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## Article

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# **‘It’s not cricket’: Financial time and postcolonial temporalities in Joseph O’Neill’s ‘Netherland’**

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## **Abstract**

Based on a reading of Joseph O’Neill’s 2008 novel *Netherland*, this article discusses the relationship between cricket and finance capitalism from the perspective of time and temporality. Despite its function as a global commodity, cricket inserts a flow of postcolonial time into the temporal streams of transnational market culture, neoliberalism, and the increasing financialization of the world. Set in the aftermath of 9/11 and before the financial crisis of 2008, *Netherland* juxtaposes the deviant temporal power of cricket with the time structures of finance capitalism to illustrate how the conduct of Wall Street before the crisis can be understood as a colonial appropriation. In O’Neill’s novel, this conflict is embodied in the precarious friendship of a cosmopolitan Dutch financial analyst and a Trinidadian version of Jay Gatsby.

## **Keywords**

Postcolonialism, finance, time, temporality, cricket, *Netherland*, confidence

## **Introduction**

[We] all find ourselves in temporal currents and unless you’re paying attention you’ll discover, often too late, that an undertow of weeks or of years has pulled you deep into trouble.

(O’Neill, 2009: 83)

Cricket and capitalism are entangled in temporalities of conflict. Not because both involve a time of physical confrontation, but on the contrary, because they ostensibly do not. What connects capitalism and cricket is that both unfold a distinctive temporality in which the struggle for success is ritualized and hence appears civilized. Since its widespread introduction by British colonial rule, cricket has symbolized the cultivating spirit of ‘sportsmanship’ and the application of ‘fair rules’. Once implemented as an international

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game across Asia and the southern hemisphere, cricket developed into a proxy-colonial battlefield that promised the possibility of upward social mobility and participation. Cricket, as the Marxist C.L.R. James (1983) has argued, always included the possibility of moving beyond the boundaries of time, nationality, identity and colonialism without breaking the rules of the game. By the same token, (neo)liberal ideologies have always regarded market capitalism as the epitome of constant transgression, mobility, innovation and improvement. Following the notion of a general equilibrium, first established in neoclassical economics, the market was perceived of as a temporal system that would automatically produce a balance of supply and demand. Once left to their own rules, markets would develop into perfect machines that achieve the best possible distribution of available resources (Taylor, 2004: 239). According to this view, only the free and unfettered play of market forces, of self-interested buyers and sellers, could foster economic growth and prosperity.

Historically, however, cricket and market capitalism are also entangled in the larger temporal frames of colonialism, postcolonialism and transnational globalization. In the history of cricket in colonial India, for example, it was the recruitment of working-class Indian players and the introduction of harsh techniques that enabled the Victorian colonizers to win international matches while maintaining a superior ideal of sportsmanship and civility. As Arjun Appadurai (1996: 92) explains: "Lower-class professional players thus did the dirty subaltern work of winning so that their class superiors could preserve the illusion of a gentlemanly, non-competitive sport". In outsourcing the risks of the game to their subaltern subjects while pretending to be free from confrontation and struggle, the British colonizers staged a ruthless rivalry with the illusion of fairness. While simultaneously promising its subaltern subjects a better future if they just worked and played hard enough, the colonial apparatus of cricket deployed a temporality of capitalism not unlike that of the American Dream. The unleashing of utopian energies, desires, and hopes for a better life and their projection into an anticipated future through cricket integrated the game into the psycho-temporal matrix of Western modernity and global commodity capitalism. At the same time, cricket has also resisted the stream of capitalist temporalities of progress and acceleration. Ashis Nandy (2000: 58) has argued that the imaginative power of cricket was essentially ahistorical. As "a hard cultural form", Appadurai (1996: 90) adds, cricket changes those who play and practice it rather than being changed by its practitioners. Even in its appropriation as a global commodity, cricket maintained an enigmatic colonial elusiveness that is perhaps best expressed in C.L.R. James' ambiguous nod to Rudyard Kipling's famous line: "what do they know of cricket, who only cricket know?" (James, 1983: 5). Cricket, in James' vision, was not only an illusive and opaque game to outsiders. Cricket has always given space and *time* to the possibility of encounters, be they between people, ideas, cultures, or even different temporalities.

In the temporal configuration of the transnational and postcolonial world at the turn of the twenty-first century, which is increasingly driven by acceleration and temporal synchronization, the sport of cricket thus stands out as an aberration and anomaly. Despite its function as a global commodity, the structure of the sport, in which games are played over several hours, even days, reinserts a flow of postcolonial time into the temporal streams of transnational market culture, neoliberalism, and the increasing financialization of the world. Being both a global commodity and a postcolonial way of life, cricket symbolizes a mode of spending time and creating futures that is more often than not recalcitrant and indifferent to market capitalism's colonial appropriations. Even more, in the cultural praxis of cricket, two distinct and very different forms of time are entangled: times of finance capitalism and post-colonial temporalities.

One contemporary novel that discusses the temporal intricacies of both cricket and capitalism is Joseph O'Neill's novel *Netherland*. First published in 2008, *Netherland* revisits the conflictual grounds of the cricket field and transfers a postcolonial temporality to the psycho-geographic landscape of post-9/11 and pre-financial crisis New York. Widely celebrated in public reviews (see, for instance, Garner, 2008), *Netherland* employs cricket as a temporal allegory for the complex globalized realities of the present era. Set in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 2001 and before the financial meltdown of 2008, the novel narrates a large array of interrelated topics: disrupted family ties in the wake of catastrophe; cosmopolitan friendship in a transnational world; trauma and paranoia in a world shaken by terrorism; precarity and affluence in the heyday of the subprime mortgage bubble.

