to domains previously thought of as non-economic, such as physical and psychological health, natural resources and processes, individual and collective identifications and being, and eventually the entire field of social reproduction. On the one hand, this extension has led to a revaluation of the classic subject of economic theory, the "*homo oeconomicus*," who is redefined as an "entrepreneur of himself [sic], being for himself his own capital" (*Biopolitics* 226), and who is therefore in need of constant 'investment' in the form of numerous techniques of self-improvement and self-optimization (such as therapy, coaching, lifelong learning, grooming, healthy food, sports, or personal branding). Even more so, as Nikolas Rose points out, "the vital politics [of the twenty-first century] is concerned with our growing capacities to control, manage, engineer, reshape, and modulate the very vital capacities of human beings as living creatures" (*Life Itself* 3). On the other hand, the rise of neoliberal capitalism has led to what David Harvey laconically describes as the "commodification of everything" (165), that is, the transformation of a diverse range of things, phenomena, individuals, or relations into objects fit for consumption and compliant with the consumerist logics of supply and demand.³⁴

Both comprehensive entrepreneurialism and universal commodification depend on a strategic realignment of the concept of 'difference' in

³⁴ In addition to the classic Foucaultian argument, my account of neoliberal biopolitics also relies on Thomas Biebricher, *Neoliberalismus zur Einführung* [An Introduction to Neoliberalism], and Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul and The Politics of Life Itself*. Importantly, there are also a number of accounts of neoliberalism relatively unconcerned with its biopolitical dimensions, such as Colin Crouch, *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism*, or David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

What's more, an analysis that exclusively focuses on the molar transnational differentials generated by Facebook's global reach runs the risk of neglecting or downplaying the involvement of the site with the neoliberal U.S. nation-state, an involvement which obviously includes such practices as Facebook's tacit cooperation with the data-mining procedures of the National Security Agency (NSA), but which also, more generally, includes the company's overall adherence to the rules and regulations of U.S. law.

For a field so invested in studying the specific Americanness of the American imagined community it is all but impossible to divest itself entirely of the "tenacious grasp of American exceptionalism" (Kaplan, "Tenacious" 153). To practice American studies scholarship, simply by virtue of studying America and the ways in which America is different from other national imaginaries, always already means to enter into a dubious relationship with the ideological force of American exceptionalism. Hence, it is rather redundant to set up yet another transnational critique as a route of escape from co-optation by American exceptionalism, especially if that critique is constructed at the expense of leveling the exceptionalist charge at earlier traditions of American studies, which simply struggled with similar problems.³³ Instead, as American studies scholars we might acknowledge and critically interrogate the *ambivalences* of transnational difference in the context of the exceptionalist geopolitics of the U.S. Rather than pondering new strategies that might set us free from exceptionalism's grasp, we should be as observant as possible of the ways in which differential transnational critique in fact adds justificatory strength to that very grasp; rather than getting caught in what Robyn Wiegman describes as a "field-forming syntax, in which refusal, exteriority, and political consciousness are fused" (*Lessons* 237), we need to come to terms, theoretically and methodically, with the profound political ambivalence of the transnational turn.

³³ One such genealogy of (anti-)exceptionalist critique can be traced, for instance, through Pease's re-reading of Kaplan's re-reading of Djelal Kadir's inaugural presidential address to the International American Studies Association (IASA), in which Pease finally suggests "a comparativist model of imperial state exceptionalisms" (80) as yet another way out of the exceptionalist trap (see Pease, "American Studies after American Exceptionalism," 47–58; Kaplan, "The Tenacious Grasp of American Exceptionalism," and Kadir, "Defending America against Its Devotees").

the interest of capital accumulation. Although neoliberal rhetoric advances differential practice as an emancipatory means of self-realization or empowerment, difference in fact emerges as a normative means to accrue and cultivate human capital. Under these conditions, difference is only nominally linked to alterity, dialectics, or resistant politics; much more so, it represents a major technology of neoliberal governmentality and control. Difference, for instance, sustains the commodification process, including the attempt to expand the scope of commodified domains, as all commodity modification depends on the continuous and practically endless differentiation and diversification of product characteristics and product variety. A product that is 'different' increases its appeal to consumers and thus in no way challenges the established logics of consumerism and capital accumulation. What is more, the neoliberal 'entrepreneurs of themselves' depend for their economic success (which is equated, according to neoliberal logic, with their legitimation as subjects) on continuous self-differentiation and self-modification in order to remain competitive. Neoliberal governmentality rationalizes an ethos of being- and becoming-different that turns subjects into mobile, flexible, hybrid, and adaptive entities whose subjectivation and cultural legibility depend on the questioning, transgression, and eventually the management of all kinds of confines, limitations, or boundaries, including national ones; it is no coincidence, after all, that "flexible citizenship" (Ong, *Flexible 1*) has emerged as one of the hallmarks of contemporary neoliberal culture.

