

Precarious Cosmopolitanism in O'Neill's *Netherland* and Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*

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Pier Paolo Frassinelli and David Watson,

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Abstract: In their article "Precarious Cosmopolitanism in O'Neill's *Netherland* and Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*" Pier Paolo Frassinelli and David Watson propose a comparative reading of two twenty-first century novels in light of recent debates on cosmopolitanism and precarity. They examine cosmopolitan articulations within a novel dealing with immigrant communities in post-9/11 New York and within a text narrating life in the metropolis of Johannesburg. Both *Netherland* and *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* are preoccupied with economic and political precarity in cosmopolitan cities and offer a rich inventory of forms of cosmopolitan desire rooted in modes of life. By aligning and moving between these texts and the transnational networks they represent, Frassinelli and Watson explore the ground for theorizing some of the political questions brought up by contemporary world literature.

Pier Paolo FRASSINELLI and David WATSON

Precarious Cosmopolitanism in O'Neill's *Netherland* and Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*

Much scholarship of the last two decades has taken inspiration from the idea of the cosmopolitan and has produced interpretative practices which seek to understand literary histories in terms of those geographies and flows that disaggregate literary texts and their national contexts (see, e.g., Juvan <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/10>>; on cosmopolitanism see, e.g., Appiah).

Cosmopolitan perspectives have restructured the field of literary studies, transforming the way scholars imagine their object and method of study, and have brought to the fore such (renewed) frameworks for literary studies as world literature, the transnational, the global, and the planetary (see, e.g., Casanova; Damrosch; D'haen; D'haen, Damrosch, Kadir; Thomsen; Sturm-Trigonakis; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Mukherjee). However, in recent years socio-political reorientations have casted doubt on the viability of cosmopolitanism. The centrality of competing cosmopolitan approaches to criticism is undoubtedly symptomatic of alterations in the globe's politics and economy that have rearranged the relations between populations and states, between sovereign states, and between states and financial flows. But at the same time, resurgent nationalisms, the tightening of border controls and wars dressed up as humanitarian interventions have seemingly "rendered the idea of belonging to a harmonious global community of cosmopolitan citizens naïve at best, at worst simply futile" (Braidotti, Blaagaard, Hanafin 1). The consolidation of what Paul Gilroy calls a global securitocracy (156), the rise of xenophobia, as well as recent financial crises and related national austerity measures have resulted in an increased visibility of the role of the nation-state, or a fantasy of it, within numerous contexts. Consequently, modes of criticism and scholarship retaining allegiances to cosmopolitan ideals and practices need to reckon with their precarious position across the globe.

The two novels we discuss here, Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* and Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* articulate a precarious mode of cosmopolitanism — a cosmopolitanism in crisis, if you like — even while trying to imagine new, post-identitarian forms of borderless collectivity. *Netherland* is one of a growing number of novels about expatriates finding themselves in post-9/11 United States, which range from Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* to Teju Cole's *Open City*. Conversely, South African novelist Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* invites us to rethink the notion of national community from the standpoint of the limits and exclusions this formation produces. The latter is a point where the narratives of *Netherland* and *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* intersect. O'Neill too is concerned with recasting the U.S. "homeland" as part of a larger cosmopolitan circuit. But these novels ultimately do not manage to create a cosmopolitan fold around the various liminal and excluded figures that they identify: they juxtapose instead fantasies of the cosmopolitan to the messy entanglements which O'Neill's and Mpe's characters experience as both convivial and fraught. These texts thus seek to enact a dual task: to narrate an ongoing fidelity to the possibilities enabled by certain modes of cosmopolitanism and think through the precarity of these potentialities. In turn, they give shape to some of the terms and narratives which make it possible to work through the precarious position of cosmopolitanism today.

Our choice of the term "precarious" is not accidental. In O'Neill's and Mpe's novels we encounter a rich recapitulation of the range of meanings attached to it. The first of these identifies precarity with the conditions resulting from the effects of neoliberalism and the current financial crisis: economic insecurity, contingent or flexible employment and a concomitant promotion of individual entrepreneurship and success in the market place (see Lazzarato; with reference to the tension between the discourse of virtuous citizenship and the experience of precarity in contemporary South Africa see also Barchiesi). This is closely linked with what Lauren Berlant describes in *Cruel Optimism* as a structure of affect emphasizing the disposability and insecurity of life as such. Current financial and affective precarity can be and often is mobilized by the state in opposition to cosmopolitanism. Christian Marazzi, for instance, explains that the most expedient and likely response to the spread and intensification of the financial crisis since 2008 by affected nation-states is deglobalization: the employment of devaluations and protectionist measures to immunize national economies against the crisis (25). Similarly, the U.S. war on terror illustrates how the militarization of affects denoting the

vulnerability of the human and national body is today part and parcel of the workings of the nation-state. The discourses on entrepreneurship, upward mobility narratives, the U.S. after the 9/11, and a looming financial crisis filling *Netherland*, as well as those on xenophobia, contingent forms of communal life and immigrants from Mpe's novel constitute a rich inventory of the precarious conditions and affects circulating globally. At the same time, these texts add a third and final semantic layer to precarity. Speaking of what he terms "infolabor," Franco "Bifo" Berardi suggests that "connectivity and precariousness are two sides of the same coin," which is to say that to enter into social relations is to exist in a precarious state (35). Judith Butler, in *Precarious Life*, gives the perhaps canonical account of this when she posits that vulnerability and an ongoing experience of precarity call us to a recognition of how relationality and community are constitutive of the self. Within these frameworks, the precarious circumstances narrated in *Netherland* and *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* are formative of the cosmopolitan communities the texts struggle to give form to. In both novels precarity and cosmopolitanism coexist in a zone of indistinction and folded together they resist disaggregation into antithetical utopian and dystopian modalities.

