

### **Contracts of Spatiality after Postmodernism**

Hi, everybody. Thank you, Professor Riquet, for your invitation to speak before you and your students. It is a real pleasure to be here and talk to you, as I will for the next 45-50 minutes, about space, democracy, politics, and geopolitics at a pivotal moment in history. And, without further ado, let me start out by noting this: democracy, it bears reminding ourselves these days, presupposes a togetherness, certain protocols of communality susceptible to accommodate, as Jean-Luc Nancy notes in *Vérité de la démocratie*, the world's singularities (Nancy 62). Whether we think of it as foundational, as *notre donnée première* to which history has repeatedly failed to measure up, as something already albeit imperfectly achieved by modern governance, or as a utopian goal beyond the present's ever-receding horizon, such an 'accommodation' requires and, when effectively implemented, enacts an understanding of being as quintessentially and ethically being with an other (Nancy 24-25). As a datum, historical reality, or desideratum, shared space thus conceived lies at the core of the democratic project. Conversely, democracy can be seized on as a sharing topology, a sui generis logic of space *qua* domain of co-presence, of being with an other within a communal zone or area.

The social *mise-en-scène* of this logic spans a vast array of cultural practices and has been subject to modern spatial contracts for centuries. In turn, these agreements' readability and overall rhetoric fluctuate across time, place, and medium. Sanctioning what has been called the production of space in modernity, such compacts were, in the West, basically drawn up in the revolutionary aftermath of the Enlightenment and were periodically—perfunctorily, moderately, or radically—amended thereafter. A barometer of social change, these operations run an entire

discursive gamut from the juridically specific and literal, where they formalize particular regulations of ‘space-heavy’ issues such as legal occupancy, land ownership, eminent domain, easement, real estate transactions, and, in more turbulent times, the ‘nationalization’ of private or corporate property, to the more general and literary. And it is quite refreshing to witness thinkers like Jacques Rancière turning to literature and other putatively ‘superstructural’ phenomena to make legible the ‘pact’ undergirding a society’s otherwise very material and deeply consequential spatial setup.

As is well known, Rancière has been most vocal in stressing not only that the co-existence of self and other and the ‘distribution of the sensible’ deriving from it are a marker of actual democracy, but that such ‘apportionments’ (Rancière 2011, 12) of the perceptible surroundings also occur and can be, as he claims in *The Lost Thread*, ‘community-forming’ inside literature and the arts more generally (Rancière 2017b, 74). Moreover, as he submits, configuring human togetherness spatially is what poetry and literature intrinsically *do*. This is also that which renders the literary political, and a priori so. For, in a fundamental way, political distributions and politics generally are ‘spatializations’ of togetherness—attributions, distributions, and redistributions of space, of places where we can be, where we should be, and sometimes where we are not with others ethically. In this vein, what *grounds* or undercuts politics is a spatial ethic. But the regrounding, the ‘spatialization,’ spatial embodiment, or the mapping onto social space of this ethic when the apportionment of a society’s ‘sensible’ stock becomes politically unsustainable or undesirable is, Rancière observes, an aesthetic prerogative, whether we talk about political action ‘per se’ or aesthetic innovation (Rancière 2017a, 50).

It is in fact principally the latter that the philosopher draws from in his attempt to identify progressive (‘dissenting’) models of ‘rebuilding the common’ (51) spatially, viz., by means of an

