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Constructing and Contesting the State(s) of Exception: Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* and the American Transnational Novel

9/11 Novels and the State of Exception

In the United States, the contemporary debate about the “states of exception” has been long related to the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. From Giorgio Agamben’s seminal studies (*Homo Sacer I*, 1995; and *State of Exception: Homo Sacer II*, 2003) to Jason Ralph’s *America’s War on Terror. The State of the 9/11 Exception from Bush to Obama* (2013), there have been numerous philosophers, historians, and sociologists who have investigated the relation between exception and sovereignty in the twenty-first century, and the elements of continuity and discontinuity with the previous decades. From its origins, located by Agamben in the French Revolution, its use in and after WWI and its role in the formation of dictatorships and totalitarian regimes in European countries, the state of exception can be located in the interstice between law and politics; as regards the American context and the US Constitution, it calls into question the dialectic between the powers of the president and those of Congress, that turns mainly into a conflict over sovereign decision in an emergency situation, like (and especially) a state of war. As Agamben notes, since “the sovereign power of the president is essentially grounded in the emergency linked to a state of war, over the course of the twentieth century the metaphor of war becomes an integral part of the presidential political vocabulary whenever decisions considered to be of vital importance are being imposed” (Agamben 21).¹ It is precisely this “emergency,” or exception, in its suspension of the Rule, that, according to Slavoj Žižek, has been the most cohesive element for national communities (64).

The “exceptional response” that 9/11 provoked, the limitation of individual freedoms, and exclusionary policies within the country with the USA Patriot Act as well as the military consequences abroad, have been the object of a plethora of literature in the following decades, which mostly depicted 9/11 as a turning point in world history, a personal and collective trauma that left individuals and writers, especially in the months that followed the attacks, overwhelmed by images but with no language to voice their disorientation and anguish.

As for fiction, to the “loss for words” DeLillo complained of in his “In the Ruins of the Future” in November 2001 so many writers responded by the middle of the decade that a new sub-genre was born – “9/11 fiction,” that is, literature in which 9/11 events are the setting and the theme of the narrative. As Birgit Dawes pointed out in her exhaustive *Ground Zero Fiction: History, Memory, and Representation in the American 9/11 Novel*, in the first ten years after the attacks more than 230 novels about 9/11 were written, 162 of which by US novelists (6).

Most of these novels, mimetically re-enacting the events, eschewed social and political discourses in favour of a retreat into domesticity: the trauma and the process of healing were depicted as a personal, individual struggle that consigned society and politics to the background. In seeking refuge from the bewilderment of 9/11, the characters in these novels looked for comfort in traditional structures like the family or small communities – a trend that can be seen, for example, in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) and Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007). However, some novels questioned the hegemonic culture’s ideological boundaries and political and social repercussions. These works, as critic Richard Gray commented,

resist the challenge of silence by deploying forms of speech that are genuinely crossbred and transitional, subverting the oppositional language of mainstream commentary – Us and Them, West and East, Christian and Muslim. And they respond to the heterogeneous character of the United States and its necessary positioning in a transnational context by what I would call deterritorializing America. [...] All of them, in short, try to reimagine disaster by presenting us with an America situated between cultures. (17)

In addition to dismantling the binary oppositions constructed by hegemonic discourse and underlying the pluralism of the American experience, some novels also contested the ideological foundations of the state of exception by shifting their focus beyond the boundaries of the nation-state in an attempt to “imagine how US citizenship looks and feels, both for Americans and for others” (Rothberg 158). According to Michael Rothberg, to resist the “authority of closure” 9/11 novels should also include those works written by transnational authors, capable, as Caren Irr noted in her pivotal text on what she termed the “geopolitical novel,” to “situate the United States on a variegated international map rather than universalizing its time-space” (185). Opposing isolationist myths and promoting forms of global identification, these novels investigate and question the state’s hegemonic imaginaries sustaining affiliations with the transnational. Their transnationality however does not negate, but articulate the mutation in state power of the United States and the hybridities generated by its cultural deterritorialization.

Among the transnational novels that questioned the many facets of the construction and legitimacy of the state of exception related to 9/11 events, Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* (2008) is probably the one that stimulated the majority of critical responses due to its complexity and self-reflexivity. Constructed as a series of flashbacks from the narrative present of 2006 in London, when the narrator is informed of his friend Chuck’s death, the story is told from the perspective of the Dutch-born equities analyst Hans van der Broek, who follows his wife Rachel, an English lawyer, to New York in 1998. The plan is “to drop in on NY for a year or three” (O’Neill 1) and then go back to London. Although they are successful and wealthy, and a son, Jake, is born, their emotional estrangement is already under way. Hans’s life crumbles with, and after, 9/11, 2001: forced to leave their Tribeca loft and move to the Chelsea Hotel, a long-term stay midtown residence, Rachel decides to return to England with their young son a couple of months later, leaving Hans behind. Alone in the city, Hans’s search for companionship leads him to his favorite sport, cricket, and towards the Staten Island Cricket Club, where in the summer of 2002 he meets Chuck Ramkissoon, an Indo-Trinidadian immigrant, entrepreneur, and (it will be discovered) small-time gangster who dreams of building the

