The general consensus among critics of contemporary U.S. culture seems to be that the events of 9/11 have wrought far-reaching alterations in the nature of U.S. state power with consequences that we are yet to fully comprehend. For instance, in his magisterial *The New American Exceptionalism*, Donald Pease argues that earlier versions of American exceptionalism revolved around a “structure of disavowal” that functioned as an ideological masking strategy making citizen-subjects envision the nation through a fantastical lens that “eradicated the difference between the national ideal U.S. citizens wanted and the faulty nation they had, by representing America as having already achieved all that a nation could be.” Following the 9/11 attacks, however, the Bush administration inaugurated a State of Exception that “did not require this [earlier] structure of disavowal because it was its construction of itself as The Exception to the discursive norms of American exceptionalism that constituted the grounding authority of its power to rule.” This new exceptionalist regime openly revealed the U.S. state’s intentions as, in George Steinmetz’s words, “domestically authoritarian and geopolitically imperialist.” In short, the policies of the U.S. state after 9/11 are defined by a constrictive tightening of focus in the domestic arena as well as by an expansive engagement in maintaining global power. The consequences of the state’s investment in centripetally focused hegemonic imaginaries to manage domestic populations has been summed up in Pease’s suggestive comment that, in the post-9/11 climate, “U.S. citizens became internal émigrés who migrated from the nation to the homeland.”

I wish to trace possible responses to these mutations in state power by way of the post-9/11 American novel and its particular affiliations with transnational imaginaries. For one, transnational imaginaries, by locating the U.S. within osmotic mapping systems that continually chip away at the barriers between ‘home’ and the ‘foreign,’ engage with both the domestic

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1 A version of this essay appeared in *The Journal of Transnational American Studies* 6.1.
3 Ibid., 180.
and the global dimensions of state power. The fracture effected by the “transnational turn” in American studies lends a valuable perspective as it rectifies, what Pease calls, the “two interrelated dimensions of the disavowed underside of American exceptionalism – US imperialism and US global interdependencies.” In light of the nation’s ‘geopolitically imperialist’ ambitions, it also becomes all the more crucial to delineate oppositional transnational practices that do not repeat the hegemonizing moves of the state that often operate under the semantic guise of the ‘transnational.’

To be sure, there are latent dangers in reading transnational practices as always oppositional and ideologically pure enterprises devoid of slippages and fault lines. Not the least among these dangers is that of what Thomas Bender calls “new blindesses” that might result from working free of the national ideology “only to embrace the ideology and process of globalization...the danger of complicity, conscious or not, in a triumphalism that justifies the current state of capitalism.” The cautionary notes in the particular context of American studies have taken two general directions. The first is seen in the attempt to link the broad development of the ‘transnational turn’ to its enabling socio-political conditions. In this vein, Leerom Medovoi has ably demonstrated that our understanding of the recent transnational focus cannot be divorced from the post-Fordist mode of production and wealth management and he places an important injunction to historicize the transition: “If post-Fordism relies upon the retooled state and upon the new world organizations for many of the same regulatory functions that the Keynesian state once provided to Fordism, then does post-Fordism also rely on any unique ideological formations comparable to the national narrative that enabled Fordism?”

The direction of the second critique has been to tease out points of osmosis and contrasts between transnational moves dictated by the state and finance capital and a version of transnational American studies attentive to the aspirations of neglected populations and buried histories. Amy Kaplan clearly states this when she urges scholars “to think more creatively and critically about what we mean by internationalizing the field when Bush has his own vision of ‘a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests.’ For indeed empire is a

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7 Thomas Bender “Historians, the Nation, and the Plenitude of Narratives” in Rethinking American History in a Global Age, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 12.

8 Leerom Medovoi “Nation, Globe, Hegemony: Post-Fordist Preconditions of the Transnational Turn in American Studies.” interventions 7 (2005): 168. According to Medovoi, “Nation-centered American studies bore a relationship to Fordism that was not merely generic...but materially situated: it served as a pivotal knowledge project of the...Fordist university. So too post-national American studies must be historicized alongside the post-Fordist turn in American higher education” (166).
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form of transnationalism.”

Johannes Voelz, arguing against transnational American studies’ self-portrayal as the oppositional Other to state power, demonstrates that the boundaries are much more porous and he critiques transnationalist scholars for lacking “an adequate framework to address the role of the state and its changing properties in the global era when talking about transnationalism.”

Even with these cautionary notes, it remains undeniable that the energies released by the ‘transnational turn’ not only has a history of oblique opposition to the state’s visions of what the nation should become but they have also enabled, in Pease’s words, “a rethinking of the national in the light of newly invented spatial and temporal coordinates.”

Invoking the transnational in this sense – of rendering unfamiliar what we accept as ‘natural’ – I map how post-9/11 fiction speaks back to the state’s hegemonic imaginaries through an analysis of Joseph O’Neill’s <em>Netherland</em>.

