



*Ethno-religious Identities  
and Cosmopolitan Echoes  
in John Updike's 'Terrorist' (2006)  
and Joseph O'Neill's 'Netherland' (2008)*

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In the wake of a historical trauma, a tension develops between the will to cluster around traditional public figures and values relating to power, nationalism, family, politics and gender, and the necessity to handle the new state of things that is often felt as a threat to their survival. Such values are usually reinforced rather than questioned by popular conscience and the tragedy of 9/11 made no exception. As Steven Salaita points out, Rudy Giuliani, George W. Bush and media personalities recommended not engaging in acts of racial violence towards Arab Americans right after the attacks. To manipulate social reactions, political leaders repeated sentences such as "They are American, too"; "They also love this country" and so the expectation was to make "Arab neighbors feel safe and welcome" at home without discrimination, in a tradition of "imperative patriotism" (Salaita 2005: 151). Yet, contrarily to what it preached (pleas for social peace were occasional in the dominant warmongering rhetoric), the Administration soon adopted the USA Patriot Act (October 2001), which de facto limited civil liberties and endowed police and FBI forces with unprecedented powers of control over aliens, immigrants and all American citizens. These extreme legislative measures, while safeguarding and exceptional in times of national emergency, inevitably delegitimized Otherness, making it a category of civic suspicion



and danger and conveying an ambivalent message about ethnic inclusiveness on the American territory.

Against this backdrop, far from offering a cohesive representation of ethnic and racialized individuals after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, US recent fiction on this particular subject navigates Otherness in many contradictory ways, ranging from the resistance to represent, or even think, alterity in literary forms to the desire of exploring, if not mastering it through characterization. The novels here examined, John Updike's *Terrorist* and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, deal with the long-term aftermath of 9/11 rather than shaping its symptomatic repercussions in the days following the attacks. Nevertheless, Updike and O'Neill pick up on the dualisms that run across early post-9/11 America and represent, though in ways that are at largely at odds, the impossibility for (either native or naturalized) ethnic subjects to suture their own identity to the fabric of American society. Theirs are stories of naiveté and exclusion that convey a rather pessimistic vision of multiculturalism in the twenty-first-century US society and yet they provide space for the exploration of conflicting values. In both Updike and O'Neill's novels, 9/11 has augmented social tensions and racial hatred: on the one hand, mainstream white America appears self-absorbed and depressed, unable to open up fully to the unfit or the different; on the other hand, racialized individuals are depicted in an ambivalent light and are in the end doomed because of their blind and staunch faith, regardless whether it is pinned on Islam or the American dream. This would leave us with a rather bleak picture if it were not for the fact that the "white gazes" that shape the novels cast a benign, sympathetic light on the ethnic characters by turning them into victims of their own intransigence and of even larger systemic forces beyond their control – with nuances that can be read as reactionary and patronizing.

Doubtless, conservatism and closure to Otherness are common reactions to traumatic occurrences that literature may construe and dominant culture may control. Doris Brothers is right in arguing that the "search for sameness" is an innate mode of regulating "uncertainty" and unsettlement after a shock (2003: 71). One aspect of this defence mechanism is that the more people *seem* like us, the more we side with them and feel solidified as a community against further manifestations of trauma. We seek and value the same "appearance", places, language, symbols, and beliefs and we tend to exclude from the phases of shock and mourning what is not "like us". After 9/11, American flags materialized outside many homes and declarations of solidarity and of imaginative national belonging to the US proliferated on streets and media. Not only, then, the effect of grief made us say "we are all Americans now," in a sort of "fictitious" and provisionally unanimous feeling. The phenotypic factor in such search for sameness also appeared as a reductive yet cementing aspect on a familial, social and national scale, especially for those who suffered the attacks directly in the targeted sites, either as witnesses or victims. Arab Americans were feared for their looks and



were put in a position where their “Arabness” ended up overcoming their “Americanness”. As Mary Marshall Clark discovered in her series of interviews gathered in New York right after the tragedy, “Oral History Narrative and Memory Project,” many racially-connoted Americans were discriminated against and harassed regardless of their actual ethnic origin (Latin Americans, for example). These instinctive forms of exclusionary relations were heavily manipulated by the discursive and political practices mentioned above. While the Administration invited openness, it launched a war campaign, ultimately endorsing feelings of hate, suspicion and delegitimation in the public opinion. The shaping of spontaneous popular fears by rhetorical practices and political choices contributed to make the trope of race even more elusive, rehashing and confusing the already misleading white/non-white dichotomy. Nonetheless indeed, post-traumatic forms of identity assertion are acceptable ways to cope with trauma until they remain a temporary psychological and cultural device for “self-preservation.” As Brothers explains, one of the ominous implications of such “reduction of complexity” (for example the dichotomic thinking of the “them” vs. “us” logic) is the denial of difference and the possible “attempts at its suppression” (2003: 71-72), either in the forms of racial exclusion or in the prevention of political dissent. In relation to this, both Updike and O’Neill tackle issues of difference in a quite idealized way. Racialized subjects seem to occupy a territory that is severed from the “white” historical order of culture and business and they preserve a halo of the *bon sauvage* stereotypical status, an innocence that inevitably crashes against the wall of mainstream cynicism and indifference. Consequently, ethnic characters point to the resurgence of a “white” cultural supremacy after 9/11, yet they still represent a complex, vital alternative for interpersonal and cultural negotiations in a traumatized America.