nation's first multicultural cricket park in Brooklyn. Chuck is not satisfied with supporting cricket; he wants it to become an American national sport – like baseball and football. In Chuck's dream, his cricket arena would also turn into a global, televisual "cricket business" seen by millions of people, attracting teams from all over the world. Hans's time and friendship with Chuck reach an abrupt end when Hans has to confront Chuck's hidden agenda and the consequences of his illicit dealings. The narrator's return to England and his reconciliation with Rachel separate him spatially and emotionally from Chuck, who disappears shortly after Hans's departure. After two years, his body is found, handcuffed, in the Gowanus Canal, Brooklyn.

In *Netherland*, 9/11 and the (United) State(s) of Exception are explored retrospectively using two different transnational lenses: Hans, the narrator and member of the global financial *elite*; and Chuck, a postcolonial subject and American citizen. Both contribute, as Ilka Saal noted, "to decenter the habitual first-person perspective of US unilateralism" (335). "Decentering" is a crucial term to understand how *Netherland* tries to counteract the narrative of the state of exception, whose legitimacy is questioned and contested primarily with a shift of focus on margins and marginalities – geographically, with selves and stories shaped in transnational landscapes; thematically, with 9/11 debated in a global perspective and space; structurally, through a system of flashbacks and flashforwards that erase 9/11 centrality and thus the linearity of the hegemonic narrative; as well as culturally – questioning the borders of the American "Exceptionality," and investigating the fault lines of the deterritorialization and reterritorialization of dreams and identities.

The Nation and/as the Family: Space, Time, and Optics

Netherland undermines the state of exception's premises and claims first by questioning the idea of the "state" as a fixed, enclosed space and the "exception" that 9/11 events require, and then by transforming the 9/11 national narrative into a 9/11 "transnational counternarrative" (Bimbisar 5) along international routes and webs that dismantle the state of exception's

geographical and temporal frames. As Sarah Wasserman notes, “the novel’s optics deterritorialize the attacks and ask readers to linger in a complex narrative of sustained departure” (251)

O’Neill’s strategy to reframe 9/11 through a transnational web that relies on both the expansion of the horizontal (geographical) and vertical (temporal) textual map can be already inferred by the duration of Hans’s narrative: rather than engaging closely with 9/11 and its immediate aftermath, the narrative expands its focus to cover approximately eight years of the narrator’s life, from his relocation to New York in 1998 and his return to England five years later, to the discovery of Chuck’s death that gives rise to the narrative, in 2006. Encompassing such a broad temporal spectrum, with a complex frame of flashbacks and flashforwards that take the narrator and the reader back and forth across the Atlantic, O’Neill undermines the centrality of the event, as well as the “linear narrative of the nation” (Gray 70) and the boundaries it generated.

Regarding space, reframing is evident in the title, which directly addresses the ambiguities of the idea of the “nation.” What, where, is this “Netherland”? The term can have different meanings, some contingent on Hans’s life (and times) and some symbolic. By negating the specificity of place, the title invites the reader to look at what lies underneath geographical and political definitions. As for the protagonist, “Netherland” can refer both to his origins, The Hague and, more generally, Holland; and the present, New York after 9/11. The closest linguistic reference is obviously to the Netherlands, where Hans and the author grew up; a connection reinforced by the novel’s rootedness in Hans’s memories of his motherland. At the same time, O’Neill points out how Hans’s past in the Netherlands and his present in New York are intimately related:

On one level, Netherland can be taken as a synonym for New York, since “New Netherland” is the historical name for this part of the world. It’s also a reference to the Dutch “eye,” which was the first colonial eye to survey this part of America. At least in my mind, it’s also a way to think of Ground Zero after the attacks, that heartbreaking void. And, yes, it can be associated with the mental state of Hans and some other characters – including the character named New York City. (qtd. in Reilly 9)

New York after 9/11 turns into a “netherland,” a submerged world where Hans is “noticeably lost” (O’Neill 93), stuck into an emotional and geographical “paralysis” (22). The metaphor of this existential, suspended state is Hans’s accommodation in New York – not the Tribeca loft he refuses to move back to, but the Chelsea hotel, where he feels “hospitalized” (39), and whose residents “by their furtiveness and ornamental diversity reminded me of the population of the aquarium I’d kept as a child, a murky tank in which cheap fish hesitated in weeds and an artificial starfish made a firmament of the gravel” (41). The emblem of this disconnected universe is Hans’s only acquaintance in the building: Mehmet Taspinar, or The Angel, a young man of Turkish origins who walks around with a pair of tattered white wings and a tiara on his head, and who moved to New York because it was “the one place in the world where he could be himself, at least, until recently” (44) – that is, until 9/11, and until his mother flew in from Turkey to take him back home.