In what follows, I read the novel from the perspective of financial and postcolonial temporality. *Netherland*, I will show, connects financial time with postcolonial temporality by superimposing cricket and market capitalism to reflect upon the often problematic *cultural management of temporal relations* in a transnational America. In *Netherland*, the encounter of an expat cosmopolitan financial analyst and a postcolonial businessman on the hidden cricket fields of transnational New York City enacts a productive encounter of two life-worlds, of class and ethnicity. In doing so, the novel tells a story of fairness, privilege and injustice in accessing the future and the making of time.

### Financial time and postcolonial futures

Questions of temporality are vital when thinking about both the postcolonial world and the world of finance symbolized by Wall Street. "Time", as Russel West-Pavlov (2013: 3) has put it, "is riddled with issues of power and hegemony, and is at stake in much political struggle". In fact, the history of modernity and colonialism as such is unthinkable without the influential but ever-changing cultural conceptualizations of time that have shaped its technological and economic structures. The notion of a "universal and absolute time" as invented by Isaac Newton, for instance, not only promoted and facilitated industrialization; it deeply influenced Enlightenment thought and the development of global capitalism as we know it today (West-Pavlov, 2013: 23). Predicated on synchronization, progress, movement, and a relentless orientation towards the 'future', Enlightenment modernization and the worldwide expansion of the capitalist system decoupled temporal rhythms from local practices and lived traditions. As Benedict Anderson (1991: 33) has shown, even the constitution of nation-states was by and large a work of establishing imagined communities through temporal synchronization. As a conceptual system, the western model of time has not only deeply affected modes of production and economic exchange, but through segmentation, scheduling, and synchronization, has also turned time into "an indispensable, precious commodity" (Quinones, 1972: ix).

According to Max Weber (2002: 39-45), this means then that time should always be invested rather than spent. Imbued with an ethics that saw the profane worldly vocation as a divine "calling", the modern capitalist ideology turned work into a quasi-religious activity dedicated to the future. For the protestant mind, the waste of time was frivolous (Weber, 2002: 104), just as if a waste of time in the present would necessarily also be a waste of time in the future. Time itself, in Benjamin Franklin's famous dictum, turned into a form of money that should not be enjoyed, but constantly reinvested. But beyond the ideological impact of protestant belief, a fundamental obsession with time, and especially with the future, seems to lie at the very heart of capitalism itself. As Marx (1993: 407) put it in his *Grundrisse*, "the

surplus value created at one point [in time] requires the creation of surplus value at another point [in the future]". In order to bridge both points in time, capitalism institutionalized the protestant confidence in God as a financial instrument: credit. Through the construction of anticipated capital, "credit money" or "bank money", as Benjamin Kunkel (2011: 14) has it, always reaches out to the future to generate more (surplus) value, which will then pay off the debts from the present.

From this perspective, credit money, or money as such, turns out to be merely a fictitious instrument, driven by the management of "temporal relations" (Esposito, 2011: 10). In *The Future of Futures*, Esposito reminds us "the credibility of money has exclusively relied for centuries on the credibility of promises of payment at the level of the economy as a whole – that is, on the circulation of delayed credits or on the management of temporal relations" (2011: 54). Capitalism, in other words, crucially depends on the accessibility of the future. Given the future's fundamental uncertainty, however, financial instruments such as credit, insurance, or derivatives realize this access primarily through speculation, confidence, or, at best, self-fulfilling prophecies. This calculation of an anticipated outcome of the future and its projection into the present through financial instruments therefore creates what Paul Langley (2008: 480) has called a "colonizing of the future".

In the era of neoliberalism and financialization unfolding since the 1980s, this heavy reliance on monetary values from 'a colonized future' has affected not just the sphere of finance and economics, but in fact reached into the everyday life of ordinary people and the way we relate to and narrate our world. In his essay, 'The End of Temporality', Fredric Jameson (2003: 704) notes:

The futures of the stock market – whether in the literal and traditional sense of investments in crops and other seasonal goods not yet in existence or in the more figurative sense of derivatives and speculations on the company reports and the exchange listings – these 'futures' come to be deeply intertwined with the way we live our own individual and collective futures generally, in a period in which careers are no longer stable and layoffs a seemingly inevitable hazard of professional and managerial as well as proletarian levels of society. By the same token, the new rhythms are transmitted to cultural production in the form of the narratives we consume and the stories we tell ourselves, about our history fully as much as about our individual experience.

These new rhythms of financialization predicated on the harvest of a speculated futurity in the present and based on an opaque stacking of debt, reached a peak in the financial crisis of 2008. In what came to be known as the subprime mortgage crisis, an enormous amount of "debt, acquired against the promise of fictitious capital from the future [...] was suddenly revealed as unredeemable. This double revelation provoked a worldwide crisis as both investors and institutions had the financial ground pulled from under their feet" (West-Pavlov, 2013: 132). In the subsequent bailout of financial actors with taxpayer's money, the colonization of the future in the present turned out to take away a potential future from ordinary people and public services worldwide, triggering the advent of monetary austerity.