John Updike has always been considered the quintessential New England author, a master of middle-class existential doubts about marriage, faith, capitalism and morality, where nuanced but subtly wrenching conflicts end in an uncertain hope for a better social and personal equilibrium. In spite of his incursions into African (fictionalized) politics in *The Coup* (1978) and into multi-racial love in a romanticized, trite setting in *Brazil* (1994), Updike has always preferred to unravel the Western anxieties of the suburban Waspish character, synecdochically represented by his Rabbit Angstrom. When *Terrorist* came out in 2006, then, it did not seem a topic that Updike cannot deal with, of course, since his imagination was wide and experienced, yet it struck everyone for its unexpected and possibly illuminating subject matter in a time when 9/11 still burned under its ashes and had never been so bluntly addressed.

Explaining his choice to Alden Mudge in an interview for *BookPage Magazine*, Updike admitted he wrote *Terrorist* out of a twofold fit of entitlement: not only did he happen to be in Brooklyn visiting a relative on September 11, 2001 and directly witness the collapse of the Twin Towers; he also felt that: “I was qualified to speak



about why young men are willing to become suicide bombers. I can kind of understand it, and I'm not sure too many Americans can" (Mudge 2006). This sounds daring as much as odd, considering Updike's strong Christian Lutheran religious and cultural background. Was it perhaps *that* specific background that he felt would help him speak with competence about Muslim suicide bombers? Were his experience and/or knowledge of how intransigent and pure religious morality can be – and of the difficulties in trying to live up to it – that Updike thought could assist him in fleshing out a kamikaze's psychology? My sense is that the religious underpinnings of Updike's poetics were essential in the construction of *Terrorist* and this essay will show how the particular positioning of Updike as an implied author in this 9/11 novel is directly connected to the theistic doubts and struggles that had already unfolded throughout his fiction and that now present a new facet. More importantly for our discussion, Updike's religious discourse occasions the parallel development of a racial one, which appears to some reviewers predictable if not jingoistic (Banerjee 2008). While I partly share this point of view, since some descriptions of the protagonists' complexions throughout *Terrorist* appear at times superfluous or even unsettling, I also ascribe such effect to Updike's traditional voyeuristic indulgence on the material aesthetics of the body, which easily transforms a potentially complex representation of race in the novel to a visual poetics of the surfaces. In this conundrum, where we are left wondering whether the author plays pointlessly with racial features or emphasizes their relevance to the protagonists' thinking, I believe Updike has a larger vision in *Terrorist* that questions the cultural imperialism of "whiteness" by making the ethnic gaze of the young Arab American protagonist, Ahmad, the gaze we side with throughout the story. A paradoxically idealized and perhaps implausible character, the young terrorist unmasks the decay of post-9/11 US society through his "moral" mission, which only magnifies and does not change the cultural inertia that lingers in the peripheral underbelly of America.

Capitalizing on the revived discourses about the "clash of cultures" in the 9/11 aftermath (Huntington 1996), then, Updike's *Terrorist* is chillingly Manichean. Set in a lifeless New Jersey industrial town, ironically called New Prospect, where a once prosperous and now stagnant economic development has transformed Victorian "suburban houses" into "housing" (Updike 2006: 95) and "inner city fields" into "congested slums" (*Ibid.*: 96), the story features characters whose ethnic, religious and cultural differences are clear-cut and irreconcilable. The post-9/11 "search for sameness" has here produced social dualisms. By juxtaposing the lives of an Islam-fanatic, self-marginalized, eighteen-year-old Arab American student, Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy and a middle-aged, Jewish-but-atheist school counsellor, Jack Levy, Updike effectively crystallizes post-9/11 American stereotypes about religious and racial identity. Ahmad is a good, irreprehensible high-school student who attends the Qur'an classes of his teacher, Yemeni imam Shaikh Rashid, in a downtown studio



fashioned into a mosque. He is the son of an Egyptian father, who left him when he was three years old, and an Irish American mother, Teresa Mulloy, a “trashy and immoral” woman whom his father married only to gain American citizenship (Updike 2006: 32-33). Teresa has raised Ahmad negligently, day by day, through her job as a nurse and her amateur paintings she occasionally manages to sell. To Ahmad, Islamic religion represents his only reason for life: defining himself as a “good Muslim in a world that mocks faith” (*Ibid.*: 69), Ahmad thinks that “America wants to take away [his] God” (*Ibid.*: 39) and that in the US “there are too many paths, too much selling of many useless things. They brag for freedom, but freedom to no purpose becomes a kind of prison” (*Ibid.*: 148). He has chosen his “Straight Path” (*Ibid.*: 148): headed for Jannah (the Islamic paradise – *Ibid.*: 238), Ahmad undertakes a jihad against kafirs, i.e. infidels who are “sex-obsessed” (*Ibid.*: 71) and a “distraction” to combat (*Ibid.*: 109). Although he says that jihad “doesn’t have to mean war...it means striving, along the path of God. It can mean inner struggle,” the young Mohammedan will soon become a proud “tool” in the hands of God Himself who, Ahmad thinks, “employs simple men to shape the world” (*Ibid.*: 251).