“Home” is another pivotal element in the narrative reframing of 9/11: while relying in part on domestic tropes, the novel calls into question the idea of domesticity itself. Although O’Neill apparently interrogates the notion of home and intimacy by looking away from 9/11, that event and his ensuing family crisis are parallel and concurrent, the latter becoming a metaphor of the former. Exacerbated by 9/11 events, Hans and Rachel’s domestic crisis parallels their American transference, with New York as the site of their emotional estrangement, which occurred well before 9/11: Hans recalls “the two New York years in which she withheld from me all the kisses on the mouth, withheld these quietly and steadily and without complaint, averting her eyes whenever mine sought them out in emotion” (168). Even at the apex of their professional success, Hans confesses he was “not smug” about it because smugness “requires a certain reflectiveness, which requires perspective, which requires distance; and we, or certainly I, didn’t look upon our circumstances from the observatory offered by a disposition to the more spatial emotions – those feelings, of regret, or gratitude or relief, say, that make reference to situations removed from one’s own” (121-22).

Perspective, distance, and context are what the couple lacks in their American years – something that worsens with and after 9/11. In the

immediate aftermath of the attacks, Hans and Rachel try (unsuccessfully) to find a meaning and a way together to make sense of 9/11 by comparing it with other dramatic events in world history: “We were trying to understand, that is, whether we were in a pre-apocalyptic situation, like the European Jews in the thirties or the last citizens of Pompeii, or whether our situation was merely near-apocalyptic, like that of the Cold War inhabitants of New York, London, Washington and, for that matter, Moscow” (29). Hans even calls his father-in-law for advice in case of a nuclear attack in order to link 9/11 to something known and in continuity with the past. As Arin Keeble suggests, Hans and Rachel’s sense of uncertainty is located in historical thinking (165) – which requires distance and perspective.

This emotional detachment and the PTSD suffered after the attacks lead Rachel to long for and attain a trans-Atlantic separation, with the family crisis increasingly permeated with strong political overtones after her departure. Once apart, their perspectives on 9/11 and the state of exception diverge even further, with Rachel as the “corporate litigator” (O’Neill 126) and the voice of European dissent, attacking American foreign policy. At the same time, Hans, unable to contribute to the discussion, tries to find an emotional connection because, as he admits, he “had not succeeded in arriving at a position. I lacked necessary powers of perception and certainty and, above all, foresight. The future retained the impenetrable character I had always attributed to it. [...] In short, I was a political-ethical idiot” (131-32). Hans’s bewilderment and muteness when confronting Rachel’s fiercely politicized outbursts testify to a problem of perspective that refracts the US vision – and leads Hans to involuntarily replicate the American media standpoint (Gonzales 209-10).

It is the construction of this hegemonic perspective that leads Rachel to decide not to go back to the United States, “at least not before the end of the Bush administration or any successor administration similarly intent on a military and economic domination of the world” (O’Neill 125). Rachel is afraid that their son Jake could “grow up with an American perspective” (126), exposed as he would be, as she tells Hans,

to an upbringing in an “ideologically diseased” country, as she put it, a “mentally ill, sick, unreal” country whose masses and leaders suffered from extraordinary and self-righteous delusions about the United States, the world,

and indeed, thanks to the influence of the fanatical evangelical Christian movement, the universe, delusions that had the effect of exempting the United States from the very rules of civilized and lawful and rational behavior it so mercilessly sought to enforce to others. (125-26)

Since the family crisis and 9/11 run parallel in the text, with Hans and Rachel's arguing on the phone about the state of exception and its narrative, Rachel starts also questioning the couple's narrative: "She stated that she now questioned everything, including, as she put it, the narrative of our marriage. 'The whole story,' she said. The story of her and me, for better and for worse, till death did us part, the story of our union to the exclusion of all others – the story" (36). "Union" and "exclusion" are both the terms at the core of the institutions of marriage and of the State, especially when it is a state of exception. Since Rachel and Hans's attempts to frame and understand their marital crisis, as well as 9/11, are told retrospectively, once the fracture has been sutured and the two are reunited, the marriage crisis is presented as a suspension of ordinary lives – an "exception" to the routine, that mirrors the suspended state generated by 9/11.

Like 9/11, according to Rachel the family crisis is something that "you can't geographize" (34), that transcends emotional, geographical, and political borders; and since their crisis is marked by transatlantic distance, constructing it in parallel with 9/11 makes the latter a transnational question as well, that can be discussed only within the space of that void, and recollected by Hans only when he is back in London. Rachel's rationality and "European" perspective vs. Hans's emotional and "American" disorientation are the characters' responses both to their marriage crisis and to the 9/11 aftermath: if, as far as marriage goes, reconciliation will take place, it will benefit from mutual understanding, but not of ideological convergence, as the gathering at Matt's, one of Rachel's friends, illustrates. When Matt suggests that September 11 was "not such a big deal [...] when you think of everything that's happened since" (240), the arithmetic of deaths clashes with Hans's feelings – enraged not because geographic proximity would make him a survivor or eyewitness (something he realizes he is not, tucked away as he was in Midtown), but by the erasure of emotions nobody should be entitled to. This time he is supported by Rachel, who

leaves the party with him and shares the memory of the sirens and the fear that once separated, and now re-unites, them.

