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Desert Stories: Liberal Anxieties and the Neoliberal Novel

Liam Kennedy

What can American literature tell us about the role of the United States in a neoliberal global order in which American hegemony is both maintained and undermined by flows of unfettered capital? As is widely documented, the inexorable spread of free-market capitalism in the wake of the endings of the Cold War has led to an increasingly complex interdependence — of markets, nations, and technologies — and accelerated movements of people, capital, and information. There have emerged new geographies of economic connectivity and power, new divisions of labor, and new landscapes of work and waste. The representation of these changes has been a challenge for literary fiction (and many other forms of cultural production), in part due to the speed and scale of the processes of change and the barely legible nature of some of these processes. Benjamin Kunkel, writing of the protagonist in Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland*, observes: “Many of us live...this kind of far-flung life, globalized in all its localities, international even on a molecular scale, but contemporary fiction has struggled to keep pace with the aggressive contemporaneity of this way of living.”¹ But the challenge for contemporary fiction surely goes deeper than this, to produce narratives commensurate to the shifting coordinates — economic, political, and representational — of the neoliberal global order and, concomitant to this, to reimagine the value of literature (including that of a national literature) in relation to these coordinates. This is a tricky balancing act and in the work of American writers who take up this challenge we often find that residual liberal anxieties come up hard against regnant neoliberal realities. I will consider two recent examples in the work of Dave Eggers and Joseph O’Neill.

There is some evidence of an emergent geopolitical imaginary in American literary production as a growing number of writers seek ways to narrativize America’s global engagements and map shifting contours of American power and identity in global terms. Bruce Robbins, in his essay “The Worlding of the American Novel,” notes that American writers are becoming more “worldly,” trying to connect global and domestic spheres and also remap American literary identity, yet he argues that this is restrained due to the continued focus on self-discovery and inability to work out the degree or kind of harm America does in the world.² More recently, Caren Irr, in her book *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: US Fiction in the Twenty-First Century*, has argued that American writers are productively exploring global matters and that there is an emerging geopolitical consciousness that is “proto-political” in recognition of formative effects on global inequalities.³ Yet, she too points up limitations and constraints on this emergent consciousness.

I think both critics are right to be cautious about the claims for a “worlding” of contemporary American literature, even as they identify and map new energies in this regard. At its best this literature explores new forms of relationality and illuminates some of those coordinates of a neoliberal global order referred to above. Yet, the emergent geopolitical imaginary of contemporary American literature remains conditional on national beliefs, values and assumptions, not least in its difficulties in representing the “obscene underside” of the neoliberal world order.⁴ It tends to gloss the tensions neoliberalism creates between market and state and between capital and territory, whilst registering anxieties about American self- and national identity. This is most evident in literature that either mandates or assumes the critical facility of a liberal imagination or the adequacy of realist form in responding to a market-saturated socio-political world. The novels under review here not only signify the limits of a liberal imagination, they also refer us to (in) capacities of literary fiction to realize or realistically depict the dreamwork of neoliberal capital.

Dave Eggers’ *A Hologram for the King* (2012) and Joseph O’Neill’s *The Dog* (2014) might be described as “worldly” in that they dramatize America’s economic and spiritual declensions in the context of its faltering global hegemony. Both writers create narratives that explicitly address excesses and contradictions of neoliberal capitalism. Notably, both employ desert settings in expatriate narratives that take their protagonists to the Middle East, to Saudi Arabia in Eggers case, and to Dubai for O’Neill. In this they follow on the heels of a growing cadre of Western journalists and scholars who have visited Middle Eastern sites of urban development to which international flows of speculative finance have been drawn. Most commonly, Dubai is the focus of analysis, though several other cities in the Arab Gulf states are also cited.⁵ Dubai first caught global attention with its spectacular credit-fuelled growth in the post-Cold War period, as it built on abundant amounts of debt to create a global hub for banking, tourism, and transportation, all attractive to neoliberal capital investment — and all with the tacit approval of the us, which has sold the UAE its military hardware and software, secured shipping lanes, and can rely on it as a regional base. Dubai’s perceived success in transforming itself into a “city as corporation” has encouraged a trend of entrepreneurial urbanism and master-planned cities on the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf, including the “economic cities” emerging out of the deserts of Saudi Arabia and Qatar as these states prepare for a post-oil era.⁶ These cities provide special regulatory frameworks that facilitate modes of “flexible citizenship,” which allow the “proficient class” to flourish while sustaining more disposable workforces, many of whom became heavily indebted in order to obtain employment.⁷ The urban social orders that result reveal specific contradictions of neoliberal capitalism, notably in the ways that their elites seek to manage social progress in relation to economic liberalism.⁸ Western commentators, and especially media reports, have generally observed these developments with apprehension, though with limited focus on nuances of local structures and contexts, rather focusing on these “cities of the future” as portents of a dystopian global urbanism. To be sure, narratives about hyper-exploitation of workers are common, and many of these commentators note the stark inequalities and prohibition on political freedoms and citizenship rights, contrasting with the expansion and celebration of consumer freedoms and private accumulation. Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk refer to these sites of excessive speculation and privatization as “evil paradises,”

