Also by Kristine A. Miller

BRITISH LITERATURE OF THE BLITZ: Fighting the People's War

Transatlantic Literature and Culture After 9/11

The Wrong Side of Paradise

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uniqueness through which Hans sometimes gazes at the rest of the world. O'Neill cultivates a dirty cosmopolitanism to put on display both Hans's idealistic aspirations for global fellow feeling and the realistic limitations, frequently self-inflicted, that overburden his attempts at change. Though it might be too much to ask of a single novel to map fully what constitutes an extraterritorial space, *Netherland* does relate, through the limited vision of its narrator and its studied juxtapositions of literary genre, how this space just might amount to something more than a Neverland.

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An Interview with Joseph O'Neill

Laura Frost

In Joseph O'Neill's 2008 novel *Netherland*, a Dutch banker, Hans van den Broek, retrospectively narrates the story of how he was displaced from his lower Manhattan home on September 11, 2001, and moved with his wife and son to the legendarily bohemian Chelsea Hotel. When his wife, frustrated at his passivity, then moves to London with their son, Hans's story really begins. He joins a group of Caribbean and south Asian immigrant cricketers on Staten Island and befriends a shady entrepreneur, Chuck Ramkissoon, who hopes to establish the sport as a great American game. Michiko Kakutani called *Netherland* a "stunning" and "resonant meditation on the American Dream" ("Post 9/11"). James Wood pronounced it "one of the most remarkable post-colonial books I have ever read." *Netherland* went on to win a place on the *New York Times Book Review* list of "10 Best Books of 2008" and the 2009 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. It got another boost when Barack Obama told the *New York Times* that he was in the midst of reading O'Neill's novel (Leonhardt).

Critics have debated *Netherland*'s status as a 9/11 novel. While Wood asserted that it had been "consistently misread" as such, Adam Kirsch observed in the *New Republic* that, "[l]ike all the best novels inspired by September 11, *Netherland* treats the attacks themselves very obliquely, and thus avoids the painful literalism that afflicted John Updike's *Terrorist* and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*." Zadie Smith agreed that "*Netherland* is only superficially about September 11 or immigrants or cricket as a symbol of good citizenship" ("Two Paths"). Several scholars have embraced *Netherland* as a model of how 9/11 can be contextualized through a transnational, even postnational, purview.[1] O'Neill himself, with his Irish–Turkish family background and his years in the Netherlands, Turkey, London, and now New York, speaks from an unusually cosmopolitan position. Although *Netherland* is mostly set in New York and sharply depicts the anxieties of post-9/11 life in the city, its characters are drawn from all over the world and render the drama in an international, multiethnic frame.

I met Joseph O'Neill in Manhattan on a rainy day in a tiny café with an adjoining door to a hair salon: a quirky holdout against the Starbucks

invasion.[2] While a woman had her hair highlighted behind us, people wandered in and out, ordering espresso and pastries. We talked about cricket, the Euro, and O'Neill's then novel-in-progress (*The Dog*, which will appear in 2015) over a soundtrack of Amy Winehouse and bus brakes screeching outside. While O'Neill has been interviewed extensively about many aspects of *Netherland*, we focused on the novel's relationship to 9/11.

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FROST: I want to begin with your introductory note to the 2010 paperback edition of *Blood-Dark Track: A Family History* (2000). You say, "[W]hile I have no quarrel with this tag [the '9/11 novel'], I will allow myself to state that if I have written a '9/11 book,' that book would, in my mind, be *Blood-Dark Track*" (2). I'd like to talk about both those points. First, the tag "9/11 novel," with which many novelists have quarreled.

O'NEILL: Well, all tags are objectionable to the extent that they are reductive. But to the extent that any tag is valid, why not a 9/11 tag? Is there really a reader out there who sees the 9/11 tag and shuts down their brain to everything else? Readers are more sophisticated and able to transcend tags and see them for what they are. They're Post-it notes, not tattoos. Also, every reading of a book is a tag of sorts and to be valued accordingly, not least as an emblem of attention. Books thrive on attention.

FROST: I guess the more intriguing twist in that quote is that for you, *Blood-Dark Track* rather than *Netherland* is your "9/11 book."