<Netherland>’s themes straddle two overlapping concerns: on a broader scale, the text reimagines ways in which the transnational aesthetic might respond to the alterations in state power after 9/11 and, more narrowly, <em>Netherland</em> is a crucial intervention in the debate over post-9/11 American fiction. A quick recap of this seemingly narrow debate about a literary sub-genre will reveal that it rehearses several larger concerns about envisioning the U.S.’s role in the world. The critical discussion largely centers around whether the form has become, in Bruce Robbins’s term, “worldly.” In his wide-ranging critique of the American literary responses to 9/11, Richard Gray argues that “new events generate new forms of consciousnesses requiring new structures of ideology and the imagination to assimilate and express them...And it begs the question of just how new, or at least different, the structures of these books are. The answer is, for the most part, not at all.” Expressing consonance with many of Gray’s assertions, Michael Rothberg writes that “a reaccentuation has not taken place ” and that the “fiction of 9/11 demonstrates...a failure of the imagination.” Rothberg calls for “a fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship...a complementary centrifugal mapping


Johannes Voelz, “Utopias of Transnationalism and the Neoliberal State” in Re-Framing, ed. Fluck, Pease and Rowe, 356. In the same volume, Pease makes a similar point that although the “transnational prevents the closure of the nation...[it] is not the Other of the nation. The transnational names an undecidable economic, political, or social formation that is neither in nor out of the nation-state. Inherently relational, the transnational involves a double move: to the inside, to core constituents of a given nation, and to an outside, whatever forces a new configuration”, 5-6.

Donald Pease “Introduction” in Re-Framing, 5.


that charts the outward movement of American power.”

Robbins writes that the event of 9/11 “has created its own unique local surround, a restricted time/space that replaces and cancels out any abstract planetary coordinates.” He concludes: “the point seems to be that the novel’s field of vision has contracted, not expanded.” The dominant critical consensus, therefore, seems to be that the sub-genre has failed to embrace the transnational imperative to remap the U.S.’s relationship with the rest of the world and it has, instead, sought refuge in the rituals of the domestic. This quick recap demonstrates that the core issue is about how the U.S. cultural-aesthetic sphere might incorporate the transnational perspective in a post-9/11 world. In what ways should literature best respond to the mutations in state power? How might fiction effect transnational mapping strategies that speak back to the state’s regulatory practices of reinforcing national borders and dividing home and the foreign? And in what ways are those strategies compromised by affiliations with the hegemonic imaginaries of both state and non-state structures?

If we subscribe to Aihwa Ong’s suggestive definition of the prefix “Trans” as denoting “both moving through space or across lines, as well as changing the nature of something,” and if we remain partial to her suggestion that “transnationality also alludes to the transversal, the transactional, the translational, and the transgressive aspects of contemporary behavior and imagination…incited, enabled, and regulated by the changing logics of states and capitalism,” Netherland, with its pronounced engagement with the narratives of recent immigrants in New York city and with its sustained meditation on the meanings of American identity in the post-9/11 landscape, is obviously qualified to stake claim to the transnational label. While Netherland takes up the challenge of imagining worldliness through its various transnational counternarratives, the essay locates its reading between the osmotic spaces wherein the constituent elements of the transnational bear varying relations of resistance, conflict, and consonance with power structures. In this sense, the essay’s intervention partly derives its theoretical ballast from what Arjun Appadurai calls “relations of disjuncture” by which he means that “the various flows we see – of objects, persons, images and discourses – are not coeval, convergent, isomorphic or spatially consistent…the paths or vectors taken by these various kinds of things have different speeds, different axes, different points of origin and termination, and different relationships to institutional structures in different regions, nations or societies.”

In Netherland, these disjunctures effect an unsettled and ambivalent series of counternarratives with unstable relations to power structures. In reading the disjunctures overdetermining Netherland’s transnational entities and in locating the novel’s aspirations towards a post-9/11 worldliness between the

15 Aihwa Ong Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality (Durham: Duke UP, 1999), 4
competing pulls of globe and nation, we come to a fuller comprehension of the ways in which nation-states still exercise a spectral fascination upon the imagination and how novels might more fruitfully gesture towards challenging such tenacious hegemonies.

*Netherland’s* transnational ethics is articulated through a trichotomous entity: the narratives of its two main protagonists Chuck Ramkissoon and Hans van den Broek, the game of cricket, and the imaginaries of new geospatial technologies such as Google Earth. The central narrative is built around the unlikely friendship between Hans, a Dutch banker married to an English lawyer, and Chuck, a Trinidadian immigrant. Constructed as a series of flashback vignettes from the narrative present of 2006 in London when Hans hears of Chuck’s death, the narrative traces the estrangement of Hans and his wife Rachel after their first arrival in New York city in 1998, Rachel’s return to England with their young son after the 9/11 attacks, Hans’ search for companionship following this personal crisis and his growing friendship with Chuck whom he meets through the games of cricket, and Hans’ eventual return to England and reconciliation with Rachel. On the surface, then, *Netherland* follows the “familiar romance pattern” of many post-9/11 American novels “in which couples meet, romantic and domestic problems follow, to be concluded in reconciliation or rupture.” But the narrative, even while relying on domestic tropes, opens up an incomplete longing for the worldly through its transnational counternarratives.