“dreamworlds of consumption, property and power,” and ask: “Toward what kind of future are we being led by savage, fanatical capitalism?”⁹

It seems likely Eggers and O’Neill have been reading some of these narratives. Each novelist has researched their locales in some detail and has something to say about these settings as symbolic or allegorical sites of neoliberal capital. In an interview, O’Neill remarks: “Dubai markets itself as an outlier...and ‘we’ seize on this in order to view Dubai’s horrors and drawbacks as a special case...and in no way reflective of ‘us.’”¹⁰ At the same time, as he notes in another interview, “A lot of the humanist ideas we are attached to are put in question by Dubai. I think this makes Dubai less an outlier than a forerunner to the West.”¹¹ While cognizant of economic realities, each author represents their Middle Eastern settings as shimmering mirages, projections of Western fantasies. This is to say that even as they utilize sociological perspectives to depict socio-economic realities of these urban developments, they also romanticize them as projections of individual angst and ennui. In both novels, harsh realities and legacies of neoliberal financialization are explored through the consciousness of hapless middle-aged white male protagonists whose singular woes are universalized and imaginatively mapped onto a broad canvas of globalization, readily conflating national and self-diminishment. Their protagonists attempt, often humorously, sometimes poignantly, to hold onto outmoded or devalued values, struggling to find a language to express their subjectivities — symbolic inefficiency is writ dramatically large in their sense of victimization and diminished expectations.¹² There is a note of the absurd in both novels, as the protagonists find themselves in worlds that appear to be abstracted beyond common reference points of language or human interaction. The absurd atmosphere heightens tensions between the authors’ aims to tell us something about the inequities and human costs of neoliberalization and their difficulties in representing this something.

Made in America

Alan Clay, the protagonist of Eggers’ *A Hologram for the King*, is a not unfamiliar figure, a successful salesman in his youth he is now an unsuccessful consultant in middle age. More than a few critics have referred to him as the Willy Loman of the post-industrial age and viewed the novel as “a kind of ‘Death of a Globalized Salesman.’”¹³ Eggers tells us that Alan was “born into manufacturing and somewhere later got lost in worlds tangential to the making of things.”¹⁴ His skills have become irrelevant, “Now he was fifty-four years old and was as intriguing to corporate America as an airplane built from mud. He could not find work, could not sign clients” (14). In the present of the novel we find him in Saudi Arabia in the surreal setting of The King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC), a spectacularly ambitious urban initiative to build a city north of Jeddah that will compete with Dubai.¹⁵ Alan has been hired by the American IT giant Reliant to sell holographic communications technology to the King, with a view to picking up further contracts for the KAEC development. He desperately hopes this job will enable him to literally and figuratively salvage himself — “Alan’s commission, in the mid-six figures, would fix everything that ailed him” (36) — reflecting a belief in the dreamwork of capital that he cannot let go off. And so he waits, futilely, for hours and then days for the King to come. It comes as no surprise to the reader at the end of

the novel that the contract he seeks is awarded to a Chinese company that “could deliver the it far quicker and at less than half the cost” (330).

As Alan waits in the desert, the author takes us into his backstory. We learn that he has played a role in the demise of American industry that he now laments and sees himself as a victim of, for he was involved in the outsourcing of manufacturing at American firms he worked for, most notably the bicycle firm Schwinn. As Eggers details this story we cannot avoid the more didactic and diagrammatic elements of the novel: Alan’s fate is clearly intended to parallel America’s in the age of globalized capital, the loss of a meaningful “place in the world’s economy” (14). Underlining this, Alan’s father is presented as a symbolic foil to his son, a virile World War II veteran who was a foreman in a shoe factory and now retired on a healthy union pension on a farm in New Hampshire. In a phone call, his father inveighs:

I’m watching this thing about how a gigantic new bridge in Oakland, California, is being made in China. Can you imagine? Now they’re making our goddamned bridges, Alan. I got to say, I saw everything else coming. When they closed down Stride Rite, I saw it coming. When you start shopping out the bikes over there in Taiwan, I saw it coming. I saw the rest of it coming — toys, electronics, furniture. Makes sense if you’re some shitass bloodthirsty executive hellbent on hollowing out the economy for his own gain. All that makes sense. Nature of the beast. But the bridges I did not see coming. By God, we’re having other people make our bridges. And now you’re in Saudi Arabia, selling a hologram for the pharaohs! That takes the Cake! (87)

Even the hologram points out Alan’s (America’s) diminishment: having been a man who sold real things made in America to real people who lived in America he now tries to sell a simulacrum to an invisible king.