Rather than depicting the family as a refuge against the horror (to be protected within and by national boundaries) *Netherland* succeeds in showing how the two are mutually related and dependent, and how sutures of emotional and ideological wounds can be effective not in retreat, but in the opening of spaces, even distances, where confrontation can take place.

History, Memory, and Myth: American Dreams, Exceptionalism, and Exception(s)

The transnational openings and decentering of 9/11 in *Netherland* take place not only on a spatial level, but in the historical dimension as well; in other words, the constitutive elements that shaped both European and American culture and ideologies, their mutual relations and dependencies, including those that contributed to American exceptionalism before, and the state of exception later.

As his family troubles have shown, Hans's paralysis and attempt to overcome the crisis are related to his difficulty in gaining "a perspective" – a perspective dependent both on his entrenchment in the American geographical and cultural milieu after the attacks but also on his (and the United States) relation to the past, history, and memory. As already mentioned, after the attacks Hans tries, unsuccessfully, to frame them into a historical pattern of continuity. However, his transnational identity is significant in historical transnational relations. His cosmopolitanism places him on the route of imperial history, from The Hague to London, and finally to New York. One cannot help but notice how these countries are constitutive of the debate on "Empire": while The Hague and London represent the Dutch and the English empires, New York is the center of a new financial empire – an empire whose control is constructed on the basis of differential mobility, or in other words by restraining the mobility of specific groups and accelerating that of its elite, in order to secure a form of stability generated by the accumulation of capital (see Virilio), a fact to which Hans's transatlantic life testifies.

The first name of New York, New Amsterdam, emphasizes the continuity of Hans's transnational path, and links him even more closely to the colonial framework and the ruling transnational class. Hans's Dutch roots entrench him in the American soil, according to Chuck, who sees Hans as "a member of the first tribe of New York, excepting of course the Red Indians" (O'Neill 75). Despite the fact that Hans's Dutch origins reflect the origins of the country and make Hans "the most recent iteration of the original American presence in this part of the world" (Bacon 2) and the legitimate claimer of the New World, in a financial rather than in a political way, Hans wants "to discharge the obligation of remembrance that fixed itself to one in this anomalous place, which offered so little shade from the incomprehensible rays of the past" (O'Neill 204), as he makes clear when Chuck takes him to an old Dutch cemetery. Rather than claiming the New World as his, Hans's only affiliation with his Dutch past is the parallel he suggests with Rip Van Winkle: on a train near Tarrytown, in a valley that "slipped back into timelessness" (76), he falls asleep, and his memory goes back to his student days between Leiden and The Hague – just as Rip Van Winkle's sleep had brought him back to Dutch colonial times. This parallel uniting the two Atlantic shores is reinforced when Hans, in one of his last visits to his mother, wears his teenage clothes and, "dressed, then, like Rip Van Winkle" (115), walks around his old neighborhood. Just as Rip's twenty-year sleep during the War of Independence testifies to the difficulty of American culture to face its first national trauma, in the same way Hans's escape into cricket affords him a temporary respite from loneliness and a sense of personal and historical disintegration – a trauma that turns from national to transnational, but that, like Rip's, combines a troubled relation to origins and institutions (be it the state or the family) with deep anxieties over the future.

Hans's narrative is "a spasm of memory" (Cochoy and Gaudin 2); the narrator seems unwilling to bear the burden of the past, both private and historical, the first linking him to Holland and the second to the United States. Hans's difficulty to cope with the burden of history and the bewilderment it generates is reflected in his struggle to find linearity in the narrative of his own life, filled with transatlantic *déjà-vus*, patterns, and people (especially women) that keep reappearing in different places:

the memories of his mother go back to The Hague during his childhood and his sporadic visits to her during his adulthood, but also to her only visit to New York when Jake was born. Then the memory of Rachel's transatlantic drive, from London to New York and back which allowed her to live both in an American (and further on back in time a European) past and an English present; and even the memory of a woman he shared a taxi with years back while in London ends up constituting a trans-Atlantic connection when he later had a one-night stand with her in New York. Whether, as Karolina Golimowska notes, these coexistences contribute to giving coherence to Hans's personal life cartography, they also make his temporal and spatial universe fragmented and indistinct, difficult to be reordered in a linear narrative (166).