When Jack Levy tries to convince him that his good grades and a college education might turn him into a first-class professional on the job market, Ahmad shows no interest in joining the larger society and his greatest ambition is to get a CDL and start delivering for Excellency Home Furnishings, a job the imam has recommended him for. The furniture delivery business is run by a Lebanese American family, whose thirty-year-old son, manager Charlie Chehab, is friend to the imam but actually is a CIA agent undercover. During their delivery trips throughout New Jersey, Charlie tests Ahmad’s profound religious convictions through long rants about America’s lack of faith, media addiction and imperialist military philosophy – all this in view of luring him into the mindset of the holy warrior against Western beliefs. Resolutely shaping his own language and determination out of the imam’s teachings, and indeed surpassing his master in strength of faith, Ahmad accepts the assignment to blow up the Lincoln tunnel that leads from New Jersey into New York City driving a bomb-equipped truck. The unlikely end sees Jack Levy jumping on the truck, trying to talk Ahmad out of the terroristic scheme and then pressing him to go through with it when he realizes that his own life has also become pointless. Ahmad finally gives up on his plan, persuaded to do so more by the smiles of two black children in the car in front of him than by Jack Levy’s empty pleas and desperate resignation.

Updike then weaves a story with thriller overtones, in which Ahmad’s self-sacrifice to the Islamic cause represents a kind of innocent and seductive experience for the reader, who romanticizes and exoticizes the boy’s unwavering religious zeal as something alien and lost at the same time. When Charlie Chehab compares the jihad to the American Revolution and exalts George Washington as a popular combatant for independence like “Ho Chi Minh,” “Hamas” and “Al Queida” to motivate Ahmad to



action (Updike 2006:181), our response is duplicitous: while we see the irony in Updike's hyperbolic construction of fundamentalism as a liberating, transhistorical force in a post-9/11 scenario, we also perceive that Charlie touches the sore point of the lack of civic virtues/religion in current US society. Although critics like Kakutani blasted *Terrorist* as "one-dimensional" and "cartoonish," the story reveals more about ongoing conflicting visions of the world in the US than it may seem at first. Through the character of Ahmad, Updike wants to show that Islam is not only a religion but a practical way of life, a lived credo that ultimately does not distinguish between private belief and public agency. This credo is juxtaposed with the apathy and superficiality of Western society, which is made up by people who have no control over their lives and mostly carry on in a moral vacuum. As Doran explains, while religion is mainly felt as a "private 'matter'" by Westerners (*Ibid.*: 9), the *Ummah*, the Muslim community of believers, connects religion and culture in both spheres of existence. In this sense, Hénaff, Lepidus and Doran clarify, Muslims refer to Westerners as *Christians*, therefore employing a religious category rather than a national or even ethnic one to imagine "the other" (*Ibid.*: 87).

In making Ahmad's fundamentalism admirable for being so pure amidst the pathetic cultural surroundings – until the imam and his terroristic network drive his belief to violence, Updike implicitly reinforces the novel's underlying assumption about the US dearth of public commitment and subservience to the material religion of capitalism. In this way, the novel paradoxically sets Ahmad above the herd through exemplary conduct (attending the mosque, working weekend shifts, loving his job, etc...). At one point in the story Ahmad says to a schoolmate: "All America wants of its citizens, your president has said, is for us to buy – to spend money we cannot afford and thus propel the economy forward for himself and other rich men" (*Ibid.*: 72). Even though for most of the novel we do not share Ahmad's language, attitudes or path, we endorse his perception of America and get in touch deep down with his religious candour and lucidity of judgment, aspects that the narrative exalts and finds disconcerting at the same time. As Updike confesses in the Mudge interview, "I thought it was important to show how much Ahmad needed to make his own philosophy, as it were, because the environment wasn't coming up with any" (2006). Also, Updike reverses the stereotype that makes kamikazes heartless, as Gregory Orfalea points out when he writes that, throughout the novel, "we hope that Updike's humanity will not desert us" (*Ibid.*: 190), and indeed Ahmad does not kill anyone in the end. The author's strategies of inversion and moral displacement are ironic, yet the overall tone of the novel is not, as it configures a bitter indictment of America's historical amnesia and materialism that 9/11 has once again uncovered. As Richard Gray observes,



the threat here is not in Ahmad but in the world that seems to challenge and imprison him. Updike captures this: the sense, not merely of not belonging but of not feeling safe, of fearing that the world he inhabits is eating away at the very core of his belief and his self. (Gray 2009: 135-36)

As Peter Bailey explains, faith has always been an issue that Updike himself and his protagonists were grappling with. Examining Updike's literary output, Bailey observes that a streak of nihilism progressively grows throughout Updike's fiction: from the *Rabbit* tetralogy up to *In the Beauty of the Lilies* and *Villages*, characters abandon faith and withdraw from God, becoming secular individuals whose spirituality remains inscrutable – the adulterer Owen McKenzie, the Branch-Davidian Clark Wilmot, Harry Angstrom himself realize that the Kierkegaardian religious experience they had tried in many different ways to pursue (personal, intimate, incommunicable, as we noted above, that Western religious experience is deemed to be – and as Updike thought it should be) comes to a deadlock. According to Bailey, “the chronic unresponsiveness of God has cumulatively darkened Updike's vision” (Bailey 2006: 243) and he detects in his fiction what he calls “the reluctantly expanding secularism of Updike's aesthetic” (*Ibid.*: 33). However, if Bailey is accurate in detecting Updike's progressive challenge to his own Christian beliefs and poetics, *Terrorist* comes as a *coup de théâtre* against the grain of such critical evidence. Whereas, as John Leonard puts it, “Rabbit Angstrom explode[d] himself from overconsumption” (Leonard 2006: 1), Ahmad Mulloy's story is the swansong by a spiritually disenchanted author. Indeed, while Updike as a white middle-class, middle-aged male allegedly “identifies” with Jack Levy's faithless acquiescence to the earthly existence (the secularized, atheist character juggling between a fat wife, his lover – Ahmad's mother Teresa – and a dreary job), the author's moral and religious fascination stays with the believer Ahmad. The boy, with his white, well-ironed shirt, his sexual abstinence and his respect for God and his job (“[h]e is pleased to find in the trucking regulations a concern with purity almost religious in quality” – Updike 2006: 75) represents the experience of spiritual totality and fullness of life (and afterlife) that the West, Updike and his promiscuous fictional world have missed or at worst never experienced. The dangerous side of Ahmad's choices appears merely a detail that can be worked through in the end. In this way, Jörg Richter argues, “Updike omits any clear-cut judgment of the moral rights and wrongs of terrorism but instead accentuates the paradoxical nature of religious experience within a secular and technologically dominated world” (Richter 2008: 483). Of course, in this way Updike's literary operation situates itself outside of history, refusing to unravel the specific political implications of 9/11 and blaming them on the hollowness of American “population” for which he expresses “disgust” (Walsh). Interestingly though, despite the Manichean and stereotypical organization of the plot, *Terrorist* avoids ethical rigidity, equally distributes strengths and weaknesses among its characters and even finds in the