It is crucial to draw some distinctions between the main protagonists to illuminate the extent to which each carries the burden of transnational counternarrativity. As an upper-class white man working in the global economic order as an equities analyst, Hans’ relationship to national borders is different from that of Chuck. James Wood notes that Hans can, in fact, “come and go in America on a banker’s whim.” Hans’ nebulous relationship with formal American citizenship demonstrates Daniel T. Rodgers’ observation that those “who enter these transnational labor systems that circulate through the United States are not in the first instance headed for America, though their jobs might lie there. They are, rather, workers who belong simultaneously to more than one country and culture, moving through transnational networks of information, neighborhood, and kin…in short, scattered: diasporic.”

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17 This competing pull can be noted in the fact that while the book has been readily incorporated as a fine example of the transnational imaginary, O’Neill asserts in an interview with Katie Bacon that his novel is “an American novel…my first novel as an American novelist. Now that I’ve lived here for ten years, I feel able to insert myself into the rather welcoming field of American literature.” See O’Neill’s interview “The Great Irish-Dutch-American Novel” in *The Atlantic*.

18 Gray,134.


It might be argued that Hans’ actions throughout the novel introduce a new twist to our understanding of the diasporic figure within American culture. Brian Edwards and Dilip Gaonkar argue that the critical potential of the diasporic figure has been defanged by its absorption into the hegemonic national imaginary of American multiculturalism. They write: “The diasporic figure...could in fact be made to underwrite the American Century thesis...By privileging the trope of America as destination, the vernacular incorporation of diaspora reinscribes the unique path of American democracy from political resistance (against Britain) to socioeconomic redistribution...to recognition of cultural and other identities of difference.” Hans’ oblique unsettledness, in other words, perhaps articulates a new version of this earlier coming-to-America narrative by introducing what the authors call “the perspective of shifting critical nodes.” Instead of a narrative of return that likely risks absorption into the national imaginary, we now have Hans “passing through” highlighting the fact that “diasporic subjects who arrive in the United States do not come to ‘America’ as a (final) destination but rather to the United States as a holding place.” As Edwards and Gaonkar note, such ‘passing through’ helps recast the U.S. “among a proliferating set of trajectories, national, subnational, and regional, that make up the present global matrix.”

To be sure, O’Neill romanticizes Hans’ unsettledness and his seeking “alternative forms of allegiance” through the game of cricket as a critical aspect of challenging formal citizenship.

It is also crucial to note that while Hans’ actions help us rethink the U.S. “not as terminus but rather as node through which people are passing,” this critical unsettledness is somewhat compromised by the fact that it is enabled, above all, by Hans’ membership in the ‘transnational capitalist class.’ The ambivalence of passing through is reflected in Hans’ apathy towards political opinions of any kind and his general sense of social disengagement as he drifts through most of the novel in a daze of misery. Unlike his wife Rachel who becomes increasingly vocal in her resistance to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Hans remains indifferent: “I, however, was almost completely caught out...my orientation was poor. I could not tell where I stood. If pressed to state my position, I would confess the truth: that I had not succeeded in arriving at a position...I had little interest. I didn't really care. In short, I was a political-ethical idiot.”

While it is reductive to claim that Hans’s apathy might be a direct function of his membership in the “transnational capitalist class,” his character also resonates with the kind of transnationality that Wai Chee Dimock has strongly critiqued. Referring to the Asian business elite, Dimock writes: “Transnationality of this sort points not to the emergence of a new

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22 Voelz, 366.
23 Joseph O’Neill, Netherland (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008), 109. All quotations are from this edition and will hereby be referenced parenthetically within the paper.
collective unit – a *global civil society*...but to the persistence of an old logic...of capitalism. Market born and market driven, it is infinite in its geographical extension but all too finite in its aspirations. It offers no alternative politics, poses no threat to the sovereignty of the state.”\(^{25}\) In Hans we can sense several contradictory impulses: his disregard for formal American citizenship poses challenges to state sovereignty, while Hans’ affiliation with corporate citizenship foregrounds the political ambivalence of certain sectors within the transnational umbrella.