allotment of spaces (*partage des espaces*) susceptible to eventually open up the democratic ‘possibility of another world’ (72-73). An aesthetic undertaking twice, and in that eminently—‘intensively’—political, literature proves itself a prominent ‘world-making’ modality (a *manière de faire monde*) insofar as it brings to bear on extant spatial arrangements an imaginatively ‘rearranging’ sensorium whose one-of-a-kind ‘reclassifying’ and redistributive, fundamentally ‘dissenting’ mechanisms are geared to redefining (*requalifier*), reassigning, and otherwise repurposing our living spaces (Rancière 2002, 49, 46). New spatial contracts are thus, and quite *stricto sensu*, written, and it is noteworthy that they are no less significant than the stylistic-linguistic, rhetorical, and deliberative contracts on which Nelly Wolf’s analysis of the modern novel’s contractual structure dwells in *Le Roman de la démocratie*. In effect, the fulcrum of Wolf’s discussion of novelistic contractuality and the focus of the aforementioned spatiality contracts roughly coincide, both inhering in the other’s *presence in a medium*, whether this medium is linguistic, a certain language in which this other is represented at the *discours* level, or physical, namely, a place, environs, or physical expanse in which he or she is represented diegetically, cast in an *histoire*. By the same token, what Wolf determines, in a Rancièresque vein, as a ‘distribution of language’ is ethically and politically isomorphic to an apportionment of space and by and large contractually equivalent to it (Wolf 47). For instrumental to the ‘rearrangements’ set off by both is a *positioning*, more to the point, the position assigned or reassigned by the novelist to the other, a location that, as far as fictional space goes, is literally one, an actual place, abode, habitat, or geography inside the book’s imaginary world. With another terminology, the key issue here is whether the spatial reshufflings in play in modern fiction are *relational*, the extent to which they unfold a topology and ultimately ‘make a world’ where self and other inhabit a domain of ethical sharing—where presence is rooted in co-

presence.<sup>1</sup> Ethical co-presence is the condition of genuine, democratic communality, one for which fiction may make provisions if its spatial contract is democratic or, to the contrary, one for which such stipulations may lack or may be insufficient if the compact in question is totalitarian, leaving no room, ontologically, ethically, politically, and diegetically, for the other.

The collectivist utopia of an unfettered public sphere and the *univers concentrationnaires* of the Nazi and Communist regimes, respectively, are, of course, not only the extremes on the democratic-totalitarian scale of political spatiality but also, statistically speaking, the exceptions. For the most part, the antithetic types clash, intersect, or combine in modern fiction in all kinds of ways, so much so that the short story, novel, or novella becomes in its entirety the fine print of a spatial pact whose precise affordances generation after generation of critics struggle to adjudicate. As Wolf, Rancière, and others have suggested, this contractual ‘undecidability’ is a blessing in disguise: on the one hand, literary complexity constitutes a juridical liability, foreclosing as it does linguistic instrumentality and exposing literature’s legal inadequacies; to be sure, there would be no need for specialized legal language if such shortcomings did not exist. On the other hand, and more importantly, the same ambiguity-building apparatus lies behind literature’s uncanny, unique capacity to reach far beyond the legal and the political in ‘fostering worlds’ featuring unforeseen, highly imaginative if not automatically ‘democratic’ spatial setups.

Now, twenty-first-century fiction regales the reader with sophisticate arrangements and dynamics of place and people in which democratic or ‘relational’ spatiality is, to reiterate, a far-from-perfect reality, a promise (plausible or already broken), or a situation whose prerequisite is what I view as spatial critique—a challenge, direct, oblique, or both, and a rewriting of one or more of postmodernity’s spatial contracts. In what follows, I attend to such a critique by pursuing the crisis of the relational articulation of space and by the same token the predicament

of the democratic body politic in Joseph O’Neill’s 2014 novel *The Dog*. To my mind, the book is an exemplar of late- or post-postmodernism’s deployment of topological representation and attendant prescriptions of space, place, and social sites as a gauge of democracy. I propose, specifically, that *The Dog* both projects and queries what I call ‘the spatial sublime’ and, further, that, on the whole, O’Neill manages to bring out in bold relief the less relational, less co-presence-oriented, less democratic, and arguably less noticeable clauses of contemporary contracts of spatiality. A ‘crisis’ of such contracts and, in a sense, of the contractual narrative (Wolf 96), i.e., of *The Dog* itself thus becomes legible in the novel, and the reader must figure out for himself or herself if this is a strength or weakness of O’Neill’s art.

An Irish writer of Turkish descent who grew up in the Netherlands, Mozambique, and Iran, and currently teaches in the United States, O’Neill has authored one of the best ‘post-9/11’ fiction books in any language, the 2009 Pen/Faulkner Award winner *Netherland*. His works set up—‘arrange,’ ‘shape,’ and ‘fictionalize’ in the etymological sense of Lat. *fingerere*, as Rancière would probably tell us—a ‘sublime’ *spatial world order* that promises to be cosmopolitan in a relational, participatory, and forward-looking way. As I will show, this order is undermined, however, by the actual allocation of human presence and, derived from this distribution, by the Rancièresque *appearance* of people across the space this order purports to transform. *The Dog*’s ‘demos’—the ferociously exploited Asian laborers, the stateless *bidoons*, the sexual laborers from the former Soviet republics, and the rest of the underprivileged multitudes—alongside the ‘high-net-worth’ Lebanese ‘men of the world,’ Donald J. Trump wannabes, and the Western lawyers, bankers, and managers catering to them in the United Arab Emirates, where *The Dog* is set, gain admission to buildings, clubs, businesses, and public spaces and are, consequently, allowed to be with others according to an *exclusionary code of social presence*, to an unethical