spiritless and cynical Jack Levy the “saviour” who in the end, against all odds, prevents the catastrophe from happening. Levy’s gesture disavows the violent ramifications of Ahmad’s religion but it also reasserts the boy’s spiritual innocence.

In *Terrorist*, these contrasts between Islam, Catholicism and atheism mobilize a no less explicit racial debate. If Islamic fundamentalism is a force that can thrive in the “lake of rubbles” of New Prospect, racial discrimination seems to follow along. However, even the treatment of race in the novel sounds “politically correct”, as if Updike aimed at representing a wide range of racially connoted (when not racist) attitudes in connection with a particular faith and within the delicate social equilibrium determined by the terrorist attacks of 9/11. For example, Ahmad thinks of his religious views as inseparable from his ethnicity. While he is proud of his father’s “baked” complexion (Updike 2006: 13), he despises his mother’s mottled white Irish skin color that appears as that of a “leper” (*Ibid.*: 170). When he walks beside Teresa in stores or around the city, he is “embarrassed by the mismatch of her freckles with his own dun skin,” (*Ibid.*: 151) since, Updike writes, “his taste, developed in his years at Central High, is for darker skins, cocoa and caramel and chocolate” and for dark eyes: “Ahmad regards his mother as a mistake that his father made but that he never would” (*Ibid.*: 170). Developing his portrait, Updike imagines Ahmad having a crush on Joryleen, an African American schoolmate whose “smooth body” he pictures “darker than caramel but paler than chocolate, roasting in that vault of flames and being scorched into blisters” (*Ibid.*: 9), as his religious ideas about “impure” sexuality and damnation lead him to think. Also, Ahmad is almost conquered by the sermon, energy and songs at the Black Christian church where Joryleen invites him one day to listen to her solo.

All these references to “blackness” constellate the novel but often sound so sensuous and gratuitous that they seemingly buttress the pair ethnic appearance/religious strength, but they add nothing substantial to Ahmad’s character. Such ethnic specifications appear like aestheticizing (food) items rather than deeper elements of identity and signal the author’s inclination to deal with race as an aesthetic rather than political category (as much as he focuses on the “idealistic” aspects of terrorism). While Updike indulges in those descriptions to remind us that Ahmad is in love with himself, his Egyptian heritage and, *therefore*, his faith, his construction of the character through these particulars is overcharged and artificial, as if every single detail about skin color or every ethnic connotation were relevant to the boy’s beliefs and had to be justified or reported. For example, Ahmad’s “blackness” is depicted as “superior” to the rough and ignorant “African Americanness” of Tylenol, Joryleen’s boyfriend and future pimp. Tylenol’s mother picked his ridiculous name out of a commercial she heard on TV: Updike and Ahmad’s voices, confused in the free indirect speech, give this piece of information clearly casting a derogatory light on the African American minority and implicitly boosting Ahmad’s ethno-religious identity





and distance from pop culture. The same undermining logic works for different shades of whiteness. Ahmad twists these shades as he likes: he despises his mother's skin but is intrigued by his imam's "waxy white" complexion that is "shared with generations of heavily swathed Yemeni warriors" (Updike 2006:13). There are purity and exoticism to this "waxy white" that Teresa's freckles lack and this is what attracts Ahmad's attention.

Mita Banerjee maintains that "*Terrorist* is a novel obsessed with, and not only curious about, skin color" (2008: 16). In identifying a sudden increase of the practices of racial profiling after 9/11, Banerjee observes how *Terrorist* and many narratives linked to the cultural climate of the tragic events racialize and denaturalize Arab Americans in order to question their "fit" in American society. Racial profiling implies that certain racial features highlight the predisposition in a person to commit a crime. Arguing that whiteness gained new currency and legitimation in cultural discourses after the attacks, Banerjee declares that biological skin color has become a tool for exclusion and denial of citizenship. However, while Banerjee might have a point in saying that Updike's fiction is reactionary in having Ahmad's gaze "profilng" everyone throughout the novel, astutely inverting ethno-historical roles, I also think that whiteness does not come out as strong and "muscular" as she thinks it does, since indeed Updike wants to be "fair." Ahmad is not the "racist" as long as the white implied author sides with him, otherwise the narrative would undermine itself. First of all, we have identified Updike's fascination with Ahmad to the point that their two gazes coalesce in the free indirect speech and narrative structure. We see the world through Ahmad's eyes, the eyes of a young Arab American in the wake of 9/11 who mistrusts everyone and reasserts his own cultural tradition in total loneliness: "Ahmad feels his pride of isolation and willed identity to be threatened by the masses of ordinary, hard-pressed men and plain, practical women who are enrolled in Islam as a lazy matter of ethnic identity" (Updike 2006: 177). As we have pointed out above talking about Mary Marshall Clark's street interviews and the elusiveness of the racial trope, Ahmad is a reversed testimony of the confusion and "reduction of complexity" that affect not only the average American, but also (in Updike's view) young Arab Americans. In Ahmad's mixed identity, his "Arabness" inevitably prevails over a decaying American context in which 9/11 has aggravated and re-polarized racial conflicts (at school, for example) but it has also left things untouched. He finds no similarities in the people around himself. When travelling to the suburbs of New Prospect, where immigrants of decades before have by now blended in, Ahmad thinks (through Updike's voice),