New York and the Netherlands frequently overlap in Hans's life, as both are scenarios of familial estrangement and losses. The sense of alienation that progressively distances him from Rachel parallels the sense of estrangement his cosmopolitan life leads Hans to feel for his mother, both during her visit to New York and his last visit to her in Holland, as if she "has been placed in the furnace of memory even when alive" (O'Neill 116). The void Hans feels after the premature loss of his father in a car accident in his home country when he was two and of his mother's lonely death a few months after her visit to New York are paralleled by the temporary loss of his new family after his wife leaves him behind in New York. This fragmentation process is aptly represented by Hans's inability to put in some kind of order the many Kodak images he has taken of his son during his weekends in London – images he will commission Chuck's girlfriend to reorder because he feels he needs a story (172).

The story he cannot find in his present is out of focus in his past, too – Hans is estranged even from his past selves: "I find it hard to muster oneness with those former selves whose accidents and endeavors have shaped who I am now [...] my natural sense is that all are faded, by the by, discontinued" (63). Plagued by "the burden of remembering" (111), Hans's memories can find a way, and a form, only when the narrator is back in Europe, away from "the tradition of oblivion in force in this city [New York]" (204) and from the erasure of the past (or better, its careful management) that reminds Hans of the maintenance of a cricket field:

I find it hard to rid myself of the feeling that life carries a taint of the aftermath. This last-mentioned word, somebody told me, refers literally to a second mowing of grass in the same season. You might say, if you are the type prone to general observations, that New York City insists on memory's repetitive mower – on the sort of purposeful post-mortem that has the effect, so one is told and forlornly hopes, of cutting the grassy past to manageable proportions. For it keeps growing back, of course. (2)

Rather than generating a sense of closure, as the state of exception usually exacts (for example by reinforcing the politics of exclusion and limiting the permeability of political borders), 9/11 constitutes in the text a path towards extraterritoriality, both in the geographical and temporal frame, but also in terms of diversity. Besides the transatlantic openings generated by the family crisis and those generated by history and memory, in the “working out of a non-unilateral, decentered account of trauma that situates and transforms the national self within complex global relations to others” (Saal 349), *Netherland* opens up to the concept of Otherness also within the US national boundaries, a concept heavily marginalized in 9/11 fiction. Here the Other is represented by the world of cricket and working-class third-world immigrants, very far removed from the privileged cosmopolitan clique Hans represents, a commonality that encompasses the traditional social structures of the family and nation. Despite Hans's previous sporadic incursions into ethnic communities, thanks to his friend Vinay, a food critic, it is cricket and Chuck that allow him to experience the cosmopolitanism of the ethnic communities, especially those in the outer boroughs. Hans substitutes the geographical centrality of Manhattan with ethnic and social marginalities, most of which are the product of post-colonialism.

If Hans's bond with the United States is the legacy of history, Chuck's legitimacy as an American is affirmed by political and, even more important, by cultural affiliation: proud of his “enthusiastic and successful studies” (O'Neill 97) that allowed him to obtain American citizenship, Chuck is in love with his adoptive country. Even 9/11 leaves his American Dream unaltered, to the point that, recollecting those days, he recalls the time he spent as a volunteer rehoming the pets in Brooklyn as “a wonderful

experience" (100), a "state of elation" that "the catastrophe had instilled in many" (101), Hans notices – as if 9/11 had also provided an appropriate occasion for self-invention.

If, rather paradoxically, in the attempt to give meaning to the scattered fragments of his recent past, the narrator feels that a story is what he needs (172), according to Chuck "[t]here is always a story" (175). Hans's difficulty in keeping together the fragments of his life is in stark contrast with Chuck's ability to carve out his own: "He told his own story constantly. [...] His legend was transparently derived from the local one of rags and riches" (175), from his difficult childhood in Trinidad, through his American odyssey, to the anticipation of his cremation in Brooklyn. Chuck's motto, "Think fantastic" (104), and his capacity for self-invention and dreaming big are underlined in the epigraph of the novel, Walt Whitman's poem "I Dream'd in a Dream," and in the many references and parallels with F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), with intertextual links that "reinforce *Netherland's* preoccupation with the American Dream, its evanescence, and its underlying violence" (Saal 335).

O'Neill shifts the center *vs.* periphery dynamics at work in Fitzgerald's text from national to global and explores the new routes of that dream and its viability. Questioning the "viability" of the American Dream is a constant after 9/11, as O'Neill underlines: "The Gatsbyesque narrative of the corrupting of the American dream is premised on the existence of an autonomous, intact America. But there are forces – including 9/11 and the globalization of the economy – that have destroyed that premise and ended a hugely significant literary and cultural era in American life. I think the challenge for writers is to explore that and recognize it" (qtd. in Bacon n. pag.). In *Netherland*, O'Neill explores the post-national reverberation of the American Dream – mainly what happens in the dialectics between the "center" and the peripheries, that is, the historical and global interdependencies in the aftermath of 9/11. One element of continuity between Chuck's American Dream and his post-colonial past is violence. In his life, violence links his harrowing childhood in Trinidad, where he faces death several times and is almost killed by marijuana dealers, to his racketeering dealings in New York, which he hoped would allow him to build his cricket arena. The violence in Chuck's life, however, has in the