The homology between the vast fallout of the 2008 financial crisis and the postcolonial condition has been pointed out by a number of critics (Giannacopoulos, 2015: 166; Douzinas, 2013: 101). In fact, much like colonialism, financialization prescribed a structured future to a wide range of people in various social strata, societies or cultures that had not actively initiated the given historical situation, creating – to put it drastically – a form of financial alterity. Especially the recent Greek debt crisis, as Costas Douzinas (2013: 101) notes, "has an element of poetic justice". He continues:

The neo-colonial strategies imposed on Africa and Latin America are reimported for the first time to the continent, which invented and spread them [...] ‘stabilize, privatize, and liberalize’ is the mantra of the IMF and the World Bank. Every aspect of this standard recipe is now applied to Greece [...] The Greeks are well on the way to becoming the European colonials. (Douzinas, 2013: 101)

For a number of decades now, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have forced loan agreements, debt repayment agendas and structural adjustment programs upon countries in the Global South. Following the economic exploitation of high imperialism, many former postcolonial nations were provided with international loans designed to help developing countries ‘catch up’ with the first world. For this reason, a primary concern of postcolonial criticism has always been to understand the way temporal conceptualizations work hand-in-hand with economic, political and cultural ascriptions. According to Keya Ganguly (2004: 162), in postcolonial theory,

the[se] issues have entailed characterizing the ‘alterity’ associated with postcolonial forms of being; in other words, the focus has been on the ways in which, and the degree to which, the postcolonial has been taken to represent an ‘other’ time whose logic and historical expression are incommensurable with the normative temporality of clock and calendar associated with Western modernity.

For postcolonial criticism, then, the question of how the synchronizing and colonizing imperial renditions of time put forward by the West can be resisted and reconceptualized to foster independence and emancipation has always been decisive. A primary objective of “postcolonial thought in general”, as West-Pavlov (2013: 158) notes, was hence a “confrontation with forms of temporality identified as specifically European and imperialist, and the ways it proposes alternatives that may elude this imperial time”. In Joseph O’Neill’s novel *Netherland*, this constellation is played out in an encounter between two protagonists who embody these contradictory temporal frames.

### **‘Netherland’: Postcolonial America at the turn of the century**

In *Netherland*, the successful Dutch banker and financial analyst Hans van den Broek finds himself left by his family in a traumatized New York City constantly afraid of new terrorist attacks. Being surrounded by almost dreamlike figures, Hans finds distraction in the attempt to acquire an American driver’s license and in the game of his childhood, cricket. In the postcolonial ‘netherworld’ of cricket he meets Chuck Ramkissoon, a Trinidadian who seems to pursue a postcolonial form of the American Dream. Chuck wants to finance a multi-million dollar cricket stadium. In a scene in which Chuck drives his new rich acquaintance to the would-be construction site of his new stadium, he begins to explain the transnational realities of New York City:

“How many West Indians would you say lived in the New York metropolitan area? English-speaking West Indians, now: I’m not talking about Haitians and Dominicans and what have you.” I told him that I have no idea. “Well, let me enlighten you,” Chuck said, waving the frozen cop who guarded the Battery Tunnel turn-off. “According to the 2000 census, five hundred thousand. You can safely add fifty per cent: so we’re talking about seven hundred and fifty thousand, maybe even a million, and growing. We had sixty per cent growth in the 1990s alone [...] And if you think they’re coming to mop floors and drive taxis, you’re wrong. They’re coming to make real money. [...] Have you ever visited the Newcomers School in Astoria? All the kids are from Pakistan. You know what they do in their spare time, these kids. They play cricket.” (O’Neill, 2009: 103)



Apart from this mimetic reflection of the transnational reality of New York at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the motif of cricket and the novel's pun on 'Netherland' represent an intersection of global forces. Cricket – displayed in the novel as the precursor for baseball – emerges as both a subconscious dreamworld and cultural memory of the origins of New York (New Amsterdam), made accessible only through the traumatic wound of 9/11. Through the use of cricket, the novel reveals New York City's strong connection to the postcolonial Anglophone world and conceptually bridges the gap between the transnational reality and the oftentimes-underestimated postcolonial legacy of contemporary America.

In fact, *Netherland* transfers the postcolonial constellation to the wealthy years of the new millennium. Bringing together two immigrant men with a different class background, different ethnicity, and different access to the future, cricket is at once a 'game of confidence' and a 'confidence game'. Chuck dreams his American Dream to "start a whole new chapter in U.S. history" and to help Americans see the "real world" through cricket (O'Neill, 2009: 103). In the novel, cricket serves as a proxy for either the 'boundary' or the 'beyond' of the future-oriented temporality of the American Dream. In a crucial scene Chuck explains to Hans that he, just like his former colonizers, wants to civilize Americans with cricket:

"What are you saying? Americans are savages? [...]" In a confidential tone he said, "Americans cannot really see the world. They think they can, but they can't. I don't mean to tell you that. 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 [...] bringing back an ancient sport, with new leagues, new franchises, new horizons [...]" (O'Neill, 2009: 281)

To Hans, however, Chuck is not only an intelligent, eloquent dreamer with good manners and benevolent aspirations; he is also a man of ambivalent action. Beside his struggle to build an international cricket field, he is running a successful, secret Trinidadian lottery called 'whe-whe'. Eventually, Hans realizes that the extensive driving lessons Chuck is so eager to give him are in fact a cover to collect his bets. Even though Hans was introduced as the financial analyst, it is Chuck who here appears as the clever gambling 'banker'. He ruthlessly engages in criminal activities and is not shy about exposing Hans to the risks they pose.

