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The Post-American Novel: 9/11, the Iraq War, and the Crisis of American Hegemony

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The Post-American Novel:  
9/11, the Iraq War, and the Crisis of American Hegemony

By

Gabriel Page

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Doctor of Philosophy

in

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in the

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University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Donna V. Jones, Chair

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Professor Francine Masiello

Professor Nadia Ellis

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Abstract

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This dissertation proposes a new analytical category for thinking about a subset of post-9/11 Anglophone novels that are engaged with the political aftermath of 9/11. I designate this category the post-American novel, distinguishing it from the category of 9/11 fiction. While the 9/11 novel is a sub-genre of national literature, focusing on the terrorist attacks as a national trauma, the post-American novel is a transnational literary form that decenters 9/11, either by contextualizing the terrorist attacks in relation to other historical traumas or by shifting focus to the “War on Terror.” I theorize the post-American novel as the literary expression of international opposition to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. International opposition to the Iraq War exposed the fractures in American global hegemony, and so I define the post-American novel as the historically-engaged novel of the crisis of American hegemony. I develop this argument through a detailed analysis of the political aesthetics of some representative post-American novels by four international writers. In various ways, these novels all diagnose post-9/11 American society from an international perspective and subvert the myth of American exceptionalism, though their forms of cultural and political critique are more far-ranging than this. The category of the post-American novel is not meant to herald the end of American literature. And though I peg its emergence to the second Iraq War, the category is flexible enough to encompass a range of contemporary novels by international writers who explore the role of the United States in a changing world.

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## Introduction

On February 15, 2003, millions of people took to the streets of over 600 cities around the world to demonstrate against the imminent U.S. invasion of Iraq, marking the “largest protest event in human history” (Walgrave and Rucht xiii). Over the course of the previous year, the Bush administration had been selling the war to the American public on the basis of false claims that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and posed an imminent threat to the United States and the rest of the world, while encouraging the equally false belief that Iraq was involved in the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, British Prime Minister Tony Blair made the case for war to a much more skeptical and resistant public in the U.K.

The desire to overthrow Saddam Hussein had been central to neoconservative foreign policy discussions since the early 1990s (Ehrenberg et al. 3). In an influential article published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1991, neoconservative journalist Charles Krauthammer called on the U.S. to take advantage of the “unipolar moment” by implementing a more aggressive foreign policy to secure U.S. interests and block challengers to American hegemony. This was echoed in Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis, first appearing in an article published in 1993, which not only predicted a conflict between the West and Islam, but also actively encouraged political leaders to expand and consolidate America’s global hegemony.

In 1997 a group of neoconservative intellectuals in and outside of government formed the Project for a New American Century (PNAC), advocating for unilateralism, preemptive war, regime change, and the active spread of U.S.-style democracy and free-market capitalism. The following year, a Republican-led Congress passed the Iraqi Liberation Act, and later that year President Clinton authorized military strikes on select targets in Iraq. With the election of George W. Bush in 2000, several members of PNAC assumed high-level positions in the administration. The terrorist attacks on 9/11 presented them with the opportunity to advance their foreign policy agenda, which would come to be known informally as the “Bush Doctrine.”

Though determined to invade Iraq and overthrow Saddam Hussein no matter what, the Bush administration initially sought a resolution from the UN Security Council to provide a veneer of international legitimacy for the war. France and Germany led the opposition within the Security Council, highlighting dissension both within the European Union and NATO. China and Russia also registered their more modest dissent. Supported by governments in the U.K. and Spain—though not, generally speaking, by their citizenries—and a number of Eastern European countries—all former members of the Soviet bloc—the invasion of Iraq was opposed by numerous state delegations, international NGOs, civic and religious organizations, and the 118 nations comprising the Non-Aligned Movement (Ehrenberg et al. 119).

Neither diplomatic negotiations nor popular demonstrations were capable of stopping the invasion of Iraq—called “Operation Iraqi Freedom”—which commenced on March 20, 2003. Contrary to the expectations of the Bush administration, the invasion and subsequent occupation of the country produced an anti-American insurgency, sectarian violence and civil war, as well as the proliferation of terrorism in Iraq and beyond. Iraqis commonly refer to the invasion and its aftermath as the “collapse” (Kukis xiii). The “War on

Terror” generated numerous scandals for the American government, including torture, assassinations, civilian massacres, and indefinite detention at the military prison at Guantanamo Bay.

The Iraq War struck a major blow to the international reputation of the U.S., exposing the fault lines within U.S. global hegemony. As Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin observed, the “American state’s war of aggression in Iraq [...] evoked an unprecedented opposition, including within the capitalist core states” (32). Though there was no sustained antiwar movement, nationally or internationally, the war finally became unpopular in the U.S. and a key issue in the 2007 presidential election. Barack Obama won in large part by campaigning to end the war, which more or less happened in 2011 (while other related pledges, like closing down Guantanamo, remained unfulfilled when Obama left office in 2016). The Afghan War, meanwhile, continues 17 years (at the time of writing) after it commenced on October 7, 2001, having acquired the status of the longest war in American history.

Without asserting an overly simplistic causality, it is obviously impossible to separate the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq from much that came after it, including the Arab Spring, the rise of ISIS, the Syrian Civil War, the refugee crisis, and the emergence of xenophobic right wing nationalisms around the world. And yet, with all that’s happened since 2003—and in light of all the present dangers and crises—the U.S. invasion of Iraq seems like...well, like *history*. But it was precisely 9/11 and its political aftermath that sounded the death-knell of post-Cold War American triumphalism, and marked the end of what Francis Fukuyama infamously dubbed the “end of history.” Moreover, the event fueled nationalist anxieties about American decline that the failures in Afghanistan and Iraq have only increased.

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In his cultural history of 9/11 and the “War on Terror,” David Holloway notes that the terrorist attacks on September 11 were widely described as a “moment of historical rupture, an epochal event that drew a clear line through world history, dividing what came after 9/11 from what went before” (1). President Bush famously said that “everything changed” after 9/11, and this view was broadly disseminated by the mainstream American media. Among other things, this framing of the event promoted the view that the tragedy and trauma of 9/11 was beyond all comparison to any previous national tragedies or traumas. Critics of the Bush administration’s response to 9/11 tended to emphasize the continuity between the pre- and post-9/11 periods, denying the epochal character of the event and the incommensurability of the tragedy.

In response to the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq a year and half later, a debate emerged in the American public sphere about whether or not the U.S. was (or had) an empire. Though Thomas Jefferson described America in paradoxical yet suggestive terms as an “empire of liberty,” it is a basic component of American self-understanding—and of the myth of American exceptionalism—that the U.S. is not an empire, the principal evidence being that it has no overseas colonies (which of course some people dispute). However, as David Holloway observes, this view began to change with the 2003 U.S. invasion Iraq:



Lodged harmlessly enough in the intellectual subsoil of the Western academy, or dispersed into small pockets of radicalism that remained generally peripheral to mainstream political discourse, debate about American empire in the 1990s made only sporadic and limited impacts on popular discussions about America's role in the world. After 9/11 the climate changed dramatically. The concept of American empire often occupied the centre-ground in discussion about the causes and consequences of 9/11, and about the underlying motivations and historical drivers of the war on terror. The Bush administration denied that America had an empire to maintain or enlarge. But after 9/11, on this and related issues, the administration looked increasingly out of step. (12)

Holloway refers to this cultural debate reassessing American foreign policy since the end of WWII as "empire revisionism." What was remarkable about this debate, as Holloway observes, was the broad range of ideological positions it included. Important critical analyses of American empire from the Marxist left included David Harvey's 2003 book entitled *The New Imperialism* and Giovanni Arrighi's two-part essay from published in the *New Left Review* in 2004 entitled "Hegemony Unraveling." Meanwhile, non-Marxist historians like Andrew Bacevich, a retired Army colonel, recuperated and extended the critical postwar historiography of Charles Beard and William Appleman Williams, publishing a series of revisionist histories and critical interventions since 9/11 beginning with his 2002 *American Empire: The Reality and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy*.

There were also, unsurprisingly, apologists for American empire who participated in the debate, including several non-Americans, such as Canadian historian and politician Michael Ignatieff, who published an influential article supporting the U.S. invasion of Iraq in early 2003 entitled "The American Empire (Get Used to It)"; neoliberal British economist Deepak Lal's 2004 *In Praise of Empires*; and Scottish historian Niall Ferguson's *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* published the same year. Neoconservatives working in the Bush administration did not themselves invoke American empire. As Holloway notes, they didn't need to: "The Bush Doctrine turned national security into a transnational public good that could be secured only by American global dominance and by the vigorous policing of competitor states and groups" (43-4). That this was something millions of people around the world refused to accept in my view ought to be taken as a sign of the crisis of American hegemony.

Liberal politicization in opposition to the invasion and occupation of Iraq was reflected in post-9/11 Anglo-American literary debates. One of the major points of contention in these debates was whether 9/11 ought to be used as a period marker in literary and cultural production. Inasmuch as doing so seemed to lend support to the official view that "everything changed" on 9/11, many critics stressed the continuities between the pre- and post-9/11 periods. In addition to arguing against the views of 9/11's incommensurability and its transformation of American foreign policy, critics argued that 9/11 could not be said to mark a new period in literary and cultural production because the event had failed to innovate new literary and cultural forms.

Many critics, however, hoped that 9/11 would generate new literary and cultural forms. Richard Gray, a British scholar of American literature, was a major critical voice in debates about literature after 9/11. In an article published in *American Literary History* in

2009, Gray described the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath as “part of the soil, the deep structure lying beneath and shaping the literature of the American nation, not least because they have reshaped our consciousness; they are a defining element in our contemporary structure of feeling and they cannot help but impact profoundly on American writing” (“Open Doors” 129). Gray went on to write that “[n]ew events generate new forms of consciousness requiring new structures of ideology and the imagination to assimilate and express them—that is the intellectual equation at work here. And it begs the question of just how new, or at least different, the structures of these books are” (133).

Considering an array of novels dealing explicitly with 9/11, Gray concluded that they had not really innovated any new forms to express the new structure of feeling after 9/11. Among the limitations of the 9/11 novel in Gray’s judgment were its confinement to the early stages of trauma and its limited representations of cultural difference. In a response to Gray’s article published in the same issue of *American Literary History*, Michael Rothberg echoed Gray’s negative evaluation of 9/11 fiction, judging it to represent a “failure of imagination” (Rothberg 153).

Critiques of the shortcomings of the 9/11 novel revealed a desire for post-9/11 literature not only to be formally innovative but also to do a specific kind of political or cultural work—a desire more or less explicitly shaped by opposition to Bush’s “War on Terror” and more specifically by opposition to the Iraq War. In the same article referred to above, Richard Gray argued that after 9/11 American novelists had

the chance, maybe even the obligation, to insert themselves into the space between conflicting interests and practices and then dramatize the contradictions that conflict engenders. Through their work, by means of a mixture of voices and a free play of languages and even genres, they can represent the reality of their culture as multiple, complex, and internally antagonistic. (“Open Doors” 147)

The times required that American fiction become “deterritorialized” and Gray singled out writers whom he dubbed “novelists of the immigrant encounter” as being in the vanguard of such cultural deterritorialization” (135). Rothberg, meanwhile, was less sanguine about the promise of immigrant and multiculturalist fiction, writing that what was needed was a “centrifugal literature of extraterritoriality” that imagines “how US citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, both for Americans and for others” (158).

The prescriptivism of the post-9/11 literary debate was noted by Catherine Morley, who criticized Gray and Rothberg for “outlining a specific trajectory for American writers in a manner which might seem to transcend the role of the cultural or literary spectator” (720). In a less overtly prescriptive mode, Bruce Robbins wrote in 2011 that “as the regions of the world that are obscurely tugging on each others’ everyday life have increased, the demand has grown for better maps, more complex and reliable global positioning systems” (1097). Robbins then asks whether or not American fiction after 9/11 had become more “worldly.” After considering the “disorientation” and “retreat into domesticity” of several 9/11 novels, and critiquing immigrant fiction for reinforcing the myth of American exceptionalism, Robbins comes to the general conclusion that it had not in fact become more worldly (Ibid.).

While many critics expressed disappointment with the perceived formal and/or political conservatism of post-9/11 fiction, others have found a new preoccupation with ethical and political issues in the contemporary novel worthy of critical attention. For example, in *Plotting Justice: Narrative Ethics and Literary Culture after 9/11* (2012), Georgiana Banita argues that the formal features of many post-9/11 novels—and what she terms their “emplotment of ethical thought”—speak to a post-9/11 anxiety about “what it means to assume or defy the responsibilities that emerged in the wake of the terrorist attacks” (1). Banita analyzes literary works that give a “genealogy for this anxiety” and “recontextualize the terrorist attacks as one in a series of twentieth-century events (from the Holocaust to the Balkan civil war) that have challenged our assumptions about living with cruelty and terror” (1).

Unlike many critics writing about contemporary fiction, Banita defends using 9/11 as a period marker, arguing that “even as new catastrophes demand literary attention, 9/11 is likely always to partake of their significance” and that a “critical vision of contemporary literature that doesn’t pay tribute to that event is, by now, virtually unthinkable” (12). In her analysis of the ethical preoccupations in post-9/11 novels, Banita does not offer a theory of post-9/11 fiction. This, however, is precisely what Caren Irr does in *Toward the Geopolitical Novel* (2014), arguing that that various strands of twenty-first century U.S. fiction are moving toward a new genre which she calls the “geopolitical novel.”

Considering a vast number of contemporary novels, Irr identifies six sub-genres of contemporary fiction that she regards as feeding into the emergent genre of the geopolitical novel. They are the migrant novel, the Peace Corps thriller, the national allegory, the revolutionary novel, and the expatriate satire (10). Though her genre study is focused on U.S. fiction—which she interestingly defines by a work’s “explicit effort to address a North American audience”—Irr does not include the 9/11 novel within her study, arguing that it belongs more to “national trauma writing” than it does to this new political fiction (12). The political character of this fiction, Irr argues, lies in the way this new fiction “shatters isolationist myths, updates national narratives, provides points of access for global identifications, and, perhaps most important, allows reflection on the emerging subjects of consensus (for better or worse) in the United States” (3-4).

The ambivalent post-ideological politics of the proto-geopolitical novel theorized by Irr may be contrasted with the critical power of what Leerom Medovoi terms “world-system literature” (645). Medovoi grounds his proposed genre in Giovanni Arrighi’s analysis of the various phases of hegemonic domination over the world-system—Genoese-Iberian, Dutch, British, and American—and his thesis, articulated in the 2005 article cited above, that American hegemony had entered its “terminal crisis” (57). Medovoi argues that world-system literature successfully maps the world system at this moment of crisis and recalibration. From a world-systems perspective, Medovoi writes, the critical question is “when and how does literature register the (political, military, economic) deployments of power that organize or reorganize global spaces—nations, cities, regions, peripheries, and centers alike?” (653)

Medovoi presents his theory of world-system literature in the course of an insightful reading of Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* that I shall consider in more detail in Chapter 1. Hamid’s novel exemplifies his theory, and while he gestures towards a few other contemporary novels that would be amenable to a world-systems analysis, it is clear that a great many novels, approached from this perspective, would be found deficient

in terms of their capacity to map the world-system, and would therefore have to be criticized for the way they obscure deployments of hegemonic power. So while I'm generally inclined to accept Arrighi's analysis of the current historical conjuncture, I'm skeptical about using his theory as a master key for interpreting contemporary fiction.

Arrighi regarded the 2003 invasion of Iraq as a symptom of a hegemonic crisis rooted in structural changes to the global economy. As far as literary criticism is concerned, I think we can read the crisis of American hegemony in the world's critical response to the Iraq War. From this perspective, the salient aspect of the concept of hegemony is the *consent* of the governed. If the Bush administration, as Holloway put it, presented U.S. national security as a global public good, the worldwide protest against the Iraq War—including critical representations of America as an empire, rather than the more beneficent hegemon—represented the refusal to understand regime change in Iraq as such a global public good, and may therefore be taken as representing the withdrawal of consent.

Of course, long before 2003 most Marxists, many postcolonialists, and some historians—as well as countless ordinary citizens in countries where the America has exercised “hard” and “soft” power—regarded America as an empire. The significant change after 2003 was that this view began to be more widely accepted by liberals internationally—the kind of people who tend to write and read novels.

There are a number of novels by international writers that are engage with the political aftermath of 9/11 and that more or less explicitly (and forcefully) represent America as an empire. These novels would fit into one or another of Irr's sub-categories of the proto-geopolitical novel and could be analyzed by a critic like Medovoi as being more or less successful world-system novels. They are a set of novels that both register and express the crisis of American hegemony precipitated by the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Appropriating a phrase coined by Fareed Zakaria in the mid-2000s, I propose designating them “post-American” novels.

The thesis of Zakaria's *The Post-American World* (2008/2011) is simple: rapid economic growth in the developing world, which Zakaria refers to as the ‘rise of the rest,’ is driving the transition from a unipolar world dominated by the United States to a multi-polar ‘post-American world.’ Zakaria writes:

The rise of the rest is at heart an economic phenomenon, but it has consequences for nearly every other sphere of life. At the politico-military level, we remain in a single-superpower world. But in all other dimensions— industrial, financial, educational, social, cultural—the distribution of power is shifting, moving away from American dominance. That does not mean we are entering an anti-American world. But we are moving into a post-American world, one defined and directed from many places and by many people. (4)

Zakaria does not use the term *hegemony* in his book, but that is what he is talking about. Nor does he present his story in terms of crisis and decline—the fear of American nationalists since the early 1990s—but as the positive outcome of America's construction of the liberal international (capitalist) order since the end of WWII. And though he does discuss the Iraq War in his book, his argument is mostly about globalization and economic convergence between nations. For Zakaria, America remains exceptional, and American

acceptance of its relative decline in economic power and political influence would constitute one more sign of such exceptionalism.

While Arrighi's argument may be judged to be preferable to Zakaria's in terms of its complexity, analytical power, and radical appeal, Zakaria's catch phrase encapsulates a liberal cosmopolitan ethos shared by many contemporary fiction writers and the position from which they critiqued American culture and foreign policy—especially unilateralism—during the years of the Bush presidency. For this reason, it is appropriate to designate them post-American novels.

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The post-American novel is the historically-engaged novel of the crisis of American hegemony—not primarily at the deep structural level of the global economy, but on the surface level of literary protest or dissent. It is a response in the first place to the 2003 U.S. invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq. If the invasion of Iraq was, as Arrighi argued, a symptom of America's hegemonic crisis, then it may be said that the post-American novel is more concerned with the symptom than the deep causes, and it is itself symptomatic of the crisis: in postcolonial parlance, the world "writes back" to America (more or less overtly, more or less ambivalently).

As far as international fiction during this period is concerned, the crisis of American hegemony is more a matter of the American loss of legitimacy in the eyes of the world than it is of the relative decline of America's economic power. Political contestation is not of course the only way for the political to surface in the text. Nor does contestation have to be expressed, in every case, in the form of overt resistance. But for a novel to register the post-9/11 crisis of American hegemony, and therefore be what I am calling a post-American novel, it must signal somewhere in the text that it is responding critically to the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

The post-American novel is a species of post-9/11 fiction written by immigrant, expatriate, or international authors. Many critics have noted that in much post-9/11 fiction the terrorist attacks themselves are decentered or treated obliquely. This is so in the post-American novel as well, but this decentering of 9/11 must be understood as a component of a political aesthetics. If hegemony is distinguished from imperial domination by the consent of those within the hegemonic bloc, then the political dissent in these novels by international writers is properly seen to represent, in the literary sphere, the crisis of American hegemony.

Though sharing some features with the immigrant novel, the post-American novel subverts the immigrant narrative and the myth of American exceptionalism to which it is traditionally yoked. To be sure, the critique of American culture has been a feature of immigrant fiction from the beginning, especially in what Tim Prchal calls the "immigrant tragedy" plot (428). From this perspective, each of the works I consider in this dissertation might indeed be understood as immigrant novels, and yet their multifaceted critiques of American culture—racism, historical amnesia, neoliberalism, hyper-masculinity, militarism, and so on—are both situated in a very specific historical context and far in excess of the narrative of failed assimilation that serves to critique the American Dream.

Though being distinct from the 9/11 novel and the immigrant novel, the post-American novel has numerous connections to various currents in American fiction. Cecilia

Tichi, for example, writes about American fiction's tradition of civic protest, which "exposes moral and social injustice in a bid to reshape public opinion and thus to hasten positive social change in the United States of America and beyond" (393). Not all the works that I consider in this dissertation have an activist orientation, but all of them are, in my view, directed primarily at an American readership, and so the forms of injustice they register necessarily participate in the cultural shaping of American public opinion. In terms of its relationship to this American tradition of civic protest, the post-American novel could be described as the protest of a nascent global citizenry.

In addition to the tradition of civic protest, the post-American novel might also be connected to the U.S. literature of imperialism and war, a literary archive analyzed by Russ Castronovo. According to Castronovo, this body of work dispels the "tenacious cultural fiction, one maintained for decades by American historians, that the USA lacked an imperial tradition of the sort that blemished traditional European powers" (541). This cultural fiction was exposed in the revisionist historical debates about American foreign policy that began before the invasion of Iraq and continued throughout the decade and which can be seen as informing the novels I consider in this dissertation.

Broadening the category beyond imperialism and war, the Americanist John Carlos Rowe writes about a tradition of American fiction that "addresses organized state violence in US history" (813). This body of literature includes the literature of war, westward expansion, imperialism, slavery, race and ethnicity, class struggle, and so on. What I am calling the post-American novel could very easily be put in dialogue with many of the fictional works in Rowe's capacious category. In this respect, Rowe makes a relevant observation when he writes that the 9/11 attacks "had something to do with the global perception by many that the USA is the major neo-imperial world power in the post-Cold War era" (827).

Finally, the post-American novel is in many ways continuous with American fiction of the 1990s. In *After the End of History* Samuel Cohen studies the retrospective turn in American fiction of the 1990s, bookended by the end of the Cold War and 9/11, considering works by major American writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth, Toni Morrison and Don DeLillo. Cohen argues that these novelists joined the critical dialogue of the 1990s about American history and the role of the United States in the world after the end of the Cold War, especially by "constructing counternarratives tracking the careers of American exceptionalism, triumphalism, and national identity generally through the nation's history" (28).

My argument about the post-American novel should not be understood as advancing a claim about the end of American literature or the irrelevance of the national paradigm in the global present. It is simply a claim about historically-engaged contemporary (i.e. post-9/11) fiction by international writers, narrated by immigrant or expatriate narrators, and in which the ongoing crisis of American hegemony is the more or less explicit subject matter, registered on the narrative surface yet requiring critical interpretation in order to articulate the specific character of its political aesthetics or the contours of its ethical reflections. American fiction—more or less worldly—continues to be written, as does immigrant fiction—more or less critical of American culture—and, as time passes, more 9/11 novels are certain to be written.

The post-American novel is part of an international cultural response to the Iraq War. I believe it is important to single out the Iraq War from the broader "War on Terror"

with which it was conflated by the Bush administration because it was the illegitimacy of the Iraq War rather than the war in Afghanistan—or, subsequently, wherever drone warfare was, and continues to be, waged—that mobilized international opposition, expressing the desire—however evanescent—for a world without war or hegemonic domination.

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The idea for this project formed around my encounter with Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole's *Open City* a few years ago. Cole's novel is a highly singular work—not really the sort around which one can readily form a new literary category. What initially struck me about Cole's work was what I intuited to be a deep (yet highly elusive) form of political and ethical engagement with the post-9/11 period in which it is set. It took me a long time to figure out how to articulate my understanding of the form of engagement *Open City* embodies. I had to learn how to read it, and I'm still not sure that I have read it well enough. I came to see the novel as a response to the Iraq War—or rather, I came to see the Iraq War as the historical occasion that generated a much more wide-ranging mediation on history, violence, and justice (or its absence). I then sought out other texts that situated themselves in this historical period and were likewise engaged with political and ethical questions, and especially the question of fiction's social responsibility in a time of war. This guided me towards contemporary international authors with postcolonial backgrounds or interests writing—however obliquely—about the Iraq War. In addition to *Open City* (Chapter 4), I analyze Pakistani-British writer Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (Chapter 1), Irish-Turkish-American writer Joseph O'Neill *Netherland* (Chapter 2), and Bosnian-American writer Aleksandar Hemon's *The Lazarus Project* (Chapter 3).

Many studies of contemporary fiction—as, for example, those of Georgiana Banita and Caren Irr discussed above—survey a broad corpus of novels. This makes good sense given the great quantity of novels now being published every year. Even so, I do just the opposite in this dissertation, offering a more sustained close reading of a few select post-American works. They are not the only works that fit the description I've been giving of the post-American novel, but they are representative, in different ways, of the category.

They are also, notably, all male-authored works, which has not been part of the way I've defined the category. My choice to make engagement with the Iraq War an essential selection criterion for assembling the corpus ruled out works like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), which in many other ways perfectly fits the category of the post-American novel. *Americanah* is a novel by a cosmopolitan Nigerian writer that is largely set in the U.S. in the mid-2000s. The novel has a critical edge, centered on race in America. The immigrant narrator's enthusiasm for the election of Barack Obama reflects both a recognition of the historical importance of that victory in the national context and a liberal cosmopolitan elation at the displacement of Bush from the White House. Finally, the narrator's return to Nigeria in the final section of the book—not on account of failure in America but in spite of success—may be taken as a sign that we have indeed entered a post-American world, where one may pursue one's dreams just as easily in Nigeria as in America.

*Americanah* would thus seem to be a relevant and interesting example of what I am calling a post-American novel. And yet, for all its historical engagement with the American cultural and political scene in the first decade of this century, Adichie does not engage with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, her interests lying elsewhere. To have included a work like Adichie's in my corpus would have certainly broadened and complicated the category in interesting ways, but I would have been forced to focus on its "occlusions," and it did not interest me to do so.

Taking *Open City* as my point of departure not only determined what got included in the corpus but also the close reading methodology I employ here. For a few decades now, close reading has faced periodic challenges in the humanities, most notably by Franco Moretti. In his well-known article from 2000, Moretti referred to the practice of close reading as a "theological exercise," and in its place proposed a new methodology he wryly designated "distant reading" (151). Distant reading, he argued, can produce "theoretical knowledge" about a "system in its entirety," though the price of such knowledge, he admitted, may very well be the disappearance of the individual text (Ibid.). From my point of view, the disappearance of the individual text is undesirable. My interest lies in the opposite direction of trying to see the text as clearly as possible. With its roots in Biblical hermeneutics, close reading is in some sense a theological exercise. But it has multiple rationales in a secular culture, including what is most important to me: ethics.

Ethical criticism, whether of the humanist or poststructuralist variety, is not usually linked in an explicit way to close reading, though ethical critics—whether followers of Wayne Booth or Derrida and Levinas—invariably privilege certain works which they read closely. Peter Brooks, however, has indeed explicitly linked close reading and ethics in his post-9/11 work.

Upon reading the "Torture Memos" drafted by Deputy Assistant Attorney General John Yoo for the Bush administration—and in consideration of the interpretive bad faith they embodied—Brooks launched a seminar at Princeton in the mid-2000s entitled "The Ethics of Reading and the Cultures of Professionalism," which led to a symposium entitled "The Humanities and the Public Sphere." In his introduction to the book that came out of the symposium, Brooks argues that the "ethics of the humanities lie very much in its practice of reading, that its discipline is the discipline of close, attentive, faithful interpretative acts of reading" (12).

Most of the participants at the symposium distance themselves from the thesis that literature has positive ethical effects on the reader, though Elaine Scarry presents a sophisticated version of it when she argues that through its "invitation to empathy, its reliance on deliberative thought, and its beauty," literature has the power—albeit "glacially"—to "diminish acts of injuring" (42). While the philosopher Charles Larmore challenges the very notion of an ethics of reading on the basis of the "asymmetrical relation" between the reader and the text—that is, unless the relation is understood as an indirect one to the author—Derek Attridge argues that the ethics of reading is a matter of "do[ing] justice to the singularity of the literary work, and thus to the achievement of its author or authors," which he terms "responsible responsiveness" (Larmore 50; Attridge 66).

My own view of the ethics of reading begins from the premise that every literary work is singular, like the people who create them and those who read them. The ethics of reading thus involves orienting oneself to the singularity of the work—as it does with



Attridge—but it simultaneously involves responding to the work from the position of one’s own singularity. This dual-faceted character of the ethics of reading may be understood in reference to the traditional philosophical understanding of ethics with its simultaneous concern for “how we ought to live in order to live well, and how we are to treat one another and perhaps other living beings as well” (Larmore 49).

Discussions about the ethics of reading are typically centered on doing justice to the other—the text or the author—and rightfully so, since this is always the most difficult thing to do. But in consideration of the twofold character of the traditional concept of ethics, we might see reading as not only a form of justice or fidelity to the text, but also as a form of self-fashioning. If one dimension of ethical reading has to do with self-fashioning, then this ought to be understood in terms of developing one’s capacity for judgment—one’s capacity to make and stand by decisions about meaning and value, which we know to have no independent foundation.

There is always the danger of misreading a text—not willfully and perniciously like John Yoo—but inadvertently, as a result of carelessness or excessive commitment to one’s theoretical, political, or even ethical agenda. This danger leads Brooks to invoke an ethic of “self-dispossession in favor of the text” (11). I am sympathetic to this aspiration—and share the value of fidelity that lies behind it—but the self is not so easy to do away with (and believing otherwise is likely to lead to self-deception). Brooks writes that in order to defend our interpretation of a text, we must “constantly submit what we want the text to mean to the constraints of the lexicon, the historical horizon, and the text as a whole” (3). We also present our readings to other readers, who will judge whether a text can indeed mean what our interpretation of it says it means.

The close reading methodology I employ in this dissertation therefore resides on a commitment to the singularity of the individual work. From this perspective all literary works are singular, but the handful of novels I focus on here additionally raise ethical questions—questions of injustice, complicity, and responsibility. I take their historical engagement and ethical reflection as a signifying their interest in the responsibility of literature—both in a time of war and in a radically unequal world, bequeathed to us by the history of colonial dispossession and racial oppression. These novels demand a mirroring critical practice—one that is historically-engaged, and one in which that form of engagement is ethical.

Although the history referred to in these novels is the recent past and is part of our living memory, it is not part of living memory for the generation born in the 1990s or after 9/11. What’s more, with all that has happened since the end of the Bush presidency—all the new crises and disasters that claim our attention and make claims upon us as moral agents—memory of even the recent past begins to fade. My insistence on the link between the novels I study in this dissertation and their historical occasion—and thence my description of them as post-American—is not intended to suggest that they are contained by their historical context. But it is important to consider their forms of historical engagement, both in order to better understand them and also because the crisis of American hegemony remains, 15 years after the invasion of Iraq, an ongoing story.

## Chapter One

### Anti-Imperial Critique and Post-Hegemonic Appeal: The Politics of Narrative Form in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

In the aftermath of 9/11, while the Bush administration was waging its “War on Terror” in Afghanistan and Iraq, many critics of contemporary Anglophone fiction expressed a desire for the post-9/11 novel to be more politically engaged. It was a near consensus among critics that the 9/11 novel had failed to get past the national trauma of the terrorist attacks and consider them from a broader transnational perspective or situate them within a deeper historical context. No critics accused 9/11 novels of supporting the agenda of the Bush administration, but the arguments these critics made for literary transnationalism and cosmopolitanism—for American fiction to become more “worldly,” as Bruce Robbins put it—were certainly motivated, at least in part, by opposition to this neoconservative nationalist political agenda. In their introduction to an edited volume from 2008 entitled *Literature After 9/11*, Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn posed the political question directly: “Is it possible to speak in a voice that exceeds the personal, to use a public voice, to launch a political critique in literature?” (5). Mohsin Hamid’s 2007 novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* answers that question in the affirmative. More precisely, Hamid’s novel is clearly animated by the same feeling expressed by critics in post-9/11 literary debates that contemporary fiction had a certain responsibility to engage critically with the politics of the post-9/11 world.

Born in Lahore, Pakistan, Hamid spent six years as a child living in the United States while his father was in graduate school at Stanford. After his family returned to Pakistan, Hamid attended an American school. He came back to the U.S. to attend college at Princeton, where he studied international relations. While at Princeton, he took a fiction writing workshop taught by Toni Morrison. After graduating from Princeton he studied law at Harvard, and then moved to London where he worked as a management consultant while developing his fiction writing. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* was his second novel, following *Moth Smoke* (2000), a novel about the decadence of the Pakistani elite. In 2013 he published a novel parodying the business self-help genre entitled *How to Get Rich in Rising Asia*, and in 2017 he published a magical realist novel about the Middle Eastern refugee crisis entitled *Exit, West*. He has also published a book of essays on politics and culture entitled *Discontent and its Civilizations* (2015).

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* stages an encounter between a Pakistani man and an American man in Lahore, sometime after the peaceful resolution to the India-Pakistan border standoff in June 2002 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003. The novel takes the form of a first-person present tense narrative spoken by the Pakistani man with a physically present but silent American narratee whom he addresses directly. Hamid has described the work as a dramatic monologue and cited Albert Camus’s *The Fall* (1956) as the inspiration for the novel’s form, though in the course of her analysis of the intertextual relationship between the two novels the critic Maragaret-Anne Hutton argues that it would be more aptly described as an “implied dialogue” in which “the missing words and acts of the fictional interlocutor can be inferred from what is said by the narrator” (60). This

aspect of the narrative form produces some odd effects. The presence of the interlocutor, his physical characteristics, and his speech and body language, must all be vocalized by the narrator since the present tense narrative temporality precludes access to his thoughts.

The novel opens under the sign of hospitality. The narrator approaches the other man on the street in Lahore and offers his assistance. The overture is evidently received with suspicion as the narrator immediately says, “Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America” (1). The Pakistani man, who gives his name as Changez, invites the unnamed American to tea and dinner at a restaurant in the Anarkali bazaar, where he proceeds to tell him the story of the four-and-a-half years he lived in the U.S., including his student life at Princeton, his subsequent work for a prestigious financial consultancy called Underwood Samson, and his courtship of an American woman named Erica.

The narrative shuttles back and forth between the narrated past and the unfolding present. While Changez’s narrative begins as a sunny story about a brilliant young international student pursuing the American dream, as it progresses he increasingly expresses resentment towards America, often in an accusatory way. In the context of the narrated past, this serves to foreshadow some personal transformation, creating a significant difference between the narrating-I and the (not much younger) narrated self. The nature of this transformation is a mystery that produces narrative suspense. In the context of the encounter unfolding in the present, such expressions of resentment and criticism—coupled with Changez’s evident pleasure in the American’s anxiety—quickly raise the suspicion of a significant difference between who Changez says he is and the truth of his identity and motives.

