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Towards a Worldly Post-9/11 American Novel: Transnational Disjunctures in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*

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The general consensus among critics of contemporary US culture seems to be that the events of 9/11 have wrought far-reaching alterations in the nature of US state power with consequences that we have 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."[1] 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" (180). This new exceptionalist regime openly revealed the US state's intentions as, in George Steinmetz's words, "domestically authoritarian and geopolitically imperialist."[2] In short, the policies of the US 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. In Pease's suggestive comment, the US state's management of domestic populations in the post-9/11 climate took a deterritorializing turn as the state became "dissociated . . . from the territorially bound nation" and, instead, a geographically nebulous "homeland security state" with the same exceptionalist norms put in its place. This had the consequence of making US citizens "internal émigrés who migrated from the nation to the homeland."[3]

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 engage with both the domestic and the global dimensions of state power by breaching the self-contained myths of US nationhood and by continually chipping away at the barriers between "home" and the "foreign." The fractures effected by the "transnational turn" in American Studies lend a valuable perspective as they resurrect, what Pease calls, the "two interrelated dimensions of the disavowed underside of American exceptionalism—US imperialism and US global interdependencies."[4] 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 blindnesses," which 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."[5] The concerted efforts to critique transnational practices have taken the form of distinguishing 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 form of transnationalism."[6] Leerom Medovoi makes the related point that "a post-national imagination does not of itself make for a progressive vision. . . . The question is not 'whether transnationalism', but rather whose."[7] Arguing against transnational American Studies' self-portrayal as the oppositional Other to state power, Johannes Voelz ably demonstrates that the boundaries between transnational critiques and the state are much more porous, and he criticizes 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."[8] Even with these cautionary notes, it remains undeniable that the energies released by the "transnational turn" not only have a history of oblique opposition to the state's visions of what the nation should become but have also enabled, in Pease's words, "a rethinking of the national in the light of newly invented spatial and temporal coordinates."[9] 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 *Netherland* (2008).

Netherland's themes can be analyzed through the lens of two critical issues: on a broader scale, the novel reimagines ways in which the transnational aesthetic might respond to the alterations in state power after 9/11 and, more narrowly, the text is a crucial intervention in the debate over post-9/11 American fiction. A quick recap of this seemingly narrow debate about a literary subgenre reveals that it rehearses several

larger concerns about envisioning the US's role in the world. The critical discussion largely centers on whether the form has become, to use Bruce Robbins's term, "worldly."[10] In other words, has the form responded adequately to the allegations that US fiction is "too parochial, local, and narrowly national"[11] by engaging with the broader planetary context? In his wide-ranging critique of the American literary responses to 9/11, Richard Gray argues that "new events generate new forms of consciousness 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."[12] 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 that charts the outward movement of American power."[13] Rothberg, in fact, holds up *Netherland* as the key exception to Gray's judgment about the subgenre, praising O'Neill's text as "one of the finest novels of the post-9/11 condition," one that offers readers the "vision of a deterritorialized America" (156). 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."[14] He concludes, "the point seems to be that the novel's field of vision has contracted, not expanded" (1099). In the context of "worldliness," Lee Konstantinou raises important empirical and theoretical questions: "What, after all, counts as an authentically worldly novel? How many worldly novels must be published . . . before a particular national literary field is considered to be worldly enough? . . . How do artists narratively emplot the complex, coordinated activities and causal chains involving government agents, terrorists, and civilians across multiple distributed spaces and through history?"[15] The dominant critical consensus, therefore, seems to be that the subgenre has failed to embrace the transnational imperative to remap the US'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 whether (and in what ways) the US cultural-aesthetic sphere might incorporate the transnational perspective in a post-9/11 world. How 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 nonstate 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 to her suggestion that "transnationality also alludes to the *trans*versal, the *trans*actional, the *trans*lational, and the *trans*gressive aspects of contemporary behavior and imagination . . . incited, enabled, and regulated by the changing logics of states and capitalism,"[16] *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 a claim to the transnational label. While *Netherland* takes up the challenge of imagining worldliness through its various transnational counternarratives, I locate my reading between the ambivalent 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 kinds of things have different speeds, axes, points of origin and termination, and varied relationships to institutional structures in different regions, nations, or societies."[17] 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 competing pulls of globe and nation,[18] we come to a fuller comprehension of the ways in which nation-states still exercise a spectral fascination on 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 lives 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. This account is rendered through Hans, who occupies the sole narrative voice in the text. Constructed as a series of flashback vignettes from the narrative present of 2006 in London when Hans hears of Chuck's death, *Netherland* traces the estrangement of Hans and his wife Rachel after their arrival in New York City in 1998, Rachel's return to England with their young son after the 9/11 attacks, Hans's search for companionship following this personal crisis and his growing friendship with Chuck, whom he meets through the games of cricket, and Hans's 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."[19] But O'Neill's text, even while relying on domestic tropes, opens up a worldly breach 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's 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."[20] Hans's nebulous relationship with formal American citizenship demonstrates Daniel T. Rodgers's 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."[21]