O'NEILL: The first significance I attach to the 9/11 novel is a political one. It has to do with the construction of political narratives and the predicament of the individual conscience in the face of history. And I think that the situation and the dilemma of the individual conscience was never more dramatic, in my personal experience, than on 9/11 and the years following 9/11. It's almost as if 9/11 was like a lightning flash that abruptly illuminated something that already existed, namely the increasingly frail capacity of the single mind to apprehend what's going on in the world in a politically and ethically coherent way. After the financial crash, this kind of thinking is more difficult than ever: I mean, do we have to be economists now, on top of everything else? *Blood-Dark Track* is the story of two men, my grandfathers, who before and during the Second World War find themselves inserted into history. Their capacity for ethical, political thinking – for identifying the narrative of reality that is most valid – is tested. And to some extent they're overwhelmed by it.

FROST: So is there a parallel between your grandfathers dropped down into history and Hans dropped down into New York?

O'NEILL: Yes, there is a parallel. Hans explicitly says how disoriented he was in the aftermath of the attacks. He doesn't think of himself as a political person.

FROST: He has one moment where he stands up to Matt in London, insisting that September 11 was "a big deal" (*Netherland* 182).

O'NEILL: Right, and it's a conservative moment. Another one is when he's defeated by his experience at the DMV [Department of Motor Vehicles] and as a result of that highly personal, in every sense irrelevant moment, he catches a glimpse (or so he thinks) of the coercive, violent nature of the state. He has the kind of epiphany that to my mind characterizes a lot of conservative thinking – the kind that makes a conservative out of the person who has been mugged, or enables someone like Dick Cheney to change his mind about gay rights because his daughter happens to be gay. That's how the right so often thinks about politics: wildly extrapolating from their personal experiences. Liberals pride themselves on a slightly more systematic ethics. Of course, systems have their problems, too.

FROST: There seems to be a parallel between you, as the narrator in *Blood-Dark Track*, and Hans. At the beginning of *Blood-Dark Track*, you describe your experience as "a slow, idiotic awakening," and I think you use the word "idiot" to describe Hans in *Netherland*.

O'NEILL: Yes. He's a "political-ethical idiot." So was I when I wrote *Blood-Dark Track*. I still am, and I don't think I'm the only one. You just become embarrassed, once you start looking into things, about how little you know. There's no end to one's ignorance. It's just limitless. You have only to undertake the most modest inquiry into history to find out how ignorant you are even in those areas that you thought you knew something about.

FROST: Did you read Naipaul's diatribe in 2005, that after 9/11, the novel is "of no account" (Donadio, "Irascible")? That what really mattered was establishing facts?

O'NEILL: It's this hilariously naïve idea that there's this superior world of fact out there and that you somehow have relatively unproblematic access to it if you simply put your mind to it.

FROST: Or that you can't do that kind of work within the novel.

O'NEILL: Was this spoken or written? He's a very careful writer and a very careless talker. There's no way he'd say that in writing.

FROST: But wasn't there a common sense among many writers that they were stymied in regard to writing after 9/11?

O'NEILL: Of course they're going to be stymied if they set out to write a fiction about 9/11. If you set out to write a novel "about" x, y, or z, you're either stymied or you're going to write something bad.

FROST: And the early novels were bad.

O'NEILL: Maybe. I haven't read many of them.

FROST: Really? You haven't read any 9/11 novels? *Falling Man*? *Saturday*?

O'NEILL: No. I did read Jennifer Egan's 9/11 novel [*Look at Me*], which was written before 9/11.

FROST: Interesting. When I interviewed Jennifer Egan, she said that she didn't read any 9/11 stuff and wasn't writing about it herself, although it's in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.

O'NEILL: From a certain perspective, almost all post-9/11 novels are "post-9/11 novels" in some way, even if they're in denial about it. For ten years, that date was very significant. The election of Barack Obama and the beginning of the financial crisis marked the end of that 9/11 era, which to me was chiefly characterized as this gigantic distortion of reality brought about mainly by the American reaction to the attacks. Of course, almost everyone was complicit. Lots of writers, for example, fell prey to this fear of everywhere-spreading Islamic fascism, which struck me at the time as obviously mostly nonsense and I think is simply untenable now. And Christopher Hitchens has died. A wonderful person and writer in so many ways, but he personified that distortion of reality. There's a novel there for someone to write – *The Hitch*. I mean, talking about the frailty of the individual conscience in the face of history.