[t]he younger Arab Americans, idle and watchful, have adopted the bulky running shoes, droopy oversized jeans, and hooded sweatshirts of black homeys. Ahmad, in his prim white shirt and his black jeans slim as two stovepipes, would not fit in here. To these co-religionists, Islam is less a faith...than a habit, a face of their condition as an underclass, alien in a nation



that persists in thinking of itself as light-skinned, English-speaking, and Christian (Updike 2006: 244).

Insisting on Ahmad's isolation, Updike wants to show that the boy's sense of superiority is the result of a historical situation as much as of an adolescent struggle for identity. Similarly, Updike points to the white, flattening Christian society Ahmad lives in, implicitly condemning its conformity and fragility through his character's behaviour.

Second of all, Updike's narrative imposes connections between skin color and beliefs so that fundamentalism is to ethnicity what atheism, or at best Christianity, is to whiteness. While there are exceptions to this rule, overall the novel portrays mixed-race Americans as believers and victims of society (Ahmad, Joryleen) and white characters as materialist, overemotional and vain (Teresa, Jack Levy, Beth). Teresa abandoned her Catholic beliefs when she was young and she admires Ahmad for his staunch faith, failing to understand the danger her son is putting himself in. Introduced by a description of her "blue veins" that "wander through the white skin, Irish white skin" (*Ibid.*: 84), Teresa tells her lover, Jack Levy, – who is concerned about Ahmad's misanthropy – that she has "never tried to undermine his faith. To someone without much of one, who dropped out of the Catholic package when she was sixteen, his faith seems rather beautiful" (*Ibid.*: 85). In this way, Updike intertwines racial and religious discourses for the reader, who is led to associate the mother's skin color with her inability to be a good Christian. Teresa also comments on Ahmad's father and his ideas about women as servants, saying,

[w]hat a pompous, chauvinistic horse's ass he was, really. But I was young and in love – in love mostly with him being, you know, exotic, third-world, put-upon, and my marrying him showing how liberal and liberated I was (*Ibid.*: 86).

Teresa pretends she is a liberal, open-minded individual, yet Updike portrays her ironically through juvenile and naive statements, where the combination "white complexion-lack of belief" is emphasized and ethnicity, in spite of her husband's chauvinism, is branded once again as the fair, politically correct choice.

Jack Levy responds to Teresa's confessions by remarking: "I know the feeling. I'm a Jew and my wife was a Lutheran...I shouldn't have said 'was.' She never changed, she just doesn't go to church" (*Ibid.*: 86). Levy wants to add his own slice of liberalism to Teresa's by stating similar confessional differences between himself and his wife. However, with Levy and Beth, Updike merely sets up other examples of white materialists and "pagans" in the desolate landscape of New Prospect,

He was a Jew. But not a proud Jew...Jack Levy took a stiff-necked pleasure in being one of Judaism's stiff-necked naysayers...Beth was a Lutheran, a hearty



Christer denomination...But after thirty-six years together in northern New Jersey, the two of them with their different faiths and ethnicities have been ground down to a lackluster sameness (Updike 2006: 23-25).

And further on:

As Jack Levy sees it, America is paved solid with fat and tar...Even our vaunted freedom is nothing much to be proud of...it just makes it easier for terrorists to move about, renting airplanes and vans and setting up Web sites. Religious fanatics and computer geeks: the combination seems strange to his old-fashioned sense of the reason-versus-faith divide. Those creeps who flew the planes into the World Trade Center had good technical educations. The ringleader had a German degree in city planning: he should have redesigned New Prospect (*Ibid.*: 27).

This "lackluster sameness" and "reason-versus-faith divide" is what marks Jack and Beth's tedious and disillusioned existence which, in contrast to Ahmad's, deploys in a growing nihilism and in a sententious, mediocre pragmatism ("he should have redesigned New Prospect"). Rather than compassion, as for Teresa, Updike relies on misery and disenchantment to portray Jack and Beth, this latter cheated upon, obese and television-addicted. Through these white, morally shallow representatives of America, it is clear Ahmad's faith (and the "grandiosity" of 9/11 plan) represent a counterpoint of dramatic irony to such waste land.