It might be argued that Hans's actions throughout the novel introduce a new twist to 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 that such a 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."[22] Hans's 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" (25). Instead of a narrative of return that likely risks absorption into the national imaginary, Hans's narrative is made distinctive by the sense of "*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" (26). As Edwards and Gaonkar note, such "passing through" helps recast the US "among a proliferating set of trajectories, national, subnational, and regional, that make up the present global matrix" (26). To be sure, O'Neill romanticizes Hans's unsettledness and his seeking "alternative forms of allegiance"[23] through the game of cricket as a critical aspect of challenging formal citizenship.

It is also crucial to note that while Hans's actions help us rethink the US "not as terminus but rather as node through which people are passing,"[24] this critical unsettledness is somewhat compromised by the fact that it is enabled, above all, by Hans's membership in the "transnational capitalist class."[25] The ambivalence of passing through is reflected in Hans's 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 US 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."[26] 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 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."[27] Hans's narrative then contains several contradictory impulses: his disregard for formal American citizenship poses challenges to state sovereignty, while his 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 small-time businessman given to verbosity is, as Wood notes, "ever eager to be grounded in America."[28] 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."[29] But Chuck's narrative is not one of seamless absorption into the US national imaginary, as he represents, in Pamela Mansutti's words, a "promising contradiction: as a naturalized citizen and racially-connoted individual, he simultaneously feels at home and alien in New York; and if he ascribes the crisis to the vague political-economic establishment he is living in, he also believes that he can do better for the United States from his insider-outsider's position."[30] 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,"[31] he might also be understood as what Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Szanton Blanc call a "transmigrant" who remains "engaged elsewhere."[32] 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."[33] 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.[34]

Chuck also functions as Hans's guide by introducing the unfamiliar perspective of other histories through what Caren Irr calls "the less advantaged expatriate illuminat[ing] the world for the more advantaged."[35] 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 he need (or can) rely to image a geopolitical scene" (671). Chuck exists to enable Hans's redemption, and it is the European/American self who ultimately bears responsibility for crafting an ethics for

the future. Hans and Chuck are, then, 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 nebulous drift 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 can be read as what Karolina Golimowska accurately describes as a "cricketer-flâneur,"[36] 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 does 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."[37] Hans's 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 fails his first driving test. Chuck gets a chance to take charge as the driver and guide of Hans's stalled narrative. *Netherland* crafts a path between Hans's disembodied existence, which, 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's and Chuck's varied relationships to storytelling, *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's 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 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.[38] 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."[39] 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 it becomes evident 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 metaphor of cricket to breach the enclosed totality of the national imaginary by giving a moral injunction to the uninitiated American observer of the game. 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.[40] 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."[41] In *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 at a cricket game 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 *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"[42]; 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."[43] 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 and the London Eye, and in Hans's comparisons of cricket to baseball.[44]

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's 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 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.[45]

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."[46] The travails of the immigrant cricketer approximate Dimock's representation of the granting of citizenship as a process wherein "the new citizens are admitted only on reduced terms, unbundled and rebundled, into less than what they were. . . . Induction into a nation comes at a price; it disciplines the inducted by the very logic by which it purports to be universal."[47] 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 outward onto other lands and other histories.

The invocations of cricket by *Netherland*'s protagonists are, however, burdened with troubling political consequences. For one, Chuck argues for a more just acknowledgment of immigrants in the US by yoking together the nation's racial history and the British colonial past. This becomes visible when he tries to remap and reroute the otherness 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."[48] But this yoking together is more of an uneven sleight of hand than a considered engagement with both terms of the equation. Both Chuck's and Hans's frequent references to British colonial history do not seriously engage with the ways in which

the sport functioned as a key hegemonic component for exercising imperial discipline.[49] 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."[50] Besides the somewhat obvious anachronism—the game has moved far beyond its idyllic origins with the involvement of giant corporate sponsorships—Hans's recourse to imperial history evades the ways in which the sport was implicated in the racial hierarchies of colonization. Elizabeth Anker critiques O'Neill thus: "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."[51] While the acknowledgment of imperial history is important, Anker's critique needs to adequately discern between the narrator/protagonist Hans, Chuck, and the author O'Neill. It is not entirely clear that O'Neill shares his protagonists' attitudes towards cricket. The "elision of racial struggle" that Anker accuses O'Neill of is perhaps more accurately read as another level of failure in Hans's vision (in addition to his other shortcomings) and, therefore, not to be seamlessly equated with O'Neill's authorial attitudes.[52]