In contrast to Hans, Chuck, the big-talking entrepreneur and smalltime businessman given to verbosity is, as Wood notes, “ever eager to be grounded in America.” This is symbolized in his gaudy 1996 Cadillac, which was “a patriotic automobile aflutter and aglitter with banners and stickers of the Stars and Stripes and yellow ribbons in support of the troops” (74). But Chuck’s narrative is not one of seamless absorption into the U.S. national imaginary. Even if Chuck can be defined as an immigrant who, as Joan Didion notes, seeks “a traditional road to assimilation, the visible doing of approved works, the act of making oneself available for this steering committee, for that kickoff dinner”\(^{26}\) he might also be understood as what Nina Schiller et al. call a “transmigrant” who remains “engaged elsewhere.”\(^{27}\) This is foregrounded in the image of various transnational axes crisscrossing Chuck’s car: an “intercontinental cast of characters passed through the old Cadillac. From Bangalore there came calls... From Hillside, Queens...an Alexandrian Copt...And, from a private jet to-ing and fro-ing between Los Angeles and London, there was Faruk Patel...And then there were strictly local characters – lawyers and realtors and painters and roofers and fishmongers and rabbis and secretaries and expediters” (161-2). It is a layered irony of the text that despite his express wish to be cremated and buried in Brooklyn, Chuck’s wife decides to send his body to Trinidad. It is only in death that Chuck escapes what Rothberg calls “a form of re-domestication” by the American national narrative.\(^{28}\)

Chuck also functions as Hans’ guide by introducing the unfamiliar perspective of other histories through what Caren Irr calls “the less advantaged expatriate illuminating the world for the more advantaged.” As Irr continues: “By coming to know Chuck...Hans learns to read alternative routes, histories, and faces; his map of the world expands to include these wavering perceptions of the mobility of others. It is not solely his own movements on which


\(^{27}\) Nina Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc “From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration.” *Anthropological Quarterly*, 68 (1995): 48. The authors write that transmigrants “are not sojourners because they settle and become incorporated in the economy and political institutions, localities, and patterns of daily life of the country in which they reside. However, at the very same time, they are engaged elsewhere...they maintain connections, build institutions, conduct transactions, and influence local and national events in the countries from which they emigrated” (48).

\(^{28}\) Rothberg, 155.
he need (or can) rely to image a geopolitical scene.” Chuck exists to enable Hans’ redemption and it is the European/American self who ultimately bears responsibility for crafting an ethics for the future. In Hans and Chuck, then, we see two figures not wholly reducible to the interpellative strategies of national ideologies. While foregrounding the lack embedded within each worldview – the risk of ‘re-domestication’ in Chuck and a nebulousness lacking a narrative sensibility attentive to the pitfalls of globalization in Hans – Netherland is located in an ambivalent site pressured by the immigrant and exilic consciousnesses.

The differences between Hans and Chuck are further underscored by their divergent relationships to narratives. Hans is the befuddled narrator simultaneously trying to connect the scattered dots in his domestic life and piece together a narrative from the vignettes supplied by Chuck. On one of his flights back from England, Hans admits he did not know how to organize his old photographs properly: “There were…people who organized such things into files and folders…I envied them…for their faith in that future day when one might pull down albums and scrapbooks and in the space of an afternoon repossess one’s life” (129). Hans’ narrative disorder is in contrast to Chuck who has charted out a complete autobiography beginning with his childhood in Trinidad, continuing through his present American odyssey, and ending in his anticipated future cremation in Brooklyn. Netherland is, thus, poised between Hans who lacks narrative skill and Chuck, the supreme teller of stories.

Hans arrives at Chuck’s door in search of a narrative balm when faced with absolute despair regarding his family life. This is rendered through the trope of failed navigation as Hans flunks his first driving test. Chuck gets a chance to take charge as the driver and guide of Hans’ stalled narrative. Netherland crafts a path between Hans’ disembodied existence that, in its lack of narrative impetus, might stultify agency and Chuck’s naïve and unflinching belief in the narrative of the American Dream. Given that this blind faith might have something to do with Chuck’s death, Hans’s obliqueness toward narratives can be read as a mode of survival. Part of Chuck’s burden in the novel is to supply a narrative capability and restore a belief in stories to Hans, perhaps not a belief as naively blind as his own, but a skeptical one that will allow Hans to survive. In Hans and Chuck’s varied relationships to story-telling, Netherland reveals narrative’s duplicity: while enabling people to make sense of their lives, narrative is also the medium through which the state makes obedient subjects of their citizens by rendering events into a sensible political order.