A Hologram for the King presents an oddly skewed narrative of progress and decline, one that all but ignores historical and environmental contexts of the building of KAEC. At one point Alan reflects, “The work of man is done behind the back of the natural world. When nature notices, and can muster the energy, it wipes the slate clean again” (117). Such observations mystify the relations between state, market, and environment, and all but ignore the biopolitics of neoliberal capital’s accumulation by dispossession. To be sure, there are references to the uneven conditions of labor and capital relations in the building of KAEC and flashes of insight about labor exploitation and curtailments of civil rights, but they are mostly just that, isolated flashes of commentary that rarely entail as either analysis or documentation. Eggers is deft at sketching incongruities. For example, as Alan and his driver leave his hotel “they drove past a desert-colored Humvee, a machine gun mounted on top. A Saudi soldier was sitting next to it, in a beach chair, his feet soaking in an inflatable pool” (24–25). But such sketches tell us little or nothing about the structural conditions of governance in Saudi Arabia. One of the most common motifs of literary (and visual) representation of globalization is to depict incongruities formed by the juxtapositions occasioned by uneven development or the contact points of different cultures. This can make for a somewhat lazy way of signifying globalization, making it visible via the frisson of incongruity and indulging the reader in what are often passive pleasures of irony or parody.

At times, Eggers extends this technique to provide fuller narrative detail on the excesses and contradictions surrounding his narrator at KAEC. Visiting a condominium development, Alan comes across the sleeping quarters of migrant laborers: “Alan opened the fire door and a roar of echoes flooded through. He was in a large raw space full of men, some in their underclothes, some in red jumpsuits, all yelling. It looked like pictures he’d seen of prison gyms converted to dormitories. There were fifty bunks, clothes hanging on lines between them” (221). Alan is forced to flee this space of squalid otherness when his efforts to adjudicate in a fight between the men ends in dismal failure and he makes his way to a luxury apartment a few floors above the migrant quarters: “It occupied the full width of the building, panoramic window to panoramic window. The décor was sophisticated, with gleaming hardwood floors, custom rugs, a mix of low-slung mid-century couches and tables, the occasional antique flourish...Over the mantle, a quartet of drawings by someone who was either Degas or drew dancers precisely as he did” (226). While moving beyond clichés of incongruity Eggers stops short of documenting or analyzing underlying structural or systemic elements of global forces and their impacts on human subjects. The realities of the laborers lives are neither explained nor explored, rather they exist to dramatize Alan’s failure to take responsibility, to engage or connect.

In some part, Egger’s focus on Alan’s failings, the indignities, humiliations, and shame he experiences, registers the author’s care to paint his protagonist as limited in self-understanding, placing an ironic distance between the reader and protagonist. Alan is not analytic for the most part, rather he is given to indulgent reflections and nostalgic reverie, but this creates an odd tension in the novel, between the belated worldview of the protagonist and the ironic omniscience of the author, exacerbated by the battened-down prose style. If the aim is that we comprehend the limitations of Alan’s worldview, by looking over his shoulder, as it were, the results are unsatisfying, though perhaps deliberately so. It may be that Eggers sees this as a means to represent the affectless condition of Alan’s stasis and so he glosses the socio-economic realities of KAEC’s development to underscore the dreamwork of neoliberal capital. On this reading, Alan’s wait for the King is a record of the financialization of time and Alan’s thralldom to speculation, to a hypothetical outcome, the paralysis of which is represented in the style of the prose.

In some sense, this is a logical outcome of Alan’s interpellation of economic thinking from his early career days as a door-to-door salesman selling household products. We are told: “Alan became a good salesman, and quickly. He needed the money to move out of his parents’ house, which he did a month later. Six months after that he had a new car and more cash than he could spend. Money, Romance, Self-Preservation, Recognition: he’d applied the categories to everything” (83). As his career develops, he learns that “he had to act like he was selling happiness, security, possibility”—this selling of emotions and values is of course the basis of commodity fetishism.¹⁶ Later, when he worked as an executive at Schwinn bicycles in Chicago, he successfully puts these lessons into practice. Alan has rosy memories of his early days at Schwinn:

In the morning he'd be at the West Side factory, watching the bikes, hundreds of them, loaded onto trucks, gleaming in the sun in a dozen ice-cream colours. He'd get in his car, head down state, and in the afternoon he could be in Mattoon or Rantoul or Alton, checking on a dealership. He'd see a family walk in, Mom and Dad getting their ten-year-old daughter a World Sport, the kid touching the bike like it was some holy thing. Alan knew, and the retailer knew, and the family knew, that that bike had been made by hand a few hundred miles north, by a dizzying array of workers, most of them immigrants...and that bike would last more or less forever. (50)

This nostalgic vision links the economics of production and consumption to an idealized American scene, of family and nation, reproduction and futurity, all held together by the fetishized bicycle: "the kid touching the bicycle like it was some holy thing."