"It's an old Trinidad Game ... the whe-whe man, also known as the banker... A boutique lottery, I call it. Very discreet, very select" [...] "It isn't just Trinians playing it any more. I get Jamaicans, Chinese. A lot of Chinese. When Abelsky joined me, the Jews became involved. They play five, ten, and twenty thousand. Big bucks. It's me they trust, not Abelsky," Chuck said. "It's my game. I am the banker. I bust the mark" [...] I understood, now], the point of my driving lessons. It gave Chuck a measure of cover, even prestige to have a respectable-looking white man chauffeuring him, while he ran collecting his bets [...] Apparently it had not bothered him that he was putting me at risk of arrest and imprisonment. (O'Neill, 2009: 225)

Chuck's secret scheme is remarkable in that it seemingly reverses the distribution of roles in colonialism. For a short time, Hans, the white banker, is put into the position of the colonized. He is the one who plays cricket, drives Chuck around and is constantly lectured by Chuck. Yet Hans, as James Wood points out, "is not a colonial like his fellow-cricketers but a colonist, part of the history of Dutch imperialism that has marked places as different as Java and America" (2008: para. 13). Behind the veil of fairness upheld by the ideology of the sport, Chuck manages to recruit the successful millionaire Hans for his "door-to-door service" of collecting his bets (O'Neill, 2009: 226). In the discriminatory structures of contemporary America, however, it is the entrepreneurial spirit and creative potential of dreamers like Chuck

that is utilized and exploited by a (still) mostly white upper-class elite at Wall Street. From a postcolonial perspective, a similar view can be applied to cricket as such. Appadurai (1996) sees in cricket nothing less than 'modernity at large'. He writes: "The complexity of this specific brand of colonial discourse [cricket as a cultural practice] also illustrates one variant of what has been seen, in a rather different context, as the ambivalence of colonial discourse" (Appadurai, 1996: 92). Similar to Homi Bhabha's (1997: 86) "resemblance and menace", cricket functions as a colonial practice that fosters the imperial spread of Anglo-European ways of life, while simultaneously providing its colonial subjects with implicit ways of resisting it. Within the wider 'colonial discourse' of cricket, however, Chuck and Hans enact this ambivalence in oppositional and yet complementary ways. For Hans, whose profession is staging the biggest confidence game in history, cricket is a 'game of confidence'. Chuck, in contrast, turns the financial 'confidence game' into a story of confidence with which he seeks to realize his own postcolonial version of the American Dream.

For Hans, "making a million bucks in New York was essentially a question of walking down the street – of strolling, hands in pockets, in the cheerful expectation that sooner or later a *bolt of pecuniary fire* would jump out of the atmosphere and knock you flat" (O'Neill, 2009: 120, emphasis added). For Chuck, in turn, the American Dream remains an endless struggle at the verge of illegality, crime and denied access. Like a transnational Gatsby, the reader learns, Chuck ends up a corpse in water. Here, the novel insightfully models the postcolonial condition of contemporary America. As a transnational country of immigrants, the U.S. is displayed as a country with different temporal modes, in which its foundational myth of 'unlimited opportunity' and equal access to the future is parceled out unevenly. In this light, Hans' efforts to acquire an American driver's license turns into a far-reaching metaphor.

Troubled by marital sorrows and separation from his family, Hans spontaneously stops by Chuck's run-down office because he needs the distraction and entertainment of Chuck's driving lessons just as much as Chuck needs a respectable looking white chauffeur.

"Well, it's delightful to see you," Chuck said. He was leaning back in his chair and, my explanation notwithstanding, considering why I, an important man with better things to do, had chosen to drop by. Chuck was too astute not to have detected that somewhere behind this impromptu visit lay some need on my part – and neediness, in business as in romance, represents an opportunity. (O'Neill, 2009: 92)

The "opportunity" that both men, according to Hans's narration, discover within one another is hence driven by purely utilitarian motives. The lonely Hans is looking for distraction and belonging, the astute Chuck for potential financiers. But opportunity, as a temporal category of a potentially unrealized future, does not unfold in the same way for both. Whereas Hans finally passes his driving test and acquires an American license for purely symbolic reasons, Chuck's business plans are bound to fail. Reflecting on his relationship with Chuck, the narrator claims:

He [Chuck] was a willful, clandestine man who followed his own instincts and analyses and would rarely be influenced by advice – not my advice, that's for sure. The truth is that there was nothing, or very little, I could have done to produce a different ending for Chuck Ramkissoon. But it was a while before any of this came to me. (O'Neill, 2009: 92-93)

While Hans' narrative voice entices the reader's trust throughout the entire novel, the narrator here undermines his reliability by reflecting on his potential complicity in Chuck's death. Why did the narrator not at least do what he could to "produce a different ending for Chuck"? Hans' political uncertainty and his inability to consider his own complicity as a privileged white financial analyst cook up in a heated conversation with Hans' terror-stricken



wife. As a financial analyst with an expertise in oil and gas, Hans admits that despite his ample knowledge of the resources in the region, he is utterly ignorant about the political issues at stake and hence unable to form his own political position:

I could take a guess at the oil production capacity of an American-occupied Iraq and in fact was pressed at work about this issue daily, and stupidly. ('What are you saying, two and a half million barrels or three million? Which one is it?') But I found myself unable to contribute to conversations about the value of international law or the feasibility of producing a dirty bomb [...] I lacked necessary powers of perception and certainty and, above all, foresight. The future retained the impenetrable character I had always attributed to it. [...] In short, I was a political-ethical idiot. (O'Neill, 2009: 130-33)