spatiality that, in all fairness, O'Neill uncovers systematically. This code maps out the dark side of the global sublime, enabling not theoretically infinite access, connectivity, and the affluence allegedly following from them but the opposite: discontinuity, separation, off-limit and effectively no-go zones, gated neighborhoods, indigence, vulnerability before official bureaucracy, and an unforgiving maze of passwords, visas, checkpoints, legal barriers, vetting, brutal selection, and discriminatory regulations of all sorts. 'The global world' of which the Emirates, in particular Dubai, and especially Dubai's skyline provide major icons and success stories, turns thus out to be, as Marc Augé has put it in a different context in *La Communauté illusoire*, 'a world of discontinuity and the forbidden' (Augé 2010, 7). On the face of it, the Burj Khalifa skyscraper of the Emirati 'abracadabrapolis,' UAE's capital city, and the city itself seem to cheerfully defy nature and human nature's limitations no less. Their ambitious silhouettes are exercises in a limitless hi-tech sublime along the lines of a Kantian aesthetics of the *One Thousand and One Nights* variety, with O'Neill's unnamed narrating hero assuming in the Arabian desert something like the contemplative posture of Caspar David Friedrich's protagonist in *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. 'There are,' *The Dog's* storyteller asserts,

some who would raise an eyebrow at my favorable aesthetic assessment of the Burj. I'd invite them to come here and see the unprecedented perpendicular for themselves, but first of all to put away ideas formed in advance about this country, the brand of which, it's fair to say, places unusual reliance on the *Guinness Book of World Records* and in particular the sections of that book for children that are concerned with the breaking of records having to do with immensities. Unless I'm mistaken, in addition to the world's tallest artificial structure, our many Officially Amazing feats/features include the longest driverless metro, the tallest hotel, the largest gold ring, the most floors in a building, the

building with the largest floor space, the biggest small, and, I read somewhere, the most nationalities washing their hands at once. Even this last exploit (undertaken to mark Global Handwashing Day, and not, as the pre-judger might think, a mindless stunt) suggests to me that there remains intact in this small country a joyful, properly childlike sense of the lofty. Excelsior! (O'Neill 2014, 78).

Complete with its civilizational-Star Trekkish transgressive aspiration, *The Dog's* natural and architectural paragons of the infinite sublime are paradoxically predicated, however, on an egregiously limiting 'aesthetic of distance' (Augé 2010, 8) and enforces a germane politics as well, both externally, as lofty and dimensionally unrivaled urban landmarks are admired from the outside, and internally, as whole masses of people are excluded from indoor and outdoor spaces depending on the individuals' membership in various professional, economic, gender, and ethno-racial categories. We know full well, the interdiction of *being-here* (or *there*) is sheer prohibition of being. This ban is in force not only in Augé's famous 'non-places' but, in Dubai, all over the place, a fundamental displacement that is both ontological and political, for sublime infinitude's subliminal flipside is a spatial imaginary where finite, walled-in, and unaffordable spaces materialize only to enforce the limits of Emirati 'democracy.' 'Awe-inspiring' as the malls and towers of Abu Dhabi and Dubai may be, there is, O'Neill hints, little in the way of the Kantian 'unrepresentable' about them. They are, in all actuality, the author intimates, 'built to' very specific and eminently breakable 'codes' of spatialization.