background foundational dynamics that have shaped the history of both countries, Trinidad and the United States, whose colonial past Chuck believes Hans should be proud of because it gives the latter the right to claim that country as “his.” If violence is the element that links the colonial and the American past, “the past is never past,” as Katherine Snyder notes, comparing *Netherland* and *The Great Gatsby* (466). Violence and death are also ever-present in Hans’s and Chuck’s New York: their walks and rides, besides Chuck’s racketing campaigns, take place mainly in cemeteries, revealing something that in the United States is usually hidden from view, as Hans is quick to mention. Here the national and the transnational are again superimposed: violence is what Hans remembers being televised in those days, with American military intervention in the Middle East and the images of “dark Baghdad glittered with American bombs” (O’Neill 161); at the same time violent deaths are presented as every-day events in New York, as “the peculiar seasonal matter of bodies surfacing in the waters of New York” (160) testifies. And, the last that will come to the surface will be Chuck’s. According to Snyder, Hans’s story “depends upon, even requires, Chuck’s death” (473): indeed, it is only with the death of the American Dream that events can find their order and their place in history.

“A Crash Course in Democracy”: Cricket and the US, in the Aftermath of 9/11

In addition to the permeability of the national borders established by the transnational setting and the cosmopolitan and immigrant stories and tropes, *Netherland* addresses the short-circuits of the US state of exception through the content of Chuck’s dream itself, as dreamt in twenty-first century deterritorialized America: a dream that shows how national allegories, extended to a transnational scale, can turn into the newest face of American Exceptionalism, that, like a phoenix, arises from its own, 9/11 ashes.

Cricket is a complex signifier in *Netherland*, which clarifies the deeply vexed relation to nationality in the aftermath of 9/11. As O’Neill stated in an interview, “I think if you’re writing about cricket you’re writing about power... because cricket is such a loaded sport... And in this country [the

US] it's a sport of the powerless" (qtd. in Gray 71). Cricket is also an important signifier in American culture and post-national studies: the most famous book on cricket ever written is *Beyond a Boundary* (1963) by the Trinidadian Marxist C.L.R. James, one of the main contributors to the concept of "post-national" (see Gair): merging autobiography, anthropology and history, cricket is for James both an instrument for the affirmation of the culture of the British Empire and a key element in the formation of post-colonial, national cultures.

Cricket has been in fact a legacy of British colonial history and has long been an instrument for colonial rule and imperial discipline. As Chuck reminds Hans, echoing James, British missionaries used cricket to end hostilities among the inhabitants of Trobriand Island in Papua (O'Neill 279). Cricket is part of American history, too; however, although played in colonial times and the first decades of the Republic, it can hardly be considered an American sport since it quickly went out of fashion, as it became increasingly associated with the elite.

In *Netherland*, cricket becomes the paradigm of the colonial and post-colonial encounter: first, literally, since it is where Hans and Chuck's encounter takes place. Although the sport has apparently returned to its egalitarian origins, it nevertheless reflects immigrants' discrimination within the United States, and especially after 9/11 it has become one of the marks of stigmatization. As Hans notes the first time he joins the team, cricket players, mainly Indians and members of other minorities from the former colonies of the British Empire, have to wait for the end of other sports matches (like softball, played by middle-aged white men) before being allowed to play. As Chuck comments: "You want a taste of how it feels to be a black man in this country? Put on the white clothes of a cricketer. Put on the white to feel black" (18). As Westall notes, cricket reveals the spatialization of the city along socio-economic racialized lines, that does not represent American hybridity, but an "uneven and territorializing coexistence in which immigrant spaces are 'Other'" (290).

In Hans and Chuck's lives, cricket is the visible manifestation of their relation to power. For Hans, whose association with old and new forms of the Empire is repeatedly highlighted in the novel, cricket is the legacy left

to him by his dead father. The vicarious role of the latter is in part taken up by the other members of the cricket club his father belonged to. As he admits, “I am from The Hague, where Dutch bourgeois snobbishness and Dutch cricket are, not unrelatedly, most concentrated” (O’Neill 53). From there onward, cricket continues to be a sign of Hans’s social and economic power: when he moves to London, he joins the South Bank Cricket Club, where

on marvelously shorn Surrey village greens [...] we battled gently for victory and drank warm beer on the steps of ancient wooden pavilions. Once, after a shaky start to the season, I booked a private net at Lord’s. An elderly coach with the countenance of a butler fed balls into a bowling machine and declared, “Good shot, sir,” each time my bat connected with one of the long hops and half-volley the machine amiably spat out. (57)

As for Chuck, whose past is marked by the scars of colonialism, cricket is what he dreamed of when he was a child – a sport his father forbade him to play and that he could only watch from afar. As the visible manifestation of familial oppression and social exclusion, cricket becomes for Chuck the main object of desire and his ability to exercise power: rather than a player, Chuck wants to be the one who makes it happen and “to do what it takes to make this happen” (280) in the United States. What originated in an individual injustice is transformed by Chuck into a dream of success, with a cricket arena “for the greatest cricket teams in the world. Twelve exhibition matches every summer, watched by eight thousand spectators at fifty dollars a pop” (103) and all the income from collateral facilities, TV rights, internet viewership of millions of people.