The "masquerade" (O'Neill, 2009: 67) of predicting the future of stocks is a confidence game Hans is willing and able to play. When it comes to concrete political or military action, however, Hans defies positioning. This image of a successful financial analyst, who yet describes himself as "a political-ethical idiot", sheds an interesting light onto the ethical dimensions of financial capitalism before the financial meltdown of the subprime mortgage crisis. Similar to the figure of Eric Packer in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003), Hans can here be read as what Joseph Vogl (2015) has called 'the fallen angel of an illusion'. In a discussion of economic knowledge in the wake of the financial crisis, Vogl characterizes Eric Packer in a way that also holds for Hans van den Broek. Both literary figures are

not only an allegory of contemporary finance capitalism, of its 'arcane workings' and 'data-driven fantasies', but also the fallen angel[s] of an illusion – the illusion that markets, and especially financial markets tend towards equilibrium; that they assure a perfect allocation of resources and the best possible distribution of information; and finally, that they create a sort of social order. (Vogl, 2015: 38)

In *Netherland*, this is especially true for Hans, who as financial analyst at one of the major investment banks, is in charge of predicting and managing the future, and yet fails to anticipate the future outside of his closed financial system. In the 'real world' he does nothing to establish a social order with a "different ending for Chuck" (O'Neill, 2009: 92). Neither does Hans address the unequal access to opportunity and the future, nor does he actively do anything to change the circumstances that lead to Chuck's failure. Instead, by merely telling the story of Chuck, one might argue, Hans indirectly fosters the structures of inequality that lead to his friend's fall. In the 'netherworld' of cricket after the traumatic events of 9/11, he is confronted with a postcolonial ahistoricity that fundamentally challenges his conceptualization of time as universal and linear. Chuck installs a different and resistant temporality of cricket, rendering the histories of both men as extensions of the "temporal currents" of postcolonial America (O'Neill, 2009: 83).

### **"Not cricket": A game in time**

At the beginning of the novel Hans barely mentions his own professional life at one of the world's leading investment banks. The reader learns in passing that "the analyst business [...] had lost some of its sheen", and it is only through a reflection in the figure of Chuck and his efforts to establish cricket in New York that the "banking business" is put into perspective (O'Neill, 2009: 31). When Hans and Chuck accidentally meet at a restaurant watching televised cricket matches, Hans describes his job as an equity analyst:

These efforts required me, sitting at my desk on the twenty-second floor of a glassy tower, to express reliable opinions about the current and future valuation of certain oil and gas stocks [...]. It forcefully struck me as a *masquerade*, this endless business of churning out research papers, of blast voice-mailing overnight with my latest thoughts on ExxonMobil or ConcoPhillips, of listening to oil executives glossing corporate performance in tired jargon. (O'Neill, 2009: 67, emphasis added)

The future is, by definition, fundamentally unpredictable, and yet financial instruments like stocks, options, derivatives, or even money itself provide market actors the opportunity to make certain predictions about the current and future valuations of items of trade (Esposito, 2011: 54). Hans's encounter with Chuck, however, seems to lead him to question this basic assumption of economics. Encouraged to leave the "glassy tower" of his financial institution, Hans seems to become aware that his entire job and the structures of temporality it assumes and produces present a structural confidence game. As Esposito (2011: 54) explains, the primary financial instrument of money is itself based on a collaborative form of confidence:

Money, as sociologists have always said, is a social relation because it works only in reference to the society that guarantees and circulates it. It works because everyone knows that others know that it will be accepted. At the same time, money absorbs part of the social uncertainty. I do not know what others do even if I know that the availability of resources depends on their behavior. However, if they spend money, I know that the circle of the economy will continue to produce money and opportunities of which I shall also take advantage [...] In other words, money functions to increase the opportunities available to the present decision.

Money and markets, according to this definition, are not only driven by uncertainty and opportunity; they are fundamentally determined by information about the future or the lack thereof. For Chuck, this uncertainty and complication produces the illusion of participation and equal opportunity. As Chuck describes one of his many businesses, he explains to Hans: "I don't mind complication. For me, complication represents an opportunity. The more something is complicated the more potential competitors will be deterred" (O'Neill, 2009: 73). Complication, or the asymmetry of information, is the crucial hinge of the capitalist system and the financial economy. Money and finance are mechanisms by which uncertainty and complication can be managed through its temporal reference. Again, Esposito (2011: 56) explains:

In monetary calculation, all goods and performances are considered in view of a sale or a purchase – not on the basis of their current utility, but in view of all future possibilities of use and evaluation. The homogenizing of goods [through money and finance] starts from the future, which is why it works so well. It not only concerns current wishes and needs, but also absorbs the vagueness of hypothetical needs and the uncertainty of tomorrow.

Hans's relation to Chuck is described in similar terms. Throughout the time they spend together driving around, talking, and playing cricket, Hans never leaves his analyst epistemology. What motivates Hans to engage with Chuck and cricket is his search for social ties in the wake of his damaged family life. However, in looking for a true friend – ironically, one of the few social relations that money cannot manage – Hans never loses sight of Chuck's assumed "neediness". As their 'friendship' intensifies, Hans inserts a caveat: "My instinct was to keep him at distance, at that distance, certainly, that we introduce between ourselves and those we suspect of neediness. I was wondering, for example, when he was going to ask me for money for his cricket scheme" (O'Neill, 2009: 135).