Alan is unable to become a dutiful citizen-subject of a neoliberal order, for he lacks the capacity for self-care, the moral autonomy demanded of the neoliberal subject. This is only most evident in his refusal to take responsibility for his role in outsourcing American industry. Yet, this disavowal remains stubbornly inarticulate in the narrative. At the end of the scene Alan remembers of the family buying Schwinn bicycles the rhythmic reverie stumbles as he wonders "Why did this matter? Why did it matter that they had been made just up Highway 57? It was hard to say" (50). Unable to articulate his predicament, Alan holds onto an illusion and we learn that following his departure from Schwinn, he sank his savings into developing a bicycle of his own design. The initiative collapsed of course, but Alan still dreams: "He could still do this. He thought of his silver bike, the prototype he'd had made. It was so beautiful. Everything was silver and chrome, even the gears, even the seat. Had anyone ever made a more beautiful object? You could see it from space it was so bright and shone so defiantly" (75). Alan knows manufacturing the bike is not possible, yet is guided by fetishistic illusion, a disavowal that both sustains an ideological fantasy of an America that never existed and allows him to continue to invest in the dream of neoliberal speculation.

Alan remains trapped within an American worldview that is troubled by, but unwilling or unable to confront, the obscene underside of global capitalism. Perhaps the most telling moment of his disavowal occurs when wandering around the site of KAEC he comes across a large pit, seemingly a foundation for a building, and descends into it. At the bottom he sits and remembers a business deal a friend had recounted to him about a US glass manufacturer that had gotten the contract for the first twenty floors of the World Trade Center building, but were usurped at the last moment by a Chinese company using the very patent the US company had developed. Alan grows angry as he remembers this and is distressed that the New York Port Authority "would go abroad for such a thing, would knowingly lead PPG on — millions in equipment upgrades and retooling to enable them to build the glass — my God, the whole thing was underhanded and it was cowardly and lacking in all principle. It was dishonour. And at Ground Zero. Alan was pacing, his hands in fists. The dishonour! At Ground Zero! Amid the ashes! The dishonour! Amid the ashes! The dishonour! The dishonour! The dishonour!" (136) In this scene of trauma the references to dishonor seem tritely or comically discordant in relation to the feelings and facts of what the narrator is describing, and yet this is precisely the language Alan would use, for

he experiences this as an issue of national shame, contiguous with his own humiliations and shame in the present moment in Saudi Arabia. The linkage of Ground Zero and the attacks on 9/11 to Saudi Arabia is a suggestive one of course, and not just in terms of the networking of terror, but also that of global finance capital, but this glimpse of the Real is elided by the focus on Alan's conflation of personal and national traumas. Here, as throughout the novel, Eggers seems uncertain about how to narrativize the realities of neoliberal capitalism beyond ironic references to his narrator's delusions. At the end of the novel, Alan decides to remain at KAEC, "Otherwise who would be here when the King came again?" (331).

Given the use of irony to create distances between author, narrator, and reader, it can be difficult to delineate Egger's own investment in this narrative of American decline. Yet, the very style of the narration bespeaks a commitment to literary form that reflects this author's sense of value in the act of writing and in certain forms of writing. In a 2011 interview, where he is talking about McSweeney's magazine, he observes: "There was a time when we looked first and foremost for successful or at least interesting experiments in form. Now we're really looking for plain old good writing. After living for a while, and knowing things do happen in this world, I look for novels and short stories to reflect that."¹⁷ This paean to "plain old good writing" bespeaks a fetishization of craft that oddly echoes the nostalgia for industrial production that Alan Clay expresses in *A Hologram for the King*. In the lengthy Acknowledgements section at the end of the book, Eggers thanks the "entire staff" at "Thompson-Shore printers in Dexter, Michigan," a shout out that hints at his passionate investment in the design and production of his books. In an interview, Eggers describes visiting the firm and meeting workers: "I went to visit them and found it was a relatively small plant in the middle of homes and farms. They did exceedingly high quality work and had an archival bindery, too, and so I just was really taken with the whole enterprise."¹⁸ The embossed hardback version of *A Hologram for the King*, designed by Jessica Hische, drew much appreciative comment from reviewers and readers:

I was loathe to even crack the spine for fear of upending its sensual, aesthetic gestalt...The book's packaging seems to reference a bygone time (early 20th century? the Victorian age? early Gutenberg era? all three?) when books were rarer specimens — sacred tomes of knowledge and wisdom.¹⁹

Even the book cover is hipster-cool...it has the updated-antique aesthetic coveted by people who home brew and buy moustache wax.²⁰

The designer Hische says: "I couldn't be happier with how it turned out, it's really a beautiful object to hold in your hands."²¹ This sounds a lot like: "...the kid touching the bike like it was some holy thing." The very book functions as a fetishistic disavowal of the anxieties it narrates; like the story it tells, it is made in America.