This dream, however, has also deep ethical and political overtones. Chuck repeatedly insists on cricket’s educational potential:

“we have an expression in the English language,” he said, as silence began to establish itself amongst the players. “The expression is ‘not cricket.’ When we disapprove of something we say ‘it’s not cricket.’ We do not say ‘it’s not baseball.’ Or ‘It’s not football.’ We say ‘it’s not cricket.’ This is a tribute to the game we play, and it’s a tribute to us. [...] Now, games are important. They

test us. They teach us comradeship. They're fun. But cricket, more than any other sport, is, I want to say [...] a lesson in civility. We all know this." (16-17)

A legacy of imperialism, a tool to export civilization used by the empires, cricket can become, according to Chuck, the instrument of social and political transformation, "a crash course in democracy" (279) and a cure for a national body, plagued by inequalities, that has just experienced a post-imperial tragic backlash. Cricket would help Americans to "see the world," to find "something in common with Hindus and Muslims" (280): cricket, and its post-national potential theorized by James, would be the antidote to closures created by the state of exception.

As Saal notes, Chuck's desire to sanitize cricket of its imperial origins is more than a reversal of power relations since it "aims to implement a form of intercultural and transnational relations firmly anchored in principles of mutual respect and hospitality" (342). Played by an international community, in an arena called "Bald Eagle field" (O'Neill 108) cricket is "a metaphor for a more egalitarian and cooperative society in times of national bereavement" (Mansutti 118); a version of intercultural understanding, this sport would become the way to defuse conflicts, as it was in Trobriand Islands. In Chuck's vision, cricket would overturn the unprecedented anxieties over the domestic space that have followed the 9/11 attacks: what is foreign would be the vehicle for ethical improvement.

It would be tempting to say that, through the cricket metaphor, *Netherland* is suggesting that, rather than exporting democracy, the United States should import it. This however is not Chuck's idea: he does not consider cricket as something foreign. According to him, cricket is "NOT AN IMMIGRANT SPORT" (O'Neill 133), as one of his emails to the dozen "dear friends" titles, since it has been played in New York since the 1770s. Even Benjamin Franklin played cricket, Chuck underlines; Henry Chadwick, the father of baseball, played it: "It is a bona fide American pastime, and it should be regarded as such. All those who have attempted to 'introduce' cricket to the American public have failed to understand this. Cricket is already in the American DNA" (134). If cricket's scope is transformative and ameliorative for American society, its potential is already embedded in the American cultural milieu: as Chuck says, "my own feeling is that the US is not complete, the US has not fulfilled its destiny,

it's not fully civilized until it has embraced the game of cricket" (279). The Americanness of Chuck's dream can be detected both in the model of the American Jeremiad, recognizable in Chuck's speech, "simultaneously lamenting a declension and celebrating a national," as Bercovitch wrote (qtd. in Saal 336), and the emphasis on the origins of the sport.

Paradoxically, it is the fact that Chuck's faith is not in the dream, but in its Americanness, that limits him. His need to ground it in that specific national context, in its geography (the stadium) and its culture, is ultimately the reason for his failure; "You don't have to come to America to participate in the 'American Dream'" (qtd. in Reilly 13), O'Neill commented in an interview, echoing Faruk Patel, the millionaire Chuck wants to involve in the construction of the cricket stadium. It is Patel, who confesses to Hans, during their meeting in London after Chuck's death, that he did not believe Chuck's project could work: "There's a limit to what Americans understand. The limit is cricket. [...] My idea was different. My idea was, you don't need America. Why would you? You have the TV, internet markets in India, in England. These days that's plenty. America? Not relevant. You put the stadium there and you're done. *Finito la musica*" (O'Neill 334). Chuck's faith in America's potential and inclusivity is misplaced both for his dream and himself: not only will he not be able to build the stadium but he will be killed, his body sent back to Trinidad, and his cricket pitch will die with him, as Hans sees on Google Maps when he is back in London.

If Chuck's vision re-incorporates a "post-national" dream in a national frame that revives once again American Exceptionalism, Hans's path follows an opposing direction. If in his childhood cricket was deeply rooted in the sense of nationality and was the sign of a genealogical continuity, his transnational life gives cricket a new function: it connects him to the places he has lived in and, once in New York, allows him to bring back transnational memories and connections (Golimowska 167). Cricket becomes for Hans the space where he can recreate a provisional sense of belonging, a "re-spatialization of belonging," in the definition given by Alison Blunt (qtd. in Zamorano Llana 19), a multi-local identity based on emotional attachment to places. In order to belong, however, changes may be required. In this case, Hans must adapt to the American way of batting.