But Chuck indeed never asks for money. Yet, as a self-made millionaire and analyst primarily concerned with predicting the future, Hans fails to anticipate what is about to happen. Hans continues his revelation:

I had him down as a lover of contingencies and hypotheses, a man cheerfully operating in the subjunctive mood. The business world is densely margined by dreamers [...] I have never been open to the fantastical aspect of business. I'm an analyst – a bystander. I lack entrepreneurial wistfulness. (O'Neill, 2009: 135)

It is here that the novel reaches one of its strongest moments. *Netherland* renders Chuck as a postcolonial Jay Gatsby and questions Hans' narrative position and sincerity. His unwillingness to support Chuck's cricket project, despite their shared enthusiasm for the sport, reflects the complicity of an entire financial system that is increasingly decoupled from the real economy and effectively produces profits by exposing ordinary human beings and especially ethnic communities to the risks of the market. Hans's apologetic narrative thus does not free him from a structural complicity in Chuck's unfortunate future. Read against the backdrop of both cricket as an emblem of fairness and market capitalism as the supposedly most efficient system of resource distribution, the constellation of characters in *Netherland* is one of the key literary achievements of the novel. That the novel was published in the year of a big financial meltdown can hence be read as darkly prophetic.

In a scene at the beginning of *Netherland* reminiscent of *The Great Gatsby's* notorious line about 'fundamental decencies which are parceled out unequally at birth', O'Neill introduces an important motif of the novel: the 'It isn't cricket' or 'bodyline' controversy of the 1930s. The main issue of this controversy was a threatening and intimidating pitching technique, in which the ball was thrown directly at the batsman of the opposing team. The repercussions of this incident are still encoded in the phrase 'It isn't cricket', meaning that something is not fair and according to the rules.

In the first cricket game that Hans narrates, such a 'body-line' incident occurs. Hans is about to bat and is hit by a throat-ball from the bowler of the opposing team. When Chuck, who acts as the umpire, interferes and disqualifies the bowler, the situation escalates and unfolds its own temporal logic:

Then, as the argument on and off the field continued – "You thieving we, umpire! You thieving we!" – my eye was drawn to a figure walking slowly in the direction of the parked cars. I kept watching him because there was something mysterious about this person choosing to leave at such a moment of drama. He was in no hurry, it seemed. [...] He appeared to be holding something in his hands as he strolled back into the ground. People started shouting and running [...] The man stopped ten feet from Chuck. He held the gun limply [...] The three of us stood there for what seemed a long time. A container ship silently went through the back gardens of the houses on Delafield Place. (O'Neill, 2009: 14-15).

In the moment the bowler returns with a gun, the temporal structures of the cricket game are disrupted and suspended. The "long time" of insecurity, suddenly inserted by the unpredictable gunman, however, is not made visible by the temporality of the game, but by the temporal flow of the global economy; the container ship that "silently" passes through the background of the scene here functions as a symbol of global economic connectivity, synchronization, and transnational supply-chains.<sup>2</sup> It symbolizes a global economic flow of time that becomes visible once the temporality of the game is suspended. By politely insisting on the rules of the game, Chuck manages to suspend the gunman from the field. Eventually the game is resumed without any involvement of the police. The novel here insinuates that the regulating authority of the umpire and its civilizing sportsmanship do indeed unfold a

regulatory power over unruly conduct. After this incident Chuck delivers a speech and celebrates cricket as the last bastion of sincerity and decency.

“We have an expression in the English language,” he said, as silence began to establish itself amongst the players. “The expression is ‘not cricket.’ When we disapprove of something we say ‘it’s not cricket.’ We do not say ‘It’s not baseball.’ Or ‘It’s not football.’ We say ‘It’s not cricket.’ [...] Cricket, more than any other sport, is, I want to say” – Chuck paused for effect – “a lesson in civility.” (O’Neill, 2009: 17)

Eventually cricket emerges as a reflection of and potential counter-narrative to the management of temporal relations realized by the global, financialized economy. As a cultural form that is responsive to the environment in which it is practiced, O’Neill describes the sport as a distinct historical actor that struggles to maintain its own temporal sovereignty.<sup>3</sup> It is no coincidence that O’Neill’s “not cricket” scene here bears many resemblances to the ‘body-line’ controversy of the 1930s. In his work on cricket, C.L.R. James has related the ‘body-line’ controversy to the general intellectual atmosphere after World War I and the economic bubble of the roaring twenties. He notes:

Body-line was not an incident, it was not an accident, it was not a temporary aberration. It was the violence and ferocity of our age expressed in cricket ... It began in World War I. Exhaustion and a *fictitious prosperity* in the late twenties delayed its maturity. It came into its own in 1929. Cricket could no more resist than the other organizations and values of the nineteenth century were able to resist. (James, 1983: 249, emphasis added)

The ‘not cricket’ scene in *Netherland* transfers the body-line incident to the fictitious prosperity and postcolonial violence of the first years of the new millennium, juxtaposing two temporal flows that are distinct but entangled: the history of finance (capitalism) and the postcolonial temporality of the cricket game. Yet, just like the origins of the crisis in the 1930s and its symptom in cricket, the origins of the present ‘crisis of confidence’ in the time of finance lie deeper. They can be found in the gradual, impalpable but decisive transgressions and manipulations of moral and economic rules, which increasingly solidified the “colonization of the future” (Langley, 2008: 480) through the imposition of financial structures for “managing temporal relations” (Esposito, 2011: 54).