Changez recounts how in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks he became subject to anti-Muslim discrimination and harassment, felt alienated by the explosion of patriotism and national nostalgia, and was rejected by his girlfriend, who drifted away into her own melancholic nostalgia for her deceased ex-boyfriend Chris. The combination of his personal problems and the public situation in post-9/11 America fuel an identity crisis about who he is and where he belongs. With the commencement of the U.S. bombardment of Afghanistan in October 2001, and the India-Pakistan border standoff following a terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001, Changez recounts becoming increasingly preoccupied with current events and alienated from his work as a financial analyst. The climax of the story about his life in America comes on a business trip to Chile where he is sent to value a book publishing company. In Chile Changez undergoes a political epiphany through which he comes to understand himself as an unwitting conscript of American empire, understood as a complex of finance capitalism and militarism. This leads him to quit his job with Underwood Samson and soon after return to Pakistan where he becomes involved, as a university lecturer, in radical national politics.

The suggestion early in the narrative that Changez has ulterior and possibly hostile motives with respect to the American is developed throughout the narrative. Changez exploits the uncertainty of his own identity to stoke the American’s fears that he himself is a terrorist, conspiring with others in the restaurant to kill him. At the same time, Changez relentlessly insinuates—without betraying any sign of fear or anxiety—his suspicion that the American is an undercover CIA agent, carrying a gun and connected by satellite phone to his backup team. The climax of this tense encounter does not come until the last page of the novel—or rather, it doesn’t come at all, as the novel ends on a cliffhanger.

In terms of its popular reception, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* was a big success, becoming an international bestseller the year it was published. In a number of interviews, Hamid has expressed surprise about the novel's success in the U.S., inasmuch as its overt political critique surely risked alienating his American audience. In 2012 Hamid's novel was made into a movie directed by Indian director Mira Nair, who changed some aspects of the plot—in particular, relocating Changez's political awakening from Chile to Turkey—with the effect of diluting the politics of the novel, as the critic Albert Braz shows.

Often judging it against the 9/11 novel of national trauma, with all its perceived shortcomings, many critics welcomed Hamid's polemical novel. Peter Morey described the novel as a "sly intervention that destabilizes the dominant categories of the 9/11 novel" while simultaneously "defamiliarize[ing] our relation to literary projects of national identification" (136). Richard Gray argued that in contrast to the 9/11 novel Hamid's novel locates the crisis of 9/11 in "interstitial space, where such oppositions [of 'us' and 'them'] are contested: a site where a discourse founded on either/or distinctions is interrogated or even subverted" (*After the Fall* 65). Anna Hartnell argued that Hamid's novel "subjects the insular tendencies of the American '9/11 novel' to a postcolonial gaze, and in so doing makes manifest the repressed political content of the genre" (336).

Hamid's novel is formally experimental in an explicitly political way. The dramatic monologue form instantiates a radically asymmetrical relationship that investigates real-world power relations through enacting symbolic domination and narrative retribution. The form literally renders the American a captive audience (or hostage), and as such serves as an efficient vehicle for postcolonial counter-discourse in the mode of (literally) "writing back to the empire." The target of Hamid's critique is not only American imperialism, but also neoliberalism, and, I would suggest, a form of masculinity, subtending both capitalism and militarism, which gender theorist R.W. Connell has termed "hegemonic masculinity" (77). Indeed, Thomas AErvoid Bjerre argues that Changez's dismissal of his American identity and his critique of American foreign policy can be read as an indirect critique of a hegemonic masculinity that saturates American culture" (262).

The narrative form aligns the reader with the silenced and terrorized American—an awkward and unwanted identification for many readers, not least because he is a barrel-chested white man who symbolizes American economic and political hegemony. This effect of the narrative form has led some critics, such as Sarah Ilott and Leerom Medovoi, to argue that the novel is addressed to an American audience—a judgment I share. Hamid's novel is primarily addressed to an American audience. The novel risked alienating this audience with the harshly critical portrayal of American empire that it gives. But if the novel's narrative situation and structure of address identify the American reader with the American narratee, I claim that the novel ultimately seeks to effect a disidentification between the two, appealing to the American audience to recognize its moral responsibility to citizens of other countries and act on such a commitment in their capacity as citizens.

## **The Terror and Pleasure of Suspense**

The popular success of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* in the U.S., along with its film adaptation, is surely due, in large measure, to the unpopularity of George W. Bush's presidency—and the Iraq War—when the novel was published in 2007. But the novel's popular success probably owes just as much to its status as a thriller. The novel's title

suggests that it is about terrorism—“fundamentalism” being a metonym of “terrorism,” especially for an American audience after 9/11. This expectation raised by the title is reinforced at the outset of the novel through the allusion to the narrator’s beard. Moreover, the appearance of the American in a foreign setting—an American who has the physique of a military man—unambiguously establishes the genre’s espionage scenario.

The thriller, which has been described as the most popular narrative genre, is often traced back to William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* (1794), a novel in which the eponymous hero is pursued by his former employer after discovering a dark secret about the man’s past. The genre contains numerous subgenres including crime fiction—with all its various subdivisions—and espionage fiction. Espionage fiction was first popularized by Ian Fleming in his James Bond novels of the 1950s, followed in the subsequent decades by the spy novels of John Le Carré, which are generally regarded as being more literary. Outside of genre fiction, Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (1907) and Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American* (1955) are notable examples of literary authors writing political novels with espionage plots. With its critical exploration of American exceptionalism, Greene’s novel is an especially important literary precedent for Hamid’s novel. According to Paul Cobley, the thriller is a capacious genre, defined not so much by a narrative formula but rather by a “bundle of expectations harbored by readers about the quality of interaction that a text will facilitate for them” (n.pag.). The interaction that readers of thrillers expect from a novel is characterized by tension, anxiety, anticipation, and above all suspense.

There is an in-built tension in the narrative form of Hamid’s novel. It is a highly asymmetrical form, establishing a radical inequality between the one who speaks and the one who listens. Graham Greene’s “quiet American”—undercover CIA agent Alden Pyle—becomes the *silenced* American—who may or may not be a CIA agent—by virtue of the narrative form Hamid employs. The American narratee is completely subject to the Pakistani narrator, becoming visible or audible only through the narrator’s mediation. In a sense, the narrator conjures the American into being through describing his physical characteristics, clothing, facial expressions, and body language. “How did I know you were American?” Changez asks his interlocutor before explaining that it was not on account of his race (white), nor his clothing (business suit), nor his muscular physique (that of a sportsman or a soldier). “[I]t was your *bearing* that allowed me to identify you, and I do not mean that as an insult, for I see your face has hardened, but merely as an observation” (2).

The word “observation,” and its variant forms, appears over and over in the narrative. In voicing such observations, Changez communicates to the American that he is being very closely observed. Moreover, Changez communicates that his powers of observation are not restricted to the body, but include much less tangible things like “bearing,” as well as affective states like anger and, as the narrative progresses, fear. This powerfully conveys to the American that he is under surveillance and that nothing can be hidden from the other man’s penetrating gaze. In registering the American’s anxiety, Changez intensifies that anxiety, and this contributes to creating the atmosphere of danger, and corresponding suspense, that is characteristic of thrillers.

The suspense of Changez’s narrative, and of the novel as a whole, is also generated through foreshadowing. In telling his story, Changez foreshadows some transformative event. Describing how he felt upon moving to Manhattan to start his job Changez says, “Yes, I was happy in that moment. I felt bathed in a warm sense of accomplishment. Nothing troubled me; I was a young New Yorker with the city at my feet. How soon that would

change! My world would be transformed, just as this market around us has been” (45). Withholding the nature of that transformation increases the narrative suspense, especially when paired with the suggestiveness of Changez’s beard and his increasing criticisms of American culture.

Changez’s criticisms of America cast into doubt his initial description of himself as a “lover of America.” In recounting his vacation to Greece after graduating from college he remarks upon the sense of entitlement of the privileged classmates:

I, with my finite and depleting reserve of cash and my traditional sense of deference to one’s seniors, found myself wondering by what quirk of human history my companions—many of whom I would have regarded as upstarts in my country, so devoid of refinement were they—were in a position to conduct themselves in the world as though they were its ruling class. (21)

This critical description makes explicit what was intended, though disavowed, in his earlier remark about being able to identify the nationality of the American by virtue of his “bearing,” and the American was clearly correct in taking the comment as an insult.

Along with his criticisms of America, he increasingly gives direct expression to his resentment of America’s wealth and power from the perspective of Pakistani nationalism:

Four thousand years ago, we, the people of the Indus River basin, had cities that were laid out on grids and boasted underground sewers, while the ancestors of those who would invade and colonize America were illiterate barbarians. Now our cities were largely unplanned, unsanitary affairs, and America had universities with individual endowments greater than our national budget for education. To be reminded of this vast disparity was, for me, to be ashamed. (34)

Changez’s resentment is a function of his shame. It arises from a judgmental perspective that compares and ranks, which is inculcated him through his training as a financial analyst in a company that prides itself on being a meritocracy. This perspective depends upon the unquestioning acceptance both of the dominant conception of value and the idea of meritocracy, and Changez comes to reject both.

That Changez might truly be a lover of America seems to be definitively contradicted by his account of his reaction to 9/11. Changez was on a business trip to Manila at the time of the terrorist attack. It was his first overseas assignment for Underwood Samson and a reward for being the best of the new recruits. The assignment was to value a CD distribution firm, and he describes how after seeing the extra measure of respect the Filipinos gave to his American colleagues he adopted an American accent and smug self-importance in order to pass himself off as an American.

Changez recounts watching the terrorist attacks live television in his hotel room: “I stared as one—and then the other—of the twin towers of New York’s World Trade Center collapsed. And then I *smiled*. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased” (72). Though he goes on to describe himself as being perplexed by his reaction, and subsequently ashamed of it, his initial feeling of pleasure reveals to him a deep-seated and previously unacknowledged resentment of America. To the American

narratee, it confirms his growing suspicion that Changez is hostile to America and that his hospitality is but a performance.

Changez exploits the uncertain difference (from the American's perspective) between the narrating-I and the narrated self through foreshadowing and delaying the nature of his transformation. Additionally, he feeds the narratee/reader's expectations that he is a terrorist and that the resolution of his identity crisis involves embracing—however reluctantly—a fundamentalist religious identity. His confessional narrative increasingly appears to in fact be an act of concealment. The reader, who is aligned with the narratee on account of the narrative's structure of address, begins to doubt everything Changez says.

While stoking suspicion about his true identity and motives, Changez simultaneously insinuates, with increasing directness, his own suspicion that the American is a CIA agent. Changez remarks upon the American's muscular physique, observes that he has a satellite phone, and implies that he is carrying a gun. Despite all this, Changez does not betray the least amount of fear himself. This air of invulnerability, reinforced by his narrative control, seems like further proof that he is indeed conspiring with others to harm American.

The resolution of Changez's identity crisis upsets—or at least appears to upset—expectations that his narrative has raised. Aggravated by Erica's withdrawal from him, America's bombing of Afghanistan, and the possibility of a war breaking out between Pakistan and India, Changez's identity crisis comes to a head while on a business trip to Chile. Sent to Valparaiso to value a book publishing company that is set to be acquired by another company, Changez meets Juan-Bautista, an old Chilean man who runs the company but is resistant to it being sold by the owners. Juan-Bautista is initially standoffish to Changez and his colleagues, aware that if the deal goes through it will likely result in the shutting-down of the loss-generating trade division with its "commercially unviable" literary fiction (142). Literature, the novel suggests, is in tension with economic rationality, embodying a different form of value and therefore necessitating a different form of valuation. Saving literary fiction, as Juan-Bautista evidently wishes to do, thus represents both resistance to the hegemony of exchange value and the defense of an endangered form of experience and mode of thinking.

One day Juan-Bautista invites Changez to lunch and asks him if he is bothered by making his living through "disrupting the lives of others" (151). Disavowing any responsibility, Changez replies that, "We do not decide whether to buy or sell, or indeed what happens to a company after we have valued it" (Ibid.). Juan-Bautista then asks Changez if he knows the story of the janissaries—young Christian boys, kidnapped by the Ottomans in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and trained to fight in a Muslim army against their own civilization. The intended parallel is explicit, and the analogy is perfectly imperfect—since Changez didn't come to the United States as a child but rather as a young adult, he retains a memory of his culture and therefore, unlike the 14<sup>th</sup> century janissaries, is free to repudiate his "adopted empire."

As Albert Braz argues, it's no accident that Changez's political epiphany occurs in Chile, the site of what Ariel Dorfman called the "other 9/11"—that is, Augusto Pinochet's CIA-backed coup on September 11, 1973, which transformed Chile into a laboratory for neoliberalism and led to the disappearances and deaths of thousands of Chilean citizens (250). Curiously, Juan-Bautista does not recount this true history from the recent past of American disruption of the lives of others, but rather a historical parable from distant past.

From a certain perspective, this would seem to make Juan-Bautista complicit in historical erasure. Why would Hamid choose to stage his narrator's political awakening in Chile, but then have the catalyst for this politicization remain silent about the CIA-backed coup? The suggestion may be that that, through its appeal to the imagination, fiction has (or might have) greater political efficacy than the recitation of historical facts. Juan-Bautista's historical parable, at any rate, is quite efficacious in this regard.

Juan-Bautista's parable of the janissaries causes Changez to experience a political epiphany that resolves his identity crisis:

There really could be no doubt: I was a modern-day janissary, a servant of American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war [...] I had thrown in my lot with the men of Underwood Samson, with the officers of empire, when all along I was predisposed to feel compassion for those, like Juan-Bautista, whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its own gain. (152)

Changez's political awakening upsets the expectation that he becomes a religious fundamentalist. Indeed, his narrative subversively resignifies the concept of fundamentalism, redefining neoliberalism as a religion and thereby undercutting Western claims to secularism.

Earlier in the narrative, Changez told his American interlocutor that Underwood Samson's motto was "*Focus on the fundamentals.*" Changez explains that this motto "mandated a single-minded attention to financial detail, teasing out the true nature of those drivers that determine an asset's value" (98). The "creed," as he elsewhere puts it, brought him refuge from the sorrows of his disintegrating relationship with Erica, though could not contain his rage about the bombing of Afghanistan nor his preoccupation about a war between Pakistan and India. Recalling his political epiphany in Chile, Changez tells the American that "my days of focusing on the fundamentals were done" (153-4). Changez abandons the assignment in Chile, sabotaging the acquisition deal, which was clearly Juan-Bautista's intention. Upon returning to Manhattan, he looks upon the city with an "ex-janissary's gaze," and the multicultural metropolis appears transfigured to him as a traditional empire.

But even as the story of his transformation upsets the expectation that he comes to embrace a fundamentalist religious identity, his unreliability renders this uncertain. Indeed, Changez interrupts the story of his political awakening by registering and responding to the evident disbelief of his American interlocutor:

But your expression, sir, tells me that you think something amiss. Did this conversation really happen, you ask? For that matter, did this so-called Juan-Bautista even exist? I assure you, sir: you can trust me. I am not in the habit of inventing untruths! And moreover, even if I were, there is no reason why this incident would be more likely to be false than any of the others I have related to you. Come, come, I believe we have passed through too much together to begin to raise questions of this nature at so late a stage. (151-2).



By undermining the truth status of his story, Changez's identity and motives remain mysterious and threatening, thereby sustaining narrative suspense.

Changez's political epiphany ultimately issues in a critique of America's military interventions around the world—albeit only a partial list—and of finance as a tool of American empire, concluding with a critical diagnosis of post-9/11 America:

As a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority. And you acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world, so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions of your tantrums, not least my family, now facing war thousands of miles away. Such an America had to be stopped in the interests not only of the rest of humanity, but also in your own. (168)

The nature of his intervention to stop America is the mystery that structures the final section of the narrative, though Changez indicates his belief that the American, if he is the CIA assassin Changez believes him to be, already knows how the story ends. "What exactly did I do to stop America, you ask? Have you really no idea, sir? [...] I will tell you what I did, although it was not much and I fear it may well fail to meet your expectations" (168-9).

Changez recounts how after returning to Pakistan he became a politically engaged university lecturer who encouraged his students to participate in demonstrations that were labeled "anti-American" by the western media. When one of his students was accused of plotting to assassinate an American aid-worker, Changez came to his defense and in front of television news cameras declared that "no country inflicts death so readily upon the inhabitants of other countries, frightens so many people so far away, as America" (182).

Changez's account of his intervention includes a very significant revelation, the importance of which has been largely overlooked in the novel's critical reception, though it provides a striking new perspective on the narrative as a whole. Changez's major revelation at this late point in the narrative is that the news footage was picked up and used in a "War on Terror" montage and that he has subsequently been living in a state of paranoid anticipation that America would send an "emissary" to Pakistan to kill him:

I have felt rather like a Kurtz waiting for his Marlowe. I have endeavored to live normally, as though nothing has changed, but I have been plagued by paranoia, by an intermittent sense that I am being observed. I even tried to vary my routines—the times I left for work, for example, and the streets I took—but I have come to realize that all this serves no purpose. I must meet my fate when it confronts me, and in the meantime I must conduct myself without panic. (183)

This revelation, coming in the last pages of the novel, opens up new ways of understanding his narrative. Changez had hitherto appeared fearless and invulnerable, but no longer. This narrative surprise reveals that Changez's apparent fearlessness, which enhanced the sense that he was in total control over the situation—therefore supporting the narrative's framework of conspiracy—was not really fearlessness but fatalism. Changez's comparison

of himself to Kurtz, and of his silenced interlocutor to Marlow, is odd for a number of reasons, not least because in *Heart of Darkness* Marlow was *not* sent to kill Kurtz, though Changez evidently believes that the American is on a mission to kill him. The logic of the analogy may reside in the fact that just as Marlow finally delivers some letters to Kurtz's fiancée (whom Kurtz refers to as "My Intended"), Changez's American interlocutor, regarded from a functional standpoint, mediates Changez's "letters" to Am/Erica.

Changez's late revelation requires the reader to reconsider the power dynamics that have been structuring the encounter all along. Whereas the dramatic monologue form establishes a radical power asymmetry in Changez's favor, which he is seen to exploit maximally with retributive *schadenfreude*, this narrative surprise reveals a vulnerability that was hidden in the course of this masculine competition for dominance and revenge.

In light of this revelation, Changez's story may be understood as an account of how he became the man denouncing America on the news—the man who appeared in a "War on Terror" montage and who is therefore, by definition, a terrorist. But this is not an account that in any way seeks to persuade the American of his innocence. Some critics have interpreted the Changez's narrative as an act of self-defense, drawing the comparison to Scheherazade of the *Arabian Nights*, while others have suggested that it may be read as an act of self-martyrdom. Of course, the unknowability of Changez's intentions has been central to the novel's production of suspense throughout.

Changez's late revelation nonetheless allows us to understand the political significance of the narrative form Hamid created for the novel. One of the pillars of the Bush Doctrine after 9/11 was preemption, and the invasion of Iraq was presented not as a war of aggression but as a preemptive war. In international law a preemptive war is defined as "an attack on a country because it poses a demonstrable and imminent threat," which was not of course the case with Iraq in 2003 (Ehrenberg xxii). Nevertheless, preemption can be seen as the deep structural metaphor of Hamid's novel. Changez's narrative is a *preemptive narrative strike*. The narrative form, moreover, may be seen to mirror the U.S. response to 9/11 in Afghanistan (retribution) and Iraq (preemption)—in other words, it mirrors on the formal level that which it protests on the level of content.

The novel ends on a cliffhanger. Changez walks the American down a mostly deserted road back to his hotel. The burly waiter from the restaurant whom the American earlier found intimidating is walking at a distance behind them, perhaps following them, or simply heading home after work. In the final line of the novel, Changez remarks on the glint of metal he sees as the American reaches under his jacket and says that since they are now "bound by a shared intimacy" he presumes his interlocutor to be reaching for his business card holder. What happens next—whether there is violence or not—is left unwritten.

The cliffhanger is a common device of thrillers, especially serial thrillers. Given that the novel is not part of a series but rather a stand-alone volume, Hamid's choice to end the novel on a cliffhanger represents a subversion of a key convention of the genre. Not only does the outcome of the encounter remain unresolved, but also the true identity and motives of its two characters remains unknown and unknowable. Such a lack of narrative closure denies one of the major satisfactions of the thriller genre in order to prompt reflection in the reader. Changez describes Juan-Bautista's historical parable of the janissaries as having set him on an "inflective journey" (146). If Hamid's novel is seen as being addressed to the American reader, then it seems safe to assume that he sought to do something similar.

Though the narrative form aligns or identifies the reader with the American narratee, in a subtle way the form actually works to disidentify the two as an unintended consequence of observing the conventions of the genre. One of the classic reading pleasures of the thriller genre is precisely the anxiety produced by the sense of imminent danger or violence it produces. What this means, however, in the context of Hamid's novel is that though the reader is aligned or identified with the American narratee as a result of the narrative's structure of address, the reader's anxiety is non-identical to that of the American. Importantly, there is pleasure associated with the reader's anxiety that is not in any way available to the American narratee who feels throughout the encounter that his life is in imminent danger. In this way the narrative form itself—deploying a dramatic monologue in the context of a thriller—works to disidentify the reader from the narratee and what he represents, which is exactly what I take Hamid's intention to be.

### **Political Allegory and the Common Reader**

In writing *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid was responding to the same sense of urgency that was felt by many critics of contemporary Anglophone fiction who were calling for the post-9/11 novel to do some kind of political work. A number of critics noted that Hamid introduced the politicized aesthetics associated with the postcolonial fiction—at least a certain form of it—to the post-9/11 novel. At a time when the history of American foreign policy was being reassessed in terms of empire, Hamid published a novel that assailed, in the most direct of ways, American imperialism, which it presented moreover as a combination of military and economic power.

The political character of “third-world literature,” as he then termed it, was the subject of Fredric Jameson's controversial 1986 article entitled “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.” Jameson notoriously argued in this article that *all* third-world texts were national allegories, and he was promptly taken to task for his theoretical hubris, first by fellow Marxist Aijaz Ahmed, followed by many other critics. Over the decades, Jameson's argument has also had a few defenders, like Imre Szeman who, after charging Jameson's critics with willfully misreading the argument, updated Jameson's theory to articulate the relationship between the nation and allegory in the context of globalization. More recently, Caren Irr has revisited Jameson's argument in her own theorization of the contemporary political novel, about which I'll have more to say later.

The major point of Jameson's article was that—let us say, *some*—third-world novels were directly or transparently political in a way that “first-world” novels were not, and the form that this political engagement took was national allegory. Jameson argued that:

Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic, necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.* (69)

The transparency of their status as national allegories made such novels seem naïve to first-world readers, Jameson asserted. Yet it was through the use of allegory that they managed to overcome the split between public and private that exists in advanced

capitalist societies. And it is precisely this split between the public and the private that necessitates, when it comes to analyzing the literature and culture of advanced capitalist societies, the sort of complex hermeneutical procedures for which Jameson is known.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is clearly an international allegory. Speaking from the position of a Pakistani national, Changez denounces American imperialism to a man who is a physical embodiment of it—business suit, soldier’s physique—whether or not he is in fact the CIA agent the narrator suspects him to be and not just some hapless business traveler. What is striking about Hamid’s novel, however, is that there is a national allegory embedded within the international allegorical frame narrative. The story Changez tells the American about his life in America is itself overtly allegorical.

As he is finishing his senior year at Princeton, Changez gets a job with a prestigious valuation company named Underwood Samson (U.S.) And before starting his new job, he goes to Greece on vacation with some fellow Princetonians, where he meets and falls in love with a woman named (Am)Erica. Back in New York, Changez begins courting Erica, and with his new, well-paying job as a junior financial analyst for Underwood Samson, he is well on the way to achieving the American dream. Changez characterizes Erica’s post-9/11 depression and withdrawal as a “powerful *nostalgia*,” and then a page later says, “Possibly this was due to my state of mind, but it seemed to me that America, too, was increasingly giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia at that time” (113, 114-5). Allegory is at once a symbolic expression of the narrator’s ambivalence toward America and a symbolic vehicle for diagnosing post-9/11 America.

In the critical reception of the novel the national allegory has often been judged to be “heavy-handed” or “overdetermined,” and therefore seen to foreclose interpretive possibilities. A few critics, however, have found the national allegory to be richer and more complex than it at first appears to be and have given subtle readings of it that complicate its apparent straightforwardness and the transparency of its meaning.

Anna Hartnell, who contextualizes the national allegory in terms of a post-9/11 debate about multiculturalism, draws attention to the conflicted character of the allegory. Observing how the allegory instantiates a “divergence of discourses on state and nation,” where Underwood Samson stands for the state and Erica for the nation, Hartnell argues that the allegory presents a “compelling exploration of the narrative of American innocence” (337). Hartnell focuses her reading on the relationship between Erica and her deceased ex-boyfriend Chris, whose name recalls both Christianity and Christopher Columbus, and who she consequently reads as a figure for Europe. In this reading, Erica’s nostalgia for Chris represents America being “locked in a nostalgic embrace with Europe, an embrace that refuses to be transformed by the postcolonial moment that Changez potentially represents” (343). And yet, on account of Changez’s representation of Erica’s innocence, and his unabated longing for her after returning to Pakistan, Hartnell concludes that “while the novel’s polemic explodes the myth of American innocence, the story of Erica leaves it intact” (345). For this reason, Hartnell sees the novel as reinforcing the myth of American exceptionalism, a claim I shall return to in the conclusion of this chapter.

While Hartnell finds an ambivalence at the heart of the allegory that complicates the novel’s explicit political critique of American imperialism, Leerom Medovoi finds signs of a more complicated “geopolitical unconscious” beneath the novel’s manifest anti-imperialist perspective (650). Medovoi observes a resonance between the representation of the tension between economic and military power in the novel and Giovanni Arrighi’s theory of

hegemonic crisis in the world-system. According to Arrighi, a period of financialization precedes the historical transition from one global hegemonic power to another—as for example from Dutch to British, or from British to American—though the existing hegemon may try to forestall this event through military action. Arrighi understood the Vietnam War, coinciding with the ascendance of finance capital, as marking the “signal crisis” of American hegemony and argued in 2005 that the Iraq War marked its “terminal crisis,” China emerging to displace it as the new global hegemon.

The national allegory plays a key role in the novel’s engagement with the crisis of American hegemony. Medovoi’s reading begins with the puzzle of why exactly the 9/11 attacks trigger for Erica the traumatic loss of ex-boyfriend Chris and rapidly lead to her decline—a question which Changez himself puzzles over when telling his story to the American. Medovoi proposes a solution to this puzzle through a subtle interpretation of an allusion to the Tintin comic *Flight 714* that appears in the novel. On the wall of her bedroom, Erica has a drawing that Chris drew for her that was inspired by *Flight 714*, the story of a villain called Rastapopoulos who hijacks an airplane and lands it on a desert island in order to seize the fortune of the airplane’s millionaire owner Laszlo Carreidas. Chris’s drawing is a *mise en abyme* of an island seen from above with a volcano that contains within its caldera another island with a volcano.

Medovoi notes that the Tintin comics projected the racist colonial perspective of their Belgian author George Remi (also known as Hergé), who Medovoi writes “believed that the future of the world depended on the success of a ‘New Order’ represented by American ascendancy,” and he reads *Flight 714* as allegorizing a threat to the postwar American order (656). Medovoi connects the publication of *Flight 714* in 1968 to what Arrighi termed the “signal crisis” of American hegemony, and then argues that the 9/11 attacks triggered Erica’s traumatic loss because they symbolized the return of the hijacked Flight 714 to “strike a successful blow against an American hegemon” (656). Thus for Medovoi, Hamid’s novel does considerably more than merely critique American imperialism. The novel maps the world-system through its transnational plot and engages with the crisis of American hegemony—as theorized by Arrighi—both through its thematization of finance and through the symbolism of the national allegory.

Hartnell and Medovoi’s compelling interpretations of the national allegory show that its significance is not nearly so transparent and univocal as its overtness initially suggests. Moreover, both critics resist the simple identification of the novel’s politics with its anti-imperial message. For Hartnell, the novel is less radical than it appears to be (or perhaps less ideological), whereas for Medovoi the novel is more radical than it appears to be (or at least more nuanced in its analysis of empire).

Neither Hartnell nor Medovoi, however, considers how the allegory functions in the plot—that is, within the context of the encounter. The symbolism must be understood in relation to Changez’s mind games or psychological manipulation of the American, which is to say that its significance should be considered in relation to the novel as a thriller. As Peter Morey observes, in consideration of the “shifty nature of our focalizer,” the overt symbolism of Changez’s story ought to be seen as being “consistent with the novel’s constant attention to fiction-making” (140).

The obviousness of the symbolism indicates that it is meant to be noticed. It is meant to be noticed, in the first place, by Changez’s American interlocutor. On the story level, allegorical resonances suggest narrative invention and therefore undermine

Changez's claim to be giving a true account. In the context of the encounter, symbolic language must appear to the American as coded speech. The suggestion of more than one level of meaning renders Changez's discourse ambiguous, seeming to confirm the American's suspicions regarding Changez's malicious intentions, which plays to Changez's advantage. Moreover, it intensifies the atmosphere of imminent danger that is essential for sustaining the novel's suspense.

If the overtness of the allegory is seen to have a motivation internal to the plot—that is, it is meant to be noticed by the American narratee in Changez's act of narrative retribution—it is also clearly meant to be recognized by the reader. Interestingly, the question of the reader was central in Jameson's original discussion of third-world national allegories. Jameson judged them to be "alien" to the first-world reader on account of their transparent intentions, describing these works as coming to this sophisticated reader, whose literary tastes have been formed by modernism, "as though already read" (66). Jameson therefore reasoned that they were addressed to some "Other reader, for whom a narrative, which strikes us as conventional or naïve, has a freshness of information and a social interest that we cannot share" (Ibid.). Jameson was rightly criticized for the homogenizing and condescending assumptions about "us" and "them" on which his argument was based. Indeed, Neelam Srivastava interprets Hamid's novel as contesting the first-world Jamesonian literary critic, whose interpretive activity the narrative short-circuits by producing a "first-world allegory" from a "third-world perspective" (176). Problematic as it is when applied to third-world literature, Jameson's thesis about the "Other reader" is provocative when applied to Hamid's novel. I wish to suggest that the "Other reader," to whom the novel is primarily addressed, is not the allegorizing American literary critic but rather the non-professional American reader.

This hypothesis finds support in the popular genre Hamid employed for his politically-engaged novel. From this perspective, the overtness of the national allegory might be seen to be among the reading satisfactions the novel provides to the consumer of thrillers. More specifically, the allegory, which feels like a disconcerting mode of doublespeak to the American narratee, provides the pleasures of symbolic recognition and decoding to the reader, which is akin to the solving of some mystery common to many thrillers.

A similar idea is suggested in the narrative itself, which we might take as a metafictional comment. Changez explains his *schadenfreude* upon watching the hijacked airplanes fly into the twin towers on television by saying, "at that moment my thoughts were not with the *victims* of the attack—death on television moves me most when it is fictitious and happens to characters with whom I have built up relationships over multiple episodes—no, I was caught up in the *symbolism* of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees" (73). Just as the romance plot of Changez's story facilitates readerly identification with this narrator—at least potentially—the overt symbolism may also be interpreted as being a strategy of entrapping the American reader, or of disconnecting the compassion the reader might otherwise feel for his or her anxious compatriot.

In her interpretation of the allegory, Hartnell astutely observes that its dual-faceted character represents a "divergence of discourses on state and on nation, a divergence that is, indeed, mirrored in the very different treatments of Underwood Samson and Erica" (337). This represents Changez's ambivalent feelings toward America, and for Hartnell it

additionally renders the novel's anti-imperialist critique ambivalent. But if we regard the novel as being addressed to a broad audience of non-professional readers, the divergence of state and nation effected by the national allegory suggests a compelling way of understanding the novel's political intervention. I propose that Hamid wants to disidentify the American audience from its government, and ultimately appeals to the nation to take responsibility, through the capacity of individual citizens, for the politics of the state.

## Two Aesthetic Modes in Tension

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a novel that is full of tensions. There is the in-built tension of the narrative form and the way that develops through a fundamentally conflictual encounter. There is the tension that informs Changez's identity crisis, the tension between his loyalty to his homeland and his affective investment in America. There is the tension that is produced and sustained by the uncertainty of his true identity and motives. There is the tension produced by inequalities within the world-system which the novel represents. And finally, there is the aesthetic tension between the overtness of the allegory and the ultimate ambiguity of the cliffhanger ending—a tension fundamentally between the novel's extreme purposiveness and its radical indeterminacy, both of which seem to block interpretation, though in opposite ways. Caren Irr's recent reconsideration of Jameson's argument about national allegory is suggestive for how this tension between the overdetermination of national allegory and the indeterminacy favored by postmodernism might be understood.

In "Postmodernism in Reverse," Irr observes that an overlooked aspect of Jameson's original argument was that national allegory was the "dialectical counterpart" of literary postmodernism (516). Irr writes that for Jameson national allegory provided an "antidote" to the "antipolitical qualities of postmodernism" (Ibid.). In her own theorization of the twenty-first century geopolitical novel, Irr sees the revival of national allegory as "mark[ing] a new relation to postmodernism" (517). Whereas postmodern fiction tends to obscure its material situation, the new national allegories "register the conditions created by global neoliberalism" (Ibid.).

Irr does not discuss Hamid's novel in the article I quote from. She does discuss it, however, in *Toward the Geopolitical Novel*, though there she analyzes it in terms of migrant fiction rather than national allegory. But her observation about the dialectical relationship between national allegory and postmodernism provides an illuminating perspective on the form of Hamid's novel.

Though it would be possible to read the novel as parodying national allegory, I think that national allegory and postmodern indeterminacy coexist in tension. Hamid registers and denounces neoliberalism and American imperialism in his novel, but then renders this explicit political critique ambivalent—though without negating it—through ambiguity and indeterminacy. This tension between these two modes allows Hamid to have it both ways: the novel is at once an effective vehicle for launching a political critique in literature—aimed, as I've suggested, at a broad American audience—and simultaneously a model of resistance to ideological closure. Sarah Ilott writes that Hamid's novel "simultaneously encourages interpretations through its ambiguity, but also resists the fixing of singular interpretations as a symptom of the fundamentalism that the work persistently deconstructs" (582).

It is possible, moreover, to see a correspondence between these two aesthetic modes that coexist in the novel and the two epiphanies Hamid gives Changez. Though it often goes unremarked upon in critical engagements with the novel, following upon his return to Pakistan Changez has a second epiphany. His political epiphany in Chile reveals to him that he is a conscript of American empire and seems to resolve his identity crisis, inasmuch as he returns to Pakistan and embraces a nationalist identity. But shortly after returning to Pakistan he has an emotional epiphany prompted by the grief he feels over the loss of Erica, whose depression presumably drove her to commit suicide:

Such journeys [of mourning] have convinced me that it is not always possible to restore one's boundaries after they have been blurred and made permeable by a relationship: try as we might, we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be. Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us. Perhaps you have had no comparable experience, for you are gazing at me as though at a raving madman. (173-4)

In light of this epiphany, Changez's embrace of Pakistani nationalism does not signify the recovery of an authentic or essentialist identity, but rather appears to be a strategic response to American neo-imperialism. Indeed, immediately after sharing this experience, he adds that he is "not opposed to the building of walls to shield oneself from harm" (Ibid.).