On another level, one could complicate Anker's critique of "amnesiac uncoupling" by making the case that Hans'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 ironic manner to undercut his representation of cricket as a romanticized counternarrative. It is certainly the case that cricket, as Carmen Zamorano Llena notes, "is the lens through which Chuck observes post-9/11 America and which allows him to see the possibilities that the game offers to overcome the limiting americanist definitions of national identity that dominated the socio-political context in the aftermath of the attacks."[53] But, as Katherine Snyder notes "past injustices, especially in the form of colonial imbalances of power and the attendant potential for violence, remain legible in *Netherland*."[54] For instance, the darker side of the sport is revealed when Chuck, unwittingly, recounts the story of the Trobriand Islanders who were civilized and given "a crash course in democracy" through cricket by the British missionaries.[55] 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.[56] Although it might be argued that these flitting references to cricket as an imperial disciplinary strategy are not sustained enough to be read as an integral part of *Netherland*'s political commitments and, therefore, remain only as what Snyder calls the "colonial trace,"[57] they emerge through an irony that perhaps escapes its protagonists. Chuck's insistence on cricket's "civility" is also ambivalent. As Claire Westall maintains, "Clearly, there are multiple interpretive avenues for reading Chuck's insistence upon civility: as

the reiteration of an imperial message without irony or critical distance; as the ironic and knowing deployment of a myth set to win hearts and wallets; and as the postcolonial and/or global exposure of imperial hypocrisy achieved by demanding the standards former masters claimed for themselves."[58] 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."[59] 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."[60]

Unlike Chuck, Hans's relationship with cricket is more personal, and the sport provides an ameliorative balm as he associates it with "unhurried time"[61] and idyllic childhood scenes with his mother watching him play. But the memories also ultimately hinder Hans's 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" (48–49). It is through cricket that readers glimpse Hans's 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 US, Hans, at Chuck's insistence that he 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. Hans yokes 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 his paradoxical assertion of being "naturalized" when, in fact, Hans does not pursue formal American citizenship.

My analysis of *Netherland*'s worldly gestures would 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 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 with 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, [and] traverses the world."[62] 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.[63]

Readers 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.[64] 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's 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 already noted above:

> 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)

Both the Google Earth scenes clearly convey a sense of the technology's liberatory potential in the heady untethering 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" (254). 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 attaches 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 reinserting 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 noncorporal aerial vision[65] with the corporal and the sentient.

Netherland ends with a scene of profound ambivalence as Hans recalls a Staten Island Ferry ride with his 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."[66] This "extraordinary promise" rendered by the narrating I/eye 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's mother diverts the reader's 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 is thus peopled with competing and parallel gazes that simultaneously draw the reader toward the shores of the United States and divert her from such national moorings. The ending 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 US 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 affiliations to the powerful appropriative impulses of the nation, the globe, and the visions of a globalized present/future driven by finance capital. While *Netherland* takes on the challenge of imagining worldliness and remapping 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.

Notes

I thank Amit Baishya and Demetrios Lallas, who read earlier versions of the paper and gave helpful comments. I also thank the three anonymous reviewers of *JTAS* for their help in improving the argument.

[1] Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 22.

[2] George Steinmetz, "The State of Emergency and the Revival of American Imperialism: Toward an Authoritarian Post-Fordism," *Public Culture* 15, no. 2 (2003): 341.

[3] Donald E. Pease, "Introduction: Re-mapping the Transnational Turn," in *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies*, ed. Winfried Fluck, Donald E. Pease, and John Carlos Rowe (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2011), 22.

[4] Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies—Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005): 17–57; and Donald Pease, "Re-thinking 'American Studies after US Exceptionalism,'" *American Literary History* 21, no. 1 (2009): 20.

[5] Thomas Bender, "Introduction: 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.

[6] Amy Kaplan, "Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, October 17, 2003," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2004): 10.

[7] Leerom Medovoi, "Nation, Globe, Hegemony: Post-Fordist Preconditions of the Transnational Turn in American Studies," *Interventions* 7, no. 2 (2005): 170.

[8] Johannes Voelz, "Utopias of Transnationalism and the Neoliberal State," in Fluck, Pease, and Rowe, *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn*, 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 introduce a new configuration" (Pease, "Introduction," 5–6).