This gradual transgression and manipulation of rules was an unprecedented economic deregulation, set in motion by Reagan in the 1980s and continued well into the administration of George W. Bush. Drawing on neoclassical economics, the Reagan Administration started an unprecedented deregulation of the economy involving cutbacks of social spending and a vast privatization of public services, based upon an extreme confidence in the self-organizing potential of markets and their ability to settle in equilibrium once they are left to themselves.

## **Times of finance and the crisis of confidence**

Where, in the contemporary neoliberal period, can one find the origins of this fundamental confidence in the self-organizing powers of the market? On July 15, 1979, at the end of a severe energy crisis and an economically devastating decade, President Jimmy Carter delivered what he called the ‘crisis of confidence’ speech. In the address, Carter prepared his fellow citizens for pending reforms and openly criticized the ideology of a liberal economic order predicated on perpetual and unquestionable growth. In a famous and oft-quoted passage, he asks his fellow citizens not to succumb to consumerist self-indulgence and deplores the lack of confidence accompanied by it:

Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy longing for meaning. We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose. (Carter, 1979: para. 34)

Carter's speech was intended to strengthen the optimism of the American public. But it failed to halt the general decline in confidence during those years. On the contrary, in the presidential campaign of 1980, Carter was defeated by someone who seemed to embody the very confidence that Carter had diagnosed as missing: Ronald Reagan. In contrast to the introverted and painstaking engineer Carter, the former actor Ronald Reagan personified confidence to an extent Carter could just not compete with. But especially for common working-class American citizens, who bought into Reagan's promise to stabilize the economy through wealth that would trickle down to them if only large companies would be given a free hand, the confident Reagan turned out to be a political confidence man. His supply-side economics, which later came to be known as 'Reagonomics', ushered in nothing less than the most profound restructuring of the US economy since the New Deal.

The era of neoliberalism engendered a breakthrough of big monopoly firms by rolling back the New Deal's anti-monopoly legislation. But more importantly, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the rise of financialization. If, as Saskia Sassen (1991: 331) explains, the "consumption capacity of a critical mass of workers [was] of central importance to profit realization for the leading industries" in the manufacturing era, this "economic necessity", on which the social contract for the welfare state rested, has literally been eroded during financial neoliberalism. The finance industry that developed since the 1980 created what investor and speculator George Soros has called a 'super bubble':

The system was so successful that people came to believe in what former US president Ronald Reagan called the magic of the marketplace and I call market fundamentalism. Fundamentalists believe that markets tend towards equilibrium and the common interest is best served by allowing participants to pursue their self-interest. [...] Nevertheless, market fundamentalism emerged as the dominant ideology in the 1980s, when financial markets started to become globalized and the US started to run a current account deficit. Globalization allowed the US to suck up the savings of the rest of the world and consume more than it produced. (Soros, 2008b: para. 4)

It is quite ironic that the 'crisis of confidence' that had dominated the 1970s turned into a global confidence game in which all presidential administrations since Reagan have gradually and continuously deregulated financial markets. From the perspective of this larger historical frame, one could argue that the 'crisis of confidence' never really abated. In fact, it was never restricted to the economic alone. Instead, it reached well into the psycho-political constitution of an entire era.

However, while the stock markets skyrocketed during the 1980s and especially during the 1990s, the crisis of confidence reached a new climax at the traumatic beginning of the new millennium with the dot.com crash and 9/11. The "current crisis of confidence," Mark C. Taylor presciently noted in 2004,

is the result of neither the isolated events nor the aberrant actions of misguided individuals (e.g. terrorists) but is the symptom of a profound crisis of representation that is endemic to modern and postmodern society and culture. [...] For the past two centuries, the line separating appearance and reality, truth and illusion, the material and the immaterial, the real and the virtual has been gradually eroding. [...] Postmodern religion, art, architecture, and philosophy are, in large measure, the cultural articulation of a crisis of confidence created by a crisis of representation. (Taylor, 2004: 1)



In Taylor's view, however, this fundamental crisis of confidence was "prefigured" by literature, the arts, and the media, then finally and fully being absorbed by finance capitalism:

postmodern culture simultaneously reflects and promotes economic changes that result in what can only be described as a postmodern economy [...] the play of signs prefigured in late modern and postmodern art and architecture expands to encompass the world of finance. As the financial economy displaces the so-called real economy, money becomes increasingly virtual and markets morph into webs circulating images and information. (Taylor, 2004: 3)

Of course, postmodern art, literature and the precarious idea of representation have to be seen in correlation with the modes of production in a given society or culture, and obviously, nowhere have theories of post-structuralism been more valid than for financialized neoliberalism. Taylor's insistence that postmodern literature and art are complicit in the 'promotion' of financial capitalism is especially relevant with regard to *Netherland* and its narration of financial time and postcolonial temporalities.