In contrast to the voluble Chuck, Hans’ quiet mother plays the crucial role of an ethical guide. Hans describes her mode of parenting thus: “My mother, though watchful…was not one for offering express guidance, and indeed it may be thanks to her that I naturally associate love with a house fallen into silence” (90). The mother’s role in shaping Netherland’s ethical vision, in

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helping Hans see and redirect his vision when needed, is most clearly illustrated in the novel’s ending and in an episode when Hans visits Holland.30 Standing by the window of his old bedroom, Hans recalls his boyhood self mesmerized by the lighthouse: “He was an only child…but my recollection of watching the light travel out of Scheveningen contained the figure of my mother at my side, helping me to look out into the dark. She answered my questions” (87). Neither the lighthouse of the European past nor the glittering towers of the Manhattan present alone will be adequate for Hans to craft an ethics of the future and, as we shall see in Netherland’s ending, his mother transcends both these imaginaries to posit an optics of the dialectic constituted by both the past and the present.

This dialectical optics is more prominently visualized in the scenes featuring cricket. One might argue that O’Neill uses the concept-metaphor of cricket in a Levinasian sense to breach the enclosed totality of the national imaginary (‘Being’ in Levinas’ terms) by effecting an ethics of moral injunction to the uninitiated American observer of the game. According to Levinas: “ethics arises in relation to the other and not straightaway by a reference to the universality of a law. The ‘relation’ to the other man as unique...would be, here, the first significance of the meaningful.”31 O’Neill writes that, to most Americans, “cricket is among the most mysterious and unimportant of sizeable human activities...[but] The combination of triviality and obscurity is what’s significant.” As “the stuff of a national blind spot” wherein “one’s intuition and judgment always fail,” O’Neill envisions cricket as the absolute Other to the hermetic American imaginary.32

Cricket has the potential of drawing out the American national self from its enclosure by confronting the bewildered viewer with a moral imperative to acknowledge the Other: “the ability to locate, in a mostly static herd of white-clothed men, the significant action. It’s a question of looking” (149). This instance of paying heed to the Other is, as Levinas suggests, an instructive moment:

To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression...It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I...to have an idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other, or Conversation,

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30 In an interview, O’Neill points out the centrality of the concept-metaphors of vision and seeing in Netherland: “the novel is deeply involved with a quest for vision. Hans is forever looking at things, peering out windows...much of the drama involves perception, or misperception. There is a constant search for meaning: Where do I look? What am I supposed to be looking at? What do I see? What do I make of what I see?” (15) See O’Neill’s interview with Charley Reilly, Contemporary Literature 52 (2011): 1-20.


is...an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching...not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain.\textsuperscript{33}

In \textit{Netherland}, this ethical gesture of noticing the Other on the cricket field operates through a double-optic that requires the observer to concurrently maintain two mutually contradictory scales of vision. One scale focuses on the minute strip of the batting pitch, while the other encompasses the larger field of play: “One contradiction of the sport is that its doings simultaneously concern a vast round acreage and a batsman’s tiny field of action...The uninitiated onlooker is...puzzled by the alternation of two batsmen and two bowlers and two sets of stumps – a dual duel – and the strange activity that occurs after every six balls, when the fielders stroll, for chaotic seconds, into positions that imperfectly mirror the positions just abandoned” (149).

This dialectical double-optic demanded of the uninitiated viewer stages two significant transnational strategies; first, that of closely observing the granules that constitute the national terrain for signs of interpellation by the ‘foreign’ through a gesture of what Peter Mallios calls “molecular intensity” marked by “pulling...so closely \textit{within} the territory claimed by a national frame...that what once were its coordinating figures are now seen as part of a terrain which...at the microscopic level, is found to be pervasively and indissociably constituted and coinhabited by ‘foreign’ signs and mediations”\textsuperscript{34} and second, of pulling back far above and beyond the borders of the state in a transcendent intervention that reveals the nation as a temporal unit best illustrated by Dimock’s “deep time” to breach the fiction that ‘there can be a discrete, bounded unit of time coinciding with a discrete, bounded unit of space: a chronology coinciding with a territory.”\textsuperscript{35} In the above description of the game, Netherland maintains this simultaneity as a dialectical vision as the seeing I/eye observes both the ‘vast round acreage’ and ‘the batsman’s tiny field of action.’ This ethics demanded of the cricket viewer is incarnated in another form as a persistent binary between the aerial and the earthly, noted in the scenes featuring the geospatial imaginary of Google Earth, the London Eye, and in Hans’ comparisons of cricket to baseball.

In addition, the American version of cricket also serves as a metaphoric scale to measure the losses – psychic, emotive, and physical – that immigrants undergo during the process of Americanization. The sport thus brings a tone of critical counternarrativity to the American Dream as can be noted in Hans’ description:

Play such orthodox shots in New York and the ball will more than likely halt in the tangled, weedy ground cover...Consequently, in breach of the first rule of batting, the batsman is forced to smash the ball into the air...and batting is turned into a gamble...This degenerate version of the sport...inflicts an injury that is


\textsuperscript{34} Peter Mallios, \textit{Our Conrad: Constituting American Modernity} (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2010), 11.