In terms of the two aesthetic modes the novel holds in tension, the political epiphany can be said to correspond to national allegory while the emotional epiphany can be said to correspond to postmodern indeterminacy. While the political epiphany produces ideological certainty, the emotional epiphany undoes such certainty on the basis of affective experience. It also undoes the pretense to autonomy and invulnerability that are characteristic of hegemonic masculinity and the reigning form of American foreign policy.

Finally, Changez's emotional epiphany can be seen to be the vehicle for the novel's appeal to the American reader. If the hyper-masculine narratee cannot identify with the experience Changez describes, perhaps the American reader—whom the novel has attempted to disidentify from the American narratee—can. Hamid wants America to engage with the world—not to withdraw from it in fearful or melancholy isolationism—though to do so on the basis of equality, which means both recognizing common vulnerability and dispensing with the ideology of American exceptionalism.

### **Symptomizing the Crisis of American Hegemony**

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is symptomatic of the fault lines in American hegemony that opened up dramatically in response to America's military response to 9/11 and especially the war of aggression in Iraq. The novel forcefully writes back to America, assailing not only the rhetoric of the "War on Terror" and the neo-imperialist foreign policy of the Bush Doctrine—unilateralism, preemptive strike, and regime change—but also assails a fundamentalist market ideology, contests monolithic national or cultural identities, and critiques a violence-prone form of hegemonic masculinity that Changez's narrative act of retribution in its own way reproduces. In all these ways, Hamid's novel may be said to symptomize the crisis of American hegemony, which, as Medovi shows through



his world-systems analysis of the text, it simultaneously registers through a thematization of finance, its mapping of global political-economic relations, and its national allegory.

Indeed, Medovoi argues that Hamid's novel exemplifies an emerging genre of global fiction, which he refers to as "world-system literature," a category that contains both literary transnationalism and the literature of empire. This analytical perspective is oriented around the question of how literature "register[s] the (political, military, economic) deployments of power that organize or reorganize global spaces" (653). Though Hamid's novel, in Medovoi's analysis, engages with the crisis of American hegemony in a way that corresponds strikingly with Arrighi's political-economic theory, as a category of literary analysis world-system literature would obviously include works that cognitively mapped other parts of the world-system at other historical conjunctures. As such, world-system literature is obviously a much broader category than what I am calling the post-American novel.

Toward the conclusion of his article on *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Medovoi poses the following question: "Do the imaginings of a world-system in crisis open opportunities of imagining a qualitatively different world that is not a world-system, not the fresh round of accumulation that accompanies the next reconfiguration of global space, but a glimmer of something that could be new?" (657). This, he suggests, would represent a "utopian moment" in world-systems fiction, but the question is a rhetorical one and he doesn't pursue it in his analysis of the novel.

As a matter of fact, there is such a utopian moment in the novel, and it is not just a matter of negating the world-system, as Medovoi implies, with its succession of hegemonic regimes of capital accumulation. The novel's utopian moment arguably comes in the passage that I referred to above as Changez's emotional epiphany and the insight concerning interdependence to which it leads. "I do not mean to say that we are all *one*," Changez hastens to clarify when he sees his American interlocutor staring at him as if he were a "raving madman" (174). However, it is an implication of his epiphany that separation is really an illusion based on the (masculine) fear of vulnerability and desire for control.

This insight of interdependence, and the moral responsibilities it implies, is the novel's utopian moment. It resonates with Judith Butler's argument in *Precarious Life* that acts of violence like the 9/11 terrorist attacks reveal the vulnerability and interdependency that might be recognized as the "basis for global political community" (xiii)—an argument Joseph Darda makes central to his reading of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as a novel that "evokes and stages precarious life" in the interest of building international solidarity (121). This insight of interdependence—more compelling than any traditional utopianism—does indeed point to a very different kind of world than the one that exists and the one that is likely to come under a new hegemonic configuration.

It is principally on account of Hamid's critical engagement with the "War on Terror," both in Afghanistan and Iraq, that I designate the work a post-American novel. Additionally, the novel stakes a critical position with respect to two subgenres of American fiction—that of the immigrant novel and the 9/11 novel. Rather than becoming naturalized in America—or even simply disillusioned with the promises of the American dream—Changez instead becomes radicalized through his encounter with America and then voluntarily repatriates himself to Pakistan. And while 9/11 plays a crucial role in Changez's narrative, the event is decentered through shifting attention to the "War on Terror" and other geopolitical events

such as the 2001-2002 India-Pakistan border standoff—an event which Changez notes was hardly even registered by the American media.

It is certain that if the post-American novel does nothing else it must at least subvert the ideology of American exceptionalism. But this precisely has been called into question by certain readers of the novel. Doesn't Changez's ambivalence, and his representation of (Am)Erica's innocence, signify that, in spite of the critique, the novel actually reinforces American exceptionalism? This argument is made by Hartnell, who connects what she sees as being the novel's affective investment in America to the American exceptionalism that was frequently invoked by President Obama—and notably before him Martin Luther King Jr.—arguing that the novel “rigorously critiques US foreign policy by calling on America to live up to its founding ideals” (346).

This is certainly a plausible interpretation of Changez's ambivalence and continuing affective investment in America, but a different perspective emerges from the novel as a whole, one that has little to do with America's founding ideals and everything to do with America's mode of relating to the rest of the world. After all, the founding ideal of freedom was repeatedly invoked in the argument to liberate the people of Iraq from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein. Rather than upholding American exceptionalism, the novel's investment in America has more to do with the desire to see America participate constructively in a post-American world.

In addition to working against ideological closure as discussed above, the novel's cliffhanger ending can be seen to have a specific political significance within the historical horizon of the crisis of American hegemony. The novel's lack of closure signifies that the future relationship between America and the rest of the world remains undetermined, underscoring the openness of the future and consequently the opportunity for the American reader to exercise political agency in his or her capacity as a citizen.

## Chapter Two

### Empire and Ambivalence: the Fraught Politics of Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*

If Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* expresses the crisis of American hegemony through mobilizing the thriller genre for anti-imperial critique, Joseph O'Neill's lyrical realist novel *Netherland* (2008) engages with America's post-9/11 hegemonic crisis in a much more ambivalent way. The novel tells the story of another foreign person living in New York City and working in the financial industry, though the narrator of O'Neill's novel is not a minority subject who suffers exclusion after 9/11, but rather a wealthy white man who is plunged into a personal crisis when his marriage unravels.

Born in Ireland, O'Neill grew up in Mozambique, Iran, Turkey, and the Netherlands on account of his father's work in the construction of oil refineries. He studied law at Cambridge University and worked as a lawyer in London for a decade, where he wrote his first two novels, *This is the Life* (1991) and *The Breezes* (1996). In 1998 he moved with his wife to New York City, and in 2001 he published a non-fiction book entitled *Blood-Dark Track* about his research into his two grandfathers—one an Irish member of the IRA and the other mostly likely a Turkish spy for the Axis powers—both of whom were imprisoned by the British during World War II. In 2014 he published his most recent novel entitled *The Dog*, which takes place in Dubai and presents a portrait of the transnational capitalist class.

*Netherland* takes place in New York City the aftermath of 9/11. Dutch equities analyst Hans van de Broek and his English wife Rachel, a corporate lawyer, suffer from 9/11 trauma. The couple anxiously anticipates the next attack—perhaps at Times Square where both of them work, or at the Indian Point nuclear power plant just outside the city. No longer wanting to live in New York, Rachel decides to return to London with their infant son Jake to begin a trial separation, leaving Hans alone and bereft. Back in London, Rachel becomes politicized during the build-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, resolving not to return to the U.S. or have their son grow up there, while Hans remains unmoved by the political zeitgeist, preoccupied with his own personal anguish and existential crisis.

In order to distract himself from his sorrows, Hans takes to playing cricket—a sport he played growing up in The Hague—with South Asian and West Indian immigrants in the outer boroughs of New York City, which is how he meets Chuck Ramkissoon, an Indo-Trinidadian entrepreneur who has reinvented himself in New York in the mold of the mythical immigrant striver. Maintaining that cricket is an original American sport, Chuck's big dream is to reintroduce cricket to mainstream American culture, and to this end he begins creating a cricket field on land leased from the National Park Service in Brooklyn where he plans to build a world-class cricket arena that would host international matches broadcast globally. Though initially skeptical of Chuck and his dream, Hans finally suspends his disbelief, and begins to dream along with him.

Like his literary prototype, Jay Gatsby, Chuck turns out to have some illicit activities in his business portfolio, including a gambling racket based on an informal Trinidadian lottery known as "weh-weh," and when Hans finds out that Chuck uses violent methods to collect on gambling debts, he is horrified, marking the beginning of the end of their

relationship. Not long after, having acquired the determination to get his family back together, Hans returns to London, where he is living in the narrative present. Having already reunited with his family when the novel begins, Hans receives a telephone call from a *New York Times* reporter informing him that the corpse of Chuck Ramkissoon has been fished out of the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn. Hans's retrospective narrative is a response to a question from Rachel about who Chuck was, framing the narrative as testimony, witness, and confession.

*Netherland* was very well-received in its earliest newspaper reviews, though critical evaluations subsequently became polarized. In his May 2008 review of the novel in the *New Yorker* James Wood described *Netherland* as "a large fictional achievement, and one of the most remarkable postcolonial books I have read" (102). Wood praised O'Neill's "elegant, long sentences, formal but not fussy, punctually pricked with lyrically exact metaphor," adding that it is "a pleasure to be reading an attentive prose about New York in crisis that is not also a prose in crisis" (104).

Zadie Smith was the first to strike the dissenting note in a scathing review of the novel published later that same year in the *New York Review of Books*, in which she sardonically described *Netherland* as the "post-September 11 novel we hoped for" (n.pag.). Smith attacked the very lyricism that Wood praised, writing that:

A breed of lyrical Realism has had the freedom of the highway for some time now, with most other exits blocked. For *Netherland*, our receptive pathways are so solidly established that to read this novel is to feel a powerful, somewhat dispiriting sense of recognition. It seems perfectly done—in a sense that's the problem. It's so precisely the image of what we have been taught to value in fiction that it throws that image into a kind of existential crisis, as the photograph gifts a nervous breakdown to the painted portrait. (Ibid.)

Smith concluded that "*Netherland* sits at an anxiety crossroads where a community in recent crisis—the Anglo-American liberal middle class—meets a literary form in long-term crisis, the nineteenth-century lyrical Realism of Balzac and Flaubert" (Ibid.).

The articles by Smith and Wood established, in general terms, two of the major approaches to the novel. Michael Rothberg and Elizabeth Anker are two critics, among many others, who followed Smith in seeing *Netherland* as a 9/11 novel, though they arrived at quite different evaluations of its politics. Rothberg described *Netherland* as "one of the finest novels of the post-9/11 condition" for its representation of a "deterritorialized America" (156). Anker meanwhile discussed *Netherland* much more critically as a 9/11 novel that shared various formal and thematic features with other male-authored 9/11 novels, rendering the terrorist attacks as a "crucible in middle-aged masculinity" and "collaps[ing] the trauma of 9/11 into the psychic economy of the spectacle, with the ultimate effect of subduing 9/11's fraught sociopolitical meanings" (464).

Various critics have followed Wood in reading *Netherland* as a postcolonial novel, or at least made cricket central to their engagements with the novel, invoking C.L.R. James's insights in *Beyond a Boundary* about the race and class politics of the game in colonial societies. Channeling James, Richard Gray writes:

Cricket was and remains both a legacy of imperialism and a means of resistance to it; the roles played out on the cricket pitch are an agency, an instrument of social ideology and political transformation. What we have in the game of cricket [...] is a balancing of complicity and resistance, in which, in order to turn a residual colonial practice into a subversive anti-colonial one, the cultural practice must first be learned and assimilated according to the terms of the dominant colonial order. Cricket, on these terms, is a paradigm of the colonial and postcolonial encounter. It is about collusion and conflict between the colonizer and the colonized, oppressor and victim; in a word, it is about power. (71)

Sports historian Jeffrey Hill writes that “[i]n spite of the game’s increasing international profile, due in large measure to the commercial potential of its new ‘Twenty/20’ form, cricket remains essentially a game of the former British Empire, an abiding legacy of political and ideological traditions with which Americans should not wish to associate themselves” (220). The significance of O’Neill’s transposition of the sport from its postcolonial British context to a post-9/11 American context has been a key question in the critical reception of the novel.

Other than cricket as a legacy of British colonialism, the novel features a number of references to the Dutch colonial history of New Amsterdam. Many critics writing about the novel have chosen only to focus on *either* the British *or* the Dutch colonial contexts. In a notable departure from these two critical perspectives, Katherine Snyder focuses on the traumas of America’s foundational violence through a detailed interpretation of the intertextual relationship the novel bears to *The Great Gatsby*. Snyder argues that *Netherland* “invokes the shade of a national past shaped by occluded yet foundational violence, a traumatic colonial history that is both insistent and ineffable within the text” (459).

The significance of *Netherland*’s constellation of references to the history of European colonialism, American foundational violence, 9/11, and the Iraq War is one of the major interpretive problems raised by the novel. The most sustained critical engagement with the whole of *Netherland*’s historical constellation has been made by critics who approach the novel from the perspective of world-systems theory. Claire Westall, for example, argues that by concentrating on contemporary global cricket, O’Neill connects the Dutch, British, and American phases of global hegemony. Westall boldly claims that *Netherland* is a “novel we cannot know without knowing the world system,” but then, holding close to Arrighi’s theory, faults O’Neill’s novel for failing to “articulate the terminal crisis and ‘end point’ facing Euro-American hegemony” (288, 297).

O’Neill is clearly interested in the histories and legacies of empire, but rather than understood as corresponding (imperfectly) to world-system theory, *Netherland* is better understood as responding to the widespread framing of the Iraq War as an act of imperial aggression and America, therefore, as an empire. On the one hand, the novel seems to support this view by contextualizing contemporary history in relation to the histories of Dutch and British imperialism, as well as 19<sup>th</sup>-century American continental expansion. But on the other hand, the traces of imperial history and legacies of colonialism that the novel registers are mostly illegible or incomprehensible to the novel’s center of consciousness, Hans, who is portrayed at once critically and sympathetically. The ambivalent

representation of Hans—as well as the novel’s other main characters, Rachel and Chuck, who are Hans’s gendered and raced foils, respectively—ultimately accounts for the fraught character of the novel’s politics, which has so often been remarked upon in *Netherland’s* critical reception.

### **Political Commitment and Political Indecision**

Though *Netherland* has often been read as a 9/11 novel, and the terrorist attacks play a central role in the plot of marital disintegration, O’Neill chose not to represent the attacks themselves. The novel, rather, is more about the aftermath of 9/11, and the concept of the “aftermath” is thematized early in the narrative. Hans recuperates the original, literal meaning of the word—the “second mowing of grass in the same season”—and then uses it to elaborate a place-specific metaphor that resonates throughout his narrative: “You might say, if you’re the type prone to general observations, that New York City insists on memory’s repetitive mower—on the sort of purposeful postmortem that has the effect, so one is told and forlornly hopes, of cutting the grassy past to manageable proportions. For it keeps growing back, of course” (4). New York City is classically the place of self-reinvention, which depends upon purposefully forgetting the past, and especially, as seen in this melancholy formulation, depends upon submitting to the illusion that one is free from its determination.

The past that Hans wishes to forget at the beginning of the narrative, when he receives the telephone call informing him about the death of Chuck Ramkissoon, is precisely the period he spent alone in New York when he was “unhappy for the first time in [his] life” (4). The ensuing narrative—a response to Rachel’s question about who Chuck was—is about the aftermath of 9/11 in a personal sense, when, abandoned by his wife and separated from his son, Hans became “lost in invertebrate time” and his narrative is one of a “descent into disorder” (30, 91). It is a narrative that he finally suggests, with self-denigrating irony, might be titled “The Adversity of Hans van den Broek” (219). A substantial part of the novel’s anxiousness results from the fact that it elicits readerly sympathy for an extremely privileged character while substantially blocking sympathy for more socially marginalized ones.

If Hans is primarily interested in private life, 9/11 and its political aftermath effectively destroys the separation between the private and the public, and references to the Iraq War in particular appear throughout the narrative. After returning to London, Rachel joins the antiwar movement, and her new political commitment occasions an argument with her husband—a very important scene that I shall discuss shortly. Beyond this scene, in the course of his narrative Hans recalls how he began to receive “stupid” questions at work about the “oil production capacity of an American-occupied Iraq” (99). In one of her narrative intrusions, Rachel asks Hans about Chuck’s politics, causing Hans to reflect that “[w]hile the country floundered in Iraq, Chuck was running. That was political enough for me, a man having trouble putting one foot in front of the other” (163). Chuck may however possess more of a political consciousness than Hans credits him with, once describing cricket once as a “crash course in democracy” that could help the American government—in the immediate context of globally unpopular Iraq War—improve its international relations (211). After Rachel and Hans have reconciled, the topic of the Iraq War comes up at a party in London when someone relativizes the tragedy of 9/11 in terms

of the human toll of the Iraq War causing Hans to leave the party in anger, though he ultimately comes to recognize the “unambiguous disaster in Iraq” (252).

The major scene referring to the war unfolds as an argument between Hans and Rachel over the telephone. Rachel calls Hans on Presidents’ Day, two days after the worldwide antiwar demonstrations on February 15, 2003. She informs him that she took their son Jake to the demonstration in London and that he held up a NOT IN MY NAME sign. Though she doesn’t invoke the I-word—that is, imperialism—Rachel has reached the conclusion that the Bush administration is intent on “military and economic domination of the world,” and she declares definitively that she will not be returning to New York to live, nor will she allow Jake to be brought up in a “‘mentally ill, sick, unreal’ country whose masses and leaders suffered from extraordinary and self-righteous delusions” (95).

Rachel’s politicization surprises Hans who refers to her, bitingly, as a “corporate litigator [...] radicalized only in the service of her client and with not the smallest bone to pick about money and its doings” (96). Hans tries to avoid engaging in political argument, but Rachel is insistent. She charges him with being a conservative, which he denies, and he charges her with aggression, to which she responds: “This is about a life-and-death struggle for the future of the world. Our personal feelings don’t come into the picture” (98). Throughout this scene—presented, of course, through Hans’s wounded, resentful, and ironizing perspective—Rachel appears overemotional, self-righteous, and bullying.

Recalling this period, Hans says that the “imminent invasion of Iraq had stimulated an impressive and impassioned opinion in practically everybody I knew”—though not in himself (99). He remains outside the liberal consensus of the moment, unable to take a position on the war for lack of information and “foresight.” But most of all, he confesses to having been indifferent to the war—preoccupied as he was with the disintegration of his family and his own unhappiness—and describes himself as a “political-ethical idiot” (100).

Though it goes on for several pages, this scene has largely been passed over in the critical discussion of *Netherland*, likely on account of its topicality and thus apparently minor importance—or because critics have, for many good reasons, tended to see the relationship between Hans and Chuck as forming the heart of the novel. Matthew Brown is one critic who has recognized the importance of this scene, analyzing the political argument between Hans and Rachel in terms of how O’Neill negotiates the relationship between family melodrama and trauma narrative, two subgenres commonly employed in post-9/11 fiction.

Brown argues that O’Neill “uses the collapse of Hans’s marriage to survey the national and international intimacies troubled by 9/11 and to expose the allegedly shared values that grounded not only Hans and Rachel’s personal relationship but also the post-1945 ‘special relationship’ between the United States and Great Britain” (117). Brown describes Rachel as the novel’s “mouthpiece for populist anti-war sentiment in Britain that neglects, perhaps, to take into account the reactionary bourgeois values that inform this position,” by which he means “post-imperial nostalgia,” though he doesn’t provide any evidence to support this suggestion (118). Meanwhile, he attributes Hans’s political apathy to an individualism that “refuses to translate family drama into political allegory” (118). Ultimately, Brown interprets their argument as allegorizing a post-9/11 literary debate about the “role domestic fictions should play in framing trauma narratives” (Ibid.). To be sure, Rachel’s assertion that the public and political supersedes the private and emotional

echoes those critics of the inwardness and domesticity of the 9/11 novel—or at least reflects the widely shared sense that during the two terms of the Bush presidency fiction had an urgent social responsibility.

This scene, however, plays a more important role in the narrative than Brown recognizes. Many critics, beginning with Zadie Smith's early review of *Netherland*, have noted the anxiety that saturates the novel, though have not given an adequate account of it. The whole of Hans's anxious narrative unfolds within the critical gaze of his wife, and her perspective intrudes at various moments to challenge Hans's. Rachel declares that the political exigencies of the moment demote personal feelings; Hans's narrative is one of personal feelings and is therefore anxious. Rachel's critical—at times prosecutorial—gaze places Hans on trial. In another context, his narrative might be judged to be generally self-indulgent, but in the context of the Iraq War—and in light of the politicization of his liberal cosmopolitan peers (and presumably many of the novel's readers)—this self-indulgence becomes especially culpable. Indeed, Hans's self-indulgence in a time of war arguably becomes complicity with those who are waging it, which is exactly what Rachel charges him with.

The political argument between Hans and Rachel inevitably raises the (fraught) question of the politics of the novel. Hans is a self-avowed “political-ethical idiot,” but Rachel, who is supposed to be more politically enlightened, is portrayed—necessarily through Hans's focalization—rather unsympathetically. The ambiguity here is consequential. It renders the novel's constellation of historical references to Dutch and British imperialism, along with American 19<sup>th</sup>-century continental empire-building, likewise ambiguous. I propose that the novel ought to be seen as responding to the representation of the Iraq War as an act of imperial aggression and therefore of America as an empire. This hypothesis explains the logic of the whole constellation of historical references. The novel contextualizes America and the Iraq War within the history of empire, thus appearing to embody the political perspective Rachel articulates—but which Hans ironizes—in the narrative.

### **Interrogating the Liberal Consensus**

Though she elicits Hans's narrative by initially asking him who Chuck was, and though her critical gaze and periodic intrusions thoroughly shape its form, the importance of Rachel's character has generally been overlooked in interpretations of the novel. This owes in part to the fact that Rachel's decision to leave Hans and return to London seems in many ways to play merely a functional role in the narrative. Rachel's departure is necessary for Hans's encounter with Chuck, and this postcolonial encounter is regarded as the real interest of the novel, that which distinguishes it from the many other novels that engage with 9/11 through the trope of marital estrangement and male midlife crisis. Moreover, it is through Hans's relationship with Chuck that the narrative comes to register the geographies of empire and the legacies of colonialism.

Hans first meets Chuck during a cricket match at Walker Park in Staten Island that Chuck is officiating. When a drunken supporter of the opposing team, angered by Chuck's calls, wanders onto the field with a gun, Chuck skillfully diffuses the potentially deadly situation. After the match, while both teams are eating and drinking together in a spirit of conviviality, Chuck gives a speech on cricket in which he defines the sport as a “lesson in



civility” (15). Chuck goes on to describe how cricket was an original sport of America, played by the likes of no less a figure than Benjamin Franklin, though was later abandoned in favor of baseball, and presently has no visible presence in American culture. In order to right this wrong, and for the immigrant players to claim their “rightful place in this wonderful country,” Chuck asserts that it is imperative for all the players to live up to cricket’s code of civility (16).

Chuck’s invocation of cricket’s colonial ideology in this scene is ambiguous. Claire Westall observes that “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 exposure of imperial hypocrisy achieved by demanding the standards former masters claimed for themselves” (295). On account of Chuck’s contradictions, the matter is undecidable; and the simultaneous possibility of all these interpretations is a contributing factor to the fraught character of the novel’s politics.

Hans runs into Chuck again on accident in a Pakistani restaurant watching a cricket match on television. Chuck presents himself as an entrepreneur with various businesses, among them a kosher sushi restaurant in Brooklyn. After learning that Hans works in the financial sector, Chuck cryptically mentions a new cricket venture he is undertaking, and implies that he seeks Hans’s financial investment in the project. They exchange contact details, but it is ultimately Hans who seeks out Chuck.

Having decided to get a driver’s license in an attempt to “counter the great subtractions that had lessened [his] life,” Hans goes to the DMV to apply for a learner permit (63). On account of a discrepancy in the way his name is printed on various forms of identification, the permit is denied to him. Hans is exasperated by the experience, describing himself as being “seized for the first time by a nauseating sense of America [...] under the actuation of unjust, indifferent powers” (68). The ordinary privilege he customarily enjoys and takes for granted as a wealthy white man is denied to him in this encounter with American bureaucracy. On his walk home, Hans glimpses a sign for CHUCK CRICKET, INC. in the second-floor window of a building and goes inside. In retrospect, Hans remarks that Chuck “was too astute not to have detected that somewhere behind this impromptu visit lay some need on my part—and neediness, in business as in romance, represents an opportunity” (71). Miserable and alone in New York, Hans seeks sympathy. “I was, to anyone who could be bothered to pay attention, noticeably lost. Chuck paid attention and thus noticed” (72).

Hans understands Chuck to seek his financial backing for the cricket project, but to do so through means more whimsical than a sales pitch: “He was going to fascinate me” (72). Chuck finally succeeds in doing this, but Hans’s fascination is initially rooted in utter disbelief at the kinds of things Chuck, without a trace of irony, habitually says—things such as, “I love the national bird [...] the noble bald eagle represents the spirit of freedom, living as it does in the boundless void of the sky” (75).

As Chuck drives Hans out to an old airfield in Brooklyn, which he has named Bald Eagle Field and which he is leasing from the Parks Department as the future site of his New York Cricket Club, he evokes for Hans his vision of building a world class cricket arena with international matches globally televised. When Hans and Chuck arrive at the field, it is covered in snow, an “immense white emptiness,” a “void” evoking the blank canvas or piece of paper on which an artist attempts to realize his or her vision (81). “Not for a second did I

take him seriously,” Hans recalls (83). Chuck proposes to Hans that he get practice for his upcoming driving exam using Chuck’s American flag festooned Cadillac, which he is then going to use on the day of the exam. Hans agrees, and so begin their “instructional drives” around Brooklyn, always ending up at Bald Eagle Field, Hans becoming Chuck’s “assistant groundskeeper” as they assess the progress of the cricket pitch and the realization of Chuck’s dream, which Hans eventually comes to share (152).

It is Chuck, an autodidact, who apprises Hans of the Dutch colonial history of New York. Chuck encourages Hans to claim his connection to the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch colonial settlers and take pride in this history. After their second meeting, Chuck sends Hans a book of colonial Dutch nursery rhymes, addressing Hans in an attached note as a “member of the first tribe of New York, excepting of course the Red Indians” (58). The one nursery rhyme that Hans reads in the book Chuck gives him commemorates a Christmas horse race at Rensselaerwyck at which African slaves are present and the “war whoop” of “Indian braves” is heard in the background (61). Later, Chuck takes Hans to the old Reformed Protestant Dutch church in Flatbush and they walk around the graveyard on the property in back where the headstones bear Dutch surnames. Without a hint of accusation, Chuck refers to the Dutch colonial settlers as Hans’s “people,” but Hans struggles to identify himself with this history (154).

Hans becomes increasingly attuned to Dutch and Native American place names, in and around New York City. In her reading of the novel, Katherine Snyder observes the “palimpsestic function” of such place names, which index occluded histories of colonial violence. Snyder describes the palimpsest as a “key figure and strategy in *Netherland*, both a motif that appears within the text and also the narrative’s primary *modus operandi*” inasmuch as it, from her perspective, a rewriting of *The Great Gatsby* (480). “*Netherland*,” she astutely observes, is the preeminent palimpsestic place name: “‘Nether’ is a kind of indexical, a gesture of reference: what is ‘nether’ is what lies under or beneath or behind something else” (480).

New York is not the only historical geography of empire that O’Neill has Hans traverse. Late in the narrative, after being exposed to Chuck’s interpersonal violence, Hans travels out to an industry conference in Scottsdale, Arizona. After the conference Hans is persuaded by three hedge fund traders from Milwaukee to drive out to a reservation casino. On the way to the casino they stop at a roadside BBQ operated by Native Americans. Hans and his (presumably white) companions all walk out to a ridge to look out across the desert like “existential gunslingers”:

It was undoubtedly a moment of reckoning, a rare and altogether golden opportunity for a Milwaukeean or Hollander of conscience to consider certain awesome drifts of history and geology and philosophy, and I’m sure I wasn’t the only one to feel lessened by the immensity of the undertaking and by the poverty of the associations one brought to bear on the instant, which in my case included recollections, for the first time in years, of Lucky Luke, the cartoon-strip cowboy who often rode among buttes and drew a pistol faster than his own shadow. (217)

Hans’s complacent reflection about his immature historical imagination—echoed in a subsequent scene a bit later in the novel once he has returned to New York—suggests that

the point of his business trip is really to map the geography of American Manifest Destiny and thus bring this history into relation with the other colonial histories that the novel registers as well as the unfolding history of the Iraq War, which makes periodic appearances in Hans's narrative.

The novel's references to Dutch and British colonial histories, as well as to American continental expansion, seem to contextualize post-9/11 America within a longer history of empire. Rachel's critical perspective on the Iraq War thus seems to be the one underwriting that of the novel. Indeed, a more radical perspective than Rachel's may be sensed behind the narrative, since Rachel only ever accuses Hans of being a "conservative"—and of only being complicit in Chuck's illegal activities—but O'Neill sets up Hans to be recognized by the reader as being connected to Dutch imperialism by nationality, British imperialism through culture, and contemporary American imperialism by profession.

And yet Hans is no mere satirical figure. For all his self-absorption and complacency, O'Neill portrays him sympathetically, even as he is clearly aware that Hans is an unlikely candidate for readerly sympathy, surrounded as he is by non-white working class immigrants and guiltily indifferent to the war raging in the distance and the (non-white) lives being destroyed by it.

Meanwhile, the narrative perspective substantially blocks sympathy for Rachel. By contrast with Hans, self-avowed "political-ethical idiot," Rachel is supposed to be the politically and ethically enlightened one. But even if Hans regards her as having superior insight and understanding and assents to her judgments much of the time, and even though his narrative is only occasionally overtly vindictive, Rachel's political commitment inevitably seems fashionable and intolerant, while her behavior does not express any exceptional ethical qualities.

Given the novel's ambivalent portrayal of Hans, at once critical and sympathetic, and Hans's ironic portrayal of Rachel, the novel is better seen as interrogating—neither affirming nor denying—the widespread representation of America as an empire during the Iraq War. Thus, while Hans can clearly be recognized as a colonizer/imperialist—and American empire to be but the latest in a succession of global hegemony—doing so, the novel suggests, may be to misrecognize both Hans and America.

Indeed, such misrecognition is thematized in one notably disturbing scene in the novel. One day Hans is sitting in a diner when he is approached by an Anglo-Jamaican woman named Danielle who remembers him—without Hans remembering her—from a one-night stand a decade before in London. They go out on a date and afterwards return to his apartment at the Chelsea Hotel. In the course of having sex, Danielle requests that he beat her with his belt, being a "gentleman" as he had been during their previous sexual encounter in London. Hans complies, taking no satisfaction in it that he is able to recall, though he does recall a melancholy thought he had when he caught his reflection in the window:

I was not shocked by what I saw—a pale white hitting a pale black—but I did of course ask myself what had happened, how it could be that I should find myself living in a hotel in a country where there was no one to remember me, attacking a woman who'd boomeranged in from a time I could not claim as my own. I recall, also, trying to shrug off a sharp new sadness produced when

the mirroring world no longer offers a surface in which one may recognize one's true likeness. (115)

O'Neill gives Danielle all the power in the scene. Her desire and will shape the encounter from the moment she approaches Hans in the diner to her subsequent rebuff of his desire to see her again, implied by her lack of response to the phone messages he leaves her. The scene is presented as another example of Hans's wretchedness.

But it also doing some ideological work in the novel. Seeing his reflection in the window, Hans recognizes the visual echo of historical racial violence. In the reflection, Hans sees someone who is not himself, or sees himself from another perspective. This other perspective sees an act of racial and sexual violence occurring, causing Hans to lament being misrecognized as a colonizer/oppressor. The scene suggests that Chuck's attempt to link him to the slave-holding Dutch colonists, coupled with Hans's anxious awareness of Rachel's critical gaze, have begun to unsettle his sense of self.

If we consider the allegorical resonance of the scene, then the logic of the analogy would suggest that the critical representation of America as an empire is likewise an instance of misrecognition—similarities between the Iraq War and previous European imperialist wars notwithstanding. Throughout the narrative, however, O'Neill has Hans continuously present himself as blind, clueless, uncomprehending, and so on. Given O'Neill's ambivalent portrayal of Hans, the political perspective of the novel must be seen as being likewise ambivalent—closer, ultimately, to the uncertainty and indecisiveness that sets Hans outside the liberal consensus of the period than it is to Rachel's critical perspective, even though the novel explores the question of American empire through imaginative form.

### **Injustice, Complicity, Anxiety**

While interrogating the representation of America as an empire, *Netherland* can also be seen as a meditation on how the racial and economic legacies of European colonialism and American foundational violence structure contemporary social relations and the ethical demands such historical injustices make on individuals—especially individuals who are wealthy, white, and male. This meditation on the legacies of colonial dispossession and racial oppression occurs both through and against the limited perspective of the narrator. In keeping with the overall ambivalent portrayal of Hans, O'Neill exposes Hans's blind spots, though without ultimately decentering the ethical perspective his narrator embodies.

The first account of a cricket match in the novel, the scene in which Chuck makes his first appearance, is one of conflict with racial overtones, when Hans's multinational team—composed of men from Trinidad, Guyana, Jamaica, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—competes against a team composed entirely of immigrants from St. Kitts. Hans, the only white man on the field, is batting when the bowler of the opposing team delivers a series of aggressive “bouncers” and “throat-balls” that cause Chuck, who is officiating the match, to issue a warning to the bowler and, when he continues to bowl aggressively, to eject him from the game. This occasions an argument on the field and Umar, a Pakistani teammate of Hans, holds Hans back, saying: “You stay here. It's always the same with these people” (13).

A drunken supporter of Kittitian team then walks out on the field with a gun, but Chuck manages to deescalate the conflict before it becomes deadly.

While this early scene of conflict has racial overtones, there is no racial tension between Hans and his teammates. Though he sometimes feels as if he is “reinforcing a stereotype” of whiteness in their company—for instance, having no rhythm on the dance floor at the annual cricket gala—they ultimately fully accept him as their teammate (140). Nor is there any racial tension between Hans and Chuck, the latter of whom makes a number of observations about American racism, but then also deploys, without hesitation or irony, a white supremacist rationality, ranking various racial and ethnic groups according to their “socioeconomic” profiles (78). Moreover, when they visit the Dutch cemetery in Flatbush, Chuck tries to get Hans to claim his ethnic connection to the Dutch colonial settlers with pride, not shame.