The injunctions of the regulatory spatiality underpinning social life in the Emirates get suddenly more restrictive in the Gulf region and the world at large after the 2007 financial collapse. By 2009, when the unnamed protagonist of *The Dog* seats himself comfortably in 'the Human Touch™' massage chair for his regular pedicure, the sharp downturn in the U. S.

economy would be felt worldwide as humanity's biggest collective disaster in the post-Cold War years. A onetime Manhattan lawyer and newly appointed trustee of the Emirates-headquartered Lebanese conglomerate known as the Batros Group, O'Neill's narrating hero, of all people, should have picked up on the 'excessive' ontology of money-making and money-moving networks either back in New York City in 2007 or in Dubai a few months later. Conspicuously, the plot puts him right smack in the middle of a crisis that is as economic as it is political—on a geopolitical scale—and spatial. *The Dog* revealingly telescopes the turmoil of global proportions in the 'spatial' subculture of a mostly American expatriate professional class. And yet, oddly enough, neither the job duties nor the relocation—both assigning the character a front-row seat to the unfolding world drama—appears to afford X, as former coworkers christened O'Neill's lead hero, a sober purchase on the planetary mechanisms of capital. To the contrary, the 'excess of information' volunteered by Ollie, pedicurist of the Dubai elite and X's scuba-diving buddy, works like a narcotic, conjuring up in X's mind the sedating purr of world 'intellectual/moral/economic' apparatuses (O'Neill 2014, 56-57). The overflow of the technicalities with which Ollie peppers the explanations of his ministrations, X recalls,

was so soothing I nearly fell asleep. Little wonder: I'd been lulled into a soporific feeling of all going well in the world, of clever men and women in unseen laboratories toiling and tinkering and steadily solving our most disastrous mysteries, of benign systems gaining in efficiency, of our species progressively attaining a technical dimension of consciousness, of a deep and hitherto undisclosed algorithm of optimal human endeavor coming at last within the grasp of the good-doing intelligences of corporations and universities and governments and NGOs, of mankind's most resilient

intellectual/moral/economic foes being routed forever and the blockheads and bashi-bazouks and baboons running for the hills once and for all (57).

Entranced at the time by the cosmetician's 'poetry,' X also reaches retrospectively, as we can notice, for more discerning genre metaphors (51). They hint that not all is well in the world, a contingency to which Ollie, the 'benign systems'' unsuspecting ventriloquist, responds preemptively by humming the lullaby of false-consciousness. For, embedded in the podiatric cradlesong lies the early twenty-first-century's favorite cultural bedtime story, a tale of a carefree—because presumably admission-free—one-world, of a world as commercially and morally duty-free zone where well-oiled networks' infallible logic envelop bodies and minds in the anesthetic comforter of ethical insouciance and people can actually indulge their *dolce far niente* pipedream of unending idleness<sup>2</sup> (57-59).

Rehashing elements from *Netherland*, the frame plot of *The Dog* charts a man's running away from his female companion<sup>3</sup> and the displacement of the defunct, quasi-marital relationship onto far-flung, 'Oriental' physical and occupational spaces.<sup>4</sup> Over these expanses, away from home, homeland, and, hopes X, longtime girlfriend Jenn as well, the former boyfriend acts out the kabuki pantomime of 'principled' separation, 'keeping the distance,' and 'steering clear' of the estranged partner. These painstakingly self-enforced distancing protocols, which X shares with Ted Wilson, his alter-ego, yield a host of detachment scripts that encode geographically and ethically his twin reaction to the palpable presence within close range of the now absent woman, on the one hand, and the omnipresence, in public and private spheres, of world systems and networks, on the other. This response—X's 'self-positioning' in the world—stems from a male spatial fantasy cancelling the spatial contract of communality and featuring instead, O'Neill

suggests, the world as a buffer zone, as empty space or ‘distance,’ between X and Jenn, and, more broadly, between X and others.

This imaginary world rests on, and further enlarges, Augé would insist, a discontinuity, a break. By implication, this world, assumes X, opens up a *de-ethicizing* space, a place at once physical and moral, or amoral, rather, in and from which ethical commitment can be conveniently rescinded. This obligation, X suspects, is a spatial byproduct insofar as most spaces are ‘always already’ shared one way or the other. Literally a ‘side effect,’ a consequence of adjacency, duty to others is, he propounds, the ethical clause of a social contract that regulates practices and habits of ‘situatedness’ that set us ‘side by side’ and alongside others, near and next to them and therefore responsible to and for them, be they coworkers, boyfriends and girlfriends, spouses, neighbors, fellow Americans, or complete strangers. X would gladly abide by the proximity paragraphs of the compact. That is, he would, at least initially, ‘share’ various spaces, intimate or public. But he shies away from the ethical upshots of physical co-presence. He would share spaces but not responsibilities for those present with him in the close quarters of the home, but also in a building, neighborhood, town, or country. ‘Since when,’ asks X, ‘is residential propinquity a basis for making demands? . . . [W]hat’s so special about neighbors? . . . [C]an I ring on the doorbells of those who happen to live in The Situation [the telltale name of his majestic high-rise Dubai residence] and expect special treatment? Can I burden random door-answerers with responsibility for my well-being?’ (43)