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aesthetic as much as anything: the American adaptation is devoid of the beauty of cricket played on a lawn of appropriate dimensions...as if the field breathed through its luminous visitors. (8-9)

The immigrant cricketer's mastery of batting strokes in his native land is rendered almost useless while playing on American soil and, as Jeffrey Hill notes, “thus through a perverse form of natural selection cricket in America becomes rather like baseball.”36 The travails of the immigrant cricketer represent what Dimock, referring to the granting of citizenship, calls “a subtractive aggregation, in the sense that the new citizens are admitted into the nation only on reduced terms, unbundled and rebundled, into less than what they were...Induction into the nation comes at a price; it disciplines the inducted by the very logic by which it purports to be universal.”37 The American Dream is not what it claims to be and cricket, located at the circumferential cusp of the nation, simultaneously casts its gaze inward to the lack at the heart of the national imaginary and looks outward onto other lands and other histories.

_Netherland’s_ invocation of cricket as a counternarrative, however, is burdened with troubling political consequences. For one, _Netherland_ argues for a more just acknowledgement of immigrants by yoking together the U.S.'s racial history and the British colonial past. This becomes visible when Chuck tries to remap the other-ness of cricket and its immigrant players through the socio-geography of American culture: “It's like we're invisible. Now that's nothing new, for those of us who are black or brown...You want a taste of how it feels to be a black man in this country? Put on the white clothes of the cricketer. Put on white to feel black” (16). But this yoking is more of an uneven sleight-of-hand rather than a considered engagement with both terms of the equation. O'Neill also frequently references British colonial history without seriously engaging with the ways in which the sport functioned as a key hegemonic component for exercising imperial discipline.38 Hans tells us: “I cannot be the first to wonder if what we see, when we see men in white take to a cricket field, is men imagining an environment of justice” (121). Besides the somewhat obvious anachronism – the game has moved far beyond its idyllic origins with the involvement of giant corporate sponsorships – this recourse to imperial history evades the ways in which the sport was implicated in the racial hierarchies of colonization. Elizabeth Anker rightly critiques O'Neill:

“This elision of racial struggle largely emerges from a romanticization of the sport...which O’Neill amnesiacally uncouples from the cartography of the British Empire. Cleansed of its imperial legacies, cricket is instead heralded to vindicate O’Neill’s vision of cosmopolitanism.”

One could make the case that O’Neill’s appropriation of cricket is not a simple case of historical erasure and that the residual histories of imperial inequities and hegemonic sleights of hand emerge, however dimly, in an ironical manner to undercut his representation of cricket as a romanticized counternarrative. For instance, the darker side of the sport is revealed when Chuck, unwittingly, recounts the story of the Trobrian Islanders who were civilized and given “a crash course in democracy” through cricket by the British missionaries. Chuck’s story functions in a duplicitous manner revealing the close association between colonial brutality and the narrative of the civilizing mission crafted to hide such a history of violence. What compounds the irony is that the civilizing narrative is repeated and endorsed by Chuck, himself a product of the indentured labor of colonial history, to Hans, a white Dutchman whose country played a prominent role in imperial history. But these references to cricket as an imperial disciplinary strategy emerge through an irony that escapes Chuck and perhaps the narrative itself. Moreover, the references are not sustained enough to be read as an integral part of Netherland’s political commitments. The ambivalence of cricket is further underlined by the sport’s close affiliations with global corporate finance. Chuck’s grand dream is to use the sport to become a key player in global commerce: “We’re thinking a TV and Internet viewership of seventy million in India alone...Do you have any idea how much money this would bring in? Coca-Cola, Nike, they’re all desperate to get at the South Asian market” (80). The Indian businessman Faruk Patel takes Chuck’s dreams even further: “My idea was, you don’t need America. Why would you? You have the TV, Internet markets in India, in England...America? Not relevant. You put the stadium there and you’re done” (251). While these imagined futures question the ‘natural’ boundaries of the nation, they are also problematic for their uncritical acceptance of finance-capital driven globalization and remind us of Peter Fritzsche’s important caution that “moving from the nation to the world is not a guarantee of political virtue.”