FROST: Scholarship on 9/11 literature has started to consolidate around two arguments, and I'd like to hear your take on both of them. One is a faulting of fiction that treats 9/11 as a domestic crisis instead of extrapolating to a larger political crisis, public life, history, the war on terror, etc. That is, focusing on the insular American domestic front instead of striving for something more global.

O'NEILL: You mean novelists should write about the battlefields of Iraq? Or the life of Mullah Omar?

FROST: Well, that to cast issues around 9/11 in terms of American domestic life is a failure to grapple with the larger panorama.

O'NEILL: Well, before I get into that, let's start by recognizing that no novel can be, or tries to be, omnipotent or all-seeing, not even *Ulysses*, and that it's always possible to say that a given fiction fails to address something. As for the specific impotence you're referring to, it's of course the case that a novel can be, and therefore perhaps should be, both panoramic and microscopic. So the conceptual dichotomy that you mention is wobbly from the outset; and I think you'd have to say that a fiction that disregards either of these perspectives is, in theory, less than ideal. Of course, what makes a novel work is much more mysterious than whether it fulfills certain ideal formats, and you're left, if your interest is to understand fiction rather than to dragoon it into the service of ideology, with the possibly tedious or conceptually unsatisfying business of looking at each novel as a special case. All that said, I think it's fair to say that novels that disregard personal, domestic dimensions, that skip the business of ordinary human subjectivity in favor of theoretical or factual objectives are obviously in formal jeopardy, since we have historians, philosophers, ideologues, and journalists already devoting themselves to these objectives. On the other hand, you can of course take issue with a bourgeois, self-involved novel of 9/11: "9/11 and the effect it had on my Bushwick cappuccino business." But I think we have to be careful not to become too grandiose about what fiction can do, even if fiction is almost inherently grandiose. I mean, there are problems with creating monumental fictional artifacts in response to perceived monuments of history. All those enormous novels and poems from the '20s and '30s, those wonderful and indispensable modernist edifices, the Dos Passos stuff and Zukovksy stuff, not to mention Joyce and Eliot, attempt to make art on a scale that bears some proportionate relationship with their enormous subjects – the history of writing, the history of consciousness, the vast complexity of modern life – and are comprehensive in their ambitions; but on some level, this striving for a supposed dimensional proportionality between the book and its subject is highly problematic. You can spend your life wandering around *Ulysses* – some of us do! – and there may well be a *Ulysses* to be written about 9/11, even though of course *Ulysses* is a masterpiece of subjectivity and domesticity – but I think it's misguided to think that a single fictional text can "grapple" with all salient aspects of what one had for breakfast, let alone what happened on 9/11 and its aftermath. ... I'd like to mention one other thing, which is that I'm not sure I really believe any longer in the individual novel as an irreducible unit of aesthetic appraisal or experience. We have to reckon with the reality of amalgamation – with the fact that our reaction to Novel X merges with our reaction to Novel Y or indeed movie Z, or a soccer match, or a conversation we had last night. In other words, a novel is just a log tossed onto a larger fire, and this structural littleness must be recognized if we want to think coherently about the very special flame produced by a piece of artistic writing. To the extent that so-called 9/11 novels deal with domestic repercussions, they may amount to little more than twigs tossed onto the fire, but that still has some validity. A 700-page novel that brilliantly investigates many things beyond the domestic, a kind of Don DeLillo enterprise, may be a large log, but in the end it's still dwarfed by the billions of other things that go into our sense of the world, not to mention the larger philosophical questions of what might be said about anything. I'm pretty sure that Don DeLillo would not have it any other way.

FROST: So the second argument is that if 9/11 literature is to be of any significance, it needs to involve new forms. That is, not just

assimilating this theme to new forms, but having the forms themselves change.

O'NEILL: I'm not sure I'd agree. Look, if you think that 9/11 is an unprecedented chapter in human experience, then yes, maybe you need an unprecedented form to write about it. If, on the other hand, you think that 9/11 is no more unprecedented than that man over there in the yellow anorak cycling across the street, then you don't need a new form as such. I'm in the second camp: I think that there are plenty of precedents for large-scale political killing. I would say that the formal pressure on literature is constant, and maybe emanates just as powerfully from the passing cyclist as from an act of spectacular violence. Let's put it another way: let's say 9/11 had been foiled, had not happened: would we say that the current form of the novel was perfectly satisfactory?