What X is driving at is that *he* cannot be ‘burdened’ by other ‘residents’ of his house, apartment building, or nation, be they lovers or ‘compatriots,’ at home or ‘in a foreign land’ (42-43). Their human prototype is Jenn. As X philosophizes, part and parcel of her ‘Jenn-ness,’ of ‘being Jenn,’ is a certain modality of ‘being with,’ a co-presence mandate, as it were. The major

rider of the largely unformulated but active agreement underwriting, as far as Jenn is concerned, her relationship with X is precisely the ‘demand’ that led to the ‘binding commitment to Jenn the implied condition of which was to be with’ her (87). This explains why Jenn is quite adamant on the ethical enforcement of the spatial-existential condition of being sanctioned by the Heideggerian *Mitsein*. In other words, Jenn and all the others out there variously embodying Jenn-ness are keen on nearness as entailing an inherent ‘commitment’ to an other’s well-being. Whether he resides in the same one-bedroom as Jenn or in the The Situation, X does ‘live in The Situation’ literally, inhabiting a place and leading a life irreversibly and tangibly circumscribed by the ethical imperative of contiguity and vicinity—by closeness in space understood as, and calling for, closeness of affect, emotional availability, and care.

The question is whether *The Dog* endorses this relational imperative. I think it does. I also think this endorsement sets up, as a project at least, spatiality as ethically ‘binding,’ as a feeling and compassion domain, hence the discrepancy between the author’s and the character’s stances and, on another level, the book’s departure from mainstream postmodernism. But, in a fashion comparable to *Netherland*’s own ethical forays into spaces and stances beyond postmodern solitude, solipsism, and self-justifying soliloquy, this gesture remains preponderantly tentative. Furthermore, this move is basically effectuated in the stylistic regime of one big narrative antiphrasis in which the author’s position—the spatial politics ultimately sponsored by *The Dog*—crystalizes implicitly by contrast to X’s behavior, statements, and overall story as told by him. The ethic of space or, as X hints, the double duty of *spatial limits as limits to spatial equality and responsibility* is a matter of conjecture. The novel elaborates no explicit theory for this ethic. Nonetheless, such an ethical theory of space and, with it, a whole plea for democratic

spatiality and democracy pure and simple, can be, again, contrastively inferred from X's frequent theorizations of space—from what he himself dubs, tellingly enough, 'room theory' (71).

This theory fulfills X's self-exculpatory desire to conceptualize, for himself and for O'Neill's reader, a personal ethic of spatial conduct as well as a broader politics of space in which room, available to self *and* other as it may be, does *not* accrue, however, the burdensome obligation to care. Or, if it does, this care or the social pressure to care can be performed or felt perfunctorily so that the individual can, X would hope, keep on living in emotionally untethered space—no special strings and no spatial strings attached. Helping out financially Brett, who 'approached [X] as one American [would] another' in a land not their own, X admits to an entire if ambiguous reterritorializing ritual of kinship ('kindredness'), communal bond, nationality, and affect. 'I had,' he acknowledges,

misgivings about whether shared nationality was a valid reason for assisting co-national A rather than alter-national B, particularly where B's needs might be as great as, indeed greater than, those of A; yet I said yes to Brett without hesitation. It was striking how, when the shit hit the fan and people suddenly if temporarily found themselves in the same tight corner, loyalties of country were re-discovered in the matter of asking for help and giving it. Which isn't to say that there was an abrupt territorial re-organization of moral feelings; there were many who were kind without reference to kindredness, and in this sense may be said to have admirably rescued the language of goodness from its primal dirt. I might add that I feel more cleanly American than ever. Leaving the U. S. A. has resulted in a purification of nationality. By this I mean that my relationship to the U. S. Constitution is no longer subject to distortion by residence and I am more appreciative than ever of the great ideals that make the United States special. I pay my

federal taxes to the last dime, and, without in any way devaluing citizenship to a business of cash registers, I can assert that I am well in the black with my country (109-110).