The exception to the rule whiteness-lack of belief in Updike's novel is Beth's sister Hermione, the assistant to the Secretary of Homeland Defence in Washington (secretly in love with him), who conflates her strong Lutheran ethos with the mission of post-9/11 homeland security, when the "nation remains on yellow" (*Ibid.*: 43). When asked rhetorically by his boss "[w]hy do they hate us? What's to hate?" Hermione replies "loyally" that "[Muslim terrorists] hate the light'...'Like bats. *The light shone in darkness*", she quotes, knowing that Pennsylvania piety is a way to [the Secretary's] heart, 'and the darkness comprehended it not'" (*Ibid.*: 48). When the Department of Defence ascertains the existence of a terrorist plot in New Prospect, the Secretary, an archetypal bureaucrat with superior career ambitions, is worried that he might not succeed in preventing it and thus he would earn nothing in terms of money and fame from the operation. Hermione "is shocked" at his words and proclaims: "Mr. Secretary, no man can serve two masters. Mammon is one; it would be presumptuous for me to name the other" (Updike 2006: 261). Quoting the sacred scriptures, Hermione, with her "transparent skin" (*Ibid.*: 45), reasserts the importance of "light" (i.e. whiteness) over "darkness," justice over evil, God over money (she embodies the reversal of Ahmad's fanaticism). Even the Secretary is described with stereotypical "white" American features (in the "light-skinned, English-speaking and Christian" nation mentioned



above), “a large man, with a slab of muscle across his back that gives the tailors of his dark-blue suits extra trouble” (*Ibid.*: 45), having “powerful, rueful masseters” (*Ibid.*: 257) and “surprisingly light-blue eyes” (*Ibid.*: 261-62). While these two characters are merely sketched in the novel and appear only seldom, working behind the scenes for national security, they symbolize ingrained ideas of exceptionalism and territorialization that were consistently revamped in US public policies after 9/11.

In his presidential speeches between 2001 and 2003, G. W. Bush consistently used expressions such as “our country” and “our citizens” (and various other instances of the possessive “our”) to stress the active role of the US in propagating freedom all over the world (as the operation “Enduring freedom” demonstrates, being carried out in different countries). These seemingly defensive rhetoric and political strategies confirm an authoritarian and exclusivist idea of US exceptionalism, where the territorial defence becomes first of all propaganda in the form of a global defence of supposedly American values, e.g. freedom, democracy, capitalism, and so on. To these values, Updike’s novel provocatively adds whiteness and Christianity through the figures of Hermione and the Secretary, depicting them as orthodox cogs in the political machine of the anti-terrorist cause. Their civic devotion contrasts with the shallowness of other white characters, but it still comes out as uncritical and even racist. Surprisingly, while Updike acknowledges the bona fide of both officers by presenting them in a pathetic and yet benign light, he makes them responsible for perpetuating an exclusionary culture based on religious and ethnic prejudices. Conveying Hermione and the Secretary’s way of thinking about homeland security in airports after 9/11, Updike writes,

[t]he dozing giant of American racism...stirred anew as African-Americans and Hispanics, who (it was often complained) “can’t even speak English properly,” acquired the authority to frisk, to question, to delay, to grant or deny admission and the permission to fly...To the well-paid professionals who travelled the airways and frequented the newly fortified government buildings, it appears that a dusky underclass has been given tyrannical power. (*Ibid.*: 46)

As Banerjee argues, “[t]he level of national alert, in Updike’s narrative, can thus be measured in racial terms” (2008: 20). However, contrarily to what she concludes, Updike is far from aligning himself with the position of those who think that a “dusky underclass” is a nuisance in the new national security policies; instead, he effectively captures and emphasizes the silent racism of those who think they are America’s ruling class and culture because of their light skin and Christian belief.

Robert Stone called *Terrorist* a “didactic” novel and yet appreciated it for the way it combines different views of America, uncovering its “moral exhaustion and reprobation” (Stone 2006). If the attacks brought to light and exacerbated the racist undercurrents of US white society, they also forced ethnic minorities to reaffirm their



autonomous role in such complicated context. As I showed, Arab-American Ahmad is an example of such cultural reaction and resistance to the sleepy, ghostly oppressive atmosphere that Updike embeds in a dull post-9/11 New Jersey. Ahmad fails for the good of everybody by refusing to go through with his terroristic plan, but he does not yield to the surrounding culture; his faith remains untarnished up to the end and he stands out simultaneously as an uncorrupted hero and a citizen with criminal responsibilities. In contrast to Updike, who polarizes opposing binary cultures in the 9/11 aftermath, Joseph O'Neill's in *Netherland* conceives the wounded city of New York as a regenerative palimpsest where Indian, Turk, Caribbean and Pakistani immigrants try to suture their own identity to the fabric of American society in name of a new racialized Gatsbian dream (Wood, Kakutani). I will briefly touch on this novel as an example of how 9/11 (or its derivations) persists in stories that do not make it a central motif of the narrative. While both Updike and O'Neill choose to have ethnic characters undergo a "narrative defeat" in post-9/11 America, O'Neill paints a portrait of ethnicity that is naive but impure since it turns 9/11 into the umpteenth occasion to generate business. Contrarily to Ahmad, who decides to immolate himself for a religious cause, O'Neill's co-protagonist, Trinidad-born Chuck Ramkissoo, a romantic Cricket lover and improvised entrepreneur transplanted in New York City, rises from rags to riches through obscure business dealings and questionable partnerships. He is a blown up, "talky, street-smart" man (Garner 1) who sells sushi to the Chinese (a cover for something "fishy") and runs Chuck Cricket Inc., a company in a shabby place downtown with his lover Eliza. The United States is for Chuck a world of dreams, social emancipation and economic welfare, where he thinks that even his big passion for cricket (noticeably a non-American sport) will find an opportunity for realization.