The current formal challenge, for me, is the global story. The perimeters of our experience are changing. Not to be horribly theoretical about it, but 9/11 was a kind of act of globalization. It abolished the idea, apparently still held by many of us, that a national boundary is a synonym for various kinds of security, not least the security of an "American" outlook.

FROST: I think this is where *Netherland* is extraordinary. In your 2009 *Atlantic* piece, you argue for the relevance of "cosmopolitan (or, twisting the idea a little, post-national) literature." And you describe Hans as a "*post*-national narrator." Also in your piece on C. L. R. James's *Beyond a Boundary*, you note the desire, at least among academic critics in American Studies, to "mov[e] beyond multiculturalism – which implicitly reinforces the notion of the United States as a place of unique value – to so-called postnationalism" ["Bowling Alone"]. Could you elaborate on those terms – cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, postnationalism – and what you see as their implications for politics and for fiction?

O'NEILL: Well, I don't want to be prescriptive. As I say, there's a basic validity to any kind of fiction you write, although you could argue about its relative interest. The novel means "new," and I think that's [cosmopolitanism, postnationalism] news at the moment. My response to all this is embodied in the novel I'm currently writing. This is what I'm interested in; but I'm reluctant to say that my hobbyhorse is better than others.

FROST: Right. If critics around World War I had come up with a list of the right ways to respond to contemporary events, would anyone have come up with any of the great modernists? Would they have come up with Kafka? Never.

O'NEILL: They would have dismissed Kafka as being hopelessly domestic and small-scale and abstract. If 9/11 is the horse and literature is the cart you're in formal trouble. There are a million ways of investigating 9/11, if that happens to be what you are interested in, and literature is just one of those ways.

FROST: There are strong utopian and nostalgic strains in *Netherland*. There's Chuck's Bald Eagle Field scheme and the epigraph from Whitman, and the novel is framed with moments of nostalgia: the opening scene with Hans's coworker's "cheap longing" for balsamic vinegar from the original Dean & Deluca and the last scene of remembering the "extraordinary promise" of the Twin Towers. How do you understand nostalgia, and the idea of an Edenic pre-9/11 moment?

O'NEILL: Well, there was the dot-com crash in 2000, so the shit was already hitting the fan in the USA. Before that, there was a massive sense of collective well-being that spread across the whole globe, and it would be limited not to recognize the enormous increases in the standard of living in certain countries around the world that had taken place in this hyper-capitalistic era. There are some countries that are unrecognizable in terms of basic amenities from what they were before. So I would think about pre-9/11 slightly more globally. If you're talking about American nostalgia about America, it's completely out of control. It's very apparent in this absurd, Mormon-like cult surrounding the founding fathers, these semi-deities who visited the earth 250 years ago equipped with foresight and wisdom to which we must still be in thrall. ... The days before the Federal Reserve existed, those were the days! You see the same phenomenon in American TV golf coverage. Whenever you watch the Masters or US Open, there's this unbelievable glorification of the past heroes of golf – you know, tinkling piano music and shots of Bobby Jones and white guys in plus fours. Very weird. People think of the British as nostalgic, but by comparison with Americans they're much less so. In the British coverage, they cut straight to the golf. There's no wallowing in the long traditions of the competition. In a way, Europeans are much less overtly fetishistic about the past, possibly because their traditions retain some vitality and their old buildings are more likely to be intact.

FROST: You bring up "7/7" at one point in *Netherland*. It's described as "frightening but not disorienting" (178). People get on with it. Whereas in America, 9/11 seems to have changed everything.

O'NEILL: I think the rest of the world also felt a similar sense of transformation about the 9/11 attacks. The Twin Towers were not just a pile of real estate of interest to the leaseholders and the Port Authority. I think people around the world were very taken aback. I think people discovered in places like Libya how attached they were, residually and subconsciously, to this idea of superior American power. Also, you can't underestimate the

power of New York. People might hate the US, but they love New York. You talk about utopia: in the history of human endeavor, has there ever been a more admirable metropolitan human gathering than contemporary New York City?

FROST: Indeed! In the scene at the end of *Netherland*, Google Maps is the ultimate omniscient narrator, creating a scene of borderlessness and an exhilarating but also scary kind of postnationalism: "[T]here is no sign of nations" (257). I could see something like Google Maps energizing narrative. How will this stuff make its way into fiction?