Hans does however experience the resentment of an adjacent character, his Guyanese driving instructor Carl, shortly after his experience of discrimination at the DMV, which had filled Hans with outrage at the injustice he suffered. During a drive out to Walker Park on Staten Island where Hans’s cricket team plays, Carl tells him about his two-year struggle to get his fingerprints taken for the permanent resident application. Hoping to “bring an end to the topic,” which evidently makes Hans self-conscious about his own privilege and the slightness of the injustice he has suffered at the DMV, Hans lamely advises Carl that he shall simply have to “persist” in his efforts, causing Carl to “grin inexplicably” in simmering resentment (118).

When they arrive at Walker Park, Hans gets out of the car where he gives expression to an idealized—and ideological—vision of cricket. The passage begins with an evocation of a social scientist’s perspective that would see New York cricket in terms of the displaced immigrant’s “quest for subcommunities” before Hans presents his own lyrical/philosophical perspective on the sport:

[S]urely everyone can also testify to another, less reckonable kind of homesickness, one having to do with unsettlements that cannot be located in spaces of geography or history; and accordingly it’s my belief that the communal, contractual phenomenon of New York cricket is underwritten, there where the print is finest, by the same agglomeration of unspeakable individual longings that underwrites cricket played anywhere—longings concerned with horizons and potentials sighted or hallucinated and in any event lost long ago, tantalisms that touch on the undoing of losses too private and reprehensible to be acknowledged to oneself, let alone to others. 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. (120-1)

Many critics discuss this passage, but none have done so in its immediate narrative context. Hans’s idealizing vision of cricket must be understood in the context of his effort moments earlier to silence Carl, whose complaint makes him feel uncomfortable about his social privilege. The idealizing vision of cricket Hans elaborates here asserts a form of universal solidarity that transcends social differences, underscoring one of the key values Hans derives from playing cricket—namely, an experience, however superficial, of post-racial conviviality. Of course, in asserting this form of solidarity on the basis of a

generalized bereavement and yearning for an abstract form of justice, Hans effaces the social inequalities linked to racial and class differences and thereby sweeps aside material claims to social justice—claims that would fall upon him as a wealthy white man.

Hans's idealization of cricket is thus one that simultaneously recognizes and obscures inequality and struggle, and can be seen as both a way of managing his anxiety about the privilege he enjoys in an unjust system and as an expression of a desire for real post-racial community. As John Duvall observes, Hans does not see himself as "someone who bears the American white man's burden of implication in the history of U.S. slavery" (342). While relations between Hans and his teammates—and between Hans and Chuck—are non-conflictual, their basically harmonious character depends upon strict boundaries around their relationships. To go beyond the boundary, in this case, would necessitate a more worldly form of justice than the one that suggests itself to Hans when he contemplates men dressed in white, all observing the legitimacy of the rules of the game as they compete against one another in an orderly and civil way on a perfectly level playing field.

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While none of the postcolonial immigrants in the novel force Hans to recognize himself as a descendent of the colonizers, or as being a beneficiary of the American racial hierarchy, O'Neill gives Hans an apprehensiveness of surfaces and what they conceal that, if interpreted symptomatically, can be seen as playing an important role in the novel's meditation on the legacies of colonialism.

Hans's crisis, after Rachel returns to London, is characterized not only by feelings of inadequacy and shame, but also of confusion and incomprehension as he is struck by the "endless perplexity of the world" (51). Hans accepts Rachel's infantilizing characterization of him as "clueless" (while contesting her characterization of him as a "rationalist"). His cluelessness is largely a matter of his complacent acceptance of appearances (or surfaces), and his crisis is largely a matter of the dawning awareness—in this narrative of delayed adolescence—that surfaces can deceive.

Though describing himself as being generally averse to explanatory narratives with their ultimate uncertainty, Hans gives a highly speculative account of his complacency and cluelessness rooted in the culture and geography of Holland—a "providential country"—when he was growing up (89). A culturally homogeneous and unified national community—before present-day "problems with and for alien elements"—produced a condition of "national transparency" in which mysteries were slight. Holland's welfare state, moreover, meant that an individual's life had been "thoughtfully conceived to benefit him from the day he was born to the day he died and hardly required explanation" (89-90). Hans speculates that the security and transparency of life in the culturally homogeneous Dutch welfare state, coupled with the population density of this "see-through little country," caused him to treasure mystery as a form of space, and in this way he came to "step around in a murk of my own making [...] and in due course to rely on Rachel as a human flashlight" (90).

Hans's account of his naivete and complacency is transparently ideological. It accords in substantial ways with anthropologist Gloria Wekker's ethnography of white Dutch identity in her book *White Innocence* (2016). Wekker's critical analysis of the

thoroughgoing self-deception of contemporary white Dutch culture—particularly in its self-understanding of being both color-blind and ethically exemplary—is especially illuminating with respect to the ethical preoccupation of O’Neill’s novel, which I discuss below.

Whether or not we detect authorial irony here in Hans’s self-presentation, the overtly ideological character of this passage renders Hans’s apprehensiveness of surfaces—and the nether spaces beneath or behind them, about which he’d rather remain ignorant—especially symptomatic. Hans’s apprehensiveness of what surfaces conceal should be regarded as symptomatizing a repressed recognition of his connection not only to the historical violence of Dutch colonialism but also to the violence attending the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq and his implication in the American racial hierarchy. Hans’s anxiety and apprehensiveness ultimately has to do with the way his self-understanding as an innocent man—and a “Hollander of conscience,” as he once puts it—has been unsettled, both by Rachel’s critical gaze and the way his association with working class immigrants of color have made him newly conscious of his manifold privilege.

The theme of the deceptiveness of surfaces is explicitly articulated by the Sri Lankan pathologist named Dr. Seem at a cricket gala Hans attends. Dr. Seem tells Hans that he is “trained to see things as they are” and to “understand the biological realities.” When Hans, wondering if he is “possibly the only person contained by the apparent world who was unable to see through it,” asks what exactly the biological reality is, Dr. Seem replies: “Deception dictated by nature” (138). Hans’s narrative is, finally, an account of how he was taken in by Chuck’s surface—both the surface of his self-presentation and the surface of his cricket field with its promise of post-racial conviviality—and thereby became unwittingly complicit in Chuck’s illicit activities.

Throughout the narrative, Hans is preoccupied with doing justice to Chuck. His narrative, in the first place, is an act of witness and one of his persistent concerns throughout the narrative is his responsibility to Chuck, whose singular personality is utterly obscured by the sensational article that runs in the newspaper about the discovery of his corpse. Hans describes the memory of Chuck as being especially “weighty,” and then wonders to himself: “But what is the meaning of this weight? What am I supposed to do with it?” (132)

The form of the question resonates with a remark he makes earlier in the narrative when Chuck takes him to the old Dutch cemetery in Flatbush and encourages him to take pride in his ethnic ties to the Dutch colonial settlers: “I had no idea what to feel or what to think,” Hans says, “no idea, in short, of what I might do to discharge the obligation of remembrance that fixed itself to one in this anomalous place, which offered so little shade from the incomprehensible rays of the past” (154). From the ethical perspective, the real question is not what he owes to the memory of his “people” but rather to the memory of his people’s “others.” The question of historical injustice and responsibility is implicitly raised by the novel despite Hans’s inability to formulate the question himself or for any of the postcolonial immigrants to force the issue with him.

The meditation on responsibility and justice running throughout Hans’s narrative—a meditation ostensibly about his responsibility to the “weighty” memory of his friend Chuck—represents an anxiety about his own innocence, in light of this repressed awareness of his implication in historical and contemporary violence, and simultaneously marks a displacement from the domains of history and society where justice is properly a

political—as an opposed to an ethical—question. Such a reading becomes plausible when we examine the course his friendship with Chuck takes after Hans becomes clued in to Chuck’s violence.

Though Hans comes to suspend his disbelief in Chuck’s entrepreneurial persona and dream of building a cricket arena, one day when Chuck suggests that the New York Cricket Club could “start a whole new chapter in in U.S. history” Hans calls him out on his grandiosity, unintentionally humiliating him, which he immediately regrets (211). That Chuck then seeks “retribution”—at least as Hans subsequently comes to see it—suggests that there may have been an implicit racial dimension to Chuck’s feeling of humiliation over and above the issue of wounded male pride.

O’Neill very carefully choreographs the scene that follows Chuck’s humiliation. Hans, who has been driving Chuck around on errands around Brooklyn ostensibly to get experience for his upcoming driver exam, drives them to a warehouse in Williamsburg. As is his custom, Hans waits in the car while Chuck goes inside to take care of his business. But when Hans sees Abelsky—Chuck’s Moldovan business partner whom he met earlier at the Russian *banya*—walk by with a baseball bat, Hans calls Chuck on the phone to find out what’s going on and Chuck invites him to come inside.

Hans does not actually witness Chuck and Abelsky’s violence in the warehouse in Williamsburg, but he is able to reconstruct the act of violence from the evidentiary traces: “Now the meaning of what I’d seen—Chuck and Abelsky had terrorized some unfortunate, smashed up his office, shoved his face in the dirt of a flowerpot, threatened him with worse for all I knew—arrived as a pure nauseant” (215). This is precisely what he is incapable of doing with the historical traces of colonial violence. The degree of personal responsibility he bears for this is subject to debate.

That Hans’s meditation on the ethics of remembrance conceals a deeper anxiety about historical crimes and their legacy in the present can be seen when Hans next sees Chuck. A few months without communication have passed between them when Chuck, having noted down the date, appears at Hans’s driving exam in Peekskill and asks Hans for a ride back to the city. In the car ride back, Hans demands an apology and an explanation from him, but Chuck ignores Hans’s demand and launches into a story from his childhood about being chased by angry cutlass-wielding men through a snake-infested forest in Trinidad after stumbling across their illegal marijuana plantation. Chuck evokes for Hans the feeling he had that day: “What I think about now, when I look back, Hans, is how, when you’re running for your life, you have this strong sense of luck. You don’t feel lucky, that’s not what I mean. What I mean is, you feel luck, good and bad, everywhere. The air is luck. Do you understand what I’m saying? I tell you, it’s a horrible feeling” (246).

Hans does not understand. His relationship to luck—or, in financial terms, risk—is of a completely different character. But O’Neill evidently does understand, or at least is capable of imagining it. Hans understands Chuck to be trying to justify his violence in terms of the disadvantages of his upbringing, and behind that the historical injustice of colonialism, which poses an implicit challenge to the legitimacy of the existing order of things. “I wasn’t interested in drawing a line from his childhood to the sense of authorization that permitted him, as an American, to do what I’d seen him do,” Hans explains. “He was expecting *me* to make the moral adjustment—and here was an adjustment I really couldn’t make” (248).



O'Neill has written some meaningful contradictions into the novel at this point, underscoring the impossibility of identifying the authorial perspective with the narrator's perspective as many critics have done, without thereby making it possible to consistently distinguish the two. Hans, after all, has drawn the line from his own past to the present, explaining his complacency with surfaces and willful cluelessness in terms of growing up in a densely populated country with the security provided by a social welfare system. He has also unthinkingly and unhesitatingly made moral adjustments for his colleagues in the financial industry, who are seen telling or laughing at racist and sexist jokes, but whom Hans nevertheless continues to respect.

Hans's initial preoccupation with doing justice to the memory of Chuck ironically culminates with him judging Chuck—though, as evidence of his genuine affection for the other man, he does so generously: "I see no good reason why his best self-manifestations should not be the basis of one's final judgment. We all disappoint, eventually" (249). Hans's generosity arguably represents liberal morality at its best, while at the same time underscoring its limitations, as it does nothing to address the social injustices he bears witness to—whether recognizing them himself or not—throughout his narrative. In the end, Hans learns from an NYPD detective that for lack of witnesses the investigation is going to be dropped. There will be no justice for the murder of Chuck Ramkissoon, a fact which distresses Hans. O'Neill shows the inadequacy of Hans's ethical individualism, though without doing anything ultimately to decenter it.

By refusing to make the moral adjustment he understands Chuck to be seeking from him, Hans maintains his own moral integrity and self-understanding as a "Hollander of conscience" and assuages the anxiety concerning his own innocence, just as Wekker details in *White Innocence*. Appalled by Chuck's interpersonal violence, Hans never fully confronts that which has all along beset his narrative with anxiety and apprehensiveness, and which Chuck must have understood (at least in part) but never called him on—namely, that his social privilege is power, its foundation is historical violence and dispossession, and it is reproduced in the present through his participation in occluded and systemic violence, for which the netherland-ish image of the "foul mechanical dark"—a metaphor Hans gives for American bureaucracy—may be seen to be a precise description. By not confronting what is beneath the surface—that is, his implication in imperial violence, past and present, as well as in structures of racial and economic oppression—Hans retains his innocence, in the sense of willful ignorance, which effectively constitutes his guilt.

One of the major dramas in Hans's narrative concerns adjusting his batting style to the field conditions of American cricket, which he is reluctant to do for fear of the "spiritual upheaval" it would induce, though, at Chuck's encouragement, he ultimately does, "without injury to my sense of self" (49, 176). For Hans to recognize his connection to colonial violence, his complicity in contemporary state violence, and his implication in structural racism would create a true spiritual upheaval. But this drama of self-discovery is not scripted for him. In the end, he reconciles with Rachel and returns home to the white bourgeois world from which he was temporarily exiled.

### ***Netherland's* Fraught Politics**

In one of her narrative intrusions, Rachel asks Hans about Chuck's politics. Hans replies that he and Chuck didn't talk about politics, but then reflects admiringly on Chuck's

ambitious hustling: “While the country floundered in Iraq, Chuck was running. That was political enough for me, a man having trouble putting one foot in front of the other” (163). Rachel’s question about Chuck’s politics is totally predictable given her recent politicization against the Iraq War. And given the politically-laden content of the novel and its apolitical narrator (self-avowed “political-ethical idiot”), it was inevitable that the same question would be asked of the novel.

Critical judgments about the novel’s politics have varied widely. Noting the “enormous gulfs of privilege, race, class” that separate Hans and Chuck, James Wood argues that O’Neill “goes out of his way (almost too didactically, I would complain) to push the novel’s actual politics of immigration and homelessness up against Hans’s unquestioned banker’s right to come and go as he pleases” (107, 111).

If the novel is too overtly political and didactic in Wood’s judgment, it is insufficiently political—or politically wrong-headed—in the judgment of several other critics. For example, in analyzing the postcolonial encounter O’Neill stages, Elizabeth Anker argues that the novel “rehearses a predictably colonialist ‘moral redemption of the white man’ narrative, in which the real terms of postcolonial dispossession are occluded while yet providing a vital backdrop for Hans’s edification” (469). The fraught character of the novel’s politics ultimately results, in my view, from the ambivalent portrayal of all the major characters and the ironic perspective on all the political and ethical discourses that appear in the text.

Many critics have approached the question of the novel’s politics through its position with respect to the myths of American exceptionalism. As Katherine Snyder observes, Chuck is an “emblem” of America, such that Hans’s ambivalence towards Chuck signifies an ambivalence toward America. Hans is attracted by American romanticism—the sense of limitless possibility for self-reinvention—which is contrasted positively against Hans’s own (Old World) fatalism. But the American dream of new beginnings is also connected to violence—both the nation’s foundational violence and the violence it justifies in pursuit of an ideal. This, it seems to me, is the explanation—and form of critique—of the Iraq War expressed symbolically in the novel, counterposed, in a non-polemical way, to the liberal consensus view of the war as an act of imperial aggression.

The problem with the antiwar position, the novel suggests, is its tendency to diminish the tragedy of 9/11 in the name of justice for Iraqis. Late in the narrative, Hans and Rachel go to a dinner party in London, at which one of Rachel’s old friends Matt opines that 9/11 was “not such a big deal [...] when you think of everything that’s happened since” (181). What follows is Hans’s most political moment in the narrative. Hans comments Matt’s dismissive remark about 9/11 in the following way:

He is referring to the numbers of Iraqi dead, and as a matter of arithmetic I understand the argument, indeed must admit it. He refers also to the dark amazement with which he and, if my impression is correct, most of the rest of the world have followed the various doings of this American administration, and on this score I again have not the slightest urge to contradict him. I speak up nonetheless. ‘I think it was a big deal,’ I say, interrupting whatever somebody was saying. (181-2)

When Matt and another man at the party begin whispering to one another about Hans—and, it is implied, what a reactionary he is for asserting the importance of 9/11—Hans abruptly gets up to leave, and Rachel follows him, telling her friend Matt to “piss off.” It is arguably Hans’s most decisive action in the novel, and it additionally signifies the reclaiming of his manhood.

Ultimately, the fraught character of the novel’s politics, I wish to suggest, may best be appreciated through an exercise in extra-textual speculation. Hans presents both himself and Chuck as being apolitical, but it is certain that Hans—neoliberal cosmopolitan that he is—would have staunchly opposed Brexit, while it seems likely, if perhaps less certain, that Chuck, as an ultra-patriotic new American, would have enthusiastically supported Donald Trump.

### **Debating the “Post-American”**

If the politics of *Netherland* are deemed to be fraught on account of its multiple ambivalences, the novel’s relationship to the category of American literature may be seen to be equally fraught. *Netherland* has been interpreted as a 9/11 novel—and the 9/11 novel is typically regarded as a sub-genre of national literature—but it has also been read as taking a transnational perspective on 9/11 and its aftermath, and as notably “deterritorializing” American culture through its focus on immigrant cricket as played on the margins of mainstream American society.

The other major reason for considering *Netherland* a work of American fiction has to do with its intertextual relationship to *The Great Gatsby*, which was noted in the earliest reviews of the novel, but has most been fully analyzed by Katherine Snyder. Snyder argues that *The Great Gatsby* is “emblematic of a national literary tradition that can be characterized as melancholic or even post-traumatic”—in view of America’s foundational violence and, more recently, the political violence of terrorism—and that O’Neill’s novel, by virtue of its style and through its intertextual relationship to Fitzgerald’s novel, likewise belongs to this tradition (464-5).

In elaborating her argument, Snyder discusses a series of post-publication interviews O’Neill gave in which he acknowledges his debt to Fitzgerald, but then suggests that his novel might best be seen as a “farewell” to *Gatsby* and the America—unique land of opportunity—upon which Fitzgerald’s novel was premised. Citing economic globalization as having inaugurated a new epoch in world history, O’Neill goes on to describe *Netherland* as a “post-American novel,” suggesting his assent to the thesis of Fareed Zakaria’s contemporaneously published book.

There is a moment late in the novel that symbolically expresses this view. After learning about Chuck’s death, Hans meets the Indian mogul Faruk Patel—who has made a fortune as a New Age guru in California—and who Chuck had attempted to persuade to invest in his cricket project. When asked by Hans if he thinks Chuck’s plan to turn cricket into a mainstream American sport, have worked, Patel says no: “There is a limit to what Americans understand. The limit is cricket” (251). In a remark that seems to express clearly O’Neill’s view of the post-American moment brought about through economic globalization, Patel adds: “My idea was different. My idea was, you don’t need America. Why would you? You have the TV, Internet, markets in India, in England. These days that’s plenty. America? Not relevant” (Ibid.).

Snyder contests O'Neill's claims about the "post-Americanness of *Netherland's* historical moment," writing that "we can see how assumptions about American exceptionalism, assumptions that incoherently combine a national sense of moral authority with a sense of moral exemption from what the U.S. demands of other nations, persists in the perceptions and actions of many of those who would defend America as a 'homeland'" (485). But this slightly misses the point (though without rendering her interpretation of O'Neill's novel any less insightful). O'Neill is making a judgment about America from a cosmopolitan (and largely economic) perspective, not arguing that the ideology of exceptionalism won't continue to inform American political discourse and foreign policy. The novel is post-American inasmuch as it is a historical novel of the post-9/11 present understood as a significant historical conjuncture.

Though I also invoke Zakaria's catchphrase—and have appropriated it in an unfaithful way to use as a key term for this dissertation—when I describe *Netherland* as a post-American novel, I mean something different than what O'Neill means. O'Neill's novel is post-American inasmuch as it expresses—both literally and symbolically, both critically and sympathetically—the crisis of American hegemony as produced not by the dynamism of global capitalism but by the invasion and occupation of Iraq, when the world reflected back to America an image in which it could not recognize itself but for which it was—and is—ultimately responsible.

## Chapter Three

### **Immigrant Discontent and Political Dissent: the Politics of Revolt in Aleksandar Hemon's *The Lazarus Project***

In terms of the crisis of American hegemony, Aleksandar Hemon's *The Lazarus Project* (2008) has none of the ambivalence of Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*. Like Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hemon's novel launches a direct political critique of post-9/11 America. Though it is steeped in the imperial histories of Central and Eastern Europe, Hemon's novel—unlike those of Hamid and O'Neill—does not approach post-9/11 America through the prism of empire. Hemon's political consciousness is primarily shaped by the ethnic violence of the Bosnian War in the 1990s.

Born in Sarajevo, Hemon came to the United States as part of a short-term exchange program in 1992, but when the war began shortly thereafter he applied for political asylum and remained in the U.S. He began writing in English a few years later, claiming to have learned the language by reading Nabokov—a writer to whom he is often compared. He published a book of short stories entitled *The Question of Bruno* in 2000, followed by the novel *Nowhere Man: the Pronek Fantasies* in 2002. Following *The Lazarus Project*, he published another collection of short stories entitled *Love and Obstacles* (2009), a book of autobiographical essays entitled *The Book of My Lives* (2013), and a third novel entitled *The Making of Zombie Wars* (2015).

*The Lazarus Project* centers on an act of historical recovery and revisionism. Hemon's novel is narrated by Vladimir Brik, a Bosnian immigrant and naturalized American citizen who settled in Chicago in 1992 at the beginning of the Bosnian War and remained there, marrying an American woman named Mary. Brik writes a column for a weekly newspaper on the contemporary immigrant experience, but harbors greater writerly ambitions. In the aftermath of 9/11, Brik sets out to tell the story of another immigrant from Chicago's past, the historical Lazarus Averbuch, a 19-year-old Eastern European Jewish immigrant who survived the 1903 Kishinev pogrom in the Russian Empire and emigrated to America only to be killed by Chicago's chief of police in 1908 on the suspicion of being an anarchist assassin.

The novel is composed of two counterpointed narratives: a historical narrative centered on Lazarus Averbuch and a contemporary narrative centered on Vladimir Brik and his project to write a book about Lazarus. The two narratives develop over alternating chapters, though various story elements cross over the border between them. The historical narrative begins with the murder of Averbuch, then describes the police investigation and the drama surrounding the internment of his body, culminating with a description of the 1903 Kishinev pogrom from which he escaped and which brought him to America in the first place. The contemporary narrative tells the story of Brik's research trip to Eastern Europe with his Bosnian photographer friend Rora during which he becomes increasingly estranged from his life in America. This storyline culminates with their return to Sarajevo where Rora is murdered and Brik decides to remain to write his book on Lazarus—the very book, it is implied, that we are holding in our hands and have just finished reading.

The novel includes 23 black and white photographs, which has prompted a number of critics to draw the comparison to W.G. Sebald's work. Serving as a frontispiece, the first photograph shows a man's tying his tie in front of a mirror, looking into the camera—looking at the viewer—through the mirror's reflection, announcing the theme of self-reflexivity. The other 22 photographs are placed at the head of each chapter. A note on the novel's title page indicates that the photographs come from two sources: contemporary photographs by Velibor Božović (a friend of Hemon) and archival photographs from the Chicago Historical Society. Božović's images resemble the archival ones in their shadows, washed-out grays, and blurriness; and all the photographs are the same size, positioned vertically or horizontally in the center of a black matte background, without captions.

With its historical plotline and formal self-reflexivity, *The Lazarus Project* may be seen as an example of what Linda Hutcheon, back in the 1980s, termed "historiographic metafiction." Literary works that fit in Hutcheon's category, such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, display a "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs," which becomes the ground for "rethinking and reworking the forms and contents of the past" (5). Historiographic metafiction, writes Michael Butter, "implies that the past remains ultimately inaccessible, that historical narration is necessarily an act of imagination, and that historiography, therefore, is not a neutral account of what happened but rather a biased story determined by the needs and convictions of those who tell it" (626).

Photography plays an essential role in Hemon's historiographic metafictional project for, as Danuta Fjellstad observes, photographs are generally regarded as being "bearers of the imprint of the real" and as such are "inevitably in friction with the fictional" (193). Photographs in a fictional narrative, Fjellstad argues, trouble the border between fiction and non-fiction: "When the documentary and the fictional clash and the line of demarcation between fiction and non-fiction is breached, ambiguity and confusion flare up" (197). Noting Hemon's ambiguous mode of incorporating photography into the narrative, Wendy Ward argues that the photographs generate indeterminacy, serving as a "reminder that photographic images are always open to interpretation and by no means elicit authentication or truth, as so commonly perceived in everyday life" (195). In addition to the metafictional work photography does in the novel, Sonia Weiner interprets the photographs as a formal expression of the fracture and duality of migrant consciousness and a central component of what she terms Hemon's "aesthetics of the migratory" (215).

While *The Lazarus Project* is an example of historiographic metafiction, it is also a novel that is explicitly engaged with its post-9/11 historical moment, and a few critics have centered their interpretations on the relationship between text and context. Charles Lewis, for example, approaches *The Lazarus Project* as a post-9/11 historical novel that raises the question of fiction and referentiality. Lewis argues that the "co-incidence between history and fiction" in post-9/11 novels has inaugurated a new reading experience that "leaves us both unsettled and inured" (39). Referencing the Homeland Security Department's terrorist threat advisory system, Lewis refers to this as a "'code-orange' reading experience" that invokes in the reader a "heightened state of alert" (Ibid).

Georgiana Banita regards *The Lazarus Project* as belonging to a series of novels that "attempt to locate the post-9/11 experience in space and time" by re-contextualizing the terrorist attacks in terms of other histories of violence (206). She argues that the Bosnian War is particularly important in this respect on account of three factors: the stylistic

resemblance of media representations of the Bosnian War and 9/11; the way the international response to Bosnia facilitates a critical understanding of the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; and the debate on the “ethics of media witnessing” initiated by the Bosnian conflict and carrying through to 9/11 and its aftermath (206). For Banita, moreover, Hemon’s inscription of 9/11 in a broader historical context is central to the novel’s ethical mediation on the “infernal recurrence of evil across histories and memories lived and imagined” (210).

It seems to me that the analysis of the text’s relationship to its context must begin with the forms of political protest and dissent that are expressed in the novel and that shape its form. Marking its post-9/11 historical moment, though shifting emphasis from the terrorist attacks to the “War on Terror,” *The Lazarus Project* assails American patriotism and the national myths on which it resides. Through recovering an American history of xenophobia and anti-Semitism, Hemon’s novel subverts the myths of American hospitality and exceptionalism, while the Bosnian immigrant narrator’s progressive estrangement from America and ultimate return to Sarajevo inverts the typical narrative trajectory of immigrant assimilation. Finally, Hemon’s explosion of national myths occurs in the context of a metafictional reflection on storytelling and fictionality that serves to critique American complacency, underscoring the appropriate conditions for skepticism and the suspension of disbelief, respectively.

### **A Usable Past: Political Anger, Ethical Ambivalence**

*The Lazarus Project* begins with the murder of Lazarus Averbuch by Chicago Chief of Police George Shippy. A photograph of a brownstone placed at the head of the chapter, with the note “Shippy Residence, 31 Lincoln Place” handwritten across the top of it, makes an implicit claim at the outset of the historical character of the following narrative. But this claim is upset in the opening lines of the novel in which the as-yet unidentified first-person narrator locates the events he is about to narrate in time and space but then immediately foregrounds the epistemological problems of knowing the past: “The time and place are the only things I am certain of: March 2, 1908, Chicago. Beyond that is the haze of history and pain, and now I plunge” (1).

The narrative methods in the opening chapter, moreover, are explicitly novelistic. The focalization of the narrative shifts among characters, presenting how Averbuch is seen from outside by fearful and hostile others, and then enters his consciousness to give access to his thoughts and feelings. “Home is where somebody notices when you are no longer there,” Lazarus muses, a remark that becomes something of a refrain in the narrative, expressing his (author’s) feeling of alienation in America (3). Lazarus also recalls something his friend Isador says, which is likewise repeated throughout the novel: “I am just like everybody else [...] because there is nobody like me in the whole world” (5). This witty and ironic affirmation of the ordinary singularity of the individual is precisely what is denied to Lazarus who can only be seen as a degenerate and dangerous type.

Hemon presents Averbuch’s murder from the point of view of Shippy, though he undermines the police chief’s subsequent claim about Lazarus drawing a gun. Shippy’s perspective is then supported by that of William P. Miller, a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, whose voice is presented in italics, setting it apart, as though it were being quoted

from a newspaper in the archive: “*There was a look about that slim, swarthy young man—clearly a Sicilian or a Jew—that could send a shiver of distrust into any honest man’s heart*” (7). As the historical narrative develops, events are increasingly focalized through the perspective of Lazarus’s sister, Olga—presenting her grief, memory, anger, and resistance—but the choice to narrate much of the early narrative from the perspective of the police and the complicitous media, emphasizing their anti-Semitism and class prejudice, keeps the dynamics of racial othering and dehumanization front and center.

In the counterpointed contemporary narrative about the production of the historical narrative, the narrator Vladimir Brik makes explicit his animus toward America. Alluding to the 2001 USA PATRIOT Act, Brik describes himself as a “reasonably loyal citizen of two countries,” but his narrative is fundamentally animated by the spirit of dissent. “In America,” Brik declares, “I waste my vote, pay taxes grudgingly, share my life with a native wife, and try hard not to wish painful death to the idiot president” (Ibid). Meanwhile, in another jab at post-9/11 American patriotism, Brik says that one time a year, on Bosnian Independence Day, he is a Bosnian patriot: “Just like everybody else, I enjoy the unearned nobility of belonging to one nation and not another; I like deciding who can join us, who is out, and who is to be welcome when visiting” (13).

Brik makes clear, moreover, the political motivation behind his resurrection of Lazarus Averbuch:

America was obsessed with anarchism. Politicians ranted against Emma Goldman, the anarchist leader, called her the Red Queen, the most dangerous woman in America, blamed her for the assassinations of European kings; patriotic preachers raved against the sinful perils of unbridled immigration, against the attacks on American freedom and Christianity. Editorials bemoaned the weak laws that allowed the foreign anarchist pestilence to breed parasitically on the American body politic. The war against anarchism was much like the current war on terror—funny how old habits never die. (42)

Telling Lazarus’s story is a way of taking symbolic revenge on the “idiot president” and expressing his dissent from the “War on Terror” by playing upon what he once refers to as the “sumptuous palette of American fears” and undermining the myths that comprise American self-understanding (47). Hemon reimagines the death and life of Lazarus Averbuch in order to critique Islamophobic othering after 9/11, subverting the core American myth of hospitality towards immigrants, which was given its canonical formulation by another Lazarus—Emma—in her poem “The New Colossus.”

Though obviously committed to anti-racism and justice, Hemon’s appropriation of Averbuch’s story raises some important ethical questions, most pressingly by the inclusion of two post-mortem photographs of Averbuch’s body being exhibited by Captain Evans. The first one presents the two figures from the front and has writing on it identifying each of them. Lazarus is slouched in a chair; Evans stands behind him, holding his head upright, one hand beneath his chin, the other on the crown. Lazarus, whose eyes are closed, has a slightly furrowed brow. He is wearing an ill-fitting suit, with apparently no shirt underneath the jacket, and his hands are crossed in his lap. Evans, in a bowler hat and bowtie, stares sternly and self-assuredly at the camera.



As with all the photographs in the novel, the relation between the image and text is a matter of interpretation. Fjellstad emphasizes that “photographs never just mirror, double, or parallel what is said in the text. Rather, the photographic image and the text enter a complex process of interdependent storytelling” (197). As Weiner observes, the photograph by itself “plainly grants the perspective of the perpetrator, framing Lazarus as a dangerous anarchist. The triumphant pose of the dignified police officer, holding the victim like his trophy for the world to see, was meant to humiliate, degrade, and violate the privacy of Lazarus, and to demonize him in the eyes of the viewers” (224). However, the significance of the image is transformed by its position in the narrative.

In the ensuing chapter Hemon provides the post-mortem photograph of Lazarus with a narrative context that opens it up to resignification. Lazarus’s sister Olga has just been questioned by the police and is taken to see her brother who she does not yet know is dead. The news has spread through the community and hundreds of people have already come to see the “anarchist foreigner” for themselves, foregrounding the theme of voyeurism. Olga enters the room and sees Captain Evans holding up her brother’s head, and only then realizes he is dead.

By imagining this context for the photograph, Hemon positions the reader/viewer with Olga, which has major implications for the significance of the photograph. Inasmuch as the original image granted the perspective of the police, it presented the corpse of a dangerous Jewish anarchist. Hemon’s reframing of the image, however, underscores the inhumanity of the police captain. Reframing the image in this way, Weiner writes, “reexamines the public sentiment that led not only to the killing of Lazarus, but also to the endorsement of the killing by the public at large” (224). In both the historical and contemporary narratives, Hemon includes the American public—and the media—in his indictment of state violence.

The second image of Averbuch and Evans heads a later chapter in the book. It is a photograph of the same scene, but from the side, with Averbuch in profile. This photograph is taken from a slightly greater distance, so we are able to see Averbuch’s unshod feet, with holes in his socks. Evans has his hand on the crown of Averbuch’s head, holding it upright. He is looking at the camera but his face is blurry, implying that he was in the process of turning his head when the photograph was taken. Two or three indistinct figures can be made out in the background. This image stands at the beginning of a chapter in which Hemon/Brik narrates Kishinev pogrom, focalized through Olga’s perspective, but with Lazarus as a primary witness to the violence. Hemon’s braiding of photograph and text in this case aligns Captain Evans with the Ukrainian Christians attacking the Jewish community in Kishinev—indeed, the *politsyant* are shown to be collaborating with the *pogromchiks* in the narrative. That a pogrom could happen in America, as one Jewish community leader in the narrative suggests, is one of the points Hemon is trying to make: “It starts with editorials and ends in massacres” (145).

Though the politics of Hemon’s use of these photographs is clear, the ethics behind the decision to do so is fraught. As Weiner notes, the use of such images “threatens to revive or prolong the suffering and humiliation of the victim and of his community” (225). Rather than generating empathy or moral indignation, such images may provide viewers with a “voyeuristic pleasure, providing the thrill of glimpsing into the other’s disgrace and pain” (Ibid).

In her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag interrogates the politics and ethics of displaying and looking at images of atrocity and trauma. Sontag's book-length essay was occasioned by the U.S. invasion of Iraq and it is focused on the photography of war. Sontag, who takes the Bosnian War as one of her chief examples, argues that: "Photographs of atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen" (13). Images of suffering, though intended to provoke action, may just as well lead to apathy. Sontag's rhetorical analysis of such images encourages us to reflect on Hemon's appropriation—and arguably exploitation—of the images of Lazarus Averbuch's corpse.

The post-mortem photographs of Lazarus Averbuch are not the only ethically questionable aspect of the novel. Hemon's choice to focalize a substantial part of the historical narrative through the perspective of the police and media involves parodying—over the course of several chapters—the rhetoric of scientific racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism that was circulating during the period, as he painstakingly anatomizes the process of othering, insisting on the American setting of this ethnic persecution. At the same time, Hemon represents violence and abjection in a markedly graphic manner throughout the narrative. Both of these aspects of the mode of representation, though clearly presented within a critical framework, raise the same fraught ethical questions as do the inclusion of the photographs of Averbuch corpse.