Whereas in Netherland or in London the ground is flat and well mowed, and the ball is hit in the traditional way, in the United States the “bushy” and irregular terrain of the fields requires players to learn to hit the ball in the air:

There was nothing, in principle, to stop me from changing my game, from taking up the cow-shots and lofted bashes in which many of my teammates specialized. But it was, I felt, different for them. They had grown up playing the game in floodlit Lahore car parks or in rough clearings in some West Indian countryside. They could, and did, modify their batting without spiritual upheaval. I could not. More accurately, I would not change – which was uncharacteristic of me. Coming to America [...] I’d eagerly taken to new customs and mannerisms at the expense of old ones. How little, in the fluidities of my new country, I missed the ancient clotted continent. But self-transformation has its limits; and my limit was reached in the peculiar matter of batting. (O’Neill 63)

Hans’s initial clinging to tradition represents, according to Carmen Zamorano Llena, “the difficulties faced by the individual when forced by contextual factors to redefine traditional understandings of collective and individual identity” (17), but also of social status and privilege. And it is only when these difficulties are overcome that he feels “naturalized” (O’Neill 233).

Chuck and Hans’s relation to cricket becomes a metaphor for their relation to power and the nation: one of the reasons Chuck likes cricket is that, contrary to baseball, which is “air-based,” cricket is a “ground-based sport” (195). It has to do with territorialization, borders, and belonging, three crucial elements in Chuck’s dream – to belong to the United States, in life and death. His “dreaming big,” the insistence on cricket as part of American history and its regenerative potential, all testify to his clinging to the ideal of “national” and to the hope that differences will be smoothed out within that national space, as he plans to do with his cricket field.

On the contrary, Hans’s approach to cricket is empirical as is his relation to the nation. Belonging, for him, is the result of personal affiliation, not of political status. Adapting to the ground and changing his batting technique allow him to reformulate his position as an outsider and, at the same time, as an American, “which makes the ‘American way’ of playing

cricket a post-national concept" (Golimowska 166) – a post-nationality antithetical to Chuck's: just as the unevenness of the terrain leads Hans to the "aerial turn" in his batting style, so too will aerial and deterritorialized become his relation to the United States, that he will leave behind by flying away.

Used to equating citizenry with "the slightness of its mysteries" that characterizes his home country (O'Neill 117), Hans is not a lover of America. Despite his well-paid job, he does not want "to join the New York dead" (100) as he makes clear when Chuck takes him to visit an old Dutch graveyard. Hans's disregard for formal American citizenship before, and for the US as a whole later, and his challenge to state sovereignty (Bimbisar 7) can be understood, as Simon Van Schalkwyk notes, thinking of "the failures of neoliberalism's promise of cosmopolitan security around the intensification of the American security state" (4).

Hans's affiliation with the US is temporal; New York is retrospectively depicted as something that "interposed itself, once and for all, between me and all other places of origin" (O'Neill 239). Hans's return to England is in the name of continuity, from the "providential country" of The Netherlands, where "there seemed little point in an individual straining excessively for or against the upshots arranged on his behalf, which had been thoughtfully conceived to benefit him from the day he was born to the day he died and hardly required an explanation" (117), to the "premature crystallization of lives" that London offers, "where men and women past the age of forty, in some cases even the age of thirty, may easily be regarded as over the hill and entitled to an essentially retrospective idea of themselves; whereas in New York selfhood's hill always seemed to lie ahead and to promise a glimpse of further, higher peaks: that you might have no climbing boots to hand was beside the point" (236).

The narrator's progressive distance from the US and, more in general, from the concept of nation is explicit in the last image of the United States in the novel, with the virtual visit Hans pays on Google Maps to Chuck's cricket field in ruins and, flowing upward into the atmosphere, "no sign of nations, no sense of the work of man. The USA as such is nowhere to be seen" (335). It is however an emptied world, without inhabitants, that, as Pier Paolo Frassinelli and David Watson note, underlines the ambiguities

of deterritorialization: here, “precarity and cosmopolitanism coexist in a zone of indistinction and folded together they resist disaggregation into antithetical utopian and dystopian modalities” (Frassinelli and Watson 3). The reader does not know what Hans will see, besides his family, after his return to London, as the final scene on the London Eye suggests: “‘Look!’ Jake is saying, pointing wildly. ‘See, Daddy?’ I see, I tell him, looking from him to Rachel and again to him. Then I turn to look for what it is we’re supposed to be seeing” (O’Neill 340). Probably a world with no borders, but the standpoint will not be in the United States.

Notes

¹ Agamben quotes President Bush’s decision to refer to himself constantly as the “Commander in Chief of the Army” after 9/11, that testifies his attempt to turn the emergency into the rule.

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