Hans van den Broek, the first person narrator of the novel, narrates his friendship with Chuck as a memoir for the reader. Hans is a Dutch banker who moved to New York from London with his British wife Rachel in 1998 to work as an equities analyst. After the 9/11 tragedy, they had to leave their apartment and relocate to a noisy Manhattan hotel where they grew more and more apart until Rachel finally decided to leave him and to go back to London with their child – Hans thought "I felt shame because it was me, not terror, she was fleeing" (O'Neill 2008: 30). When he writes the story, he is back with Rachel in London a few years later and receives the news that "Chuck's 'remains'" have been found in a canal (*Ibid.*: 5), which is the occasion that triggers the flashback story. Hans' friendship with Chuck developed when he found himself alone in New York. They met by chance and learned they both shared a passion for cricket, although Hans admits that he did not really fit in: "I was the only white man I saw on the cricket fields of New York" (*Ibid.*: 10). This sport becomes a terrain of encounter among different cultures that Chuck wants to bring together, marrying passion to business. Hans even thinks: "I sometimes wondered why the respect of these men mattered so much to me" (*Ibid.*: 173); and we infer that for Hans



this cricket experience is an occasion to go back in his mind to his childhood in the Netherlands and to his beloved, recently passed-away mother who supported him during his matches.

Truly, Hans and Chuck could not be more at odds. While Hans is a banker, known for his rationalistic mindset and the “clunking lexical precision” (*Ibid.*: 39) of his English, Chuck is a combination of “Jay Gatsby and one of Philip Roth’s long-winded, comic cranks” (Kakutani 1): his biggest dream is to revitalize New York’s cricketing scene by building a cricket stadium in Manhattan Pier 40, an abandoned shipping terminal where, right after 9/11, the Humane Society of New York had opened an animal recovery centre. This rescue project gave Chuck the idea for his enterprise: describing how people from different countries did not just take care of the animals but naturally led an altruistic life as a community for a few months, he claims: “I think for many of us it was one of the happiest times of our life” (*Ibid.*: 77). Consequently, cricket throughout the novel becomes not only a business enterprise but a metaphor for a more egalitarian and cooperative society in times of national bereavement.

Of course, the stadium project is absurd but it is part of Chuck’s double nature: to think well, but too big. A self-made man, Chuck knows what suffering means and wishes to create a true cosmopolitan community in the heart of the most cosmopolitan American city. He is the archetype of the romantic, candid dreamer who nevertheless is ready to take advantage of every person and occasion to get something out of them and advance socially. Through Trinidadian Chuck, O’Neill reactualizes the character of Gatsby and presents ethnicity as one of the shady yet propulsive economic forces coming out of post-9/11 New York. Clearly, Chuck’s “impure” idealism differs from Ahmad’s: if both want their “dream” to come true, Ahmad is uncompromising while Chuck has no qualms about tangling with surly businessmen and exploiting his own friends. Indeed, he asks the unaware Hans, who is preparing for his American driving test, to drive him around to many places where he exacts bribes and meets potential investors in his activities. Yet their friendship is solid. The cricket pitch that Chuck and Hans begin to maintain and that shines in the dark Manhattan, with the grass striped to perfection into “dark green and pale green rings” (O’Neill 2008: 147), looks like a new beginning for the city and for the US – a dream that Hans inwardly mocks and outwardly nourishes as an escapist device for himself and his “distractedness” after the terrorist attacks (*Ibid.*: 89).

As opposed to Updike, O’Neill avoids representing the anxieties and revanchism of mainstream white America after 9/11; instead, he makes Hans, a white émigré from Europe, the interpreter of this “nether-land,” with its dim, oneiric atmosphere, and Chuck the potential factor of a renewed but morally uncertain life. Both act as outsiders in a foreign territory where everyone and everything has come to a standstill. The story is punctuated by minor characters that, in spite of their national origin, do not seem to belong anywhere but to the “flat,” vacant US. They either thrive uprooted



in the web of connections of a petty business underworld – Chuck’s Jewish associate Abelsky, and other Russian and Chinese hustlers; or they blend in, working at Wall Street like Hans; or they “withdraw” from the disaster of 9/11 into the secluded hotel where Hans also takes refuge – a white lunatic with an angel costume, Taspinar, and long-term residents who look like “cheap fish” hesitating in “weed” (*Ibid.*: 33); or they play, watch and dream cricket like Chuck, coming from post-colonial countries such as Pakistan, Jamaica, South-Africa. This is not Updike’s dichotomic America, but a whole multi-ethnic humanity living in a limbo, waiting for something to happen.

Therefore, while in *Netherland* whiteness implicitly remains the expression of the dominant American culture, it is overall under-conceptualized. Chuck for example conflates it with the current short-sighted and apathetic general trend of the country, whose impulses are misdirected towards war, as he tries to explain to Hans,

Americans cannot really see the world. *They* think they can, but *they* can’t... Look at the problems *we’re* having. It’s a mess, and it’s going to get worse. I say, *we want* to have something in common with Hindus and Muslims? Chuck Ramkissoon is going to make it happen. With the New York Cricket Club, *we* could start a whole new chapter in U.S. history. Why not? ...I am going to open *your eyes*. (*Ibid.*: 211, my italics)

In Chuck interesting slippage between “they” and “we” lies his promising contradiction: as a naturalized citizen and racially-connoted individual, he simultaneously feels at home and alien in New York; and if he ascribes the crisis to the vague political-economic establishment he is living in, he also believes that he can do better for the United States from his insider-outsider’s position. Indeed, he is ready to exploit the very establishment he critiques to make his dream come true. Ingenuously, Chuck thinks that the system is limitless and that he could find in it a possible fertile ground where his cosmopolitan dream can blossom. But as the narrative implies by presenting right away Chuck’s death, unfathomable forces above him can and will overturn any alternative, ethnically-connoted vision.