Hemon is aware of the ethical problems of appropriating of Lazarus's tragic story. The trope of resurrection positions him as a Christ figure, and Brik is unceasing in his condemnation of "Mr. Christ's cult." At various moments in the narrative Brik challenges Christ's motives in resurrecting Lazarus, suggesting that he did it for self-aggrandizement. Moreover, in narrating the aftermath of Averbuch's murder by Chief Shippy, Hemon imagines that the corpse was exhumed by grave robbers and sold for medical science.

Indeed, what arguably does the most to render the narrative ethically ambivalent is the fact that Brik himself has mixed motives. Wendy Ward observes that Brik uses Averbuch's story to "work through his [own] present conflicts, anger, and sadness" (185). But Brik is also motivated by ambition—and some of his conflicts, anger, and sadness are directly traceable to his unfulfilled personal ambition to become a writer. Brik's resurrection of Lazarus Averbuch seems to be equally motivated by political anger and personal ambition, with the ethical questions of appropriating the story held in suspense. In order to write Lazarus's story and fulfill his ambition, it ultimately proves necessary for Brik to leave America and, by way of Eastern Europe, return to Sarajevo.

## **Exiting America**

Like the historical narrative, the Eastern European travel narrative continues the novel's metafictional game of blurring boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. Just as with the archival photographs used in the chapters about Lazarus, the photographs taken by Velibor Božović—implied to be a selection from those that Brik's friend Rora is constantly taking on their trip—at once "authenticate" the travel narrative and also highlight, on account of their frequently vague subjects and ambiguous relationship to the text, its constructed character. The travel narrative also continues the novel's political critique, which is routed through Brik's progressive estrangement from his wife Mary.

Mary is a Midwesterner from a Catholic family with Irish roots. She is a neurosurgeon and supports Brik financially while he pursues his ambition to become a writer. Mary is practical, well-adjusted, kind, sincere, and trusting—all of which are in stark contrast to Brik's relentless irony, cynicism, anger, and depression. Despite the obvious resonance of her name, Mary is not simply an allegorical figure for America—Hemon makes some effort to individuate her character—though she certainly represents a national type—as does her father George, whom Brik detests—giving her a functional role in the novel's political critique. "A full-blooded American, she was," Brik remarks:

She took me to baseball games and held her hand on her heart to sing the anthem, while I stood next to her, humming along. She used the national *we* when talking about the U.S. of A. 'We should have never gone into Iraq,' she would say. 'We are a nation of immigrants.' [...] She had the bright, open face that reminded me of the vast midwestern welkin. She was routinely kind to other people, assumed they had good intentions; she smiled at strangers; it mattered to her what they thought and felt. (109)

Mary's belief in good intentions, which he attributes to her Christian upbringing and American idealism, is a particular point of irritation to Brik:

She just could not comprehend evil, the way I could not comprehend the way the washing machine worked or the reason the universe expanded into infinity. For her, the prime mover of every action was a good intention, and evil occurred only if the good intention was inadvertently betrayed or forgotten. Humans could not be essentially evil, because they were always infused by God's infinite goodness and love [...] It was also an American thing—America was nothing if not good intentions. (188)

Mary's idealistic view of human nature becomes morally culpable after the emergence in 2004 of the photographs of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib in Iraq. The release of the photographs—none of which are reproduced in Hemon's book, but which resonate with the post-mortem images of Lazarus Averbuch, reinforcing the historical parallel Hemon sets up in the novel—occasions an argument between him and Mary:

All the random insults and unsupportable accusations aside, the gist of [the argument] was that what she saw was essentially decent American kids acting upon a misguided belief that they were protecting freedom, their good intentions going astray. What I saw was young Americans expressing their unlimited joy of the unlimited power over someone else's life and death. They loved being alive and righteous by virtue of having good American intentions... (188)

Brik's recollection of this argument while traveling in Eastern Europe marks a key moment in his growing estrangement from his wife. The phrase "good intentions," always invoked sarcastically by Brik, reappears several times in the novel, underscoring the importance of this scene for the meaning of the work as a whole. It also clarifies the aim of the novel's

political critique, which is targeted not just at the violence of those who occupy positions of power, but also at the public complacency that justifies and forgives it, and is therefore complicit in its injuries.

Mary's liberal American Christian worldview differs from the Manichaean worldview expressed in the binaries of the official rhetoric of the "War on Terror." Her assumption of the inherent goodness of human nature is far from demonizing the other as an "evildoer." Nevertheless, it is Mary's liberal American Christian metaphysics that the travel narrative, by conjuring a "parallel universe," negates through inversion.

It is Rora who originally suggests to Brik that he should travel to Eastern Europe to find out what he can about Lazarus's life before coming to America, observing that "[t]here is always a before and an after" (46). The trip also represents a return to Brik's ancestral homeland, for his Christian Orthodox grandparents emigrated from Ukraine to Bosnia in 1908 just after it was annexed, from the Ottomans, by the Austro-Hungarian empire. Though more than once Brik expresses guilt about not having been in Bosnia during the war, there is no suggestion in the text that any ancestral guilt might be conditioning Brik's interest in the Kishinev pogrom from which Lazarus Averbuch was a survivor.

Watching television in the hotel room in Lviv, a city near his grandfather's village where they make their first stop, Brik experiences the uncanny sensation of everything being both "familiar and incomprehensible," causing him to conjure the "frightening possibility of a parallel universe," which he goes on to describe as an "ontological warp" (68). The phrase immediately stands for the distance he feels from his American life. Thereafter, the "parallel universe" becomes an important trope in the narrative, where Eastern Europe is represented as a parallel universe to the (culpably) naïve moral universe of Mary's form of liberal American Christianity. "What I like about America," Brik ironically remarks, "is that there is no space left for useless metaphysical questions. There are no parallel universes there. Everything is what it is, it's easy to see and understand everything" (205).

The parallel universe that counters and negates Mary's Christian American one is conjured through Rora's stories from the Bosnian War and Brik's representation of Eastern Europe. The main story Rora tells Brik is an episodic one centered on a violent thug named Rambo who led a unit in the Bosnian Army during the war, profiting off the siege of Sarajevo and killing many people. Brik meanwhile represents Eastern Europe as an impoverished and depressing place, full of pimps, thugs, and prostitutes, and characterized by passivity and corruption. Dana Mihăilescu's claim that Hemon's novel "sets out to reveal the inherited clichés of the Western gaze on Eastern Europe and immigrants coming from there" holds only with respect to the rehumanization of Averbuch in the historical narrative, but definitely not with respect to the representation of Eastern Europe in the contemporary travel narrative (40).

Rora's war stories, along with the criminality on view in Eastern Europe, suggest to Brik the "plain possibility of the world governed by the depraved triumvirate of power, survival instinct, and greed"—and the "utopian iniquity" of it progressively appeals to him as he sinks deeper and deeper into a mood of alienation and despair (132). "That would be the true land of the free," he muses. "I could be the sole meaning of my life" (Ibid). The inversion of Mary's culpably naïve moral universe locates selfishness rather than good intentions behind every action, elevating evil into something like a metaphysical principle.

Rora's stories of the Bosnian War do not attempt to provide a nuanced understanding of the conflict. What's more, despite the fury Brik expresses for the Bosnian Serb war criminals Milošević, Mladić, Karadžić—with whom are associated, in his violent nightmares and fantasies of revenge, Bush and Rumsfeld—Rora's Bosnian War stories are not focused on the genocide of Bosnian Muslims, but rather are focused on the Bosnian Muslim warlord Rambo, whose name identifies him with the Hollywood archetype of violent masculinity.

Similarly, Brik's representation of Ukraine and Moldova do not in the least attempt to provide a three-dimensional picture of these countries. The representation of Eastern European poverty, crime, and corruption might thus be seen as participating in a characteristically American inability to imagine the rest of the world in complex terms. It might be argued, moreover, that such representations of the corrupt or incomprehensible places beyond America's borders reinforce American exceptionalism.

Such was the essence of Bruce Robbins's critique of American novels that travel abroad in his essay "The Worlding of the American Novel." Robbins does not discuss *The Lazarus Project* in this essay but he does single out *Absurdistan* (2006) by Russian-American author Gary Shteyngart. Robbins takes Shteyngart's novel as being representative in its portrayal of the world beyond American borders as being absurd and worthy only of satire. Alternatively, American novels that travel abroad, Robbins argues, may choose to represent "foreign history as extreme suffering" (1099). Whether foregrounding absurdity or atrocity, such representations frequently are put in the service of a "coming to America" story that ultimately reinforces American exceptionalism.

The two-dimensional representations of the Bosnian War and of Eastern Europe in *The Lazarus Project* could be subjected to such a critique. Indeed, they may be seen to support the uninformed and condescending view of Mary's father George—another national type, made to represent the specifically American combination of ignorance and arrogance—for whom Bosnia was "a remote, mythical place [...] a remnant of the world before America, a land of obsolescence whose people could arrive at humanity only in the United States, and belatedly" (162). How can such two-dimensional representations of the Bosnian War and Eastern Europe be reconciled with the novel's relentless critique of American exceptionalism?

Hemon's representations of the Bosnian War and Eastern Europe serve to conjure a parallel universe of iniquity and, far from being outside it, America is thoroughly implicated in it. In Rora's war stories, for example, the American war reporter Miller—also the name of the reporter in the historical narrative—is complicit in Rambo's criminality and violence, running errands for him and publishing stories of his heroism in Western newspapers.

Meanwhile, Brik's representation of Eastern Europe includes allusions both to the neoliberal restructuring and Americanization of post-Soviet economies and to the "War on Terror." For example, at the train station in Ukraine, Brik notes that all the poor people have the same kind of cheap checkered tote bags, and remarks that "apparently everyone in Eastern Europe, including *my country*, received one of those bags in compensation for the abolition of social infrastructure" (176). Later, crossing the border from Ukraine into Moldova, Brik worries that he and Rora could be "thrown into a Moldovan dungeon [...] and then taken away, hooded, by our American compatriots" (180). And then, watching a gangster and his bodyguard outside a McDonalds in Moldova, Brik muses that they "must

have all been made in the same factory [...] where they line-assembled independent individuals designed for the challenges of the free market and democracy” (209).

Though mobilizing stereotypes of Eastern European criminality and corruption, the novel punctures the fantasy of American exceptionalism rather than reinforcing it, and it does this most obviously by constellating the Kishinev pogrom, the xenophobic and anti-Semitic violence during the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century anarchist scare, the ethnic violence of the Bosnian War in the 1990s, and the American use of torture in the “War on Terror.” These histories are all unique and obviously can’t be simply equated with another, but at their core they involve processes of othering that reside on the basis of fantasies of difference and superiority—a process of identification, differentiation, and subordination that Hemon sees operative in ethno-nationalism and American exceptionalism alike.

There is, additionally, a subtler set of connections between these historical events, though no sign appears in the text that they were on Hemon’s mind or that he intended his reader to grasp them. At the conclusion of his 1904 State of the Union address to Congress, President Theodore Roosevelt referenced the “massacre of the Jews in Kishenef [sic]” as an example of the kind of “occasional crimes [...] of such peculiar horror” that would merit U.S. condemnation and perhaps more (n.pag.). The main thrust of the speech—which is known as the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine—justifies U.S. intervention and the exercise of “international police power” when other states act in an “uncivilized” way, which in the first place meant not human rights violations but the failure to honor debt obligations. Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin regard Roosevelt’s speech as the key articulation of the “new informal American empire” (12).

American interventions throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century were always presented as efforts to stabilize the countries being invaded, and therefore ultimately serving the welfare of their citizens. But with the Balkan wars of the 1990s—first in Bosnia and later in Kosovo—a new doctrine of “humanitarian war” was developed. By this point, there were many better—that is, more horrific—examples of human rights violations than the Kishinev pogrom of 1903, but the idea of humanitarian war was present, in germinal form, in Roosevelt’s speech to Congress. In the buildup to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the humanitarian argument was subordinated to the argument about weapons of mass destruction, but it was nevertheless part of the attempt to sell the war. And finally, the U.S.-led NATO “humanitarian” bombing of Kosovo in 1999 occurred without approval of the U.N. Security Council, making it an important precedent for the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Hemon’s constellation of the Kishinev pogrom, the Bosnian War, and the “War on Terror,” though focused on processes of othering, open up this broader history of the deployment of American power abroad. The “international police power” Roosevelt claimed for the U.S. was based on the ideology of American exceptionalism, which Hemon vengefully subverts. To adapt a phrase repeated throughout the novel—though never articulated in precisely this form—America is just like every other country, morally speaking, which is to say that its actions are motivated not by good intentions but by generally selfish ones, and that whatever politicians and the media say to the contrary should be met by Americans, as it is by non-Americans, with extreme skepticism.

## **National Fantasies and the Politics of Fiction**

The metafictional form of *The Lazarus Project* keeps the question of fictionality front and center, blurring the line between fiction and historiography on the one hand and between fiction and travel writing on the other hand. With its assumed documentary function, photography plays a central role in this metafictional game, seeming to authenticate narratives that otherwise flaunt their fictional character.

The two alternating narratives of *The Lazarus Project* together tell the story of how Brik researches and reimagines the death and life of Lazarus Averbuch, and the book we are reading is implied to be the very book he writes after returning to Sarajevo. Running parallel to Brik's Lazarus project is another recovery project—namely, Brik's recovery of his Sarajevan storytelling abilities. This story mostly develops between the lines of the contemporary travel narrative, though Brik's retelling of Lazarus's story presupposes it. Moreover, the reflection on storytelling and fictionality plays a crucial part in the novel's political critique.

Rora embodies Sarajevan storytelling in the novel. The travel narrative is full of Rora's stories, anecdotes, and jokes—themselves mini-narratives, generally having an absurdist punchline. When Brik reencounters Rora for the first time in 20 years at the Bosnian Independence celebration in Chicago near the beginning of the novel, he remembers his old friend as having been a compelling storyteller. Rora, who traveled frequently abroad, would come back to Sarajevo and regale Brik and their circle of friends with tales of his adventures, often showing them photographs to substantiate them. Brik remarks that it didn't matter if Rora's stories were true or not, only that they were good.

Later in the narrative, Brik directly contrasts Sarajevan and American storytelling in terms of how stories are shaped by the expectations of the two audiences, and how such expectations are themselves shaped by culture:

Sarajevans told stories ever aware that their listeners' attention might flag, so they exaggerated and embellished and sometimes downright lied to keep it up. You listened, rapt, ready to laugh, indifferent to doubt or plausibility [...] Disbelief was permanently suspended, for nobody expected truth or information, just the pleasure of being in the story and, maybe, passing it off as their own. It was different in America: the incessant perpetuation of collective fantasies makes people crave truth and nothing but the truth—reality is the fastest American commodity. (102-3)

The critique of American collective fantasies here echoes an earlier moment in the narrative. Brik recalls that the last time he saw Rora in Bosnia before coming to America, Rora had just returned from Berlin, where he had been selling chunks of concrete that he had spray painted to make look like pieces of the Berlin Wall, which he then sold to American tourists—with certificates of authenticity—who were “chasing the shadows of true experience” (21-2).

As a result of living in America, Brik has lost his ability to tell stories, mostly due to the reaction of his American audience who do not understand the “storytelling code of solidarity,” whereby one knowingly suspends one's disbelief for the pleasure of enchantment (102). But the “incessant perpetuation of collective fantasies” has also had its effect on Brik, such that, like Americans, he craves truth, and is therefore easy to dupe, which is precisely what Rora does with his stories from the Bosnian War.

Though Brik knows that Rora is a classic Sarajevan storyteller, he believes his sensational story about the Bosnian warlord Rambo. The difference between simply believing a story and *choosing* to believe a story (i.e. the suspension of disbelief) is crucial. Brik repeatedly challenges the truth of Rora's story about Rambo, breaking the "storytelling code of solidarity," only to then believe Rora's avowals of its truthfulness.

In Rora's story about the war, somebody tries to assassinate Rambo, who survives and goes into exile, but not before murdering the American journalist Miller, whose corpse Rora says he photographed. After the war, Rambo returns to Sarajevo, where he is treated as a war hero and protected by the government while he runs a racketeering business around the city. When, near the end of the novel, Rora is murdered outside a café in Sarajevo, Brik is sure that it was Rambo who murdered him because of the photograph he had taken of Miller's corpse. But then Rora's sister Azra informs Brik that her brother had largely invented the story about Rambo and Miller, revealing to Brik his "foolishness and gullibility" (291). Rora is actually murdered by a drug-addled teenager who wanted to steal his camera. Brik is the latest and last of Rora's American dupes.

Rora's stories, nevertheless, must be seen as a necessary condition for Brik to recover his identity as a Sarajevan storyteller. The novel ends with Brik on the threshold of writing his book on Lazarus Averbuch, which, as we know from the way the novel opens, requires imagination and invention because the historical truth is inaccessible. Though Mary has supported him financially and otherwise while he nursed his ambition to become a writer—and though his trip to Eastern Europe was funded by an American cultural organization—returning to Sarajevo, which is no longer Brik's home, is shown to be a necessary condition for fulfilling his ambition. The book itself—that is, *The Lazarus Project*—is nevertheless primarily addressed to an American audience. And though didacticism is surely anathema to Hemon, through its forms of critique the book may be said to school the American reader.

The reflection on storytelling and fictionality in the novel instructs the American reader on how—and how not—to read the book. Despite the truth-indices it contains, the wrong question would be to ask how much of Hemon's historiographic metafiction is grounded in fact—just like the wrong criticism, from the point of view of the novel's aesthetic theory, would be that its representation of Eastern Europe is not realistic.

Hemon includes a lesson about the perils of failing to recognize fictional discourse and therefore meeting it with the proper expectations. In the course of the investigation following Averbuch's murder, the assistant chief of police discovers a story written by Lazarus—whom Hemon/Brik reimagines as an aspiring writer—among his possessions. The story is a "bloody tale, written in the first person, of domestic tragedy in Kishinev," which the policeman interprets as a "confession of a double crime committed in Russia, exhibiting Averbuch's cunning, murderous proclivities and foreshadowing a life of anarchism and crime in Chicago" (61-2). The policeman doesn't know how to recognize fiction, and this has considerable consequences—not for him so much as for Lazarus.

The reflection on storytelling and fictionality in *The Lazarus Project* can ultimately be seen to belong to the novel's critique of American exceptionalism. The fictional contract involves the willing suspension of disbelief, but this assumes that the default mode of consciousness is skepticism. National fantasies are to be doubted, but literary fantasies are to be enjoyed—as they serve primarily to re-enchant the "drab, soulless world"—and are, moreover, the only form of deception that is not unethical (31). Pleasure may be the end of



fiction, but as a genre of discourse, fiction—which is the true “parallel universe” to that which passes for reality—is inherently political.

## Politics of Revolt

In reimagining the life of Lazarus Averbuch, one of the mysteries Hemon leaves unresolved is *why* Lazarus went to Chief Shippy’s house on the morning of March 2, 1908. Hemon’s version of events radically subverts the official version—or at least the official version as given in the text, including the claim that Averbuch drew a gun on the police chief—but it doesn’t rule out that his motive may indeed have been political assassination. Hemon has Olga ask Lazarus’s friend Isador if her brother was really an anarchist, and Isador responds that they were all a bit anarchist, all of them dreaming about a better world to come—though by no means were they all revolutionaries or terrorists.

Brik’s animus toward the American head of state (the “idiot president”) suggests that anarchism ought to be considered as more than a mere historical reference in the novel. One can trace out two different ideas of anarchy in the novel associated with two different visions of utopia. First, there are the historical anarchists, typified by the “Red Queen” Emma Goldman, who dream of a stateless and post-capitalist community of freedom, equality, and solidarity. Hemon comments sardonically upon what has become of that utopian dream early in the narrative when Brik and Rora visit the site of the old Jewish ghetto in Chicago, which, after various intermediate transformations, is undergoing gentrification:

Here lunatics, alongside socialists and anarchists, had stood on the corners in wait for various messiahs, all ranting about the fast-approaching better future. Here it was now, the future, it had arrived; here was the vacuum of profitable progress; here it was [...] We didn’t even stop the car; we drove through the debris of the present without touching it, no pictures taken, no film exposed. (44)

Brik’s subsequent travels through Eastern Europe can be seen as an exploration of the “debris of the present.” The gangsterism on view in Eastern Europe—that parallel universe “governed by the depraved triumvirate of power, survival instinct, and greed,” which simultaneously attracts and repels Brik in his confusion and despair—can be seen as representing an alternative vision of utopia: the capitalist utopia of neoliberal globalization. This vision of utopia is associated with a different idea of anarchy—something rather like the “anarchy” of the Hobbesian state of nature, though transvalued, in the libertarian capitalist imaginary, as a utopia of maximum individual freedom.

These references to political ideology and political economy in the novel suggest to me that Brik’s melancholy—on the surface appearing to be essentially a migrant or exilic affective state—ought to be seen as being additionally conditioned by the demise of the utopian imagination. One of the riffs in the novel centers on dislocation and homelessness, on being “nowhere,” echoing the title of one of Hemon’s earlier novels, *Nowhere Man*. “Where can you go from nowhere, except deeper into nowhere?” Brik wonders as the bus leaves Chernivitz for Chisinau (178). Later Brik muses that “if you can’t go home, there is nowhere to go, and nowhere is the biggest place in the world—indeed, nowhere is the

world” (182). Even when Brik returns to Sarajevo, he remains homeless: “I no longer had a home in Sarajevo [...] Hence I had booked a room at the Hotel Sarajevo for my homecoming” (282).

“Nowhere” is of course very close to the literal meaning of *utopia* (“no place”), suggesting that the trope of homelessness in the novel means more than migrant/exilic loss. Homelessness in *The Lazarus Project* is a function both of individual displacement and the generalized placelessness of global capitalism, with the old utopian dreams no longer having any purchase on the collective imagination and where the world itself—as a result of pervasive violence and the dominance of market values—becomes unhomey.

Brik neither romanticizes anarchism nor expresses nostalgia for communism, but his historical despair is thoroughly shaped, in my reading of the text, by the demise of the utopian imagination. And while there are a number of individual cemetery scenes in the novel, the novel itself may be understood as having been written in the graveyard of radical political dreams—the “debris of the present.”

In a discussion of the novel in the context of Hemon’s oeuvre, James Wood evocatively describes Hemon as a “postmodernist who has been mugged by history” (95). *The Lazarus Project* conjures the nightmare of history without the countervailing dreams of redemption or emancipation, which are themselves not available, the novel implies, for resurrection. Brik’s melancholy may be exilic but his despair is political. Homelessness and hopelessness are closely connected.

If the utopian political dreams of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are as dead for Hemon as the American dream clearly is, the political polemic running throughout his novel nevertheless makes it possible to see him as a kind of postmodern anarchist lobbing literary Molotov cocktails at the American state and other seats of power and repression. In this respect, there are two distinct senses in which the political aesthetics of Hemon’s novel may be described as “anarchist.” In line with postmodern aesthetic theory, Hemon’s novel resists totalization and calls attention—through its own self-reflexivity—to the constructed character of reality, thereby opening up possibilities for transforming it in liberatory ways. Beyond this, what is specific to Hemon’s novel is an anti-statist/anti-capitalist *ethos* expressed through its relentless opposition to state—and state-sanctioned—violence and to the hegemony of market values.

*The Lazarus Project* is a novel of dissent, enacting a politics of revolt. Given its critique of the “War on Terror” and the neoliberal global order, in which it identifies the United States as the hegemonic power, the novel may be seen as a post-American novel in a radical vein.

## Chapter Four

### Intricacies of Form and Subtleties of Engagement: The Political Aesthetics of Teju Cole's *Open City*

Though it is not necessarily politically committed, the post-American novel is historically engaged, in a generally critical way, with the “War on Terror,” and especially the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Like the other novels I’ve been considering in this dissertation, *Open City* registers international dissent to the Iraq War and therefore is a symbol of the post-9/11 crisis of American hegemony, as I’ve been defining it. But in addition to its historical engagement with the recent past, *Open City* is motivated by a deep commitment to justice that is expressed through witnessing its absence or denial. As a result of the novel’s many ambiguities and unreliable narrative perspective, the ethical and political commitment shaping the work is not immediately apparent and has therefore yet to be fully appreciated in the work’s critical reception.

Born in Michigan to Nigerian parents, Teju Cole grew up primarily in Nigeria. He returned to the U.S. for college and then graduate school where he studied art history. His first book *Everyday is for the Thief*, which combines photography and prose, is the account of a Nigerian student in America’s return to Lagos. The book was published in Nigeria in 2007 and then republished in the U.S. in 2014, three years after the publication of *Open City*. In 2016 Cole published a book of essays entitled *Known and Strange Things* and then the following year a book of photography and short prose pieces entitled *Blind Spot*.

*Open City* spans a year in the life of its narrator-protagonist, Julius, a psychiatrist of Nigerian and German parentage who is completing his residency at Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City during 2006-2007. Julius’s narrative is largely an account of his long aimless walks around Manhattan—ostensibly to relieve work-related stress—along with a vacation to Brussels, where his doings are essentially the same. Julius visits museums and monuments, has various casual encounters with strangers, and sees a few friends in the course of his perambulations. His urban walks combine a *flâneur’s* perceptions of the cityscape and urban life with the reflections of a mind that is brilliant, encyclopedic, restless, and ultimately opaque.

The ambiguity of the narrative is a function of Julius’s allusive and fragmentary thinking. Moreover, Julius is a highly reserved and emotionally distant narrator. It is left to the reader to infer what Julius is feeling and what lies behind his thoughts. Early in the narrative he indicates that he is preoccupied by something that he is incapable of expressing, observing that when he went to visit a friend he did not have “quite the right purchase on what it was [he] was trying to say about the solitary territory [his] mind had been crisscrossing,” such that he spoke about something else altogether (12). Commenting on this early moment in Julius’s narrative, Karen Jacobs writes that “the ability to read silences, omissions, erasures, and absences should be regarded as a pedagogical model for Cole’s readers” (92). Indeed, this is a substantial part of making sense of the narrative, but there is no interpretive code to guide one on how to read those silences, omissions, erasures, and absences. What’s more, in order to come to an understanding of the text it is

necessary to infer the motivations and interpret the implications of what he does and doesn't say.

In addition to the numerous local ambiguities, the meaning of the narrative as a whole becomes extremely ambiguous after a surprise late in the narrative reveals Julius's unreliability. One day he randomly encounters a woman he knew back in Nigeria named Moji, the younger sister of an old friend of his, whom he doesn't recognize at first. They meet socially a few times and she invites him to a party at her boyfriend's apartment, at the conclusion of which she confronts him, in private, about raping her when they were teenagers. Julius relates this episode in the same detached way he has related all of the previous encounters. He does not respond to her accusation, and he does not give the episode another thought in the short, remaining part of the narrative. Moji's accusation, and Julius's silence, radically foregrounds his narrative and moral unreliability, the enigma of his identity, and the meaning of his obscure yet highly patterned and insistently suggestive narrative. In my view, the principle context for interpreting this scene is the work as a whole.

A surprising number of critical engagements with *Open City* either do not mention Moji's revelation or they do so only in passing, noting that Julius has a hidden past, as if that were all there is to say about it. For some critics, however, Moji's accusation and its apparent failure to have any effect on Julius are evidence of his psychological dissociation, which can retroactively explain his emotional detachment and other symptomatic behaviors on display throughout the narrative.

In "Flights of Memory: Teju Cole's *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism," Pieter Vermeulen brilliantly observes that shadowing Julius's identity as a cosmopolitan *flâneur* is the figure of the pathological *fugueur*, a term used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to describe someone who walks away from their life and experiences and suffers amnesia about their identity" (42). Vermeulen interprets Cole's evocation of the *fugueur*—the "dark counterpart of the cosmopolitan *flâneur*"—as signifying Cole's interrogation of the limits of aesthetic cosmopolitanism. Vermeulen writes that,

Even if the novel is thoroughly occupied with the question of how aesthetic form can contribute to the furthering of cosmopolitan understanding, it ends up as a catalogue of failed attempts to forge intercultural connections by artistic means. The novel strings together numerous accounts of human rights abuses and testimonies of culturally very diverse experiences, yet these fail to register in even a minimally transformative way in the narrator's fatefully dissociated mind. (Ibid.)

The diagnosis of Julius's dissociation has significant explanatory power—and I shall consider this interpretation of *Open City* in greater detail later—and yet readers of the novel would do well to consider Julius's own professional diagnostic practice—standing for an ethics of reading, it seems to me—according to which "each patient is a dark room" and it is essential to be "slow and deliberate" in interpreting the ambiguous signs of psychopathology, in observance of medicine's fundamental precept to "do no harm" (238). The hasty diagnosis of dissociation misses much of the subtlety, complexity, and ambiguity of this scene and the narrative that precedes it.

Whatever the reader might think of Julius over the course of the narrative, Moji's confrontation of him about raping her when they were teenagers comes as a surprise. It is not foreshadowed in any clear way in the preceding part of this narrative of the recent past, which refuses the ordering structures of plot, and thereby closely imitates temporal experience. Though Julius bears expert witness as a psychiatrist to the truthfulness of her charge, he does not assume responsibility for the act—indeed, he does not *respond* at all. His narrative is not a confession. This lack of foreshadowing—along with the absence of reflection after narrating the revelation—generates a shock.

As so often occurs in reading *Open City*, once one has become attuned to how distant scenes or moments in the text echo one another, the precise language for describing the effect of this narrative surprise can be found in another otherwise unrelated scene. Earlier in the narrative Julius goes to an exhibition of the photography of Martin Munkácsi. In this scene, Julius views a number of photographs on light subjects from the 1920s before coming upon a photograph from 1933 of Hitler and Goebbels, to which he has an overwhelming reaction—conditioned by an empathetic horror he feels as he imagines what a Hasidic couple near him viewing the same photograph must be feeling—leading him to promptly leave the gallery. “The show turned on that axis,” he remarks. “It became about something else and couldn't be saved” (154). The scene with Moji functions in the narrative exactly as Munkácsi's photograph of Hitler and Goebbels functions in the exhibition. I shall be analyzing the scene in much greater detail below. For the moment, I simply wish to propose that the scene becomes—or ought to become—the interpretive axis of the work as a whole.

Though Moji's accusation has no emotional effect on Julius, it does engender a reflection about the inherent bias of self-representation with which he frames the scene:

Each person must, on some level, take himself as the calibration point for normalcy, must assume that the room of his own mind is not, cannot be, entirely opaque to him. Perhaps this is what we mean by sanity: that, whatever our self-admitted eccentricities might be, we are not the villains of our own stories. In fact, it is quite the contrary: we play, and only play, the hero, and in the swirl of other people's stories, insofar as those stories concern us at all, we are never less than heroic [. . .] From my point of view, thinking about the story of my life, even without claiming any especially heightened sense of ethics, I am satisfied that I have hewed close to the good. And so, what does it mean when, in someone else's version, I am the villain? (243)

This reflection, immediately preceding Moji's revelation, exhibits at once a psychiatrist's clinical detachment and a philosopher's penchant for generalization. Given what follows, this move from the particular to the general is bold, to say the least. The shock produced by Moji's accusation depends in some measure on whether the reader has all along been interpreting Julius's symptomatic behaviors as concealing something or has arrived at this moment in the narrative prepared to basically agree with his judgment of himself as someone who has essentially “hewed close to the good” (though having already confessed a number of peccadillos). In a narrative that is full of implication and indirection, this is one of the more direct statements in the novel; and though few readers, I believe, are likely to

take it as the “message” of the work, I wish to suggest that it encapsulates the ethical and political concerns shaping the narrative as a whole.

A few critics have suggested that Julius’s amnesia about raping Moji is intended to have a broader significance. Alexander Hartwiger argues that the novel “extends this realization [of Julius’s limited self-knowledge] beyond the individual and encourages readers to consider the way cultural histories about place also rely on constructed, celebratory narratives”—though he understands this as specifically referring to a celebratory narrative of New York as a global city rather than operating at any larger scale (2).

Though not invoking the phrase “national allegory,” Daniel O’Gorman gives a political interpretation to Julius’s amnesia, arguing that Julius “functions as an avatar for the United States, and his seemingly forgotten crime as an analogy for the often overlooked instances of torture and imperialist aggression perpetrated by US forces around the world, during—and in the decades leading up to—the current war on terror” (58). O’Gorman concludes—wrongly, in my view—that, given Julius’s liberal cosmopolitan identity, the allegory serves to critique the complacency of “anti-conservative politics” in the aftermath of 9/11.

I would suggest, rather, that the political allegory serves to critique *exceptionalism*, which is the political form of the self-bias, self-blindness, and ultimately self-deception of which Julius speaks in framing Moji’s rape accusation. When Moji’s confrontation of Julius is read allegorically, the scene is about historical amnesia and the revelation of past crimes that undermine the biased narrative of the self and any pretense to exceptional virtue. On the allegorical level, *Open City* is a novel about a nation that doesn’t really know itself because it has forgotten or disavowed its past crimes while refusing to recognize or rationalizing its present ones.

Earlier, I drew an analogy on the basis of function and effect between Moji’s revelation and the photograph of Hitler and Goebbels at the Munkácsi exhibition. For Julius, the shocking photograph transformed what the exhibition was about. Reasoning by analogy, we might conclude that Moji’s revelation does the same—though I would argue the contrary position. When Moji’s revelation is taken as the interpretive axis of the work, it does not transform what *Open City* is about, but rather reveals what it was about—in its highly allusive, sometimes even cryptic way—all along. The politics and ethics of *Open City* are bound up in a multi-faceted critical exploration of exceptionalism and the politics of commemoration.

That *Open City* is a meditation on the politics of commemoration is, paradoxically, both immediately apparent and not obvious. It is immediately apparent because in the climax of this plotless narrative Cole stages a confrontation between traumatic remembering and personal amnesia. However, it is also not obvious on account of the narrative’s apparent formlessness and its excess of details and allusions. The profusion of detail and allusion—along with the many ambiguities—provide an obstacle to interpreting the novel. One may of course prefer not to attempt to interpret the novel as a whole, but then would, in my view, miss out on how subtly conceived, deeply felt, and ethically committed Cole’s book is.

In this chapter I shall offer an interpretation of *Open City* through tracing the contours of its meditation on the politics of commemoration. This involves both connecting various disparate moments in the text as well as interpreting some of the text’s symbols,

silences, and enigmas. The novel registers numerous public histories of violence as well as numerous private histories of trauma. I argue that the former subverts the ideology of American exceptionalism while the latter decenters the national trauma of 9/11. The novel registers the uncommemorated histories of American violence against racialized populations and the psychosocial consequences of such historical amnesia. This constitutes the novel's remarkably unpolemical mode of political engagement and political dissent. Meanwhile, the revelation of sexual violence near the end of the novel draws out the unstated ethical question underlying the entire narrative—namely, the self's responsibility to the other. And it is through portraying the refusal of such responsibility in multiple instances and on multiple levels that the novel evinces its deep commitment to justice.