"It's Not My Forte"

Joseph O'Neill embraces what he terms his "elective statelessness" and has stated he is "interested in putting characters in places where the world order is changing, and changing in a particular way."²² In his novel *Netherland*, an Anglo-Dutch Wall Street financial analyst, estranged from his wife, connects the worlds of old and new immigrants in New York. In *The*

Dog, the narrator is another depressed and rootless individual, an attorney who leaves his unhappy life in New York, escaping the painful aftermath of a failed relationship to take up an ill-defined position in Dubai as a legal-financial “majordomo” for a very wealthy and profligate Lebanese family.²³ O’Neill milks humor from the high-end self-fashioning of his narrator’s class of wealthy expatriates in Dubai. An example is the association of buildings with status: the narrator lives in a neighborhood called Privilege Bay in a luxury high-rise called the Situation inhabited by the Uncompromising Few (according to the building’s website); it is one of a triad of luxury high rises called the Privileged Three, the other two are called the Statement and the Aspiration. He frets at the reputation and value of his apartment building, and comments ironically on the affectless world of very rich expatriates, people who, he dryly observes, “prioritize their own future prestige or devote themselves to producing deathless *objets* for their museological self-representation in posterity” (23).

The narrator is an unnamed everyman and, in certain respects, resembles Alan Clay, at least in his belated masculinity and bouts of humiliation and shame. However, O’Neill’s narrator-protagonist is a much more analytical character, given to ironic scrutiny of his role: “Mine is the inevitable fate of the overwhelmed fiduciary: inextinguishable boredom and fear of liability” (41). Mostly, his job consists of rubber-stamping documents he doesn’t understand. As O’Neill comments in interview, “He’s not even sure he really knows what his job *is*, beyond its humiliations and shame.”²⁴ If Alan Clay is a twenty-first century Willy Loman, the narrator of *The Dog* is Bartleby the Scrivener in neoliberal drag.

The Dog is a very knowing “comedy of ethics.”²⁵ The narrator tries to hold on to and articulate ideas and arguments that have little value in the neoliberal present, and there is comedy in the absurdity of his efforts to reason in the face of a world that does not conform to his outmoded liberal sensibility. He is adrift in a world devoid of responsibilities and obligations, with no sense of shared purpose or common assumptions. He mentally composes emails he never sends and muses on many subjects, all are ethical minefields: “There’s no such thing as ‘to get’ something,” he thinks to himself. “The inevitable consequence of resolving knotty unknown A is the creation of knotty unknown B” (109). Like Bartleby, he takes us into a dark web of bureaucratic complexity that produces ever greater confusion and dysfunction. Stylistically, the novel represents this complexity via baroque passages in which the narrator’s efforts to reason produce endlessly digressive “and tortuous disclaimers” (144) and serial use of parentheticals. The narrator’s mordant observations on the diminishment of values are darkly echoed in the environs of Dubai, which is depicted as “the capital of an absurd transactional culture” in which “foreigners are allowed in to do work, in exchange for certain liberties.”²⁶ It is a city where citizenship is interminably suspended and responsibility is always deferred; it is a nightmare state of neoliberal governance where suspensions of political freedoms are consequent on endless expansions of consumer freedoms. As an allegory of neoliberal governmentality, *The Dog* provides a sharply satirical take on the *lack* of responsibility at the heart of a system that requires individuals to self-responsibilize. The paradox of such a requirement, as Mark Fisher notes, is that when everyone is responsible then no one is; the required subject — a collective subject — does not exist.²⁷

It is no accident that O'Neill has chosen Dubai as the setting for this allegory. He describes the city as an "abracadabropolis" (67), a space of spectacular self-invention. As noted above, he recognizes its symbolic status as "a forerunner to the West." Clearly, O'Neill did his research on Dubai and intends to represent it as a dystopian manifestation of the logic of neoliberal capitalism. Not that he makes such direct points about socio-economic realities in the novel, where these tend to be refracted through an oblique narrative voice. In his more direct commentary on the economic order, the narrator focuses on the ways in which Dubai represents a neoliberal fantasy of mobility and choice. This is most obviously symbolized by the Dubai International Finance Centre, which is a satellite jurisdiction of Dubai and is described by the narrator as "a zone of win-win-win flows of money and ideas and humans" that promises a "future community of cooperative productivity, that financial nationhood, of which all of us here more or less unconsciously dream" (106). He uses similar terms to describe Dubai International Airport as a "dream-like world" of transience and consumer choice: "Dubai's undeclared mission is to make itself indistinguishable from its airport" (57).

In this dream world, markers of ethnicity are erased or air-brushed into near invisibility. Espying members of the Emirates air crew in his building, the narrator muses: "How clearly I remember my first exposure to this superior polyglot race, which is how these ethnically elusive women with smiling creaseless faces first struck me. They seemed indigenous to the skies" (133). At the same time, he is confronted with race and class markers of immigrant labor, including the service crew in the hotels and apartment blocks and the men building new hotels and blocks. He learns about the indeterminate status of his assistant, Ali: "He is a 'bidoon' (Arabic for 'without', apparently), i.e., a stateless person, i.e., a person who is everywhere illegally present...Neither *jus sanguinis* nor *jus soli* avails bidoons. They are, as things stand, fucked" (30). These socio-economic observations draw attention to the contingencies of "freedom" in Dubai and to ways in which these are abrogated. In interview, O'Neill observes: "The problem [the narrator] faces is that to be in Dubai is to become complicit in a very naïve sense. The wrongdoing of the government is transparent...In Dubai you cannot ignore what is happening."²⁸ But the narrator does ignore what is happening, or at least he tries to. He attempts to reason his distance from service personnel and migrant laborers, constructing elaborate disclaimers. He remarks that "I'm not blind to the jobsite labourers" (77) and goes on:

I have taken steps to inform myself about the oppressive and predicamental working conditions, not to say near-enslavement, to which many of them are subject from day one...I also know enough not to give weight to the emotion of solidarity by which I experience, from inside my chilled apartment, a one-sided connection to these men, who are in the blazing hot outdoors. I'll simply say this: I have run the numbers, and I am satisfied that I have given the situation of the foreign labour corps, and my relation to it, an appropriate measure of consideration and action. (78)

Yet, the presence of this sub-class is most pointedly narrativized as a source of ethical anxiety for the narrator who wants to "figure out how to do the right thing" (80) but winds himself ever further into a paralytic web of his own inactions and over-reasoned reflections.

For all his freedom of movement and choice the narrator is thoroughly disconnected from human interaction and this is at one with his highly financialized sense of the world around him, constantly working out the monetary value of his actions and relationships. He regularly hires Eastern European prostitutes with whom he has minimal conversation and tells us that “often, after she has left, I will Google the place a given girl says she’s from and I will learn a little about the world. My investigations are mainly photographic. I have contemplated the smokestacks of Magnitogorsk and the poplars of Gharm. A gas station in burned grassland...a window among thousands in a sovietiv housing complex — these are the icons of personal desolation with which I have come to associate the women I pay to have sex with” (83). This perverse effort to connect with emotional lives of the women through this virtual imaging of deindustrialized Soviet wastelands presents a striking biopolitical metaphor that maps the geopolitics of capital accumulation and dispossession onto financialized sexual relations. Like so much in the novel, it is an oddly skewed yet suggestive perspective on the networks of global relationships that undergird unequal exchanges at local levels. It is also of course a metaphorization of the narrator’s extreme self-alienation, a commentary on the dialectics of distance and intimacy that channel his desires and disavowals.

This distancing also feeds into his musings on national identity and his status as an expatriate. He reflects on “loyalties of country” (109): “I might add that I feel more cleanly American than ever. Leaving the USA has resulted in a purification of nationality. By this I mean that my relationship to the US 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). The irony is thickly layered here. In parsing national identity in terms of political and economic registers of citizenship the narrator calls attention both to the precarious nature of this identity, the contingent freedoms it signifies, and the contradictory logics of capital and territory. Towards the end of the novel he further reflects on his deterritorialized identity as he looks at his passport and has a “sudden insight that American nationhood is part of a worldwide protection racket and that it should be possible, surely, to live without a state’s say-so. I set to one side all theories and systems” (235). This rhetorical sloughing off of national identity seems deliberate as he prepares to be apprehended for financial mismanagement (though it is not clear what the crime is or even if a crime was committed) and refuses to flee, as many advise. And yet there is considerable ambiguity in this expressed desire to “live without a state’s say so.” After all, in many respects he already lives in a state of statelessness and this expressed desire along with the novel’s ambiguous closure speaks to the confused ethical and political dimensions of the narrator’s refusal (and his deeper disavowals of responsibility).

The novel ends with an act of self-negation as the narrator awaits a knock at the door signaling the arrival of authorities to arrest and charge him, a reminder of the European literary antecedents of O’Neill’s narrative — Dostoyevsky, Kafka, and Beckett all loom large. However, it is Melville’s *Bartleby*, a very American antecedent, who is the more relevant reference point both at the end of the novel and throughout. There is much that requires more careful analysis to detail the parallels with Melville’s story. For example, the ways in which each writer plays off the

relationship between preferences and principles in articulating human relationality in societies increasingly saturated with market values. Bartleby sums up his refusal with “I would prefer not to” while the narrator of *The Dog*, seeking for a phrase to avoid accountability in response to mails and documents he receives takes to writing on them “It’s not my forte” (98), a rather droll mimicking of Bartleby.²⁹

In borrowing some of Melville’s clothes, however, the narrator only underlines confused distinctions in the novel between the market and the state. What is O’Neill’s narrator resisting? The knock on the door, if it comes, will surely be that of the market not the state, for neoliberalism, as Michel Foucault avers, envisions “a state under the supervision of the market rather than a market supervised by the state.”³⁰ But will it come? Surely that knock would represent a centralized authority that the novel otherwise posits does not exist. The narrator’s anticipation of it signifies what Fisher calls “the negative atheology proper to Capital: the centre is missing, but we cannot stop searching for it or positing it. It is not that there is nothing there — it is that what *is* there is not capable of exercising responsibility.”³¹ We might say that the narrator’s refusal is an ontological refusal and that as such, it has a formal power as a means of establishing critical distance from a normative, if absurd, social order. But it would seem that his refusal is essentially private, he is unable to articulate any political principles that might displace or revalue market preferences.