The co-optation of these mostly molecular, ever-shifting differences by neoliberal capitalism, however, does not necessarily mean that neoliberal biopolitics constitutes a totalizing and oppressive political field that automatically invalidates the emancipatory potential of differential rhetoric and practice. Indeed, we should not underestimate the appeal of an itinerant, flexible self that easily steps in and out of disciplinary categories of embodiment, conduct, or nation. Still, the fact that this kind of molecular empowerment strictly functions according to the rationales of (human) capital accumulation and conceives of subjectivity always only as entrepreneurial, as well as the fact that this form of governmentality entails the normalization of both difference and transgression, makes neoliberal biopolitics a highly ambivalent political framework.

In their influential sociological treatise, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello attribute this ambivalence to the "dynamic relationship between capitalism and critique" (xiii) and to cap-

italism's uncanny ability to co-opt and make commensurable its critiques (which are, after all, a set of differential arguments). Over the last decades, Boltanski and Chiapello argue, neoliberal capitalism has been particularly absorptive of the "artistic critique" (38) voiced by various liberation movements and countercultural formations during the late 1960s and 1970s.³⁵ Attacking the conformity, hierarchy, and disciplinary logics of mass-administered state capitalism during the first half of the twentieth century, the artistic critique condemned all forms of oppression or subjection and demanded the liberation of the individual, chances for self-realization, the subversion of narrow social arrangements, schedules, or traditions, and a reinvigorated politics of difference (such as racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual difference). Over the years, neoliberal capitalism has adapted these demands for its own routines of accumulation: Quite ingeniously, it has shifted from a disciplinary to a managerial approach to human diversity and difference and has made productive as well as accountable the very individualized, adaptive, and highly flexible forms of subjectivity the countercultures of the 1960s had demanded. As a result of neoliberalism's remarkable normalization and management of formerly resistant practices and differential critique, Boltanski and Chiapello hold, the 'new spirit' of capitalism has begun to accumulate capital through the diversification of identities, social practices, and ways of life; creative freedoms and individualized labor routines; as well as transnational mobility and flexibility.

This biopolitical co-optation of differential critique by neoliberal capitalism has been recognized in a number of critical discourses that have relied traditionally on a politics of cultural difference in order to voice their concerns. Concerning feminist practice and critique, Inderpal Grewal, Rosalind Gill, or Nancy Fraser have tried to come to terms with the transformation of differential identity positions (such as 'woman') into consumable lifestyles. Fraser, for instance, discerns a "cunning of history" ("Cunning" 209) that has undermined the resistant potential of feminist critique, not just in the domain of consumerism, but also with respect to gender politics and transnationalism. "Unambiguously emancipatory in

³⁵ Boltanski and Chiapello stress that for empirical reasons, their analysis focuses on France, but similar critiques have been articulated in the U.S. and many other Western countries.

the era of state-organized capitalism," Fraser claims, "[feminist] critiques of economism, androcentrism, étatism, and Westphalianism now appear fraught with ambiguity, susceptible to serving the legitimization needs of a new form of capitalism" ("Cunning" 223).³⁶ A corresponding critique concerned with the politics of sexual difference is formulated by Lisa Duggan, who in her *The Twilight of Equality?* denounces the emergence of an individualized, privatized, (newlywed) LGBTIQ culture at the expense of broader public coalitions or political movements. Duggan coins the term "homonormativity" (50) to describe the normalization of sexual difference and social reproduction that has taken place since the 1990s. Formerly resistant practices of queer subjectivity and culture, which relied on differential critique in order to address broader issues of social and representational injustice, Duggan argues, have been thoroughly reconfigured by capitalism's new spirit, and have begun to serve the purpose of individual advancement and the accumulation of human capital instead.

With regard to multiculturalism and the politics of racial and ethnic difference, similar transformations of formerly resistant differentials have been observed. In their *Ethnicity, Inc.*, John L. and Jean Comaroff describe the rise of ethnic marketing and cultural branding as a form of incorporation of identity along molar lines of difference. Central to this process is "a projection of the entrepreneurial subject of neoliberalism onto the plane of collective existence" (140), a projection that turns forms of collective belonging and difference such as ethnic identity into human capital that can be marketed and eventually consumed. Ethnic self-fashioning, which was coupled routinely with demands for social recognition or economic justice, they claim, has been co-opted by the neoliberal imperative to turn whatever differential one has access to into capital resources. "[T]he more successful any ethnic population is in commodifying its difference," they argue, "the faster it will debase whatever made

it different to begin with" (19).³⁷ In an argument more concerned with the commodification of molecular differences, Kien Nghi Ha describes how notions of hybridity and hybrid difference have informed marketing and branding strategies for products reaching from car engines to pop culture. "Global capitalism," Ha argues, "has increasingly discovered the hybrid factor as a promising key element for the production and refinement of cultural products for consumption" (76).³⁸ Neoliberal biopolitics, all these authors suggest, has altered and reevaluated the politically resistant or transgressive potential of differential practice in a large number of cultural and social domains.