### **Historical Witness and the Subversion of American Exceptionalism**

As a novel of urban wandering, *Open City* has frequently been analyzed in terms of the *flâneur* trope. Critics who have approached the novel in this light, however, have tended to note that Julius is rather different from the classical *flâneur* figure. In her early review of the work, the novelist Claire Messud noted that Julius's urban wanderings involved an element of "witness, however haphazard, for history's downtrodden" (n.pag.). Alexander Hartwiger describes Julius as a "postcolonial *flâneur*," defined as a figure whose "critical gaze provides a way to read the legacies of colonialism, oppression, and exploitation back into globalization and the economic, social, and political frameworks that shape the global city" (7). Vermeulen, who describes Julius as a "cosmopolitan *flâneur*"—and ultimately, as mentioned above, a *fugueur*—observes that, through Julius's acts of witness, *Open City* participates in a turn in contemporary fiction toward "human rights issues," noting that the narrative witness is mainly composed of "scenes of violence, abuse, and exploitation, almost always tinged by a racist component" (44).

Taken as a whole, these scenes of racial violence are global in distribution, but a significant subset of them are specifically American. Early in the narrative, for instance, Julius visits his former English professor and friend, Professor Saito, an American of Japanese heritage who relates his experience being interred during World War II: "We were all confused about what was happening," Professor Saito recalls, "we were American, had always thought ourselves so, and not Japanese" (13). Julius witnesses the history of anti-black violence in America at various moments in the course of his narrative, beginning with the "enlarged photographs of early-twentieth-century lynchings of African-Americans" being sold by a street vendor in Harlem (18). One of Julius's patients, a woman whom he refers to as V. and whom he is treating for depression, is a history professor at NYU and a member of the Delaware tribe. V. is the author of a book on "a forgotten chapter in colonial history" entitled *The Monster of New Amsterdam* about a notoriously brutal Dutch colonist named Cornelis Van Tienhoven who was responsible for a number of massacres of indigenous people (26).

Shaped as it is by the recollection of his "aimless wandering" through urban space, along with the wandering of his restless mind, Julius's narrative at first appears to be rather formless. Some critics, however, have noted that the narrative is informed by the musical idea of counterpoint. Hartwiger argues that "[t]hrough abrupt, seemingly disjunctive shifts, the novel appears to create a fragmented narrative structure; however, when pulled together the juxtapositions provide a thematic unity" (4). Igor Maver notes that the

narrative develops though “employing a counterpoint rhythm and fugue-like structural techniques” (4).

Vermeulen also observes a “contrapuntal principle of composition” structuring the work, and he connects this to the form of the fugue, nicely observing how Cole plays on the double meaning of this term. “According to this contrapuntal principle,” Vermeulen writes, “particular elements (stories, thoughts, memories, characters, images) are offset by very different, even contrasting elements, which allow these elements to resonate with each other, leaving the reader with a virtual web of echoes, contrasts, and connections between and across different domains” (45).

Julius himself introduces the counterpoint motif at the outset of the narrative, where he describes his “aimless wandering” around Manhattan as a “counterpoint” to his stressful work at the hospital (3). Through establishing a contrapuntal relationship between these various American histories of racial violence, the narrative establishes a series of connections between them without erasing their specificity, which is a central part of the politics of the form, as I shall discuss in more detail later. Viewed in relation to the context of post-9/11 America, these counterpointed histories of racial violence work to undermine the discourse of American exceptionalism on prominent display around the time of the invasion of Iraq in 2003.<sup>1</sup>

While specific histories of American racial violence are counterpointed with one another, they are also counterpointed with other, non-American histories of racial violence. Julius goes to see *The Last King of Scotland* and notes that Idi Amin “murdered some 300,000 Ugandans during his rule [and] expelled the large community of Ugandan-Indians” (30). On another evening Julius goes to a talk by an unnamed Polish poet, who begins by saying, “I don’t want to talk about poetry tonight. I want to talk about persecution, if you will permit a poet this license. What can we understand about the roots of persecution, particularly when the target of this persecution is a tribe or race or cultural group?” (43). When Julius travels to Brussels on vacation, he learns that “several hate crimes had ratcheted up the tension experienced by nonwhites living in the country” and begins to worry for his own safety (99). He visits the Parc du Cinquanteenaire, built by Leopold II, and there makes an indirect reference to the Belgian atrocities in the Congo Free State (100). Later in Brussels he has a heated discussion about the Holocaust and Palestinian oppression with two Moroccan leftists (122). And, in a bar full of African immigrants who, to his surprise, turn out to be Rwandans rather than Congolese as he presumed them to be for reasons of history—though Rwanda too was a Belgian colony, as Cole surely knows—he reflects briefly on that recent genocide, connecting it in his mind with ethnic violence in other parts of Africa and the Balkans (139).

All these references to non-American histories of racial and ethnic violence may seem to weaken the claim that they ultimately serve to undermine American exceptionalism. Perhaps *Open City*’s references to racial violence—“memorial atrocity exhibitions,” as Vermeulen describes them (145)—are better understood as bearing witness more broadly to the horrors of modernity. The two hypotheses however need not be seen as contradictory. Counterpointing American histories of racial violence with

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<sup>1</sup> Commenting on the sign Julius sees (“Support our oops”), Ariela Freedman writes, “The war as pernicious error is a crucial part of Cole’s understanding of the historical impact of 9/11” (182). Freedman does not expand on the point, but her observation is right on the mark.



European and African histories both witnesses the appalling violence of modernity and shows that America is not exceptional *even in the negative sense*, as for example expressed in the anti-imperialism of the Moroccan leftists Farouq and Khalil who see America as a “version of Al-Qaeda” (121).

But these histories of racial violence registered in the narrative must ultimately be connected to the Iraq War—which is for the most part consigned to the background of the narrative—about which Julius once confesses to Professor Saito, “It’s almost too much to think about, all the intended and unintended consequences of this invasion. I think it’s a terrible mess, and I can’t stop thinking about it” (170). Before this comment he has not in fact shared any thoughts about the war, and yet the many histories of violence that do appear in the narrative, including the violence unleashed by the American invasion of Iraq, suggest that Cole himself is thinking incessantly about the victims of state violence, past and present. The next chapter in the novel, coming just a few pages after Julius’s remark, begins with a nightmare he has of a bomb going off at a market in Basra.

### **Psychiatric Witness and the De-Centering of 9/11 Trauma**

References to America’s foundational violence obviously undermine the discourse of American exceptionalism, but to claim as I am doing here that this is Cole’s intention, requires making an interpretive leap, because there is no explicit expression of American exceptionalism in the text. There is, however, what I take to be a symbolic expression of American exceptionalism in the text when Julius is thinking about one of his patients, a man he refers to as M., who has been in the “grip of delirium” since his wife discovered his infidelities and divorced him. Julius recalls M. raving to him that, “I have to be responsible for the world [...] If I don’t organize things just right, you see, everything will be destroyed. You understand? I’m not saying I’m God, but I know what it feels like to carry the world” (48). Grasping this as a symbolic expression of American exceptionalism requires hearing how it echoes the language that was swirling around in the public sphere during the period in which America was frequently described as being the “one indispensable nation.”

The theme of exceptionalism, however, is not only a matter of virtue or villainy but also victimhood, and while undermining American exceptionalism Cole’s novel simultaneously decenters 9/11 trauma. Unlike with the myth of exceptionalism, an explicit (if oblique) reference to 9/11 trauma appears in the text. Julius is on a picnic with some friends (including Moji) in Central Park when some parachutists come out of the sky presenting a beautiful spectacle for picnickers, though when they land they are immediately arrested by police officers. Julius remarks that the “police are charged with keeping us safe” and “protect[ing] us even from pleasure” (200). He then launches on a disquisition about how unsafe life was in every previous period of human history, citing casualty rates due to war or plague, before concluding: “Even in the way we speak about what little has happened to us, we have already exhausted ourselves with hyperbole” (201).

A few critics have read *Open City* in the context of 9/11 memorialization. Situating her reading of the novel in relation to the 9/11 memorial designed by Michael Arad and Peter Walker (“Reflecting Absence”), Rodica Mihăilă interprets *Open City* as “memorializing” 9/11 trauma in such a manner as to critique American exceptionalism by contextualizing 9/11 in terms of a transnational history of catastrophe as well as

foundational American violence (294).<sup>2</sup> I would suggest, rather, that the memorialization of foundational national violence actively belies the myth of exceptionalism while the transnational history of catastrophe decenters 9/11.

Ariela Freedman's contextualization of the novel in terms of 9/11 memorialization is more insightful. Freedman argues that,

Cole wants to use 9/11 not as a metonym for a unique, exclusive, or singular event but as a way to expose earlier traumas [...] Cole is conscious of the way that ostentatious mourning can serve not only as an act of memory but also as an act of forgetting. If 9/11 becomes the metonym for trauma, then what happens to the memory of earlier traumas, the history of colonialism, slavery, exploitation, and violence that is as old as the New World? (182)

Freedman considers a few of the more overt expressions of racial trauma that appear in the narrative, but does not discuss the significance of their contrapuntal relation to one another nor the work they do—and are intended to do—in subverting American exceptionalism.

If Julius's *flânerie* positions him as witness to public histories of racial violence that undermine the myth of American exceptionalism, his professional work as a psychiatrist positions him as a witness to private histories of psychological suffering, including various instances of racial trauma, that decenter the national trauma. For example, Julius's patient V. suffers from transgenerational trauma and depression, and he reports her as once saying to him:

I can't pretend it isn't about my life [...] it is my life. It's a difficult thing to live in a country that has erased your past [...] There are almost no Native Americans in New York City, and very few in all of the Northeast. It isn't right that people are not terrified by this because this is a terrifying thing that happened to a vast population. And it's not in the past, it is still with us today; at least, it's still with me. (27)

V. later commits suicide while Julius is on vacation in Brussels.

V.'s story may be seen to be counterpointed in the narrative by the story of Julius's unnamed friend, a professor of Earth Sciences at Columbia. In an episode preceding the scene of Moji's confrontation of Julius about raping her, Julius, Moji, his unnamed friend, and his friend's girlfriend meet for a picnic in Central Park. Their conversation, which touches upon many different subjects, turns at one point to mental illness and Julius shares a few stories about his craziest patients for their entertainment. Then Julius's unnamed friend shares a harrowing family history including a father who became a drug addict and abandoned the family, a mother who had children with multiple different men, and an apparently more stable uncle who one day went out into the backyard and shot himself. Up

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<sup>2</sup> A similar point is made by Giorgiana Banita in her book *Plotting Justice*. Though not discussing *Open City*, Banita notes that many post-9/11 works "recontextualize the terrorist attacks as one in a series of twentieth-century events (from the Holocaust to the Balkan civil war)" promoting a "global understanding of the 9/11 events and their aftermath through the lens of world-historical memory and trauma" (1).

to this point in the narrative, Julius has not identified his friend racially, but Moji's response to the family history does:

I suppose [...] that the things black people have had to deal with in this country—and I don't mean me or Julius, I mean people like you, who have been here for generations—the things you've had to deal with are definitely enough to drive anyone over the edge. The racist structure of this country is crazy-making. (203)

Everyone is relieved, Julius observes, when Lise-Anne—who is presumably white—makes a joke, turning the conversation away from the psychological effects of racial oppression.

Julius's unnamed African American friend does not himself express any signs of trauma or depression, though earlier in the narrative—before he has been racially identified—he shares with Julius his own “suicide ideation” in the context of a discussion about death—unrelated to any discussion of race—remarking that, “For many years, I've thought that the manner and timing of one's death should be a matter of choice...” (181). In the moment, the remark is presented purely as a philosophical position, but for the reader who connects these two moments in the text a question is raised. Shortly after the Central Park scene, where Moji makes explicit the link between racism and mental suffering and articulates a direct critique of American racism, Julius mentions another patient, Mr. F, whose depression is ostensibly due to the death of his wife though whose remark to Julius about his pride in encountering a young black doctor in view of the obstacles to black success in America suggests that his depression is at least partially conditioned by a lifetime's experience of racism (210).

Attention to racial traumas in the novel decenters 9/11 trauma. But given how 9/11 trauma registers minimally in the text—and American exceptionalism only symbolically—Cole's novel, though it is deeply committed ethically and politically, does not feel polemical. Moreover, the fact that secondary characters voice the most direct political statements in the novel—like Moji who calls out American racism and V. who links her depression to American historical amnesia—rather than giving them to Julius—whose perspective (and aestheticism) many readers assume to be the author's, at least until Moji's revelation—also disguises the novel's political critique. In fact, the authorial perspective—though obviously shifting and never entirely certain—seems to me to really be expressed through these secondary characters, as can be inferred from the novel's investigation of the politics of commemoration and erasure, which comes to the fore in the Brussels section of the narrative.

### **The Politics of Commemoration**

Midway through *Open City*, Julius goes on a four-week vacation to Brussels. It is in this section of the book where the title is invoked. Julius remarks that during WWII, Brussels declared itself an “open city,” surrendering to its invaders, and therefore was spared from destruction. Some critics have also argued for a second (implicit) significance of the title in terms of the hybridity of New York City—or at least certain places in the city. I would additionally point out that “open city” is a near homophone of “opacity,” one of the key themes of the book, and this echo seems surely deliberate on the part of the author.

The given reason for Julius's trip to Brussels is to find his German grandmother to whom he feels some connection, though he hasn't seen her since he was a child. He is estranged from his German mother for mysterious reasons and his Nigerian father died when he was a teenager. Julius's trip to Brussels seems under-motivated, even in a novel where the main action is wandering—or rather, this makes the given motive conspicuous; and, indeed, he himself ultimately calls it into question (116). In light of Moji's subsequent revelation, the reader might seize upon Julius's surmise—one passing remark, like nearly everything else in Cole's book, easily missed in the welter of details—that his grandmother was raped by Soviet soldiers at the end of WWII as pointing to some subconscious motivation behind his quest to find her (80). But his trip to Brussels has a more functional role in the narrative. Brussels is the counterpoint to Manhattan, and themes that are first introduced in the earlier Manhattan section of the book are developed in the Brussels section—in *other voices*—which in turn illuminates much of what follows when Julius returns to Manhattan at the end of his vacation.

In Brussels, Julius meets Farouq, a young Moroccan intellectual who works at an international call shop and internet access point owned by another Moroccan immigrant named Khalil. After establishing a rapport with Farouq, Julius agrees to meet him and Khalil in a nearby café. The discussion they have is the longest one in the novel and the one that deals most explicitly with politics—both post-9/11 politics and the politics of commemoration.

Farouq and Khalil describe the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the major political issue of the times and seek to learn about the American political scene from Julius. Their support for the Palestinian cause leads them to make defenses of Hezbollah, Hamas, and—somewhat more tepidly—Al Qaeda, all in the name of *resistance*, which saddens Julius as it seems to confirm American stereotypes about Arabs (120).

The center of their increasingly heated discussion has to do with the cultural power of Holocaust commemoration in Europe. “If you say anything here about Israel, you have your mouth plugged with the six million,” Khalil says, causing Julius to fire back, “You're not denying it [...] you're not actually questioning the figure, are you?” (122) Farouq then speaks up:

If we try to speak to the Palestinian situation, we hear six million. The six million: it was a terrible tragedy of course, six million, two million, one human being, it's never good. But what does this have to do with Palestinians? [...] Did the Palestinians build the concentration camps? [...] And what about the Armenians: do their deaths mean less because they are not Jews? What is the magic number for them? I'll tell you why the six million matter so much: it is because Jews are the chosen people. Forget the Cambodians, forget the American blacks, this is unique suffering. But I reject this idea. It is not unique suffering. [...] All death is suffering. Others have suffered, too, and that is history: suffering. (122-3)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “My man, suffering is suffering,” Julius's unnamed friend says to him, when the theme returns later in the narrative (181).

In the course of the encounter Julius realizes that he is playing the part of the “outraged American” with what he acknowledges to be an American hyper-sensitivity to anything that could be construed as anti-Semitic, including—and especially—criticism of Israel. Whether or not Farouq’s complaint is judged to be anti-Semitic—and later in their conversation he certainly does invoke the stereotype about Jewish business savvy—it poses a direct challenge to “Holocaust exceptionalism,” which Karen Jacobs defines as the “assertion that the tragedy of the Holocaust and its diasporic aftermath have no historical precedents and should therefore be considered as sui generis events that remain ethically beyond the comparative reach of other genocides” (98). Farouq’s complaint highlights the unequal commemoration of historical tragedies and the resentment that this can create in a radically unequal world.

Among the many instances of history-*qua*-suffering that Farouq might have cited but does not is the atrocity committed in the Congo Free State. This atrocity is alluded to in a previous scene when Julius visits Parc du Cinquantenaire built by Leopold II, whom Julius describes as a “heartless king” (100). His highly restrained ironic response to the inscription on a plaque expressing the gratitude of the Congo for the triumphs of the Belgian dynasty underlines the difference between his temperament and Farouq’s—if Julius feels any of the other man’s indignation, there is no visible sign of it. Parc du Cinquantenaire—along with the other “architectural monstrosities erected all over town by Leopold II”—is testament to the lack of public shame about Belgium’s colonial history (97). That there is no memorial in Brussels for the millions of Africans who died under Leopold II’s colonial regime—whether factually accurate or not—is implied. Dr. Maillotte, the cosmopolitan Belgian liberal whom Julius meets on the airplane and who voices a critique of American racism (89)—mentions Parc Léopold to him in passing—along with casually uttering an anti-gay slur in the course of their conversation (92)—without any self-awareness or trace of national (or personal) shame. Dr. Maillotte’s statement gestures towards a connection between the lack of commemoration of Belgium’s history of colonialism—indeed, its homage to empire—and contemporary anti-immigrant violence.

Farouq’s protest against the way Holocaust exceptionalism obscures Palestinian suffering and marginalizes other historical atrocities foregrounds the politics of commemoration, which, in the case of 9/11 commemoration, remains implicit in the novel. The lack of commemoration of Belgian atrocities in the Congo echoes the lack of commemoration of colonial atrocities against Native Americans that drives V. to commit suicide and prefigures—in a narrative sense—the lack of commemoration of New York’s history of slavery and anti-black violence, which becomes the deep subject of Julius’s narrative following his return to Manhattan.

Counterpointing these various historical atrocities against racialized populations and their traumatic legacies—especially when un- or under-commemorated—works against the process of singularization with its inherent tendency to marginalize other histories, often to the point of invisibility. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, a book that Cole is in dialogue with, Susan Sontag notes that in the aftermath of the Bosnian War some Sarajevans were upset by a photography exhibition that included images of Somalian suffering alongside images of Bosnian suffering. “It is intolerable to have one’s own suffering twinned with anybody else’s,” Sontag writes (113). Cole’s contrapuntal technique does not homogenize all historical traumas or subsume them to a single category of undifferentiated suffering, but it does challenge the idea of unique suffering.

## Historical Erasure and Psychosocial Trauma in New York City

In the course of his angry complaint about inequality in the commemoration of historical atrocities Farouq cites the history of anti-black violence and oppression in America. Earlier in his conversation with Julius, he remarked that African Americans are “victims of the same [stereotyping] portrayals as we [Arabs] are” to which Julius replies, “that’s how power is, the one who has the power controls the portrayal”—a remark that may be read as either an expression of political radicalism or cynicism (119). In the context established by the narrative, “portrayal” includes both representation and commemoration—and this remark of Julius will be crucial to keep in mind when we consider the ambiguity of his portrayal of Moji’s accusation that he raped her.

Farouq’s anger, indeed, is as much about stereotypical and homogenizing representations of Arabs and Islam in the context of the War on Terror as it is about Palestinian oppression. After conveying to Julius his understanding that Americans do not form a homogenous group, Farouq tells him that “what is important to me is that the world realizes that we are not monolithic either, in what they call the Arab world, that we are all individuals [...] We are individuals” (126). Julius responds sardonically, saying that Farouq and America, land of individualism, are ready for one another. But Julius has himself been subject to such racial stereotyping in New York by two obnoxious white children in the subway whose parents stand by “oblivious”—his irritation and anger at once indexed and disguised by the neutral statement that, “It was midnight, and I didn’t feel like giving public lectures” (32). The connection Farouq asserts between the stereotypical representations of Arabs and African Americans that efface individuality and difference may be seen as introducing another counterpointed relationship in the narrative as it begins—or continues from earlier on—its deep exploration of the psychological and social effects of the non-commemoration of black oppression and racist violence in the history of New York City.

In Brussels, Farouq had shared with Julius his project of trying to figure out how different cultures might live together respecting their mutual differences—scaling up, as it were, the image of multicultural conviviality he sees in the call shop but that does not exist in the multicultural metropolis itself. Following his return to New York, Julius decides to mail Farouq a copy of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *Cosmopolitanism*. The post office worker who attends to Julius is an African American man named Terry who identifies Julius as hailing from the “Motherland” and says that he is “raising [his] daughters as Africans” (186). Terry expresses his own stereotypes about African vitality and projects onto Julius his own desires—“you’re a visionary”—in one of the text’s deep ironies (187). Terry then identifies himself as a spoken-word poet and recites a poem of his about the Middle Passage called “The Unconquered.” He follows up with another poem about how cocaine was introduced to black neighborhoods by the white man and how black culture in America needs to renew itself through its ancestral connection to Africa. Julius leaves the post office resolving never to return to that branch.

The anger informing Terry’s black nationalist poetry may be seen as echoing Farouq’s anger, and both may be counterpointed with an earlier expression of anger in the narrative, that of one Dr. Gupta, a Ugandan-Indian surgeon who was expelled from Uganda by Idi Amin. Earlier in the narrative Julius recalls a dinner party he went to in medical

school hosted by Dr. Gupta who tells his guests that though he has become successful in America he is still angry about what happened to him and his community in Uganda. “[W]hen I think about Africans,” Julius recalls Dr. Gupta saying, “and I know that we are not supposed to say such things in America [but] when I think about Africans, I want to spit” (30). Julius notes that he was the only other African in the room and felt personally addressed by Gupta’s ire. Though such anger as expressed by Gupta, Farouq, and Terry does not usually figure in discussions of trauma, I believe that by counterpointing such instances of racial and ethnic violence and the festering anger they engender just as surely as the depression and haunting, Cole’s novel invites precisely such a consideration.

Terry’s anger against white America, in particular, may be seen as having a mythical symbolization in the novel. Much earlier in the narrative, in an otherwise entirely unrelated scene, Julius recounts the story of the Yoruba god Obatala who was charged with the task of creating human beings by Oludumare:

Obatala did quite well at the task until he started drinking. As he drank more and more, he became inebriated, and began to fashion damaged human beings. The Yoruba believe that in this drunken state he made dwarfs, cripples, people missing limbs, and those burdened with debilitating illness. Oludumare had to reclaim the role he had delegated and finish the creation of humankind himself and, as a result, people who suffer from physical infirmities identify themselves as worshipers of Obatala. This is an interesting relationship with a god, one not of affection or praise but of antagonism. They worship Obatala in accusation; it is he who has made them as they are. (25)

The story of Obatala is suggested to Julius by his seeing a crippled man in the subway and then, shortly after, two blind men. Here and elsewhere Julius shows himself to be exceptionally attuned to *physical* deformities, which prompts the original reflection that “some of the things I was seeing around me were under the aegis of Obatala” (Ibid.). Terry’s anger at white America may be seen as another kind of deformity, perhaps a spiritual one. The long passage quoted above concludes with the statement that the devotees of Obatala “wear white, which is [Obatala’s] color, and the color of the palm wine he got drunk on” (Ibid.). Obatala may thus be seen as the deity of American racial trauma and, as I’ll later suggest, of trauma more generally, where trauma itself stands as a figure for various forms of damaged life.

As is his custom, Julius makes no comment about his encounter with Terry, other than that he would be sure to avoid this branch of the post office in the future. Julius, who ultimately judged Farouq to be “one of the thwarted ones” (129)—which Messud described as a “white man’s judgment”—seems very likely to have a similar view of Terry (who declaims himself to be among the “unconquered”). Given Julius’s high cultural aesthetic tastes, it is easy to infer his judgement of the quality of Terry’s committed poetry.

Setting aside the question of aesthetic value, the reader may very well consider the claim in Terry’s poem that the U.S. government introduced cocaine into African American neighborhoods—if he or she even gives it a moment’s thought—as a kind of ghetto conspiracy theory. Such a judgment would be akin to that of the Belgian white liberal Dr. Maillotte who dismisses Farouq’s grievance about anti-Muslim discrimination when Julius

presents it to her one night over dinner in Brussels. “I don’t complain and, to be honest, I really have little patience for people who do,” she says to Julius. “You’re not a complainer, are you?” (143) Julius does not respond. He feels good in her company, and her dismissal of Farouq’s experience may condition his own subsequent “white man’s judgment,” as Messud put it, of Farouq. When it comes to racial discrimination, Julius both avoids “giving lectures” and “complaining.”

But whatever the truth may be about whether or not the U.S. government did introduce cocaine into African American neighborhoods, there is certainly a well-known historical precedent of imperial power using drugs to dominate a racialized people, as Cole’s narrative subsequently registers in a way that is quite easy to miss. Immediately after Julius leaves the post office uptown he gets on the subway and heads downtown, getting off at 14<sup>th</sup> Street and walking down to the Bowery “with no particular destination in mind” (188).

What follows is presented as just another episode of Julius’s *flânerie*, so much of which occurs on the southern end of Manhattan. Julius arrives in the non-touristy part of Chinatown and comes across a statue in a square, whom he presumes to be commemorating some Chinese emperor or poet. But when he comes closer and looks at the plaque he discovers that it is a statue rather of a 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-narcotics activist named Lin Zexu, a “hero of the Opium Wars [...] much hated by the British for his role in impeding their drug traffic...” (189). Julius does not himself make the connection back to Terry’s poem, observing rather the pigeon guano streaking the statue and the general street scene.

Julius notes that with the exception of himself and one other man, everyone else on the street was Asian. Julius watches the other non-Asian man who is shirtless and wiping his chest and arms with a rag:

There was an unearthly shine to his body, as though he were already doused in oil, but whether he was applying the shine, or trying to remove it, I could not tell. He was silhouette dark, and his body bore signs of long hours at the gym or a lifetime of physical labor [...] His entire body glistened, neither more nor less than when he started, and he himself was like a bronze statue. (Ibid.)

Julius continues to observe the man who suddenly jumps on his bicycle and rides off down the street. Only in the final sentence of the paragraph does Julius definitively identify the man racially when he notes the disappearance of his “bright black back” into the distance, though the reader may very well have perceived in the course of the description the visual echo of the slave auction.

What is most important in this description is the ambiguity of the man’s action. Julius cannot determine if he is applying or removing the oil from his muscular body. This moment, I wish to suggest, really only makes sense as part of the sequence that begins with Julius’s encounter with Terry in the post office—and perhaps, then, only if one makes the prior interpretive leap to recognize Terry as an unwitting devotee of Obatala, enthralled to the white god who damaged him. From this perspective, Julius’s perception of this “historical echo of slavery”—a phrase he uses later in the narrative, as we’ll come to shortly—may be read as a symbolic comment on Terry’s relationship to the history of black oppression in America. Is Terry’s “devotion” to the historical trauma of slavery keeping the



painful memory alive or promoting his own emancipation and that of his community from the power of white supremacy?

But there is at least one other detail in this description that deserves noting for it bears upon the politics of commemoration with which the work as a whole is preoccupied. Julius likens the man he sees to a “bronze statue.” Julius has just noted the statue commemorating the Chinese anti-narcotics hero Lin Zexu. Where is the statue commemorating an African American (anti-narcotics) hero? Does this black man who is likely in truth simply wiping sweat off himself on a hot afternoon echo the history of slavery only because there are not memorials commemorating this atrocity or statues commemorating African American heroes in New York City?<sup>4</sup>

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Julius’s encounter with Terry is part of a pattern of encounters that he has with black immigrants and African Americans in the narrative. As a rule, Julius is resistant to attempts by others to assert a common identity on the basis of race. When he recounts getting into a taxi without greeting the African driver and is reproached by him for it—“Hey, I’m African just like you, why you do this?”—Julius reflects that, “I was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on me” (40). Julius remembers this episode later when a Barbudan man named Kenneth, who Julius believes to be making a pass at him, tells him about a Nigerian housemate he used to have amongst other things, causing Julius to pity the “desperation in his prattle” (54).

At one point in the narrative Julius recalls a time he went with his ex-girlfriend Nadège and her church group to an immigrant detention center in Queens and how he listened to the refugee story of a Liberian detainee named Saidu. At the end of the visit Saidu asks Julius to come back to see him and Julius tells him that he will. Julius recalls that in retelling Saidu’s story to Nadège he himself figured as the “compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else’s life and struggle”—an idea of himself, he remarks, that she may have fallen in love with and that he certainly did (70). But he never returns to visit Saidu. While we finally learn that his unnamed friend, the Earth Sciences professor at Columbia, is African American, the explicit basis of their friendship is cultural interests—books and films—over which Julius says they tended to have differing opinions (23). Though he is black in America, with all the burdens that carries, he was light-skinned in Nigeria on account of having a white mother, which made many people assume that he enjoyed a class privilege which in fact he did not.

Though Julius is resistant to identifications on the basis of shared racial identity, he does come to appreciate the historical basis for black solidarity in America when he looks across out across the Hudson River one day and sees Ellis Island: “Ellis Island was a symbol mostly for European refugees. Blacks, ‘we blacks,’ had known rougher points of entry: this, I could admit to myself now that my mood was less impatient, was what the cabdriver had meant. This was the acknowledgement he wanted, in his brusque fashion, from every ‘brother’ he met” (55). Later in the narrative Julius notes that thousands of times every day black men passing each other in the street make small gestures of mutual respect and

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<sup>4</sup> A memorial honoring Frederick Douglass—created by the Hungarian sculptor Gabriel Koren—was installed at the northwest corner of Central Park in 2011.

solidarity conveying to one another that, “I know something of what life is like for you out here” (212). But the limits of such racial solidarity are highlighted when Julius is mugged by two African American teenagers, who will go on to be depicted in the neighborhood police advisory as types—“male, black, and young, of average height and weight” (214). Emotionally restrained as he is, Julius does not express his feelings about this. The observation itself suggests that he feels sorrow for how the incident will reinforce stereotypes about black male criminality.

The fact that Julius does not strongly identify as black—coupled with his hyper-intellectualism and reserve—might suggest to the reader that he is himself immune to the racially-conditioned forms of suffering and mental disturbance—from anxiety to depression to rage—that he witnesses both as a psychiatrist and as a historically-minded *flâneur*. But that would be wrong. No less than in Brussels when he fears that he could be the victim of a hate crime by right wing nationalists, Julius is haunted by the history of slavery and anti-black violence in New York City in a way so subtly—or even *cryptically*—presented that it has yet to be registered in the critical reception of Cole’s novel.

After retelling Saidu’s refugee story, Julius tells the story of an elderly Haitian man he met one day in the subway. The man was named Pierre and he worked in a shoeshine shop underground at Penn Station. Though his “egalitarian spirit” makes Julius generally averse to having his shoes shined, he succumbs to Pierre’s entreaties. As Pierre begins telling Julius his life story Julius notes feeling the “peculiar sense of metamorphosis one experiences on waking up from an afternoon nap to find that the sun had set” (71).

Pierre’s story is another refugee story—in counterpoint with Saidu’s—though as he describes the violence in Haiti from which he fled it gradually becomes clear that he is describing the Haitian Revolution: “We heard reports of how bad things were, how many people had been executed by Boukman and his army, and we knew we were fortunate to have escaped. The terror of Bonaparte and the terror of Boukman: there was no difference to those who suffered” (72).<sup>5</sup> Pierre continues telling the story of how he accompanied the family in whose house he served as they relocated to Manhattan and then his subsequent life as a free man, including the school for black children he established with his wife Juliette downtown. Julius does not introduce this *rencontre merveilleuse réaliste* in any special way, nor does he reflect on what Pierre tells him. His amazement can only be inferred from Pierre’s remark that, “I see from your face that it is hard for you, that it is hard for the young, like you, to understand these things” (73).

This scene has not received much discussion in the critical reception of the novel. It has yet to be observed in print that the man—or specter—Julius meets is a historical figure, Pierre Toussaint, who, according to the Columbia University project Mapping the African American Past (MAPP), may be sanctified by the Catholic Church, thereby becoming the first Haitian saint.<sup>6</sup>

When Julius comes out of the subway onto the street there are signs that an antiwar protest has recently passed by. What follows is what I am calling the first example of Julius’s racial haunting in the narrative:

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<sup>5</sup> The contextually-aware reader attuned to Cole’s manner of playing with echoes may hear: “The terror of Bin Laden and Bush: there was no difference to those who suffered.”

<sup>6</sup> <http://maap.columbia.edu/place/13.html>

That afternoon, during which I flitted in and out of myself, when time became elastic and voices cut out of the past into the present, the heart of the city was gripped by what seemed to be a commotion from an earlier time. I feared being caught up in what, it seemed to me, were draft riots. The people I saw were all men, hurrying along under leafless trees, sidestepping the fallen police barrier near me, and others, farther away [...] What I saw next gave me a fright: in the farther distance, beyond the listless crowd, the body of a lynched man dangling from a tree. The figure was slender, dressed from head to toe in black, reflecting no light. It soon resolved itself, however, into a less ominous thing: dark canvas sheeting on a construction scaffold, twirling in the wind. (74-5)

Avery Gordon's concept of haunting is useful for making sense of this strange episode, beginning with Julius's encounter with the ghost of Pierre Toussaint and ending with his misperception of a piece of canvas sheeting as a lynched man. Distinguishing her concept from trauma, Gordon describes haunting as:

an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely [...] Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view. (xvi)

The enlarged images of lynching victims that Julius glimpsed being sold by a street vendor in Harlem near the beginning of the narrative return here, after a long delay, to haunt him.<sup>7</sup> That said, such images presumably come from the Jim Crow South, whereas the "repressed or unresolved social violence" evoked in this episode is not linked to racial violence that happened elsewhere (the South), but rather to racial violence that happened in Manhattan, as indicated by Julius's easily-overlooked reference to the 1863 Draft Riots, during which 11 black men were lynched and more than a hundred people in total died.<sup>8</sup>

To invoke Gordon's concept of haunting in relation to this scene implies that this historical episode of racial violence has been "repressed or unresolved." In terms of the dialectic of memory and amnesia—or commemoration and erasure—that runs throughout the narrative, repression means non-commemoration, and it is non-commemoration, precisely, that produces a lack of resolution. On its own, Julius's encounter with Pierre Toussaint might have been interpreted as an episode of magical realism—a commercially

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<sup>7</sup> Karen Jacobs interprets the novel through the concept of the *afterimage*. "By afterimage, I refer not only to the optical phenomenon in which a secondary visual sensation occurs after its primary source of visual stimulation has ended. By afterimage, I also refer to an expanded, textually mediated, imaginative optics in which a secondary image (and concomitant understanding) emerges after its primary stimulus has been withdrawn" (89-90). This concept provides a compelling understanding for the temporally deferred narrative effect of Julius's perception of the lynching images and many other perceptions.