O'NEILL: One big issue at the moment is how technology is moving and putting under great stress our ancient ethical boundaries. You know, it's the old question: who is my neighbor? If I blamelessly turn on my homepage, there's news coming at me from all over the world. The question I have is, does our ethical capacity shut down in response? The utopian idea is that we become more ethical and care about everyone. But maybe it's the opposite. People feel very defensive when they feel they are in the wrong. They become defensive, start voting for nationalistic parties that will demonize or otherize the distant parties who, thanks to technology, are making demands on our consciences that are viewed as intolerable. On the other hand, someone like me has no understanding why NAFTA is a bad thing. I don't know what's wrong with jobs going to Mexico rather than the USA, even if I am a US citizen. Since when is the well-being of an American more important than that of a Mexican?

Money now does not respect national boundaries. Your money and my money, unfortunately, maybe does. But big money does not. If J. P. Morgan takes a two-billion-dollar hit, it's not happening in America ... But where is it happening? I'd be very interested to see a corporate atlas of the planet, showing the distribution of corporate wealth. Could you have a proper atlas of the world now that does not map the money?

FROST: So, if you're not reading 9/11 novels, what fiction do you read?

O'NEILL: I'm not reading too much fiction at the moment. I like reading prose I can't understand, which means I read philosophy. Continental philosophy, stuff by Lévinas, Derrida. I love being mystified by it. I read it mainly for the language and the psychology. It seems amazing to me that in the '50s and '60s, in particular, there were these very grandiose men, Adorno, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan and all the others, who woke up in the morning with the feeling that they could rethink the world. They just strike me as these larger-than-life, fictional characters. Look at Michel Foucault. Would someone do what he did now? You'd be laughed at, I'm sad to say.

FROST: How does your work connect with that? You're the consummate stylist, very precise. Is this incomprehensibility totally apart from your work?

O'NEILL: Well, it's there in the background, and to the extent that my writing makes a claim to accuracy, it's always a highly provisional claim. I'm not sure how much that needs to be made explicit in the writing itself, since it pretty much goes without saying, in my view, that every notion of accuracy is problematic. Let's not forget that a fundamental purpose of writing fiction, as opposed to some other kind of writing, is that fiction inaugurates its own reality and, if it mysteriously works, more or less generates its own accuracy. A novel is a thing, like an orange, and ideally no more or less accurate than an orange is; and hopefully to read is to receive the kind of pleasure and nutrition you'd get from a good orange. Then again, in the book I'm writing now, I'm investigating more explicitly the idea of an investigation. I'm going to try to make it comprehensible, though.

FROST: Conrad. "An implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention ...."

O'NEILL: Yes. The book after the one I'm writing, if either ever comes to be written, may draw quite a lot on Conrad. Actually, I conceived of *Netherland* not so much as a Fitzgerald thing, but more as a *Heart of Darkness* thing.

FROST: You thought of *Netherland* as a *Heart of Darkness* thing?

O'NEILL: Chuck as the black man on the white continent. With cricket being his way up the river. The forest of capital everywhere. That was my original conception.

FROST: Fascinating. Casting *Netherland* in terms of Conrad rather than Fitzgerald makes it look very different, aligned with a different literary tradition.

O'NEILL: Yeah, although it's worth remembering that Conrad, and *Lord Jim* specifically, was a big influence for Fitzgerald. James Wood maybe did get it right – for the reader of my book who happens to be me – when he said this is a postcolonial novel.

FROST: But he didn't point to Conrad. Because your language in that novel isn't Conradian. The language in *Heart of Darkness* is all about obfuscation. It seems to be pointing to something, but it keeps slipping away. Except that is sort of what you are doing with cricket. ... It's a metaphor for otherness or liminality, and you never really explain its workings.

O'NEILL: I love the prose in *Heart of Darkness*. Talking about nostalgia, *Netherland* is about a guy who hears that his friend has died, and then proceeds to remember him and the friendship and what else stuck to that friendship and its circumstances. So the whole

thing is an act, a spasm, of memory. That's when lyricism seems fitting, as a language of memory and longing.

FROST: Right, and *Heart of Darkness* is told with that structure too, of Marlowe remembering from the deck of the ship. ... And your next novel?

O'NEILL: The Dubai novel might actually be recognizable as a postnational novel. The new idea of the state: denizenship rather than citizenship.

Notes

1. See, for example, Gray and Rothberg's "A Failure of the Imagination" (15).
2. The interview took place on May 15, 2012.

Part III
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