[9] Pease, "Introduction," 5.

[10] Bruce Robbins, "The Worlding of the American Novel," in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, ed. Leonard Cassuto, Clare Virginia Eby, and Benjamin Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1096.

[11] Lee Konstantinou, "The World of David Foster Wallace," *boundary 2* 40, no. 3 (2013): 60.

[12] Richard Gray, "Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis," *American Literary History* 21, no. 1 (2009): 133–34. See also Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 29.

[13] Michael Rothberg, "A Failure of the Imagination: Diagnosing the Post-9/11 Novel: A Response to Richard Gray," *American Literary History* 21, no. 1 (2009): 153.

[14] Robbins, "Worlding," 1097.

[15] Konstantinou, "World," 62–63.

[16] Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 4.

[17] Arjun Appadurai, "Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination," *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (2000): 5.

[18] 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." Katie Bacon, "The Great Irish-Dutch-American Novel," *Atlantic*, May 2008, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/05/the-great-irish-dutch-american-novel/306788/.

[19] Gray, "Open Doors," 134.

[20] James Wood, "Beyond a Boundary," *New Yorker*, May 26, 2008, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/05/26/beyond-a-boundary. Karolina Golimowska argues that Hans's position as the lone white man on the cricket team in New York reduces his social status somewhat by putting "him in the position of the Other and turn[ing] the established social structures." Karolina Golimowska, "Cricket as a Cure: Post-9/11 Urban Trauma and Displacement in Joseph O'Neill's Novel *Netherland*," *Journal of American Culture* 36, no. 3 (2013): 235. I think that temporary displacement is not enough to overturn the privilege Hans carries with him as a white man. As Claire Westall argues about Hans, "Even without a father, his social access is pre-given, pre-ordained; and his mother silently watches his boyhood games shape him into gentleman, a characteristic, so often noted, which makes him an honorary Englishman in New York." Claire Westall, "Cricket, Capital, and Civility in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*," *Moving Worlds* 12, no. 1 (2012): 75.

[21] Daniel T. Rodgers, "American Exceptionalism Revisited," *Raritan* 24, no. 2 (2004): 34.

[22] Brian T. Edwards and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, "Introduction: Globalizing American Studies," in *Globalizing American Studies*, ed. Brian T. Edwards and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 26.

[23] Voelz, "Utopias of Transnationalism," 366.

[24] Edwards and Gaonkar, "Introduction," 26.

[25] See Leslie Sklair, *The Transnational Capitalist Class* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000).

[26] Joseph O'Neill, *Netherland* (New York: Pantheon, 2008), 99–100. All quotations are from this edition.

[27] Wai Chee Dimock, "Scales of Aggregation: Prenational, Subnational, Transnational," *American Literary History* 18, no. 2 (2006): 220.

[28] Wood, "Beyond a Boundary."

[29] O'Neill, *Netherland*, 74.

[30] Pamela Mansutti, "Ethno-religious Identities and Cosmopolitan Echoes in John Updike's 'Terrorist' (2006) and Joseph O'Neill's 'Netherland' (2008)," *Altre Modernità* (2011): 119.

[31] Joan Didion, *Miami* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 111.

[32] Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Szanton Blanc, "From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration," *Anthropological Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (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 in the sense that they maintain connections, build institutions, conduct transactions, and influence local and national events in the countries from which they emigrated" (48).

[33] O'Neill, *Netherland*, 161–62.

[34] Rothberg, "Failure," 155.

[35] Caren Irr, "Toward the World Novel: Genre Shifts in Twenty-First-Century Expatriate Fiction," *American Literary History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 670.

[36] Golimowska, "Cricket," 235.

[37] O'Neill, *Netherland*, 129.

[38] In an interview, O'Neill points out the centrality of the concept 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?*" Charlie Reilly, "An Interview with Joseph O'Neill," *Contemporary Literature* 52, no. 1 (2011): 15.

[39] O'Neill, *Netherland*, 87.

[40] Joseph O'Neill, "Bowling Alone," *Atlantic*, October 2007, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/10/bowling-alone/306185/.

[41] O'Neill, *Netherland*, 149.

[42] Peter Lancelot Mallios, *Our Conrad: Constituting American Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 11. Lee Konstantinou makes a claim similar to Mallios's when he argues that "we might want also to emphasize the great literary achievements that can, in skillful hands, arise from a radical narrowing of literary focus. A focus on the local—say, Henry David Thoreau's Walden, Raymond Carver's minimalist domestic spaces, DeLillo's limousine interior—can obviously, in ways both direct and indirect, teach us a great deal about the global, as much as, if not more than, maximalist works" (Konstantinou, "World," 85).