In the context of transnational American studies, and especially in U.S. scholarship, however, critics have generally focused on the geopolitical and macroeconomic dimensions of neoliberal capitalism, and not so much on its biopolitical imbrication with cultures and politics of difference. While the last decades saw a broad debate among German-language scholars on neoliberal biopolitics, U.S. critics of neoliberalism in the transnational realm have been more concerned with the U.S.' global financial and economic power, its neoimperial ambitions and racisms, and its wide-reaching political influence. A magisterial 2008 *American Quarterly* article on "Transnationalism: A Category of Analysis" may serve as a typical example of the selective discussion of neoliberal cultures. Its three authors, Laura Briggs, Gladys McCormick, and J.T. Way, emphasize the importance of transnational approaches to a critique of neoliberalism, but tellingly only refer to neoliberal geopolitics. Hence, a subsection entitled "A Few Recent Interventions: Mapping Neoliberalism, Feminism, War" (633) examines macroeconomic privatization and neoliberal governance on a global scale, but forgoes neoliberal capitalism's absorption and revaluation of cultures of difference and differential critique. Arguably, it is because of this oversight that Briggs, McCormick,

³⁷ Although *Ethnicity, Inc.* recognizes the performative nature of this form of ethnic differentiating, it is only concerned with forms ethnic self-fashioning (such as, for instance, the branding of Scottish identity by Scottish people [4–5]), not with ethnic stereotyping by white populations; the latter will be discussed in chapter 4 of this book. In her *No Logo*, Naomi Klein makes a similar point and observes the "triumph of identity marketing" (107).

³⁸ My translation from German: "im globalisiersten Kapitalismus wird der Hybridfaktor zunehmend als viel versprechendes Schlüsselement zur Herstellung und Veredelung von kulturellen Konsumprodukten entdeckt."

³⁶ A recent textbook example of the corporate absorption of feminist critique can be found in Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg's 2012 bestseller *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* and the 'movement' this book generated. For an astute analysis (and rejection) of how Sandberg instrumentalizes feminist rhetoric in order to legitimize and praise the flexible, project-oriented forms of subjectivation required by neoliberalism, see Susan Faludi, "Facebook Feminism, Like It or Not,"

2.7 Ambivalent Transnationalism or: Beyond Neoliberalism?

But what are the implications of a more active acknowledgement of neoliberal geo- and biopolitics for American studies as a field formation? Primarily, I argue, this acknowledgement entails resisting the understandable urge to conjure up rhetorically a critical position located *beyond* the entanglement of transnationalism, difference, and neoliberalism—a strategy that would morally elevate the critic and make her or him appear immune to ideological co-optation. When Lauren Berlant quips, “[b]eyonding is a rhetoric people use when they have a desire not to be stuck” (“Starved” 80), she points to these affective dimensions of critique: the emotional satisfaction derived from the establishment of critique as yet another, even more radical form of escape or resistance, as a way of dissociating one’s own critical subjectivity from the (problematic) phenomenon one is studying. However, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and others have argued, such distancing often amounts to a form of critical paranoia: Not only do scholars suspect obscured ideological power structures in every cultural practice they analyze, but they also develop a confident trust in the resistant political efficacy of their own revelatory critique. Paranoid critique, Sedgwick points out, “may be experienced by the practitioner as a triumphant advance towards truth and vindication” (133).³⁹

The confidence that critical ‘beyonding’ automatically has vindictive impact, however, is especially problematic in the context of neoliberal capitalism, since neoliberalism, as we have seen, routinely incorporates its critiques through commodification, functionalization, or management. In such a regime, any critique that attempts to venture beyond transnational difference (in both its molar and molecular forms), however, faces the paradoxical challenge to be *differently* different, and to assume an externality that can only be theoretical or utopian at best.⁴⁰ As Ulrich

³⁹ Even though not everyone subscribes to Sedgwick’s idea of “paranoid reading” (123), a growing number of critics have pointed out the affective dimensions of contemporary cultural (Americanist) critique. See Christopher Castiglia, “Cold War Allegories and the Politics of Criticism,” Jane Elliott and Gillian Harkins, “Introduction: Genres of Neoliberalism,” Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature*, or Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons*.

⁴⁰ Lee Edelman’s *No Future* is one example of such theoretical beyonding. Edelman associates queerness with a negativity so radical that it represents an

and Way put forward an overly celebratory assessment of transnationalism’s resistant political potential.