As one can see, national belonging can hardly be dismissed. At the same time, ethical behavior (kindness) and the identity compass it supplies, the identity *tout court* it subtends, need not be a function of nationality (“kindredness”), and this principle is, X contends, precisely what the de-territorialization or ‘de-spatialization’ of mutual obligation and assistance fosters. In other words, if Americanness is displaced geographically and, in a sense, politically under twenty-first-century globalization and its ‘sublime order,’ the quality of being an American is, surprisingly or not, bolstered by this very displacement ethically. In X’s judgment, *patria* is concurrently left behind and sublated by *ex-patriation*, somehow ‘purified’ of the ‘primal dirt,’ of the ground, soil, or territory tainting the language of planetary human intercourse with that nationalist bias that is deeply engrained in the fabric of kin and kind. As a matter of fact, X suspects he may be a better American outside America insofar as his U. S. residence no longer obstructs an unbiased reading of the Constitution. He is and remains, then, an American. It is just that his Americanness has stopped being territorialist; it no longer operates on the geocultural terrain marked on the U. S. map recognized by international law. What is more, to the extent that political maps, passports, custom officials, and the like enforce a jurisdictional-territorial definition of the country and its citizenry, he feels that ‘American nationhood is part of an outdated worldwide protection racket and that it should be possible, surely, to live without a state’s say-so’ (235-236).

A discrete if politically inequitable ontology of gaps, gulfs, screens, and intervals separating and thereby affording sovereign entities from human subjects to countries, the contemporary world helps solve, in X’s assessment, what he describes as ‘the terrible problem of space.’ Very roughly formulated, this problem makes it impossible for two distinct objects to be

present in the same space at the same time (210). In brief, this is how the world ‘makes room’ for us, for the self, more specifically, so that he or she can wholly be. No such room, no subject—or no liberal, supposedly autarchic and ‘unattached’ subject, at least. Space is the prerequisite to being because, as we know, being is dwelling. Being is *being in*, a function of a certain ‘hereness’ or ‘thereness.’ Full, authentic presence, X intimates, requires this dwelling, this ground and room, better yet, the room as ground. But this is precisely what he felt he lacked in the apartment he shared with Jenn before taking the Dubai job. Recalling his final fight with Jenn, who asked him to commit to their relationship by continuing their efforts to have a baby, X describes their New York domicile as an anti-space where being in devolves into mandatory being with and threatens, he believes, the fullness of his presence. ‘I’ve never felt,’ he confesses, what I felt as Jenn spoke to me in that room. I felt I was being interred from within. Each assertion she made was another shovelful. . . . I couldn’t take it. . . .

“No, you will never leave,” Jenn said. “You will stay, darling. You will stay in this room with me until I’m finished.” . . . She went on and on, irresistibly shoveling words into me, stopping every cavity of my being. I felt numb. I felt cold. I began to tremble. She was the right. There were no options. There was no going. There was only staying. She was in the right. What I wanted put me in the wrong. I had to stay here with her. It was my duty to be in rooms I did not want to be in, to have a life I did not want to have, to have a life in which I would not be present. That was the effect of my duty. That was what was owed to her. I owed her an existence lacking the characteristics of being alive, a life as an apparatus of outcomes that were not mine. There was no alternative. It was my duty. I had to accept a posthumous life (170-171).

Sharing a room in an apartment with someone, life partner or just roommate, sharing room broadly speaking, and sharing it ethically become gradually equivalent in the novel. It is also clear that Jenn, who, in X's account, is desperate to get away from Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley and her backcountry past more generally but is never shown traveling, let alone going abroad, is both nation-bounded and a national synecdoche. No wonder X dubs the United States 'Jenn-land.' Jenn marks in O'Neill's spatial imaginary the doubly 'stabilizing' gesture toward gendering territory and the territorialization of gender, where woman threatens to reduce the potential of masculinity to the meager rewards of proximity, of the household, the parochial, and the national. It is in this sense that intimacy and country are dimensions of the same space, the gendered logic of which involves tying down and reining in the male actor within an emasculating, static spatiality. Lashing back, X styles himself as the free-thinking, mobile cosmopolite who, busting loose from the Circe-like clutches of quasi-matrimonial commitment and national allegiance, answers the call of a 'man of the world' such as Edmond Batros and flies out to Dubai to join a fraternity of like-minded spirits loyal just to themselves. Lawyers, accountants, bankers, and other professionals making up a transterritorial and transnational 'financial nationhood' (107), these are to X twenty-first century avatars of the French *légionnaires*, a homosocial sodality of roving men keen on standing aside or, better yet, above and opting out, spatially and otherwise, of the trivial life of their native environments. They do get involved, and spectacularly so, on a grander scale and in much bigger, faraway, and exotic worlds. When they swing into action, their intervention stands out, imparting on them, in X's eyes, a Romantic allure of sorts, a fabled 'stature' that furnishes a historical analogue to the architectural sublime.