<sup>8</sup> For more about the 1863 Draft Riots and other significant events in the African American history of early New York City, see Leslie M. Harris's *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863*, U of Chicago P, 2003.

popular literary mode—but culminating as it does with Julius’s haunting by the uncommemorated history of the anti-black violence that occurred during the 1863 Draft Riots invests it with a critical function. The scene, finally, recalls Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, a work of speculative fiction that Julius glimpses a man reading intently on the subway earlier in the narrative and which features time travel between the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the antebellum South as its fundamental premise (45).

This, then, is the first scene of racial haunting in the novel, the major example of which is still to come. Later in the narrative—after he has returned from Brussels, though still before the scene with Moji—Julius recounts part of the history of slavery in Manhattan when he is down at Battery Park on the southern tip of the island. He has just come from meeting his accountant Parrish on Wall Street, to whom he owed payment for doing his taxes, though he forgot his checkbook at home and distressingly couldn’t remember his pin when he tried to take money out of an ATM machine. After describing the clear quality of the light that day and the children playing in the park, Julius begins to recount how in the mid-nineteenth century, well after the slave trade had been outlawed, New York had remained the “most important port for the building, outfitting, insuring, and launching of slavers’ ships” which continued to bring enslaved Africans across the Atlantic, mostly to Cuba (163).

Julius singles out Moses Taylor, a wealthy sugar merchant who was on the board of the City Bank of New York and later served as its president for nearly three decades. He notes that Taylor gave financial support to the Union side during the Civil War while simultaneously reaping massive profits off slavery—through importing Cuban sugar, investing in plantations, and operating six of his own slave ships. Julius cites an 1852 article in the *New York Times* that denounced the bank’s profiteering off slavery, indicating that it was both known about and widely tolerated—in other words, that the white population of New York was complicit in this crime against humanity. Crossing over from Battery Park to Bowling Green, Julius notes that Customs House “had been used in the seventeenth century for the executions of paupers and slaves” (164).

It is at Bowling Green that Julius reveals something he must have learned two weeks before when he returned from his trip to Brussels—namely, that his patient V. committed suicide while he was on vacation. “The *Times* had said, in the obituary I read that day, that V. wrote of atrocity without flinching. They might have said without flinching visibly, for it had all affected her far more deeply than anyone’s ability to guess” (165). Before leaving New York, the head nurse at the hospital told him that V. had asked how he could be reached, to which he responded that he couldn’t be (102). That he does not narrate this when he first returns to work from his vacation two weeks previously—or consider that but for his selfish desire to be undisturbed she might yet be alive—is one example of the strangeness of the narrative contributing to its symptomatic quality.

Julius’s remark that her suffering was not visible—but nonetheless real and ultimately overwhelming—echoes what he says about her near the beginning of the narrative when he notes that the “scholarly apparatus” accompanying her biography of the monstrous Dutch settler Van Tienhoven, coupled with the “emotional distance typical of an academic study,” hides the depth of her personal suffering (27). The reader attuned to the operation of counterpoint in the novel might see Moses Taylor as echoing Van Tienhoven, raising the question of whether Julius’s detached account of the history of slavery in New York—and the general detachment he displays throughout the narrative—conceals a

deeper personal suffering as it does in the case of his patient V. I shall return to this question later when discussing the scene where Moji confronts Julius about raping her and the enigma of his character, but presently we must consider a second episode of Julius's historical racial haunting immediately preceding his reflection on Moses Taylor and the history of slavery in Manhattan.

Having forgotten the checkbook with which he planned to pay his accountant, Julius goes to a pharmacy to withdraw some cash from the ATM machine, but he types in the wrong pin number and so has his request denied. He tries a number of different pin numbers, but keeps coming up wrong:

Now, as I stood in a little pharmacy on the corner of Water Street and Wall Street, my mind was empty, subject to a nervous condition; this was the expression that came to me as I stood there, as though I had become a minor character in a Jane Austen novel. Such sudden mental weakness, I thought (as the machine asked if I would like to try again, and I did, and failed again), was from a simplified version of the self, an area of simplicity where things had once been more robust [...] I was already late for my meeting with Parrish, who had been recommended to me by a colleague. But I left the pharmacy and wandered around the area, and tried to calm myself down [...] I shivered, and tried to ignore the nervousness, hoping it would simply float away. I went down to Hanover Square and twenty minutes later, having no definite number in mind, went to another machine, this one in the lobby of a bank. I tried the withdrawal again, hoping that the memory in my fingers, their familiarity with the pattern, might bail me out, as it sometimes did in the case of phone numbers. I was surprised the machines permitted so many attempts. In any case, all failed, and I was left with a handful of printed receipts [...] I was awed by this unsuspected area of fragility in myself. (161-2)

In the critical reception of *Open City*, this scene has been cited as an example of the novel's attention to the banality of everyday life. Some postcolonial critics meanwhile have picked up on the allusion Tsitsi Dangarembga's 1988 novel *Nervous Conditions*, and, behind that, a remark of Sartre's in the introduction to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. Nasia Anam, for instance, writes that "[i]n describing his state of mind as a 'nervous condition' in *Open City*, Julius conjures the specter of the traumatized colonized subject," but then asserts that "[t]he conditions that surround this moment of confusion, however, are hardly those of one subjected under an oppressive imperial regime." According to Anam, Julius's sudden onset of nerves should be understood as a "moment of clarity in which he sees the danger of attempting to assimilate to a society that was founded upon global acts of violence" (Ibid.). Anam concludes that Julius's "assimilation into the elite echelons of American and cosmopolitan society is predicated upon an unspoken complicity—if not participation—in that historical violence" (Ibid.).

Madhu Krishnan's commentary on the episode also turns on the allusion to Sartre's introduction to Fanon. Krishnan argues that like the native who is "estranged from history and cast into the debilitating alienation of colonialism, Julius betrays the fundamental severing from context and consequence that marks his emergence in social space as a

moment of rupture” (691). Krishnan arrives at a similar conclusion to that of Anam, arguing that “like the native, Julius, too, remains unaware of his complicity in this very system” (Ibid.).

There is, however, one detail that has been overlooked by critics who discuss this scene and which must radically expand our understanding of it as well as the depth of the ethical and political commitment shaping the novel as a whole. Water Street and Wall Street, where Julius originally tries to withdraw money from the ATM machine in the pharmacy, is the site of the old slave market in Manhattan established in 1711, and not publicly commemorated until 2015, eight years after Cole sends Julius there (and four years after the novel itself was published).<sup>9</sup> Hanover Square, where Julius next goes to try to withdraw money from a machine inside a bank, is the location of the Old New York Cotton Exchange built in 1870.

These facts suggest something a bit different from what might have been inferred from the allusion to Sartre/Fanon. Julius’s nervous condition, it would seem, is a form of racial anxiety produced by his presence at an uncommemorated site of racial violence. For this reason, Gordon’s concept of haunting makes better sense of this scene than Fanon’s concept of colonial trauma, even if Manhattan is to be regarded as an imperial space—which may very well be a suggestion Cole intends, and which would be consistent with the critical view of the Iraq War as a neo-imperialist adventure.

In light of the underlying cause of Julius’s sudden onset of racial haunting, various details in this passage might be given a symbolic reading. For example, Julius’s confusion about the pin number may signify uncertainty about the precise number of victims from the slave trade, while the handful of bank receipts Julius is left clutching may signify the repeated denial of reparations. It is up to the reader, of course, to decide how far they wish to pursue the symbolic reading.

It is this racial haunting, caused by the uncommemorated sites of lower Manhattan’s history of slavery, which immediately precedes Julius’s dispassionate historical reflection. At the end of the chapter, with numerous intervening thoughts that may carry the reader’s mind off in any number of directions, Julius mentions that the following day he received a call from his bank—Citibank—advising him that there had been many failed attempts to withdraw money from his account the previous day. In his historical reflection at Battery Park, he had noted that earlier iterations of some major present-day companies—he cites AT&T and Con Edison—were formed by merchants and bankers at the time New York was such an important part of the triangle trade. Cole leaves it to the sleuthing reader to discover that the City Bank of New York, led by the slavery profiteer Moses Taylor, changed its name in 1955 to First National City Bank of New York and then again in 1976 to Citibank.<sup>10</sup> The narrative points to how over the decades the company continued to reinvent itself, and, we may presume, either never acknowledged its past crimes or, if it did, was tacitly forgiven by the American public.

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<sup>9</sup> Wall Street itself derives its name from a wall built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by slaves owned by the Dutch West India Company to fortify New Amsterdam against an English attack. See [maap.columbia.edu/place/17.html](http://maap.columbia.edu/place/17.html).

<sup>10</sup> As we know, in 2008—a few years after the period covered in *Open City*—Citicorp, the holding company for Citibank, was bailed out by the Obama administration. The bank’s past life—its period of “primitive accumulation,” we might say—naturally did not figure into the discussion about rescuing the financial industry in 2008. Lehman Brothers, for whom Cole has Moji work, began as a cotton brokerage in Alabama and was also directly invested in the slave trade. It filed for bankruptcy in 2008 and was not bailed out.

Julius finally attributes his amnesia to an “encroaching senility,” describing himself as a “pathetic old-young man padding about in the grip of some nervousness” (166). This inexplicable nervousness, moreover, makes him look enviously at the holstered gun of a passing police officer with its “total lack of ambiguity,” highlighting the connection between violence and disempowerment—that is, how possessing the means of violence may be appealing to those who are socially oppressed and who may feel a sense of desperation without understanding why (Ibid.). Julius’s disorientation bleeds over into the next day when the first snowfall of an “unwintry winter” strikes him with a “furious sense of imbalance”—a phrase that may be understood to figure the lack of justice in history—past and present—and the fury this produces, especially for certain young men (166-7).

Though neither the old slave market at Wall Street and Water Street nor the old Cotton Exchange at Hanover Square (founded by Lehman Brothers along with various other cotton merchants and brokers) was commemorated at the time Julius is wandering around there, New York’s history of slavery is in fact partially commemorated. One day when Julius is walking around downtown he comes upon the monument to the African Burial Ground, just north of Wall Street, where 15,000 to 20,000 Africans, most of whom had been slaves, were buried over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The memorial is inconspicuous. On a side street and surrounded by large office buildings, Julius barely notices it.

In his customarily dispassionate tone, he recounts how the land had been “built over and the people of the city had forgotten that it was a burial ground,” until 1991 when excavations for a new building accidentally unearthed the human remains (220). The “squabble about the construction of the monument”—that is, the immediate political controversy over whether and how to commemorate this forgotten history given the value of the real estate—does not interest him (though it obviously interests Cole). Julius remarks, “[w]hat I was steeped in, on that warm morning, was the echo across centuries, of slavery in New York” (221).

As usual, Julius supplies some historical facts about the site, including how it was frequently raided by “cadaver thieves” who sold the bodies for scientific experimentation until the New York Anatomy Act was passed in 1789. Hartwiger interprets Julius’s visit to the African Burial Ground as serving to “trace an uninterrupted economic genealogy” from New York financial profiting off of slavery in the 18<sup>th</sup> century down to the present day as a global financial center (9)—a true enough observation, though more accurately applied to the scene of haunting previously discussed when Julius cannot recall the PIN for his Citibank account.

In terms of the African Burial Ground, what’s more important is the conclusion Julius draws from their manner of burial.<sup>11</sup> Just before noting how they were not buried all

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<sup>11</sup> Julius actually makes a mistake here when he says that “almost all [the coffins] were found to have been oriented toward the east” (221). Julius does not mention that there is a museum connected to the monument, but an informational sign inside the museum contradicts Julius, reading: “Their Heads Were Oriented to the West: Almost all the ancestors here rest with their heads toward the west. African New Yorkers made this their common tradition, even though many of their home cultures did not practice it.” Pointing this out should not at all be seen as critical pedantry. It is but one of several factual mistakes Cole deliberately has Julius make, and attention to detail is an important theme in the narrative, carrying an important ethical significance. Julius is sharply attuned to other people’s errors. For example, when he goes to see *The Last King of Scotland* he notes that the music during the credit sequence was “from the right time period, but not from

together in one mass grave but each one individually according to a variety of different rites, Julius remarks: “How difficult it was, from the point of view of the twenty-first century, to fully believe that these people, with the difficult lives they were forced to live, were truly people, complex in all their dimensions as we are, fond of pleasures, shy of suffering, attached to their families” (221-2). In other words, how difficult it is to imagine them as individuals; and if their individuality is difficult to imagine, even for a black man, it is because they were dehumanized—their names unrecorded, their histories forgotten.<sup>12</sup> Julius’s remark is a softly spoken cultural critique—and therefore, unlike the anger of Farouq or the suicidal despair of V., it is relatively easy to miss—revealing the connections between racialization, dehumanization, the effacement of individuality, and finally the erasure from history.

Lower Manhattan is not the only site of haunting that appears in the narrative. All-white spaces may also be described as haunted by the mostly uncommemorated history of racial violence in New York. Near the end of the narrative—after the scene when Moji confronts Julius about raping her—Julius goes to a performance of Mahler’s Ninth Symphony at Carnegie Hall. Julius remarks that,

it never ceases to surprise me how easy it is to leave the hybridity of the city, and enter into all-white spaces, the homogeneity of which, as far as I can tell, causes no discomfort to the whites in them. The only thing odd, to some of them, is seeing me, young and black, in my seat or at the concession stand. At times, standing in line for the bathroom during intermission, I get looks that make me feel like Ota Benga, the Mbuti man who was put on display in the Monkey House at the Bronx Zoo in 1906. I weary of such thoughts, but I am habituated to them. (252)

The history of Ota Benga, we may fairly safely assume, is not one known by the white New Yorkers at Carnegie Hall, who are unbothered, if we accept Julius’s assumption, by the absence of people of color in the space, and whom, were they to hear Julius comparison of himself to Ota Benga, may very dismiss his feeling much as Dr. Maillotte dismisses Farouq’s grievances about anti-Muslim discrimination in Brussels.

For the most part, *Open City* witnesses uncommemorated histories of racial violence in their psychological effects on individuals, but scenes such as this one suggests that they have more general social effects in “how divided our life still remains” (251). According to Gordon, haunting results from the repression or irresolution of some act of social violence.

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the right part of Africa: what had Mali to do with Kenya?” (29) But then much later in the narrative when he goes to the Munkácsi exhibit he refers to a photograph of “three African boys running into the surf in Liberia” (152), which Karen Jacobs notes is an error on Julius’s part, for the photograph is titled *Three Boys at Lake Tanganyika*, which, on the border of Tanzania, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Zambia, is a few thousand miles from Liberia (99). However erroneous, Julius’s remark about the eastward orientation of the coffins at the African Burial Ground suggests a fidelity of those buried there to the African homeland, or perhaps even that some may have been Muslims, their coffins oriented toward the Holy Land.

<sup>12</sup> One might compare the monument to the African Burial Ground, with its anonymous dead, to another plaque Julius sees downtown, bearing the inscription, “DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF THOSE MEMBERS OF THE POLICE DEPARTMENT WHO LOST THEIR LIVES IN SERVICE TO THE PEOPLE OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK,” and then the names of all the police officers, from 1854 through to 2001 and beyond, who died in the line of duty (57).



Racially homogenous spaces like Carnegie Hall may be regarded as products of this unresolved history and therefore as being haunted spaces.

Writing about Julius's act of witness for the "downtrodden," Messud writes that, "Human memory, even for the unspeakable, is short; and without efforts such as Julius's, an entire violent legacy will remain, unaddressed, beneath the bustling and plausible surface of that bastion of tolerant hybridity that is New York" (n.pag.). Human memory is short indeed—a constant struggle against oblivion. But there is another dimension of remembering and forgetting that *Open City* explores—namely, the role of power and inequality. *Open City's* witness to American histories of racial violence—and its exploration of the individual psychological effects and broader social effects of not commemorating them—is conducted in the context of the tragedy of 9/11. As critics like Mihăilă and Freedman show, the form of 9/11 commemoration singularizes the public trauma in such a way as to obscure or diminish many other traumas ensuing from state—and state-sanctioned—violence.

At one point in the narrative, Julius invokes Freud's theory of mourning and melancholy to diagnose post-9/11 America, remarking that the "mourning had not been completed, and the result had been the anxiety that cloaked the city" (208). After the attacks, the process of mourning was prematurely brought to an end and therefore the traumatic loss was "incorporated" but not "introjected." This diagnosis was fairly common by critics of the Bush administration's declaration, a week after 9/11, that the period of mourning had been concluded and it was now time for retribution through military action in Afghanistan. However, in the context of the novel's witness to the erasure, forgetting, or marginalization of acts of American state violence against racialized populations, we can discern a *shadow diagnosis* in Julius's remarks. The failure of American society to mourn the death of racialized others—Native Americans, Africans, and most recently Muslims in the course of the "War on Terror"—has led to "incorporation" rather than "introjection," such that these histories continue—and will continue—to haunt both individuals and American society more broadly, while simultaneously continuing to shape American foreign policy.

### **Ambiguity and Commitment: Reconciling the Aesthetic and the Political**

I began this chapter by arguing that Moji's confrontation of Julius about raping her when they were teenagers is the interpretive axis of the novel. In framing that scene, Julius reflects on the role of bias in self-representation, which I suggested ought to be understood allegorically as standing for the myth of American exceptionalism. This interpretive judgment provided a basis for explaining the significance of the many references to foundational American violence in the narrative and the counterpointed histories of colonial and postcolonial violence. Through examining the relations between uncommemorated histories of violence and individual psychological suffering—including despair, trauma, and rage—it became possible to see that Julius's wandering only appears to be aimless and that in fact Cole sends his narrator out to map the haunted racial topography of Manhattan. It is this allusive and frequently symbolic meditation on histories of racial violence and the psychosocial effects of not commemorating them publicly that provides the context within the narrative for considering the meaning of Moji's confrontation of Julius about raping her when they were teenagers.

As I mentioned earlier, Julius does not foreshadow Moji's accusation in any clear way. This is what produces the narrative shock and foregrounds the question of his reliability—or rather the meaning of his unreliability, both as a narrator and a moral agent. Moji's entrance into the narrative is framed by a reflection on temporality and the constructed character of the past:

We experience life as a continuity, and only after it falls away, after it becomes the past, do we see its discontinuities. The past, if there is such a thing, is mostly empty space, great expanses of nothing, in which significant persons and events float. Nigeria was like that for: mostly forgotten, except for those few things that I remembered with an outsize intensity. These were the things that had been solidified in my mind by reiteration, that recurred in dreams and daily thoughts: certain faces, certain conversations, which, taken as a group, represented a secure version of the past that I had been constructing since 1992. But there was another, irruptive, sense of things past. (155)

Julius presents his chance reencounter with Moji as occasioning precisely such a rupture with the secure version of the past, but remains initially vague about it. Moji identifies him by his full name, and Julius says that he didn't remember her until she identifies herself, at which point he remembers her, but only—as we later realize—in his secure version of the past, in which she is the younger sister of a high school friend of his from whom he had long since grown apart. Not only does Julius not foreground Moji's subsequent accusation, Cole has him give the reader a deliberate misdirection, speculating that Moji might have remembered him after all these years on account of a "schoolgirl crush" (158)—something that he might have at least potentially believed at the time of the encounter but knows not to be the case in the narrative present. The meaning of this reencounter, or the desire to give it a meaning, is immediately thematized, and then denied, by Moji: "I don't believe in coincidences [...] Something either happens or it doesn't, coincidence has nothing to do with it" (159).

Julius himself later presents her confrontation of him about raping her as a question of meaning. At the conclusion of the detached reflection on bias and justification in the narrative production of the self—in which "we play, and only play, the hero"—with which he frames Moji's accusation, Julius wonders: "And so, what does it mean when, in someone else's version, I am the villain?" (243) To present this as a question of meaning is really to raise the question of whether or not it will have consequences for Julius's self-understanding and generate some form of action on his part, some kind of transformation in his character. And, insofar as we can tell from what follows, it does not. The question of meaning thus falls to the reader, and the key issues concern the form of Julius's presentation of Moji's accusation, the meaning of his silence, and the meaning of the whole scene in the context of the narrative's historical meditation on racial violence, cultural amnesia, and the denial of justice and healing.

In presenting this episode, Julius initially skips over Moji's accusation. He describes his arrival at the party, a conversation he had with Moji's boyfriend John on the balcony, and then how after leaving the party early the following morning he walked across the George Washington Bridge where he came across the aftermath of a car accident that

instilled in him a “vision of needless suffering” (242).<sup>13</sup> It is only then that he jumps back to fill in the ellipsis of Moji’s accusation, introducing it with his philosophical reflection on the role of bias in the narrative construction of the self and consequently the necessary inaccuracy of self-knowledge and, ultimately, the opacity of the self.

Part of the framing of Moji’s accusation is the general truth Julius derives from the experience. The other part of the framing is the expert witness he offers to the truthfulness of her accusation:

I am only too familiar with bad stories—badly imagined, or badly told—because I hear them frequently from patients. I know the tells of those who blame others, those who are unable to see that they themselves, and not the others, are the common thread in all their bad relationships. There are characteristic tics that reveal the essential falsehood of such narratives. But what Moji had said to me that morning, before I left John’s place, and gone up on the George Washington Bridge, and walked the few miles back home, had nothing in common with such stories. She had said it as if, with all of her being, she were certain of its accuracy. (243-4)

At first, Julius presents her accusation as reported speech: “[S]he turned to me and said, in a low and even voice, emotional in its total lack of inflection, that there were things she wished to say to me. And then, with the same flat affect, she said that, in late 1989, when she was fifteen and I was a year younger, at a party her brother had hosted at their house in Ikoyi, I had forced myself on her” (244). Noting Moji’s “flat affect,” Vermeulen writes that Moji is a “typical traumatized subject,” and concludes that “Julius’s inability to connect with her [is] entirely predictable in light of his failure to respond to trauma in the rest of the novel,” judging the meaning of Julius’s own flat affect (or affectlessness) to be an unambiguous sign of his psychological dissociation (53).

Because Julius initially presents this encounter as reported speech, we don’t know if the euphemism for rape belongs to Julius or Moji. Julius continues to recount her charge that after forcing himself on her he pretended like nothing happened and had finally forgotten her, but she had not been able to forget it, “the luxury of denial had not been possible for her” (Ibid.). Julius continues to summarize what she says to him in such a manner as to render it impossible to say who the language belongs to (that is, whether it is reported speech or free indirect discourse). Moji expresses the trauma of the event and charges Julius with being as callous in the present as he was in the past.

And then Julius switches into the first person as he frequently has in recounting other people’s stories. This gives the impression that it is a direct quotation—no mediation—although neither here nor anywhere else in the text is direct speech set off by quotation marks:

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<sup>13</sup> Julius observes that “[t]he accident must have happened not more than fifteen or twenty minutes before I got there” (241). It seems like a rather insignificant detail. But seen in retrospect, that would coincide exactly with Moji’s accusation, which makes it possible, in a speculative mode, to read the accident as an objective correlative for Julius’s unexpressed emotional state at the time of the confrontation. This would suggest that Julius’s affectlessness might be best understood in terms of modernist impersonality.

I know you'll say nothing. I'm just another woman whose story of sexual abuse will not be believed. I know that. Look, bitterness has been eating away at me all this time, because this was so long ago, and it's my word against yours, and you'll say it was consensual, or that it never even happened at all [...] I don't think you've changed at all, Julius. Things don't go away just because you choose to forget them. You forced yourself on me eighteen years ago because you could get away with it, and I suppose you did get away with it. But not in my heart, you didn't [...] But will you say something now? Will you say something? (245)

As she predicts, Julius does not respond. His mind takes flight from the present moment—as it has in various earlier encounters—first to phenomenal experience (the play of morning light on the Hudson) and then to something he read in Camus's notebooks about Nietzsche, in what appears to be a gross evasion of responsibility.<sup>14</sup>

In judging the presentation of the scene, it is necessary to recall something Julius says to Farouq when the latter man compares the stereotyping of Muslims in the post-9/11 world to the stereotyping of African Americans: "that's how power is," Julius observes, "the one who has the power controls the portrayal" (119). When I quoted this line above, I noted that it could be read either as an expression of political radicalism or cynicism—and therefore motivated either by the *longing for justice* or the *resignation to its absence*. While it is necessary to consider Julius's portrayal of Moji's accusation in light of this remark about the role of power in representation, the analysis of how power is operating in this scene is far from straightforward. In the first place, Julius is obliged by no one to share this episode. It is not as though Julius reveals this about himself in spite of an attempt to hide it. Indeed, this points to one of the chief difficulties of the scene: it is self-interest, the machinations of the ego, that produces inaccurate self-knowledge and even self-deception, but the voluntary revelation of Moji's accusation—and Julius's validation of its truth on the basis of his professional expertise—runs counter to self-interest.

Moreover, Julius does not even relativize Moji's account by juxtaposing an alternative version of events. When Moji first enters the narrative, Julius recalls a party at her brother Dayo's house, "a wild one, with lots of drinking" (157). He does not mention Moji in connection with this party. And it is not even clear that it is the same party, for Julius dates it back 13 years from the narrative present to 1992 whereas Moji dates the rape back to a party 18 years previously (157, 245).

Nor does he claim that there was a misunderstanding as he did in a previous scene that ambiguously prefigures this one. Earlier in the narrative Julius tells a story from his days at the military academy in Nigeria where he was sent by his father for high school. One day the music teacher Musibau, a low-ranking officer, publicly accuses Julius of stealing his newspaper. "I stood in mute confusion," Julius recalls. "It was a case of mistaken identity" (82). He had picked up the newspaper after lunch, but it had not occurred to him

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<sup>14</sup> The anecdote has to do with how Nietzsche, as a school boy, picked up a hot coal with his bare hand, emulating a Roman hero, in order to demonstrate his willpower and "contempt for pain." The chapter ends with Julius noting that the story about Nietzsche had been embellished. His strength of will—the highest ideal of patriarchal masculinity—was exaggerated. That it comes to Julius at precisely this moment suggests that this masculine ideal, which chiefly involves the suppression of emotion, has shaped Julius's personality to a degree we may not have hitherto realized.

that it belonged to someone else and so he hadn't regarded the act as theft. Julius is caned in front of the other boys as punishment and recalls that the event ultimately boosted his status among the other boys for his demonstration of fearlessness which contributed to the development, he says, of a "somewhat callous self-confidence" (84). The scene of Moji's accusation echoes the earlier scene of Musibau's accusation—for the reader attuned to the echoes across narrative time—in suggestive but ultimately ambiguous ways.

The scene of Moji's accusation is difficult to judge because Julius presents it, bears witness to its truthfulness, doesn't challenge or relativize it, and yet doesn't admit to having committed the crime and doesn't apologize or express any regret. On the one hand, the scene can be read as a divestment of the power of representation—Julius makes space for the other, allowing Moji's perspective to decenter his narrative authority—while on the other hand Julius's silence, both in the moment and afterward, underscores his social power as a man and, as Moji attests, the freedom he thereby enjoys from being held accountable for his misdeeds.

What's more, the form of presentation—especially the lack of foreshadowing, which would be one characteristic of a confession—suggests that this episode is, for Julius, not at all the point toward which the narrative was tending but just another encounter equal in importance to all the others that feature in the narrative. And this points to another difficulty introduced by the scene. How is Julius's behavior—both the rape and his silence when confronted about it—to be reconciled with the ethical content of the rest of the narrative—both the implied ethics of narrative witness and Julius's explicit (if intermittent and inconclusive) ethical reflections?

Julius raises ethical questions at many points in the narrative. He describes himself as being distrustful of causes and partisanship as well as the "rage and rhetoric" that tends to accompany them, but then worries that having no causes constitutes "an ethical lapse greater than rage itself" (107). Later, wandering around Brussels, he comes across a bust of Nazi collaborator Paul Claudel and recalls W.H. Auden's lines: "Time will pardon Paul Claudel, pardons him for writing well." This causes Julius to reflect: "I wondered if indeed it was that simple, if time was so free with memory, so generous with pardons, that writing well could come to stand in the place of an ethical life" (144-5).<sup>15</sup> Julius then notes that Claudel was by no means the only ethically tarnished figure publicly memorialized in Brussels, while his invocation of Claudel is shadowed by another Belgian named Paul—de Man—whose youthful flirtation with fascism, pardoned by some though not by others, came back to haunt him late in his life.

The most explicit form that Julius's ethical reflection takes has to do with his views on the professional ethics of psychiatry. At one point in the narrative he recalls that in medical school he had a female professor—replacing an older male professor who was dismissed for making derogatory comments about Asians—who modeled "what a compassionate practice might look like," which inspired Julius with his "stubbornly held

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<sup>15</sup> This question is ultimately to be put to Julius, who "writes" well, inasmuch as Cole's narrative has been lauded for its lyricism. In another register, Cole shows how time—or rather the public—has effectively pardoned slave profiteers like Moses Taylor, and countless others, inasmuch as the companies they built continue to exist, reaping huge profits for those who run them or are invested in them, and sometimes crashing the whole economy through speculative greed.

and somewhat naïve vision [...] of what psychiatry really ought to be about: provisional, hesitant, and as kind as possible” (207-8).

Later in the narrative, Julius shares his humanistic approach to psychiatry with his unnamed friend: “I told him that I viewed each patient as a dark room, and that, going into that room, in a session with the patient, I considered it essential to be slow and deliberate. Doing no harm, the most ancient of medical tenets, was on my mind all the time” (238). Even if we attribute the assumed ethical impulse behind historical witness to the author rather than the narrator, we still have to consider Julius’s silence in light of the broader ethical reflection Cole gives to him and specifically to his stated professional ethics. Of course, it may be taken as an example of the co-existence of cultural refinement on the one hand and monstrous cruelty on the other hand, as seen in some racist Enlightenment thinkers and subsequently the Nazis. In Julius’s case, there is no answer to the question, but, if nothing else, connecting these disparate moments in the narrative fleshes out the complexity and ambiguity of the scene.

If Moji’s confrontation of Julius about raping her when they were teenagers constitutes, as Julius says, an “irruptive sense of things past” challenging the “secure version of the past,” then we might see Moji’s scene as echoing, in the sphere of interpersonal relations, the accidental discovery of the African Burial Ground in lower Manhattan in 1991. Both are instances of the “return of the repressed” (that may additionally point to the 9/11 attacks inasmuch as they were frequently portrayed by critics of the Bush regime as an instance of “imperial blowback”). With the discovery of the African Burial Ground, New York City’s history of slavery—not unknown to scholars of course, though not publicly commemorated—was suddenly revealed to the public. It was a history in which several present-day corporations and banks were implicated. How to commemorate the African Burial Ground was a site of political struggle. It was ultimately commemorated—though rather inconspicuously, as Julius subtly observes, especially if one were to compare it to the memorial commemorating the tragedy of September 11.<sup>16</sup>

Pursuing the logic of the analogy, we might see Julius’s portrayal of Moji’s accusation as a weak form of commemoration. If Moji’s accusation does not lead to any great crisis or transformation in Julius, we can see that the accidental discovery of the African Burial Ground did not lead to any great public reckoning about New York’s history of slavery. Such a line of reasoning, of course, in which more and more examples might be adduced of power escaping accountability, of power reinventing itself, and of power remaining silent about past misdeeds or disavowing responsibility through some sort of “mistakes were

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<sup>16</sup> In *Precarious Life*, another book that Cole is in dialogue with, Judith Butler argues that “certain forms of grief become nationally recognized and amplified, whereas other losses become unthinkable and ungreivable” (xiv). While the losses of 9/11 are “consecrated in public obituaries that constitute so many aspects of nation-building,” while the victims of American state violence—both in America and elsewhere—are erased, producing a “national melancholia” (Ibid.). Sontag notes this erasure in *Regarding the Pain of Others* when she observes that there is no museum of history of slavery in Washington D.C.: “To have a museum chronicling the great crime that was African slavery in the United States of America would be to acknowledge that the evil was *here*. Americans prefer to picture the evil that was *there*, and from which the United States—a unique nation, one without any certifiably wicked leaders throughout its entire history—is exempt. That this country, like every other country, has its tragic past does not sit well with the founding, and still all-powerful, belief in American exceptionalism” (88). The problematic absence of such a museum was finally resolved with the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C. in 2016.

made” type of admission, can very quickly lead to cynicism—or despair. And yet, the “irruptive sense of history”—an allusion to Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History”—will always present an opportunity to do justice, heal a wound, and make a positive intervention in the generally amoral course of history.

Julius’s silence in response to Moji’s accusation of raping her may signify, as Moji asserts, his callousness. However, it may also signify Julius’s genuine inability to remember the event and therefore his shock, or his remembering of it differently though refraining to say so, or a tacit and contemptible acknowledgement of his power to remain silent in the security that he will not be held accountable, or that his mind is, as Vermeulen argues, “fatefully dissociated,” a diagnosis that may include amnesia (genuine or feigned) or may be focused on his pathological affectlessness (42).<sup>17</sup>

If Julius’s remarks about the role of bias and selective remembering in the construction of self-identity is intended to resonate as national allegory—as I believe to be the case—then Julius’s dissociation *qua* amnesia ought to likewise be considered from an allegorical perspective, perhaps signifying a pathology of power and a mechanism for justifying domination. Understood as affectlessness or lack of empathy, however, Julius’s dissociation might be taken, firstly, as a pathology of masculinity, and, secondly, as standing for American callousness with respect to Iraqi suffering caused by a war of choice (and also with respect to many forms of suffering and injustice in the U.S.)<sup>18</sup>

But dissociation is not the only reading one can have of Julius’s symptomatic behavior. Julius may suffer from dissociative identity disorder, as many critics have understood it, or he may be suffering in a non-pathological way. As noted earlier, Julius’s various remarks about V.’s imperceptible anguish presents the interesting possibility that Julius himself is likewise suffering—even, we must imagine, suffering shame about having raped Moji when he was a teenager—without showing signs of it.<sup>19</sup> Julius may be, moreover, like the father in Erice’s *El espíritu de la colmena* who is “shell-shocked, or in the cage of some memory he cannot talk about” (198).

*Open City* is a vast echo chamber or hall of mirrors and the reader who is attuned to such echoes and reflections can develop a slew of conjectures about Julius, though nothing can ultimately be decided because Julius is himself a “dark room.” Julius hides behind his intelligence and does not allow the reader to glimpse what is going on in his heart. He is like one of Brewster’s portraits, with their “air of hermeticism,” each one a “sealed-away world, visible from without, but impossible to enter,” or like the African woman he sees in the church in Brussels, who he speculates may have fled violence in her homeland—coming to Belgium to forget something terrible she either did or witnessed—but who, like the

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<sup>17</sup> It does not clear anything up to note that Julius is susceptible to periodic aphasia as when a guard at the American Folk Art Museum comes up to tell him that the museum will be closing shortly and he says, “I forgot how to speak and simply looked at him” (40).