Structurally and aesthetically, *Netherland* operates outside of the postmodern paradigm of metafiction, floating signification, playfulness, and the exhaustion of narrative form. It does so, however, merely by unfolding, as Zadie Smith has described it, as an "anxious" form of "lyrical realism" that is hesitatingly conscious of its attempts to break out of the postmodern crisis of confidence. In her review of the novel, she makes this clear: "It is absolutely a post-catastrophe novel but the catastrophe isn't terror, it's Realism. [...] By staging its fears *Netherland* intends to neutralize them. It's a novel that wants you to know that it knows you know it knows" (Smith, 2008: para. 11, emphasis in original). In a way, *Netherland* wants to escape the postmodern condition by addressing not its material or spatial structures, but by aiming purely at its temporal dimensions. In a scene in which the narrator Hans describes his flirtation with the temporal promises of the American Dream, symbolized in his attempt to acquire a US driver's license, he speculates:

Perhaps the relevant truth – and it's one whose existence was apparent to my wife, and I'm sure much of the world, long before it became apparent to me – is that we all find ourselves in temporal currents and unless you're paying attention you'll discover, often too late, that an undertow of weeks or of years has pulled you deep into trouble. (O'Neill, 2009: 82-83)

In fact, the "temporal currents" that have pulled the world into "trouble", the novel suggests, are the temporality of financial capitalism and the colonization of the future through, stocks, bonds, and derivatives. It is through the direct juxtaposition of financial time and postcolonial temporalities that the novel attempts to develop a reconstructive gesture to end the deep crisis of confidence, to get out of the temporal currents of financialization. Early in the narrative, after Hans receives a letter from Chuck pointing out that both Dutch culture and the cultural form of cricket share a forgotten history in the US, these forgotten "temporal currents" come into view.

A few days later, I caught the Maple Leaf Express, bound for Toronto, to Albany, where a group of investors awaited. [...] At Harlem, the Hudson, flowing parallel to the track, came into view. I had taken this journey before, yet I was startled afresh by the existence of this waterside vista, which on a blurred morning such as this had the effect, once we passed under the George Washington Bridge, of cancelling out centuries. [...] The valley slipped back into timelessness. (O'Neill, 2009: 76)

The timelessness that the novel itself here tries to evoke, represents a return to an unrealized utopian time, not as a temporal deferral of gratification and the imperative of investment, but

a return to the American Dream as the transnational and cosmopolitan utopia of open hospitality and togetherness. The two temporal flows that O'Neill thus confronts via the figures of Chuck and Hans are ultimately flows of alternative American histories that have become all the more visible in post 9/11 New York City, and constitute an alternative form of American exceptionalism. In bridging the gap from two complexly interrelated historical aberrations, 9/11 and the financial meltdown of 2008, *Netherland* narrates the temporal dimensions of the globalized world as it moves into a fundamentally uncertain terrain: the unpredictability of a truly postcolonial future.

## Conclusion

What does a novel on cricket tell us about the current crisis? As one critic has put it, "to say that *Netherland* is about cricket is like saying *Moby Dick* is about whaling" (Gonzales, 2009: para. 3). Indeed, what both of these great American novels share is an imaginary cartography of the ever-spiraling vortex of modernity, the American Dream, and the monomania of the people at its helm, people that seem to be willing to risk everything and everybody to achieve their own goals. At the same time, the novel is also a great parable of timing and temporality in the present financial, postcolonial, and transnational condition. In the global history of ideas, Western conceptions of time as linear, homogenous, empty and universal turn out to be an instrument of power. Especially for those actively thinking about possible alternatives to a European modernity, issues of time have always been at the forefront of theoretical contestation. West-Pavlov (2013: 159) explains the function of time within postcolonial thought:

The temporalities identified as those inculcated, for instance, by colonial education, were those of the forward vector of progress and incremental acquisition of civilization, which provided a legitimizing alibi for the more direct forms of exploitation carried out in the colonies by the imperial powers. Paradoxically, however, by identifying European conceptions of history as universal and singular and then posing contestatory forms against that singularity, much postcolonial analysis of temporality has tended to replicate the very structures it critiques.

The same can be said about *Netherland*. The novel skillfully addresses the linear and universal temporality of financial capitalism and its 'colonization of the future'. In the aberrant timing of cricket, however, the novel does not and cannot reach beyond the systematic boundaries of both cricket and capitalism. "I cannot be the first to wonder," Hans notes in his long philosophical reflections of the game, "if what we see, when we see men in white take to a cricket field, is men imagining an environment of justice" (O'Neill, 2009: 159). This "environment of justice", however, remains an unrealized dream of a denied future. The management of temporal relations as institutionalized by Wall Street ultimately rejects what the anthropologist Johannes Fabian (1983: 25) calls a "temporal coevalness". The phantasmagorical image of justice through the civilizational game of cricket in *Netherland* fails to undo what Western Eurocentric thought has done since Enlightenment: relegate 'the other' to another time.

## Notes

1. The original line from Kipling's poem 'The English Flag' is: "And what should they know of England who only England know?" (2013: 291).
2. Because many financial products originated at sea – such as insurance, for instance (see Armstrong, 2004) – the container ship can here also be read as a symbol of finance capitalism.
3. To add a further layer of complexity to the scene, it should be noted that the violent interruption of the game is committed by a member of a cricket team from a postcolonial background – St. Kittens. This complicates the narrative stance of Hans and the postcolonial constellation because although Hans conceives of himself as an immigrant, as the only white person at the field, he is the one whose presence initially provokes the violent interruption: "At a certain moment the visitors fell prey to the suspicion [...] that a conspiracy to rob them of victory was afoot [...] It did not surprise me, therefore, when I took my turn to bat, to receive three bouncers in a row, the last of which was too quick for me and whacked my helmet" (O'Neill, 2009: 13).

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