Now, the Emirati urban ‘miracle’ may be the outcome of a particularly artificial remaking of history and geography into a hypermodern monumentality that seems temporally and topologically disconnected. Abu Dhabi and Dubai, the ‘abracadabrapolis,’ jump at you out of the desert and out of place and time as well, an architectural mirage boggling the mind. The *sans pareil* hysterical modernism of their ‘excelsiorist’ design appears, X’s *Arabian Nights* associations notwithstanding, unbounded by time and place, defying any time and place and any perception that would locate and historicize them—they are, or purport to be, rather, the spatial sublime, a notion variously rehearsed throughout *The Dog*. However, X does not shy away from leveling out, from ‘horizontalizing’ this presumptuously transcendent vertical sublime, bringing it down to earth. He does not ignore the injustices that are part and parcel of the Emiratis’ everyday, and he voices his ambivalence about the kind of cosmopolitan community possible in a world in which the artificial beauty, smoothness, and functionality of things and people are enforced undemocratically, sometimes brutally policed, and otherwise subject to Byzantine statutes and regulations. ‘These harmonies and consistencies of tone and demeanor,’ X notes, are nothing other than indicia of an agreement of feeling between all of us who partake in and of this polity, namely that, in essence and in potential, ours is a zone of win-win-win flows of money and ideas and humans, and that somewhere in our processes and practices, as we sense in our bones and sometimes almost sniff in the air, are the omens of that future community of cooperative productivity, that financial nationhood, of which all of us here more or less unconsciously dream.

My difficulty, at this moment, is that I cannot feel at one with the people who coolly go across the plazas, who after all have the intention of going into the interiors of the gray buildings, i.e., into rooms, whereas I am going out of my building with no

intention of going into another building. I would even say that the harmoniousness of these people and their surroundings depends on the viability of the indoors as a place for those outdoors to go to, because after all there isn't much that can be accomplished by walking between buildings. In other words, I feel anomalous as I go across the plaza, and very hot; also, it is unsustainable to keep going across the plaza. I must go back indoors, into a room (106-107).

X means his room, a room of his own. Not unlike *Netherland*, O'Neill's 2014 novel describes a failed community project, more exactly, a partial failure. The protagonist left Jenn and his homeland because he felt he had—literally and metaphorically—no room of his own, no private space to retreat to and be by himself. But the Dubai 'situation' does not offer the remedy either. This is not so much because the hero cannot safeguard his privacy away from Jenn, from the New York City apartment, and from the country of citizenship, but because spatiality conceptualized in this autonomistic-individualistic sense has never been his true problem. Whether a room inside a home, a cubicle inside his Dubai office, or room broadly, such as the 'breathing room' people sometimes feel they lack inside a relationship, family, community, or *Heimat*, space is by definition relational and cannot be enjoyed, made use of, and otherwise 'had' if it is not shared on some level. Despite appearances, 'occupancy' is never a completely solitary affair, and this is one tough lesson X learns the hard way. Space is bound up with otherness, but O'Neill's Dubai is premised on the other's exclusion from public fora as well as from spaces of high-end commerce, leisure, and interaction. The world's working Cinderellas are simply banned from such zones unless they clean up, do work—usually the dirty work—and otherwise serve, ordinarily in objectifying and abjectifying roles. They *appear* in the exercise of such functions or they do not. The female janitors, for instance, are forced to erase their own visibility in hotels,

malls, and residential places like The Situation when they do not perform their menial duties. Prohibited from ‘encroaching’ on the turf of the well-off other than when on the job, the migrant workforce is kept out of sight in an ‘alternative geography’ away from the glamor, glitz, and obscenely unaffordable consumerism of Dubai’s ‘elites.’ ‘[W]hat really rattled me,’ X confesses,