A closer scrutiny of the ways in which the differential logic of transnationalism has been reconfigured by the new spirit of capitalism and has been absorbed into its routines of accumulation, however, suggests a more ambiguous assessment of transnational cultural practice. Because of its differential logics, transnationalism shares conceptual ground with many of the above politics of resistance and recognition, and thus faces similar challenges from the pervasiveness of neoliberal biopolitics. Transnationalism’s border-crossings and transgressions of various territorialities run the risk not only of making manageable global capital flows, but also of supporting the hybrid politics of flexible subjectivation and accumulation. In their influential *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri state, “[t]he affirmation of hybridities and the free play of differences across boundaries [...] is liberatory only in a context where power poses hierarchy exclusively through essential identities, binary divisions, and stable oppositions” (142). Such a context of disciplinary power with clear distinctions between inside and outside (and powerful means of policing such distinctions), however, has been progressively eroded by capitalism’s new spirit, and by neoliberalism’s biopolitical transformation of the concept of difference. In its place, Hardt and Negri argue, there has emerged a system of power and capital accumulation that operates precisely through the differential processes of hybridization, diversification, and adaptive control.

As American studies scholars, we have to recognize that transnationalism’s critique of the disciplinary confines of the nation-state is routinely challenged by the biopolitics of neoliberalism. To argue that differential practices are potentially open to neoliberal co-optation, however, should not be taken to mean that the critical logics on which they are based actually caused the comparatively uncomplicated rise of neoliberalism on a global scale. Rather, it simply means that a critique of the American imagined community constructed along the paradigm of the border always already has to negotiate its own imbrication in neoliberal biopolitics, as well as the ambivalence this imbrication engenders. If we want to take seriously the transnational turn, we need to acknowledge the connections between molecular transnationalism and the new spirit of capitalism, and more generally recognize that there lies immense political significance in the disciplinary frameworks, institutional structures, and conceptual paradigms of transnationalism in a neoliberal age.

Bröckling puts it, “the contradiction of prescribing difference as a norm for all [cannot] be evaded by being even more different” (198).

Against such being-even-more-different, I suggest a critical reflectiveness aware of the ambivalences produced by the overlapping and simultaneity of the resistant potentialities of difference on the one hand, and its normative management functions on the other. As American studies scholars studying the effects of transnationalism, we should not rely all too easily on the perceived efficacy of critical distancing, and rather attempt to explicitly negotiate our own imbrication in neoliberal logics: even as we analyze transnational American cultural practice (which I will do in this book), we still have to be aware of the political significance of differential transnationalism as a cultural analytic in the first place. A more ambivalent critical attitude generates neither a hopeful celebration nor a dismissive downplaying of the intervention performed by the transnational turn. Instead, it shifts the focus to a contextual mapping of the various ways in which neoliberalism simultaneously enables and forecloses particular differential reading practices. Instead, it attempts to evaluate politically the various co-optations of differential transnationalism in the context of neoliberal capitalism. Instead, finally, it negotiates actively the ambivalent terrain on which transnational difference has been and can be articulated—a terrain delineated by the appeal of resistant rhetoric and the relentless commodification of differential practice; by the emancipatory transgression of boundaries and the unfettered flows of global capital; by the critique of the nation-state and the indefatigable authority of American exceptionalism; and by the promise of empowerment through flexibility and the rigorous normalizations of managerial control.

This chapter has provided a critical rationale for why a more ambivalent assessment of transnational cultural practice is necessary. On the one hand, I have offered a survey of the most prominent conceptual approaches to transnationalism, and have outlined basic terminology for my

“opposition [...] precisely to any such logic of opposition” (24). Its critical power (and its burden), Edelman claims, “is located less in the assertion of an oppositional political identity than in opposition to politics” (17). In their *Commonwealth*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri perform a similar critical move, and propose a utopian “altermodernity [which] extends beyond opposition and resistance” (103). Both interventions, albeit articulated in different cultural and political contexts, have had to answer hard questions about their applicability for political practice.

own cultural analyses (chapters 4 to 6). This has entailed the systematization of two major paradigms, and the examination of the distinct notions of difference these paradigms use to differentiate the transnational from the national. On the other hand, I have shown what it means politically to study American culture as transnational in the context of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. As neoliberal geo- and biopolitics routinely co-opt transnational practice as well as critique, it is crucial to develop an analytic that accounts for these entanglements. In the following chapter, I suggest that ‘performance’ can be such an analytic: Arguably, performance has emerged as a prominent “[genre] of neoliberalism” (Elliott and Harkins 1) that not only refers to cultural, economic, and technological domains alike, but also conceptually links neoliberalism with transnationalism: through performance, I will show, we can account for potentially transgressive transnational practice *as well as* for neoliberal functionalization and subjectivation.