30 Orlando Patterson eloquently describes the pedagogical imperative embedded in the game: “The most striking thing about cricket, as a game, is its emphasis on order...cricket is exceptional both for its complexity and its almost consciously articulated ideology of obedience and authority, the latter being symbolized in the person of the umpire. Nor is it an accident that cricket is one of the few games which requires two umpires.” See Patterson’s “The Ritual of Cricket” in Liberation Cricket, 146-7.
41 As James Wood points out: “Hans is not a ‘colonial’ like his fellow-cricketers but a colonist, part of the history of Dutch imperialism that has marked places as different as Java and America.”
Unlike Chuck, Hans’ relationship with cricket is more personal and the sport provides an ameliorative balm as he associates it with “unhurried time” (45) and idyllic childhood scenes with his mother watching him play. But the memories also ultimately hinder Hans’ abilities in the American version of the game: “There was nothing, in principle, to stop me from changing my game, from taking up the cow-shots and lofted bashes…I could not…I would not change…self-transformation has its limits; and my limit was reached in the peculiar matter of batting. I would stubbornly continue to bat as I always had, even if it meant the end of making runs” (48-9). It is through cricket that we glimpse Hans’ complicated relationship to the national imaginary and his paradoxical gestures towards his identity. As opposed to the programmatic procedure of earning formal American citizenship symbolized by the bureaucratic nightmare of the DMV office with its “extraordinary clutter of columns” and “faces of sullen hostility” (65), Hans describes a ‘naturalization’ of a different sort that stages the complex transmigrancy of his life. During his last league game in the U.S., Hans, at Chuck’s insistence to retool his batting style, executes an unorthodox shot with “an unsightly, crooked heave” repeating it again “with a still freer swing” (176), hitting sixers with the remaining balls. Even though Hans soon loses his wicket and his team loses the game, he demonstrates his competence in the American version of cricket: “What happened after that…ultimately didn’t count…what counted was that I’d done it. I’d hit the ball in the air like an American cricketer, and I’d done so without injury to my sense of myself” (176). This initiates a process of recovery that culminates in Hans acquiring a narrative and navigational capability symbolized in his passing the second driver’s license test. He indulges in this celebratory moment of abandoning past burdens and describes his dream of a cricket stadium in breathless prose: “All of which may explain why I began to dream in all seriousness of a stadium, and black and brown and even a few white faces crowded in bleachers…there is a roar as the cricket stars trot down the pavilion steps onto this impossible grass field in America, and everything is suddenly clear, and I am at last naturalized” (176). The implications of this passage are layered. We see Hans yoking together incommensurables: dream and reality in the phrase ‘to dream in all seriousness’; the racial harmony of the future in the black, brown, and white faces united by the cricketing spectacle in the ‘impossible’ grass field; and Hans’ paradoxical assertion of being ‘naturalized’ when, in fact, he does not pursue formal American citizenship.

My analysis of Netherland’s worldly gestures will be incomplete without taking into account the sections featuring the geospatial imaginary of Google Earth. These segments further extend the novel’s worldliness by foregrounding the transnational potential of new technologies and their ability to circumvent the nation’s borders while revealing the weaknesses of these new modalities in generating an ethics of the double-optic previously demonstrated on the cricket field. Google Earth represents the subversive potential
of the geospatial media that offers us the possibility, unlike traditional cartography, of imagining a future without national boundaries. In *Netherland*, Google Earth is resonant of what Rita Barnard calls “a noncorpum” which is “a simultaneously familiar and alien entity that moves in and out of various bodies, minds, and locations, traverses the world.” The noncorpum is a grammar of the mobile optic able to short-circuit national borders and establish narrative vantage points beyond the nation’s hegemonic narratives. As a geospatial imaginary that, according to Sangeet Kumar, “challenge(s) the very concept of defined international boundaries due to their ‘borderless’ architecture”, Google Earth resonates with transnational potential.

We first see Hans using Google Earth as a compensatory gesture for his absent family:

> There was no movement in my marriage, either; but, flying on Google’s satellite function...I surreptitiously traveled to England. Starting with...the United States, I moved the navigation box across the north Atlantic...and with the image purely photographic, descended finally on Landford Road. It was always a clear and beautiful day...the scene was depthless. My son’s dormer was visible...but there was no way to see more, or deeper. I was stuck. (123-4)

Even though the passage describes the potential of the geospatial imaginary to zip headily across the Atlantic in disregard of national borders, it also foregrounds a limitation as Hans notes that the scenery always remained unchanging and that there was no way for him ‘to see more, or deeper.’ Google Earth’s limitations to account for the sentient are further underlined as the above passage immediately segues into an episode highlighting the failure of another vision; Hans’ inability to see into his estranged wife’s life. Hans confides that he had no other knowledge about Rachel besides the perfunctory details of her work life: “Of what one might suppose to be a crucial question of fact – the question of other men – I had no knowledge and did not dare make inquiries. The biggest, most salient questions – What was she thinking? What was she feeling? – were likewise beyond me. The very idea that one’s feelings could give shape to one’s life had become an odd one” (125).

The second episode repeats the heady freedom of Google Earth that we have already noted:

> I go to Google Maps...I rocket westward...to America...It is, necessarily, a bright, clear day...Nothing seems to be going on...consequently with a single brush on the touch pad I flee upward into the atmosphere and at once have in my sights the physical planet, submarine wrinkles and all – have the option, if so moved, to go anywhere. From up here though, a human’s movement is a barely intelligible thing. Where would he move to, and for what?...The USA as such is nowhere to be seen. (252)

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In both the Google Earth scenes, we clearly sense its liberatory potential in the heady un-tethering of physical limitations. But the images are also deceptive as they represent a static monovalence unable to capture the complexities of human reality. The geospatial imaginary is representative of only one side of the double-optic; that of the distanced view approximating Dimock’s perspective of ‘deep-time.’ The technologically mediated imaginary is unable to generate, on its own, the double-optic central to the novel’s transnational vision that holds the aerial and the earthly in a meaning-generating nexus.