was the mysterious population of cleaning personnel. The mystery lay not only in their alternative geography—theirs was a hidden zone of basements, laundry closets, staff elevators, storage areas—but in the more basic matter expressed in Butch Cassidy’s question for Sundance Kid: Who are those guys? That’s not to say I viewed this tiny, timid population of women in maroon outfits as in some way hunting me down, as Butch and the Kid were, poor guys, all the way to Bolivia; but something wasn’t right. . . . I couldn’t place those strange brown faces—somewhere in Asia? Oceania?—and I certainly had no data about the bargains that presumably underwrote my room being clean and their hand being dirty. I was confronted with something newly dishonorable about myself: I didn’t want to find out about these people. I did not want to distinguish between one brown face and another. I didn’t want to know whether these persons were Nepalese, Guyanese, Indians, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Kenyans, Malaysians, Filipinos, or Pakistanis. For their part, these women seemed not to want to be differentiated or even seen, because they always scurried away those few times our paths crossed. Therefore it was a situation governed by mutual avoidance (44-45).

The subaltern cannot be seen because it is not allowed to be seen but also because people like X are not really interested in noticing him or, more often than not, her. It is true that the exploited multitudes of the Global South are obligated, sometimes *expressis verbis* by employment ‘contract,’—about which the novel offers details occasionally—to keep their distance, and this

physical, social, and affective interval rarely shrinks in *The Dog*. But X's attempts at reaching across it remain halfhearted. Besides, they are doomed to fail because the spatial pact of his world, of which Dubai is just one segment, suppresses, inhibits, or devalues 'contact' (45). X's recurring references to the troubles into which the New York City 'Subway Samaritan' got himself as a result of having stepped into an other's space and rescued a man who had fallen onto the train tracks (20, 47, etc.) are among the countless rationalizations of a topo-social setup that de facto relegates X's 'others'—much as he would Jenn—to a place external to his own spatially, emotionally, and ethically. His donations to the cause of the mistreated workers of the Gulf States, a philanthropic initiative that mirrors the Batroses' own, more dubious charity activities, bear witness to a guilty consciousness but also to a broader spatial contract that precludes *direct* (81) involvement and with it the reterritorialization of at-distance, abstract generosity as 'spatialized empathy,' kindness whose object is a co-present other. Vice versa, when he has no choice but to tolerate an other such as Alain, Sandro Batros's son, as a 'given . . . in the same room as him [X] and counting on this obligatory mutual vicinity to make [him] act in loco parentis or in loco amicus or otherwise wear some unwarranted caretaking hat,' X declares that, while he is 'obligated to accept the son's presence,' he is 'not obligated to accept and will not accept any responsibility for [Alain's] greater welfare' (65). The other is indeed a 'given,' a *datum* of one's space and existence in a world where ontology is fundamentally topology. X's big problem is his inability to own up to the upshots of the spatial a priori the other makes for. This problem is personal, accounting for X's fall—a literal one too, because he becomes a fall guy for the Batroses' financial schemes—as well as social, shedding light on the predicament of democracy in the sublime cityscapes of *The Dog* and in the twenty-first-century global world more broadly.

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I have developed the relational concept ('relatedness') in the context of what I have determined as U. S. contemporary literature's transition out of the postmodern paradigm in *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary*.

<sup>2</sup> Symbolic is, as far as actual duty-free zones go in *The Dog*, the episode featuring the Iranian who got stuck at Dubai International Airport in such an area ("Concourse"), which is "basically . . . a mall." The scene can be read as the flipside of A. S. Byatt's "Baglady," a short story collected in *Elementals* (185-182) and whose female protagonist cannot find her way out of an "Oriental" mall. Whereas O'Neill's hero is "happy as a clam" and "the toast of the town" (58), Byatt's heroine is distraught and seems in real trouble.

<sup>3</sup> Several stories included in O'Neill's 2018 collection *Good Trouble* rehearse *The Dog*'s marital subplots as well as spatial issues such as vicinity and spatial relationships with others (O'Neill 2018).

<sup>4</sup> For an extensive analysis of *Netherland*, see my book *Reading for the Planet: Toward a Geomethodology* (168-176).