O’Neill is not alone in invoking Bartleby as a figure of resistance in neoliberal times. Theorists such as Giorgio Agamben, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and Slavoj Žižek have all invoked Bartleby as a symbolic figure for a radical politics — he was even something of a mascot for the Occupy Wall Street movement. Notwithstanding the debates about the efficacy of such invocations by the theorists, I find O’Neill’s invocation unsatisfying and confusing, but also telling in that it signifies some of the underlying anxieties in the novel. The narrator’s refusal is at one with the narrative’s refusal of meaning, registered in its parenthetical digressions and baroque styling, and it is as much its formal refusal as its narrative content that marks out the anxieties in this shaggy dog story.

In this respect I am reminded of Zadie Smith’s comment on O’Neill’s *Netherland*, describing it as “an anxious novel, unusually so,” a book that “wants you to know that it knows you know it knows.”³² In her essay “Two Paths for the Novel” Smith writes: “But *Netherland* is only superficially about September 11 or immigrants or cricket as a symbol of good citizenship. It certainly is about anxiety, but its worries are formal and revolve obsessively around the question of authenticity. *Netherland* sits at an anxiety crossroads where a community in recent crisis — the Anglo-American liberal middle class — meets a literary form in long-term crisis, the nineteenth-century lyrical Realism of Balzac and Flaubert.”³³ While I think Smith’s essay is an overdetermined polemic on the subject of “establishment literary fiction,” I think she is right about the existence of an anxiety crossroads and I think O’Neill is still at that crossroads with *The Dog*, anxious about how to express either his literary or political credentials. In interview, he is acerbic in commenting on what he terms the “chattiness” of contemporary discourses, referring to a “banal and treacherous lucidity that’s underpinned by a bogus, consumeristic egalitarianism, which cannot tolerate the idea that good writing might not instantly and cost-

effectively yield its full significance, and might in fact make one feel in some sense *beneath* the work.”³⁴ What “good writing” means here in some part is writing that is “writerly,” that withholds ready meaning, and O’Neill clearly ascribes this as in itself a value. At the same time, and notwithstanding the stylistic differences between *Netherland* and *The Dog*, in each novel O’Neill fetishizes his own prose style as an oblique commentary on the way we live now.

I do not think O’Neill is alone at what Smith calls the “anxiety crossroads” and Dave Eggers can be seen loitering there too. Both *A Hologram for the King* and *The Dog* evoke a sense of a transitional moment, an interregnum, reflecting rearrangements of the circuits of global economic power and the emergence of a liquid global order that exacerbates the tensions between capital and territory. The tropes of waiting and stasis are to the fore in each, signifying that the protagonists are caught between the powers of state and market but believe in neither; they are unable to satisfactorily self-govern and so conform to neoliberal norms, yet they can neither imagine nor commit to any symbolic identity outside of these. Their precarity is pronounced but not grounded, it is privatized in their expressions of desire and loss and their disavowals of responsibility. Matters of freedom, justice, and inequality hover in the narratives, though rarely come into view as structural conditions of the socio-economic contexts — the obscene underside of the neoliberal world order remains obscure.

These novels reflect an American unease about the legitimacy of liberal democracy under global conditions of neoliberal capitalist hegemony. In this they also represent the “worlding” of the American novel as an apprehensive charting of new relations between the national and the global, wherein learned habits and values are losing their meaning and utility. This is not only an ideological unease, it is also a matter of formal uncertainty about the capacity of literary fiction to express the realities of a post-American world. Both writers stretch conventional features of literary realism to near abstraction — minimalist in Eggers’ case, baroque in O’Neill’s — while retaining belief in the value of literary form as a hard-earned aesthetic freedom. Such consolations of form yet beg the question if American literary realism is commensurate with neoliberal reality.

Notes

¹ Benjamin Kunkel, “Men in White,” *London Review of Books* (July 17, 2008): 21.

² Bruce Robbins, “The Worlding of the American Novel,” *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, ed. Leonard Cassuto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1096–1106.

³ Caren Irr, *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: US Fiction in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 194.

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002), 32.

⁵ See Brid Aine Parnell, “The Mega Cities of the Middle East,” ThinkProgress (November 28, 2017), Accessed August 6, 2018. <http://www.think-progress.com/ae/mobility/the-mega-cities-of-the-middle-east/>.

⁶ On Dubai, see Ahmed Kanna, *The City as Corporation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). On “economic cities” in Saudi Arabia, see Sarah Algethami, “Saudi Arabia Builds Cities in the Sand to Move Beyond Oil,” *Bloomberg* (August 6, 2017), Accessed August 6, 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-08-06/saudi-arabia-builds-cities-in-the-sand-to-take-economy-past-oil>.

⁷ On the “proficient class,” see Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

⁸ Kanna focuses on such contradictions in his anthropological study of Dubai. Kanna, *The City as Corporation*.