In this sense, though, the only significant white character who provides a symmetrical counterpart to Chuck is Hans. As O’Neill tells to Katie Bacon in an interview for *The Atlantic*, the character who sparked *Netherland* was Chuck, as he wanted to write a novel about the business world before 9/11 happened. But after the attacks, he felt he needed Hans and his (autobiographical) childhood in the Netherlands as a “foil” to narrate the whole story. O’Neill interestingly calls Hans an “*international*” and “*post-national narrator*,” whose roots and past are elsewhere in the Netherlands and whose future, it seems, may happen anywhere. Through the character of Hans, post-9/11 whiteness is given a more primitive connotation and becomes a layered feature of the narrative, as O’Neill further explains in the Bacon interview,



To have a Dutch narrator in the context of an American novel is almost to have the original American narrator, because of course the Dutch were the first people here in New York. And there is reference made, from time to time in the book, to New Netherland, which is old New York. So Hans is the most recent iteration of the original American presence in this part of the world. (Bacon 2008: 2)

In other words, in *Netherland* whiteness does not become synonymous with the repressive political machine of the Bush Administration, nor with a specific nationality, but with one of the constituents of a multicultural society. In O'Neill's view, the white, Dutch narrator is part of a world that is now more than ever composite, "non-original" and authentically multiracial. The dream of cosmopolitanism thus comes full circle, including both the outsiders Chuck and Hans beyond their national origin and skin colour. While the cricket dream forged by foreigners in the United States is crushed by invisible powers (the unresolved death of Chuck) and remains utopian, the cosmopolitanism suggested by such cooperative effort is real, as it is Chuck and Hans' unique interaction in America – a friendship not based on business, but precisely on a post-racial, post-national common vision and passion.

Certainly, Hans in the novel runs the risk of remaining a "voice" or a "framework" for Chuck's indomitable spirit. Although O'Neill's writing is, as Wood argues, "attentive, rich prose about New York in crisis that, refreshingly, is not also prose in crisis: it's not overwrought or solipsistic or puerile or sentimental, or otherwise straining to be noticed" (Wood 2008: 2), Hans' literary texture is inconspicuous, perhaps too lyrical and evanescent for his banker character to be believable. When he hears Chuck's story about 9/11 and the animal Humane Society, he points out that "[t]he catastrophe had instilled in many – though not in me – a state of elation" (O' Neill 2008: 77), revealing his detachment from a life that "had become disembodied" (*Ibid.*: 30) and that was preventing any form of dialogue between him and his wife. However, in his own way, Hans undergoes a change in New York that becomes clear when he is "deterritorialized" in London, back together with Rachel. There, Hans feels more American than ever. Hearing Chuck's story for the first time when they are notified of his death, Rachel tells Hans that he only wanted to play with Chuck and "never really wanted to know him" or "take him seriously." And she adds: "Same thing with America" (*Ibid.*: 166). But Hans, who always seems subjugated by his wife, contradicts her and instead reveals how he partook of Chuck's post-9/11 "elation" by becoming more and more a cosmopolitan American and a different type of cricket player,

I'd hit the ball in the air like an American cricketer; and I'd done so without injury to my sense of myself. On the contrary, I felt great. And Chuck had seen it happen and, as much as he could have, had prompted it...I began to dream in all





seriousness of a stadium...this impossible grass field in America...I am at last naturalized (*Ibid.*:176).

Moreover, at a dinner with friends in London, Hans finds himself quarrelling with those who want to minimize 9/11, claiming that it was “[n]ot such a big deal...when you think of everything that’s happened since” (*Ibid.*: 181). While he acknowledges that the Iraqi war and the Administration’s deeds that followed were horrible, Hans still wants to grant the catastrophe independent perspective and weight, refusing to be considered a witness/victim only because he was there when 9/11 occurred and remarking that “it was a big deal” for those who lost their loved ones.

While Hans and Chuck, then, are diametrically opposed characters, they find a concrete and utopian unity in the sport they play, in the country where – and in the time when – they play it. O’Neill declared that this was his “first novel as an American novelist” in a time of “fantastic confusion and anxiety that, amazingly, was replaced by confusion and anxiety about what the United States was doing” (Bacon 2008: 1). Bringing to the attention of the reader marginal urban cultures that rarely find a voice in mainstream American literature and alluding to a global or transnational idea of “America” that flourished in the aftermath, O’Neill transforms 9/11 into an atypical occasion for business but also for dialogue and cultural renovation. Unfortunately, the ethnic character Chuck fails miserably in his pursuit of happiness (like Updike’s Ahmad). Therefore, it is the white voice that tells his story, as though multicultural discourses after the terrorist attacks of 2001 were not yet autonomous enough to convey a fully realized cosmopolitanism. However, in spite of the narrative and existential defeats that both Ahmad and Chuck endure in their historical frame, it seems that the white gazes that witness and tell their struggles show little cynicism and more sentiment than one would expect in a post-9/11 scenario. If ethnicity is still synonymous with exclusion from established social structures, it is also a crucial cultural zone that both Updike and O’Neill endow with dynamism and hope.

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