[43] Wai Chee Dimock, "Deep Time: American Literature and World History," *American Literary History* 13, no. 4 (2001): 759.

[44] Carmen Zamorano Llena engages with this double-ness from the problematic of constructing collective identity: "*Netherland* implies that the reconstruction of collective belonging requires the intertwined work of two different actors in redefining the organic national community – the narrative of the migrant communities that have traditionally integrated multicultural America; and the new transnational migrant whose ties are facilitated by new technologies and a globalized economy." Carmen Zamorano Llena, "Transnational Movements and the Limits of Citizenship: Redefinitions of National Belonging in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*," in *Transcultural Identities in Contemporary Literature*, ed. Irene Gilsenan Nordin, Julie Hansen, and Carmen Zamorano Llena (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), 10.

[45] O'Neill, *Netherland*, 8–9.

[46] Jeffrey Hill, "The American Dream of Chuck Ramkissoon: Cricket in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*," *Journal of Sport History* 37, no. 2 (2010): 226.

[47] Dimock, "Scales of Aggregation," 220.

[48] O'Neill, *Netherland*, 16.

[49] Among the many studies of cricket as an imperial discipline, I found Appadurai's, Ashish Nandy's, and Orlando Patterson's work to be particularly useful. See Arjun Appadurai, "Playing with Modernity: The Decolonization of Indian Cricket," in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 23–48; Ashis Nandy, *The Tao of Cricket: On Games of Destiny and the Destiny of Games* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Orlando

Patterson, "The Ritual of Cricket," in *Liberation Cricket: West Indies Cricket Culture*, ed. Hilary McD Beckles and Brian Stoddart (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1995), 141–47.

[50] O'Neill, *Netherland*, 121.

[51] Elizabeth S. Anker, "Allegories of Falling and the 9/11 Novel," *American Literary History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 468.

[52] Eva Dinis and Susana Araújo's fine reading of *Netherland* through the trope of creolisation is also hampered, I think, by too aligned a reading between authorial biography and textual character. For instance, they argue that "an informed biographical reading will show that Joseph O'Neill's own cosmopolitanism mirrors the narrator's. With Irish and Turkish ancestry, O'Neill has lived in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom and currently resides in the USA. . . . O'Neill himself is trapped in the same circularity, writing from a cosmopolitan, middle-class European perspective with self-inflicted psychological borders that mirror those in the physical and cultural realm, creating a 'force field' so strong that the possibility of breaking down these walls and truly exploring in depth extraneous, heterogeneous cultures is not even brought into question." Eva Dinis and Susana Araújo, "'Securing' Identities after 9/11: Challenges to Migration and Creolisation in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*," in *Shifting Borders: European Perspectives on Creolisation*, ed. Tommaso Sbriccoli and Stefano Jacoviello (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2012), 124.

[53] Llena, "Transnational Movements," 15.

[54] Katherine V. Snyder, "*Gatsby*'s Ghost: Post-Traumatic Memory and National Literary Tradition in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*," *Contemporary Literature* 54, no. 3 (2013): 478.

[55] O'Neill, *Netherland*, 211. 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" (Patterson, "Ritual of Cricket," 146–47).

[56] 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" (Wood, "Beyond a Boundary").

[57] Snyder, "*Gatsby*'s Ghost," 479.

[58] Westall, "Cricket," 80.

[59] O'Neill, *Netherland*, 80.

[60] Peter Fritzsche, "Global History and Bounded Subjects: A Response to Thomas Bender," *American Literary History* 18, no. 2 (2006): 284. As Claire Westall observes, "In New York, however, Chuck is attempting colonization in reverse, not in order to defeat

the old Massa but in an effort to join the new one" (Westall, "Cricket," 76).

[61] O'Neill, *Netherland*, 45.

[62] Rita Barnard, "Fictions of the Global," *Novel* 42, no. 2 (2009): 213.

[63] Sangeet Kumar, "Google Earth and the Nation State: Sovereignty in the Age of New Media," *Global Media and Communication* 6, no. 2 (2010): 158.

[64] O'Neill, *Netherland*, 123–24.

[65] 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 Hans's loft where the twin towers once stood." Stephen Amidon, "*Netherland* by Joseph O'Neill," *Sunday Times*, June 8, 2008, http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article4074760.ece. Katherine Snyder also provides a fine reading of the title as figuring the "spatial or temporal process of reference itself" (Snyder, "*Gatsby*'s Ghost," 480).

[66] O'Neill, *Netherland*, 255–56.

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