Having noted the failure of the geospatial imaginary, the novel moves towards a reiteration of its central vision in its penultimate scene where Hans and his family go up the giant Ferris wheel on the banks of the Thames. The double optic that threads *Netherland*’s narrative is reiterated in the attempt to marry the binaries of the technological and the human, to fuse the critical potential afforded by the distanced view and the intimate connections of the domestic sphere. As Hans goes higher up the wheel, O’Neill uses the defamiliarization technique to hint at the political possibilities embedded in the distanced view:

As a Londoner, I find myself consulted about what we’re all seeing. At first, this is easy...But the higher we go, the less recognizable the city becomes. Trafalgar square is not where you expect it to be. Charing Cross...must be carefully detected. I find myself turning to a guidebook for help. The difficulty arises from the mishmashing of spatial dimensions, yes, but also from a quantitative attack: the English capital is huge...‘Buckingham Palace?’ one of the Lithuanian ladies asks me, and I cannot say. (254)

While the passage notes the positive interventions of the aerial view in rendering strange what was once familiar and proximate, there is also a clear overlap with the static vision of Google Earth in the inability to detect a ‘sign of life.’ As they reach the top, Hans’s confusion segues into a tranquil domesticity when he reaches out to Rachel: “A self-evident and prefabricated symbolism attached itself to this slow climb...that they have made it thus far, to a point where they can see horizons previously unseen, and the old earth reveals itself newly” (254). More than a statement of domestic sentimentalism, the presence of the human element – here Rachel is recast in her earlier role as “a human flashlight” (90) – renders the initial confusion of the lifeless, defamiliarized landscape into a meaningful metaphor for the future by re-inserting the double-optic central to *Netherland*’s vision. By bringing in Rachel, the character associated with the ground and the surface, the novel tempers the heady confusion of the non-corporal aerial vision with the corporal and the sentient.

45 The play between the aerial and the terrestrial is embedded in the very title of the novel. Stephen Amidon notes in his review that the title “suggests the birthplace of its narrator...But it also describes the desolate state of his marriage to Rachel...And then there is the patch of Brooklyn lowland where the unhappily single Hans comes to spend his weekends...there is [also] the lowest land of all, the pit a few blocks from
Netherland ends with a scene of profound ambivalence as Hans recalls a Staten Island Ferry ride with his deceased mother where “finally, inevitably, everybody looked to Manhattan...A world was lighting up before us...in the lilac acres of two amazingly high towers...To speculate about the meaning of such a moment would be a stained, suspect business...I wasn’t the only one of us to make out and accept an extraordinary promise in what we saw – the tall approaching cape, a people risen in light” (255-6). This ‘extraordinary promise’ rendered by the narrating eye/I glancing towards the shores of the United States is, however, immediately undercut as Hans also recalls that his mother, the European alien who does not share his vision was, instead, “looking not at New York but at me, and smiling” (256). Hans’ mother diverts our gaze away from Manhattan’s towers towards her son. Netherland ends with Hans replicating his mother’s gestures – “Which is how I come to face my family with the same smile” (256) – and his gaze is diverted once again by an unseen and as yet indescribable vision associated with his son Jake. Netherland’s ending, with its competing and parallel gazes that simultaneously draw the reader toward the shores of the United States and divert her from such national moorings, stages, once again, the novel’s ambivalent response to the national imaginary. This tussle between competing gazes, however, remains confined to the Euro-American protagonists as Chuck’s perspective is left out.

In analyzing Netherland’s counternarratives, we can, then, trace the ways in which the post-9/11 American novel engages with the U.S. state’s constrictive hegemonic imaginaries by hinting at a yet-to-arrive-worldliness through its transnational imaginaries and by revisiting the problematic of American identity while retaining ambivalent affliations to the powerful appropriative impulses of the nation, globe, and the visions of a globalized present/future driven by finance capital. While Netherland takes on the challenge of imagining worldliness and re-mapping the United States through buried histories and the efferent affiliations of its protagonists oblique to the accumulative forces of state power after 9/11, we can also trace – in the gaps, fissures, and slippages that mark the various entities operating under its transnational umbrella – the cultural-aesthetic sphere’s difficulties in sustaining the ethical burden of constant vigilance against power structures and their hegemonic imaginaries.

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Hans’s loft where the twin towers once stood.” See his review “Netherland by Joseph O’Neill.” The Sunday Times (June 8, 2008) <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article4074760.ece>
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