⁹ Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk, "Introduction," *Evil Paradises*, eds. Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk (New York: New Press, 2007): v–xix. While Davis and Monk frame this question as part of a critical inquiry on global examples of such developments, there is a strain of hyperbole in some of this Western commentary on Middle Eastern urbanism that reflects a neocolonial sense of moral superiority. This is particularly evident in the "Dubai bashing" articles that appeared in the wake of the global economic recession that began in 2008. See Todd Reisz and Rory Hyde, "Abandoned Cars and Memories of a Bashing," *Huffington Post* (July 19, 2010), Accessed January 14, 2018. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/abandoned-cars-and-memori_b_651448.

¹⁰ Nico Israel and Matthew Hart, "Even the Toothbrush Has More than Two Paths: An Interview with Joseph O'Neill," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (September 11, 2014), Accessed January 4, 2018. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/even-toothbrush-two-paths-interview-joseph-oneill/>.

¹¹ Duncan White, "Joseph O'Neill: Dubai is Where the West is Heading," *Telegraph* (August 17, 2014), Accessed January 4, 2018. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/11034985/Joseph-O'Neill-Dubai-is-where-the-West-is-heading.html>.

¹² In Jodi Dean's terms, neoliberalism "does not provide symbolic identities, sites from which we can see ourselves," rather, it offers imaginary ideals, promoting the cultivation of our individuality, our self-fashioning. This decline in symbolic efficiency has become a staple motif of contemporary American literature. Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009): 66.

¹³ Pico Iyer, "Desert Pitch," *New York Times* (July 19, 2012), Accessed January 6, 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/22/books/review/a-hologram-for-the-king-by-dave-eggers.html>.

¹⁴ Dave Eggers, *A Hologram for the King* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 13. Pages from this novel are hereafter cited in parentheses in the body of the essay.

¹⁵ This development is not a fiction though is still under construction. Built by Emaar Properties, the real estate company owned by Dubai's Maktoum dynasty, it is on the coast of the Red Sea approximately 65 miles north of Jeddah. See Sylvia Smith, "Saudi Arabia's New Desert Megacity," *BBC News* (March 20, 2015), Accessed August 6, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31867727>.

¹⁶ Stephen Elliott, "The Rumpus Interview with Dave Eggers where Dave Announces his New Book, *A Hologram for the King*," *The Rumpus* (June 4, 2012), Accessed January 4, 2018. <https://therumpus.net/2012/06/04/the-rumpus-interview-with-dave-eggers/>.

¹⁷ Sophie Elmhirst, "Putting on the Clown Suit," *New Statesman* (April 21, 2011), Accessed January 14, 2018. <https://www.newstatesman.com/books/2011/04/eggers-book-writing-fiction>.

¹⁸ Devin Leonard, "Dave Eggers on his New Novel and Globalization," *Bloomberg Businessweek* (August 9, 2012), Accessed January 14, 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-08-09/dave-eggers-on-his-new-novel-and-globalization>.

¹⁹ Eric Heiman, "*A Hologram for the King* Book Packaging: McSweeney's," *Design Envy* (May 21, 2013), Accessed January 14, 2018. <http://designenvy.aiga.org/a-hologram-for-the-king-book-packaging-mcsweeney's>.

²⁰ Miya Tokumitsu, "First World Problems: Dave Eggers's *A Hologram for the King* and John Lanchester's *Capital*," *Slant* (May 7, 2013), Accessed January 10, 2018. <https://www.slantmagazine.com/books/first-world-problems-dave-eggers-a-hologram-for-the-king-and-john-lanchesters-capital/>.

²¹ Jessica Hische, quoted in Heiman, "*A Hologram for the King*."

²² Jonathan Lee, "Nothing Happened: An Interview with Joseph O'Neill," *The Paris Review* (October 3, 2014), Accessed January 14, 2018. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2014/10/03/nothing-happened-an-interview-with-joseph-oneill/>.

²³ Joseph O'Neill, *The Dog* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), 5. Pages from this novel are hereafter cited in parentheses in the body of the essay.

²⁴ Lee, "Nothing Happened."

²⁵ Lee, "Nothing Happened."

²⁶ John Freeman, "*The Dog* by Joseph O'Neill," *Boston Globe* (September 17, 2015), Accessed February 14, 2018. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/books/2014/09/17/book-review-the-dog-joseph-oneill/19Q8hQPITRWNM8NgNz8kXJ/story.html>.

²⁷ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: O Books, 2009), 66.

²⁸ White, "Joseph O'Neill."

²⁹ Indeed, there are some clear references to *Bartleby* in the closing pages of *The Dog* as the narrator looks forward to going to prison, a site he associates with "surface[ing] from illusion" of being "in the clear" and marking "a limit of culpability" (241). In Melville's story, the imprisoned Bartleby tells a lawyer "I know where I am." Herman

Melville, "Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street," *Billy Budd, Sailor: And Other Stories* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 44.

³⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, translated by Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008): 116.

³¹ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*: 65.

³² Zadie Smith, "Two Paths for the Novel," *New York Review of Books* (November 20, 2008), Accessed January 3, 2018. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2008/11/20/two-paths-for-the-novel/>.

³³ Smith, "Two Paths."

³⁴ Lee, "Nothing Happened."