<sup>18</sup> Noting the appearance of the trope of amnesia in multiple post-9/11 novels (though, again, not *Open City*), Giordana Banita compellingly argues that it represents a “a dissociative syndrome in contemporary consciousness about confusing ‘gaps’ in memory and history; a generalized puzzlement about how we arrived at the present point and how to proceed” (5).

<sup>19</sup> In reference to the horrors of Idi Amin’s regime in Uganda, Julius says: “I wondered, as Coetzee did in *Elizabeth Costello*, what the use was of going into these recesses of the human heart. Why show torture? Was it not enough to be told, in imprecise detail, that bad things happened?” (31)

women in Vermeer's paintings, "possessed her secrets fully," her "silence seem[ing] absolute" (37, 140).

On the one hand, Julius may be callous as Moji claims—a "heartless king" like Leopold II, or like any of the other monstrous historical figures who appear in the text. On the other hand, he may be suffering in a way that is disguised, perhaps as part of a stoical "contempt for pain" (246)—his own pain—traumatized, as it were, by his masculine socialization in a patriarchal society and the military academy where he accrued "some sort of manly virtue," or simply depressed in a way that he himself doesn't recognize (81). Though this is a narrative that employs the trope of tragic self-recognition, and though Julius once describes himself as being one of the "still legible crowd," he is ultimately legible neither to himself nor to the reader (59). If Julius's psychiatric ethics stand for an ethics of reading as I've suggested, then it is worth recalling his remark that, unlike many other kinds of doctors, psychiatrists often "feel the absence of neat solutions" (44).

The ethical ambiguity of Julius's silence in response to Moji's accusation follows from the various ambiguities of the scene itself—the climax of an apparently plotless narrative—which might justifiably be marked "*schwer*" (difficult) as Julius tells us Mahler marked the final movement of *Das Lied von der Erde*, one of *Open City's* principal intertexts (17). The text nonetheless contains an important ethical insight: We can't truly know ourselves unless we listen to how we are seen by others, not because they are always right, but because the ego, with its illusions and projections, nearly always distorts reality. Out of Julius's arrogance and apparent indifference to Moji's suffering comes an ethics of humility and a recognition of the self's moral responsibility to the other, who too often—indeed, almost by definition—occupies the blind spot of the self.<sup>20</sup>

This, ultimately, may explain Cole's decision to make the return of a repressed act of sexual violence the climax of a narrative that has been about numerous culturally repressed acts of racial violence: it exposes the blind spot of the singular perspective. As a black man in America Julius is disempowered with respect to white men, but as a man he is empowered in a way he doesn't seem to recognize—or at least never explicitly reflects on—with respect to women. Near the beginning of the narrative, Julius is sitting in his apartment when a Take Back the Night anti-rape demonstration passes by on the street beneath his window. "*Women's bodies, women's lives, we will not be terrorized,*" is one of the chants accompanied by the beating of a drum (23). Julius shuts the window, noting that "[i]t was only a little bit cooler outside than it was in the apartment"—in other words, that but for the irritating disturbance of the noisy demonstrators on the street he would have left the window open for some cool air, but will choose the stuffiness of the apartment over the noise of the protest.

It is possible to give a reading of the entire text in which this anti-rape demonstration—a single moment that hardly stands out from the great mass of other moments in the narrative—catalyzes the return of the repressed memory of the rape, generating all the various subsequent symptoms and sending Julius out wandering through the streets as it—the repressed memory—seeks some form of expression, which finally

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<sup>20</sup> In her early review of the novel, Messud came to a similar understanding of the novel's ethics, which she articulated thus: "Each of us, no matter how clearly we see others, is guilty of potentially criminal blindness with regard to ourselves. The violence that we do and that is done to us remains, like the violence of our culture itself, often invisible." (n. pag.)



comes about through his chance encounter with Moji.<sup>21</sup> But what is really important here, I think, is a casual observation that Julius makes when he looks out the window at the demonstrators: they're all women.<sup>22</sup> Whether or not shutting the window may be taken to signify a personal act of repression, it certainly represents a deafness to a particular form of violence that does not generally affect him as a man though he is vulnerable to racial and criminal forms of violence. Cole undoubtedly is conscious of this, which is why, against all appearances, *Open City* may be described as a feminist book.

If *Open City* is seen to make such points—to have a determinate political and ethical commitment—it is certainly not through the novel's center of consciousness. Julius has no firm political commitments and his ethics—spanning the personal to the professional—are highly inconsistent, to say the least—more theoretical than practical. And yet, it would be an error to conflate the narrative and authorial perspectives. Julius is not in any sense committed, but Cole definitely is. All one need do is read some of Cole's nonfiction writing to see that deep ethical commitments inform his politics.<sup>23</sup>

Cole's commitment, however, is not just to equality and justice, but to truth as well. The difference between the narrative and authorial perspectives can be established by evidence internal to the text. Cole knows things that Julius does not, like the fact that Julius is standing at the uncommemorated site of the old New York slave market when he has his anxiety attack. Julius is not wandering through the city; he is being drawn about by the author's invisible hand, as he more than once intuits. And if the connections between racial violence, historical amnesia, and psychosocial trauma are not merely a product of this reader's paranoid mind, then there is an invisible structure to Julius's wandering consciousness and his acts of witness that is undeniably purposive—not making an argument or advocating for a cause but revealing truths about the blind spots and distortions of the self and the nation.

The relationship between the work's contrapuntal form and its purposiveness has naturally been understood in different ways. Hartwiger sees Julius's postcolonial *flânerie* and the work's contrapuntal structure as ultimately yielding a "thematic unity," which he identifies as serving to problematize the branding of New York as a global city (7). Vermeulen, meanwhile, reads the work as a "catalog of failed attempts to live up to the expectation of achieved polyphonic form" (47). Since he understands Julius as representing aesthetic cosmopolitanism—and the program of aesthetic cosmopolitanism as being the promotion of empathy—Vermeulen sees the failure of the narrative to achieve polyphonic form as signifying Cole's interrogation of the ethical claims frequently made on behalf of aesthetic cosmopolitanism.

In my reading of the text, I've attempted to show that there is a logic to the form (or a thematic unity)—though it is one that Cole leaves up to the reader to articulate, largely through interpreting Julius's enigmatic (and often symptomatic) behaviors, including his extreme reticence and real or apparent affectlessness. If the work nevertheless fails to

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<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the "heart-altering thump of [the demonstrators's] martial drum" (24) does seem to be the cause of the subsequent—and otherwise inexplicable—"bellowing in [his] ribs" as he walks through Central Park (43).

<sup>22</sup> "Then, as the crowd, all of them young women, passed under the streetlamps, their chanting became clearer. *We have the power, we the might*, the solitary voice called. The answer came: *The streets are ours, take back the night*" (22-3).

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, "A Reader's War," *The New Yorker* 10 Feb 2013.

produce polyphonic form in the sense of a harmonious whole, it may very well be because the work is reflecting (on) the radical disharmony of the contemporary world.

In the course of a wide-ranging conversation with Farouq in Brussels, Farouq expresses his view that the “social function” of Tahar Ben Jelloun’s fiction is “suspect,” whereas Mohamed Choukri’s fiction is more “authentic,” being “connected with everyday life and with the history of the people” (103). Critics who conflate the narrative and authorial perspectives miss how deeply committed *Open City* is. Julius is personally disconnected from the everyday life and history of the people—many of whom disturb the precarious state of wellbeing he creates through reflection and aesthetic consumption—but as a psychiatrist-*flâneur* he brings a variety of other characters into the narrative field of representation who share their everyday lives, struggles, and sorrows all of which have explicitly political dimensions, raising questions about power and injustice. Cole’s great sleight of hand trick is to make the work seem apolitical, or at least politically vague, such that the ethical and political impulse behind it do not sideline its aesthetic qualities as a work of art.

Though for the most part the novel has not been interpreted explicitly in terms of post-9/11 fiction, *Open City* intervenes strongly in the politics of post-9/11 world. It undermines American exceptionalism through witnessing American histories of racial violence. It decenters 9/11 trauma and commemoration by witnessing traumas ensuing from uncommemorated histories of racial violence. It allegorizes national amnesia and the encounter with the accusatory other whose different perspective destabilizes the narrative of the self. Its contrapuntal method links (without equating) the Native American genocide, the enslavement of Africans and subsequent history of anti-black violence, and official and public indifference to Muslim victims in the “War on Terror.” It explores the processes of racialization, dehumanization, and historical erasure and then shows how similar processes are at work along a different axis of inequality (gender) by finally turning to another form of violence (sexual). The narrative witnesses how extant social inequalities determine what is commemorated (how and by whom), showing how the repression of histories of violence prolong psychological traumas and deepen social divisions, and finally dramatizing how—in an offense to justice and a denial of healing—power is rarely held to account. All of this emerges from Cole’s work—which remarkably does not seem polemical and even appears to some as being apolitical—such that it may be judged to successfully reconcile the “social function” of fiction with its more purely aesthetic concerns.

### **Beyond the Political: The Spiritual Meaning of *Open City***

The closing image of *Open City* reinforces the political interpretation of the novel that I have been arguing for. In the concluding pages of the novel, after having a transcendent aesthetic experience listening to Mahler’s Ninth Symphony at Carnegie Hall, Julius accepts a random invitation to get on a cruise boat leaving from the Chelsea pier. Such a scene figures in a number of post-9/11 novels (including *Netherland*) whereby viewing the transformed Manhattan skyline provides an opportunity to register and reflect on the tragedy of 9/11. Rather than the absent Twin Towers, however, it is the Statue of Liberty—the great monument symbolizing American freedom and hospitality—that comes into view for Julius. After noting that since September 11 nobody has been allowed to go inside the statue and climb to the top, he recalls that the statue originally served as a

lighthouse and that the flame emanating from the statue's torch served to guide ships into the harbor. An unintended consequence of the Statue of Liberty's eternal flame, however, was that it disorientated migrating birds who frequently flew into the statue and died.

Critics writing about the novel have given this passage the political reading it clearly invites. Mihăilă, for instance, sees the bird deaths as symbolic of the trauma which in various forms has marred the American dream" (294). Anam describes the bird deaths as a "rich metonym of the grand American experiment's collateral damage" echoing the "tension between the statue's sculptural form and the poem carved at its base" (n.pag.). Freedman describes it as a "powerful image for ambivalence," interpreting the bird deaths as "stand[ing] in for the unnamed dead of the twin towers but also for all of the casualties of freedom, from the Black Atlantic to the border wall, those who lost and lose their lives on their way to the land of liberty" (185).

In addition to the political significance of this passage, and of the novel as a whole, there is a deeper level of meaning—a *spiritual* meaning. I wish to suggest that the ultimate interpretive horizon of the novel is spiritual, if only because meaning is a spiritual need, as Julius himself exemplifies, however ambiguously.

It must be noted that while the novel encourages the hermeneutic effort formally through its numerous ambiguities, it simultaneously sends the contrary message by having Julius more than once express fear that he may have become "one of those people, the overinterpreters" (28). It is possible to read Julius's remarks about overinterpretation as signifying an authorial proscription against interpretation—perhaps coming from a strictly formalist position—but I interpret it rather as a warning against bringing pre-existing interpretive codes—especially a psychoanalytic one—to making sense of the text. The real danger in reading *Open City* is under-interpretation.

Throughout the narrative, Julius is preoccupied with the question of meaning. His intellectual practice of making connections—instructing the reader in what he or she must do in order to make sense of his narrative—is precisely a matter of making meaning. Counterpoint and echo are the major tropes in the novel for the act of making meaning. To give just two examples, near the beginning of the novel Julius describes his ex-girlfriend Nadège's voice over the phone as being in counterpoint with the chants emanating from the anti-rape demonstrators on the street (24). A bit later in the narrative, he perceives a link between Nadège and a girl he knew he was growing up—on the basis of a similarly disguised physical deformity—and likens it to "John the Baptist's echo of Elijah," in what is surely an allusion to Eric Auerbach's discussion of Christian typological reading in his famous essay "Figura" (61).

The typological interpretation of Christian hermeneutics—by which Old Testament characters such as Elijah "prefigure" New Testament characters such as John the Baptist who come to "fulfill" them—occurs within a universe created by a providential God, and throughout the narrative the question of meaning is associated with religion (and religion with consolation). Julius's relationship to religion is as interesting, complicated, and uncertain as is his relationship to race. While walking around near Wall St., he considers going into Trinity Church to pray for his patient M., but the church gate is locked. When asked by the detained Liberian refugee Saidu if he is a Christian, Julius recalls that he "hesitated, then told him I supposed I was," and then agrees to pray for the man (64). Later, in a completely different context, he says that prayer was for him "not a device for getting what one wanted out of life" but rather a "therapy of being present, of giving a name to the

heart's desires, the fully formed ones, the as yet formless ones" (215). Recalling his time in medical school, Julius remarks that while all the students were "deeply sensitive to the suffering of our patients," he himself was one "of a tiny minority, as far as I could tell, who thought incessantly of the soul, or worried about its place in all this carefully calibrated knowledge" (206).

From the religious perspective, meaning is something that inheres in the natural world and historical events. Julius observes that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century a whale beaching—common at the time and linked, it seems, to the Little Ice Age—was interpreted as a "message from the deep," and that for the Dutch, "who were attempting, at the time, not only to define their new republic but also to consolidate their hold on New Amsterdam and other foreign possessions, the spiritual meaning of the whale was ever-present" (51).

While spiritual meaning can be ambiguous, usually it was a source of consolation. Watching some sparrows in flight, Julius reflects on "how often people took comfort, whether consciously or not, in the idea that God himself attended to these homeless travelers with something like personal care [...] For many, the birds in flight were proof that we, too, were under heaven's protection, that there is indeed a special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (181).

Julius's meditation on meaning culminates with a discussion of simpling when he visits the Cloisters Museum with his unnamed friend (shortly before the scene with Moji). Simpling, Julius explains in the museum's medieval-style herb garden, was the "quasi-mystical art by which the medicinal properties of plants were related to their physical appearance" (237). Julius then remarks that, "This is where the search for meaning had led our medieval ancestors: to the certainty that God, who made all of creation, had scattered clues to the useful functions of created things in those things, and that only a little vigilance was necessary to decode those clues" (Ibid.).

Julius reflection on simpling illustrates the way his brilliant and encyclopedic mind works. He connects medieval simpling to the "search for Signs" of the sixteenth-century humanist Paracelsus, who posited that the form of a thing reflected its "inner reality" (Ibid.). Noting in passing that this theory of meaning was subsequently expressed in the "debased forms of phrenology, eugenics, and racism," it was the soul of medieval and early modern art: "unless the work of art addressed the question of an inner life, its external Signs would be empty" (Ibid.) Julius finally connects simpling to his own diagnostic practice as a psychiatrist, underscoring the difficulty of interpreting the signs of psychopathology, not least because the "mind is able to deceive itself"—"is opaque to itself"—and the "lens through which the symptoms are viewed is often, itself, symptomatic," which leads Julius to affirm the "most ancient of medical tenets," that of "[d]oing no harm" (238).

The signs of which Cole's novel is composed are thoroughly ambiguous, but not, I think, indecipherable. Unlike the uncreated world we inhabit, *Open City* has an author, who has scattered clues throughout his creation—or more precisely *cues* to the reader on how he or she might go about making meaning out of the seemingly endless flow of details, anecdotes, allusions, and echoes that compose the text. These cues, we might say, point to the work's "inner life," but to apprehend them requires a great deal of vigilance, fidelity to the text, and no doubt a will to make meaning out of a narrative that resists meaning by closely imitating the flow of historical time.

At the beginning of the narrative Julius refers to his walks around New York as "aimless wandering" and "aimless progress" (7). The latter phrase may be seen to be a

pretty good description of the plotlessness of the novel's narrative form. The phrase is conspicuous on account of its oddness—after all, who describes walking as progress?—though there are so many subsequent oddities and enigmas in the narrative that the reader is not likely to fixate on this phrase for long. However, in consideration of the narrative's witness to the violence of modernity—up to and including 9/11 and the retaliatory violence of the “War on Terror” and the invasion and occupation of Iraq—the phrase begins to resonate with significance.

Julius describes his “aimless progress” through the streets of Manhattan as the “counterpoint” to his stressful work at the hospital where, in addition to seeing patients, he is conducting research on the “affective disorders of the elderly” (Ibid.). This is another phrase that resonates with significance in the context of the narrative as a whole. Julius's affective disorders are on display throughout the narrative and are forcefully communicated during (and after) the scene in which Moji confronts him about raping her. This is the basis for the diagnosis of Vermeulen and others of Julius's dissociation.

I propose that at the deepest level *Open City* is a symbolic meditation on the “aimless progress” of modernity and the “affective disorders” of late capitalism. This interpretation draws together three major thematic threads of the novel: historical violence, emotional numbness or callousness, and ethical failure (including the acceptance of present injustice and the forgetting of past injustices).

Behind this world, there is no providential Christian deity, though there may be other supernatural forces at work. “I got the idea that some of the things I was seeing around me were under the aegis of Obatala,” Julius says early on in the narrative after seeing a crippled man and two blind men in the subway (25). Previously, I suggested that on account of the color symbolism of Obatala and his cult of devotees, he might be function as the deity of American racial trauma, but now I wish to suggest that he should be understood as the deity of trauma in a more general sense. Julius describes everyone on the subway—including himself—as “reenacting unacknowledged traumas” (7). The whole narrative, it might reasonably be said, is under the “aegis of Obatala.”

If Christian providence originally provided capitalist modernity with its mythos of the invisible hand producing wellbeing for all, it may be that Yoruba mythology is necessary to explain the traumas of present day global capitalism—not the invisible hand of the providential deity but the careless hand of the drunken one who creates deformed human beings.<sup>24</sup> And the truly important deformities that appear in the text are not the physical ones that Julius is keenly aware of but rather the spiritual and emotional ones that misshape him (and others). Only someone who can't properly read the signs—like the young woman Julius observes learning Chinese at a diner—would confuse the World Trade Organization with the World Health Organization (216). In this symbolic way, Cole's narrative presents a spiritual diagnosis of capitalist modernity, past and present—and even its future, if we take a thought Julius has after the picnic scene in Central Park as a prognosis or prophecy: “[S]ometimes it is hard to shake the feeling that, all jokes aside, there really is an epidemic of sorrow sweeping our world, the full brunt of which is being borne, for now, by only a luckless few” (208).

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<sup>24</sup> “Nothing in a man's life happens except as ordained from on high,” the pious Christian Pierre Touissant tells Julius (74). But who is on high?

A number of critics have remarked upon the melancholy tone of the work, but the tone, I think, is actually quite difficult to name, because there is so much emotional restraint in the narrative voice and almost everything important in the novel is communicated through implication. But the outlook of the novel, suggested by the interpretation of its spiritual allegory, is bleak. For example, whereas Moji is animated by an environmental concern and an impulse to change her lifestyle in response to climate change, Julius contemplates a world after humanity dispassionately (198, 257). Indeed, I would suggest that Julius's pessimism is figured symbolically in the text by the way he allows his relationship to his girlfriend Nadège to disintegrate. Nadège is the French version of the Russian name Nadezhda (a version of Nadia), which literally means "hope" and echoes Russian writer Nadezhda Mandelstam whose two most famous works are *Hope Against Hope* and *Hope Abandoned*. One may ultimately wonder if the highly aestheticized suicide ideation that Julius attributes to his unnamed friend is not in fact to be understood as his own.

As discussed above, the political significance of the novel's closing image of migrating birds who become disoriented by the torch of the Statue of Liberty and meet their deaths flying into it is clear. It also signifies on the level of the spiritual allegory. In the first place, the image of dying birds belongs to a pattern of animal death imagery running throughout the novel. I have already noted Julius's description of a series of mysterious whale beachings in the 17<sup>th</sup> century that contemporary interpreters of its "spiritual meaning" connected to "dramatic weather patterns" (50). Later, during the picnic scene in Central Park, the subject of the mysterious collapse of bee colonies comes up in the course of conversation, leading Lise-Anne (the girlfriend of Julius's unnamed friend) to suggest that "maybe bees are sensitive, unusually sensitive, to all the negativity in the human world. Maybe they are connected to us in some essential way that we haven't figured out yet, and their death is a warning of some sort to us, like the canaries in a coal mine, sensitive to an emergency that will soon be apparent to dull, slow human beings" (200). Though Julius doesn't himself speculate on the meaning of the bird deaths, he undercuts the naturalistic explanation when he observes that the "sense persisted that something more troubling was at work" (259). As far as the novel's spiritual allegory is concerned, in Western art history—and literary history as well—birds are frequently symbols of the soul, which Julius notes in regard to John Brewster and Goya, suggesting that, interpreted for its spiritual meaning, the work's closing image signifies the death *en masse* of the soul.

### **The Song of the Earth**

In this chapter I have attempted to show that a deep political and ethical commitment is shaping *Open City*. This is not an ideological commitment, but simply a commitment to equality and justice. This entails a political critique of American exceptionalism, but Julius's insight about self-bias and self-blindness is not purely allegorical. Injustice originates with the ego and exceptionalism is its fundamental fantasy.

I regard the novel as a response to the Iraq War—a war of aggression and a war of choice that demonstrated a complete negligence toward the lives and well-being of Iraqi citizens and many in neighboring countries—but it is just as much a response to the question of what to do with one's grief and anger at the ignorance and cruelty of the world, passions Cole has channeled into creating a work of art.

The way I have interpreted this novel implies the “resurrection” of the author. Cole does not force any meanings on the reader—quite the contrary—but my experience of reading the work has been the sense that a very intricate structure lies behind the apparent formlessness of the narrative surface. This sense of an intricate structure may of course be an illusion generated by the tropes of counterpoint and echo that prompt the reader to “perceive” patterns and in effect produce meanings. But while reading the novel I had the feeling that nearly every detail was significant, which is the language Julius uses to describe his experience of the world itself after listening to Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde*.

Given the structural importance of the trope of counterpoint in the novel, an informed musicological reading of *Open City* must be done, as well as an analysis of the work’s intertextual relationship to Mahler’s music, which I suspect may be quite detailed. Cole’s sensitivity to the forms of human (and non-human) suffering suggest that *Open City* may rightly be seen as his own “Song of the Earth.”

Moreover, I believe that a remark that Cole gives to Julius concerning Mahler’s music may be taken as an expression of his ambition for *Open City*. Near the end of the novel Julius goes to Carnegie Hall to hear Mahler’s Ninth Symphony, the composer’s last work before he died. Immediately after describing how being in an all-white space like Carnegie Hall makes him feel like Ota Benga, Julius says: “But Mahler’s music is not white, or black, not old or young, and whether it is even specifically human, rather than in accord with more universal vibrations, is open to question” (252). In my view, whatever claim *Open City* could make to being universal would not result from its transcendence of the category of the human but through realizing the deepest form of humanity through attunement to the suffering of others and the sorrows of the world.

## Epilogue

In March 2018, an Op-Ed appeared in the *New York Times* entitled, “Fifteen Years Ago, America Destroyed My Country.” The writer of the piece was Iraqi poet, novelist, translator, and NYU professor Sinan Antoon, who has been living in the United States since the end of the first Gulf War in 1991. Shortly after the 2003 invasion, he travelled to Iraq to make a documentary film entitled *About Baghdad*. Since 2003, he has published four novels, the most recent being *Fihris* (2016), the English translation of which is scheduled to be published in 2019 with the title *The Book of Collateral Damage*. In the *New York Times* piece Antoon writes:

No one knows for certain how many Iraqis died as a result of the invasion 15 years ago. Some credible estimates put the number at more than one million. You can read that sentence again. The invasion of Iraq is often spoken of in the United States as a ‘blunder,’ or even a ‘colossal mistake.’ It was a crime. Those who perpetrated it are still at large. Some of them have been rehabilitated thanks to the horrors of Trumpism and a mostly amnesiac citizenry... (n.pag.)

Antoon’s indictment of America echoes the indictment Hamid has his narrator make in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and it is present in one form or another in each of the other works I’ve considered under the rubric of the “post-American novel.”

The political protest may issue from the novel’s center of consciousness as it does in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Lazarus Project*, rendering them overtly political works, or the protest may alternatively be expressed by secondary characters as it is in *Netherland* and *Open City*—each of which has an apolitical narrator—and therefore be covert. In the latter case, it is the combination of the explicit protest from secondary characters and the exploration of historical amnesia, American exceptionalism, and the traumatic afterlives of the foundational violence of the nation that reveal the novel’s mode of critical engagement with the “War on Terror.” *Netherland* can hardly be called a protest novel, yet it inarguably bears the mark of the international protest against the Iraq War. *Open City* meanwhile is a protest novel at a very deep level—and then so much more beyond that.

In addition to clearly marking their post-9/11 historical context and offering a critical (dissenting) perspective on the “War on Terror,” these novels share a number of formal features. They are all, of course, written by immigrant or international authors, featuring cosmopolitan immigrant narrators, which is a defining feature of the post-American category. I do not believe that international writers in general have some privileged perspective on American culture, but their literary expressions of dissent, from cosmopolitan perspectives, merit their own special categorization.

As immigrant (or post-immigrant) novels, one of their common modalities of critique is the interrogation of the American dream—presently and historically—and the formal subversion of the classic immigrant narrative. Each of these novels ends with the narrator leaving America—emigrating away from America, though not in a uniformly bitter mood—except *Open City*. In Cole’s novel, the narrator, severed from all social connections,



remains in New York City, yet the novel concludes with the evocative image of migrant birds meeting their deaths as they crash into the Statue of Liberty (which has likewise been a major problem with the Tribute in Light every year on 9/11 honoring the 3,000 lives lost in the terrorist attacks).

The post-American novels I have been analyzing are also all male-authored works, which is not part of the definition I have given to the category, but which endows them with a number of similarities and some interesting differences. Having discussed gender in my readings of each of the individual works in this dissertation, I shall here draw some connections across the texts to show how their critiques of the “War on Terror” and the invasion of Iraq are, to some extent, reflected in the gender dynamics of each work.

All of the narrators are heterosexual men. The forms of masculinity they evince vary somewhat, but they are all on the normative end of the spectrum. All of them are self-consciously positioned at a distance—though often not far enough—from the hegemonic masculinity associated with American business and foreign policy, as well as the cowboy archetype that has such a prominent place in American culture.

In Hamid’s novel, *Changez* faces off against the physical embodiment of hegemonic masculinity in the form of his American spy/businessman interlocutor. Although *Changez* participates in the classic patriarchal competition for dominance in order to exact revenge, he ultimately expresses a decidedly unpatriarchal vision of openness and interdependence, conditional upon embracing one’s vulnerability.

In O’Neill’s novel, masculinity is in crisis—as is whiteness. As an educated liberal with a degree of self-awareness and restraint, however, Hans’s wounded masculinity does not express itself in outward rage, but is rather turned inward, manifesting as melancholy and nostalgia. O’Neill gives more conventional traits of patriarchal masculinity—bravado, sexism, violence—to Chuck, the raced character in the novel. It has been suggested that Chuck is supposed to represent a more “authentic” masculinity in the novel, though that doesn’t seem to me to be the case. What is most relevant here, in my view, is that Chuck represents both what O’Neill admires and what he disdains about America—idealism and self-authorizing violence, respectively.

In Hemon’s novel, the representation of masculinity is conflicted. The state violence he protests—in the Bosnian War and the “War on Terror”—is identified with a series of patriarchal figures. At the same time, however, Brik himself exhibits a number of characteristics typical of patriarchal masculinity. He is partially drawn to the patriarchal values of sexual conquest and violence—presented in the novel as typifying Eastern European masculinity—even as he loathes the warlords, thugs, and pimps who actually embody such values. Moreover, given that anger is one of the very few acceptable emotions for men in patriarchal cultures, Brik’s rage is thoroughly gendered—but then his grief and empathy must be seen as being non-normative. The injuries produced by patriarchal masculinity are put on endless display in the novel, though Hemon does little to decenter its perspective.

Finally, Cole’s narrator Julius can be seen to embody patriarchal masculinity through the more refined forms of emotional distance, hyper-intellectualism, and, following Moji’s revelation about the rape, a total lack of empathy. If the latter is judged to be an effect of masculine socialization rather than merely his own personal psychopathology—and the novel makes both interpretations possible—then this be regarded as exposing the pathologies of patriarchy. “One way of describing patriarchy is that it is an emotional

bystander culture,” writes Miriam Greenspan, adding that “[t]his way of dissociating from our emotions is literally killing us” (148).

How the relations between male and female characters in these novels relate to the broader critique of American exceptionalism is more ambiguous. As scholars like Anne McClintock have shown, the nation has classically been cast in gendered and more specifically familial terms, with notions like “motherland” and “fatherland” being used both to reinforce patriarchal relations within the family and to project such relations onto the nation. This was very much in evidence after 9/11, as Amy Kaplan has shown, in the novel use of the term “homeland” by the Bush administration in reference to the nation. Each of the novels I’ve examined in this dissertation features conflict and estrangement between the male narrators and their female partners, and can therefore be seen as pursuing aspects of their political analysis and critique through these tensions within the “family.”

Both *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Lazarus Project* figure the relationship between the immigrant narrator and the nation allegorically. In Hamid’s novel, Erica represents American romanticism and post-9/11 nostalgia (splitting her allegorical duties with the financial firm Underwood Samson, which represents American capitalism and materialism). Erica spurns Changez, representing America’s rejection of Muslim immigrants after 9/11 (while Changez repudiates Underwood Samson). She also represents Changez’s continuing affective investment in the idea of America even after his anti-imperialist political awakening. Though an obvious allegorical figure, Hamid nevertheless individuates her character in interesting ways.

In Hemon’s novel, the American woman is also made to figure the nation, or at least certain aspects of the national culture. Mary represents American pragmatism, optimism, and an innocence that Hemon presents as being complicit in state violence in the aftermath of 9/11. Reversing the scenario of Hamid’s novel, it is the immigrant narrator Brik who becomes estranged from his wife and ultimately rejects her when, at the end of the narrative, he decides to stay in Sarajevo. Like Hamid, Hemon attempts to individuate Mary, such that she is not made to strictly serve a functional role in the novel’s political analysis and critique. In both novels, interestingly, the fathers of the American women are characterized by a combination of ignorance and arrogance—typifying American masculinity—and are loathed by the immigrant narrators.

Marital estrangement, explicitly politicized, is also central to the plot of *Netherland*. The female character Rachel, however, is not made to represent the nation, but rather the international opposition to the Iraq War. Her return to London precipitates the narrator’s crisis of masculinity, which resonates with America’s post-9/11 crisis. Despite being portrayed through the ironizing perspective of Hans—and despite being marginalized by the plot—Rachel is a powerful figure in the narrative. She shapes it on multiple levels and consistently challenges Hans’s narrative authority. Hans and Rachel ultimately reconcile with one another after seeing a marriage counselor who advises Rachel to prop up Hans’s ego by putting him on a “pedestal,” which she consents to do, though in so thoroughly an ironic way such that it can hardly be seen as a true restoration of the patriarchal order.

The disintegration of Julius’s relationship with Nadège in *Open City* is not made to signify politically, though I have interpreted it as belonging to a spiritual allegory, in which it signifies Julius’s relinquishment of hope in the face of the unrecognized and unrecompensed crimes of racialized violence, past and present. However, as I have suggested, Julius’s encounter with Moji, which brings the novel’s political unconscious—in

terms of gender—to the surface, resonates as political allegory. Moji decenters Julius’s perspective much more radically—at least for the reader if not for the narrator—than Rachel does in *Netherland*.

In one form or another, sexual violence appears in each of these novels. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* Changez urges Erica to imagine he is her ex-boyfriend Chris so that he can consummate his sexual desire, to which she assents. In view of this form of manipulation, the ensuing scene is appropriately presented with overtones of rape that can be seen as signifying, on the symbolic level, the “violation” of America by the Muslim interloper, echoing the 9/11 attacks themselves.

*Netherland* also features a sexual encounter with a fraught symbolic significance, as I previously discussed. A mixed-race woman named Danielle asks Hans to beat her with his belt in the course of a casual sexual encounter. Hans reluctantly assents to her wishes, but upon seeing the act reflected in the window feels alienated from the situation, seeing himself as other than the person he knows himself to be (or wishes to be recognized as being). The implication is that the reflection distorts the truth of the situation, but the inversion of ordinary racial and gender power dynamics in the course of their sexual encounter is the real illusion. Danielle exits the novel after this scene, her function in the plot being to further illustrate Hans’s state of dejection, but O’Neill’s choice to make this scene echo the violence of colonialism indicates that is doing symbolic work as well.

*The Lazarus Project* includes several references to rape as a combat tactic in war. During the Bosnian War mass rape was notoriously employed by the Serbian Army against Bosnian Muslim women as part of the project of ethnic cleansing. Hemon’s narrator Brik also refers to sexual abuse by American soldiers of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib, linking these historically and geographically distinct moments of violence. Such references to rape in the context of war function as the *raison d’être* of Brik’s rage while playing a role in the novel’s protest against state violence in general. Sexual exploitation in the form of pornography, prostitution, and sex trafficking also feature in the narrative, though are represented more ambivalently, Brik describing himself, complacently, as a “moral mediocrity.”

*Open City* takes on the question of gender most directly by making the revelation of an act of sexual violence the narrative surprise. In this respect, it is the most feminist work of the post-American novels I’ve been analyzing. It is easy to imagine Cole’s novel being a successful work of fiction about urban life, history, race, identity, and so on without the narrative surprise, which effectively transforms the meaning of the whole book. It is with Moji’s revelation of the rape that the reader decides that Julius is probably not simply Cole’s alter-ego, which then necessarily raises the question of what his intention was. I read that intention as being fundamentally political. Inasmuch as it implies Julius’s real or feigned amnesia, Moji’s revelation resonates as political allegory, critiquing American amnesia, as all these novels do, to undermine the discourse of American exceptionalism. But her revelation might also be seen as an embedded critique of the masculine narrative perspective Julius embodies and of the patriarchal social conditions that produced it and the culture that values its achievements.

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In this dissertation, I've defined the post-American novel as the historical novel of the crisis of American hegemony. The concept of hegemony has been defined in various ways throughout history, as Perry Anderson shows in his recent book *The H-Word: The Peripeteia of Hegemony* (2017). Its relationship to imperialism is a matter of debate, as are the relative roles of coercion and consent in defining it as a form of political rule. Political hegemony is obviously thoroughly underpinned by economic power. In my use of the term throughout this dissertation I have mostly ignored the economic dimension of hegemony and focused on the political dimension. At the same time, I have emphasized the role of consent, interpreting expressions of dissent in post-9/11 novels by international writers as signs of the crisis of American hegemony.

As I've shown, the principle form of dissent structuring these novels has been the critique of American exceptionalism and other myths of the nation. When these novels were first published a decade ago, it seemed to many cultural commentators that nationalism was in terminal decline as a result of globalization. Indeed, following what must now be seen as the Obama interregnum, the crisis of American hegemony has generated a disturbingly (ethno-) nationalist political movement. It seems likely that there will be novels written by international writers—satires, surely—about this period of American history, which will swell the category of the post-American novel. But more importantly, the resurgence of nationalism around the world—on the basis of fantasies of the self and fears of the other—underscores the essential work of transnational and cosmopolitan writers.

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