To speak of a precarious form of cosmopolitanism runs counter to the terms of the reception of O'Neill's story of how the lives of the Dutch banker Hans van den Broek and Chuck Ramkissoon, a Trinidadian immigrant of South Asian descent, intertwine with each other in post-9/11 New York. Barack Obama's praise of the novel has led Donald Pease to attribute to both Obama's presidency and the novel a common transnational promise (<<http://www.radioopensource.org/donald-pease-obamas-transnational-presidency>>). In a similar vein, Caren Irr includes the novel in her account of the emergent genre of the world novel, characterized by, amongst others, multilingualism, geographic reach, a cosmopolitan form of ethics, and, most of all, a desire for a sense of communality left unsatisfied by the communal structures of the family or nation (668-72). Irr's reading is shared by Richard Gray, who also suggests that the novel ought to be read as reframing the post-9/11 U.S. as a deterritorialized "transcultural space in which different cultures reflect and refract, confront and bleed into one another" (55). On the face of it, this is a productive framework for reading the novel. In the paratactic narration of protagonist Hans van den Broek, "gas stations, synagogues, mosques" stand next to each other and border small businesses from "Pakistan, Tajikistan, Ethiopia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Armenia, Ghana, the Jewry, Christendom, Islam" (192). On Coney Island Avenue too, "South African Jews" watch cricket with Rastafarians in an office of a "Pakistani run lumber yard" (192). Attuned to cultural and national differences, Hans's paratactic lists attenuate and strain the ostensibly realistic style of the novel, and, more importantly, focalize and constellate cosmopolitan clusters within New York. But in doing so, he is mimetically reproducing Chuck's style of viewing and talking about New York: Chuck mediates Hans's view of New York — and, indeed, of the world beyond this city (Irr 671) — teaching him to pay attention to the city's constitutive cosmopolitanism and to thereby "see something of the real Brooklyn" (192). In fact, we can locate retrospectively the origin of the novel's paratactic style in exactly Chuck's mediation of Hans's expatriate gaze, the very gaze through which Chuck is in turn mediated for the reader.

There is something apt about this since Hans and Chuck have a place in the same paratactic lists they enumerate. Hans arrives in New York via London and finds himself alone in the city after the dual traumas of 9/11 and the breakdown of his marriage. In his disorientation and frequent remoteness — his "balloonist vantage point" (163) — this dislocated expatriate often appears as if he were endowed with a drifting, distanced modernist consciousness, a cosmopolitan perspective that measures and profits from its detachment from ordinary experience. Yet O'Neill also links Hans to the economic boom of the 1990s and its so-called new economy. He is if not representative then an example of a cosmopolitan business class circulating globally and profiting from the global economy: Hans, after all, is involved with financial speculation in oil markets. Chuck, on the other hand, can be described as following the path of what Werner Sollors terms consent: the conversion of immigrants to U.S. forms of life, and their self-definition in these terms rather than ones sourced from their country of origin. At the same time, Chuck redefines these forms of life declaring at one point that cricket is more primordial to the U.S. than baseball. Chuck operates as well within an entrepreneurial work paradigm that demands of him flexibility and adaptability. In addition to his small time gangster activities, he is running various enterprises: "Chuck Cricket Inc., Chuck Import-Export Inc. and Chuck Industries Inc."

(90). As the first of these suggests, Chuck's entrepreneurial activities blur work and play; indeed, play becomes an opportunity for work. Part of the point here is that Chuck's entrepreneurial energy renders him not just part of a cosmopolitan immigrant community, but also part of an emerging precariat. But the broader point is that by linking Hans and Chuck, O'Neill also links different modes of cosmopolitan existence, various ethnic identities, and different positions within the global economy. They interpenetrate, animate, and mediate each other without the component parts of the parataxis collapsing into one another and thereby creating a uniform representation of cosmopolitanism.

The exemplary figure for this parataxis is the game of cricket. At once outside the limits of "what Americans understand" (333), and part of Chuck's dream of civilizing the U.S., cricket is certainly an overdetermined figure in *Netherland*. Played by an intercontinental community, it is linked in the text to conviviality, civility and justice. It points in one direction to postcolonial histories and diasporic trajectories, and in another to globalized sport and entertainment industries searching restlessly for new markets and opportunities for profit. By learning to adapt to the conditions of play in New York, "the impossible grass field in America" (233), Hans feels as if he has become a naturalized U.S. citizen, yet the need for this conversion points towards his own dislocation in New York. It is at once the object of Chuck's impossible dream of making it in the U.S. and the means whereby ordinary, everyday attachments are established and maintained. Finally, it points towards both a cosmopolitan fantasy, the becoming global of cricket — an immigrant or diasporic form of play — and the incremental processes whereby a cosmopolitan group develops a non-identitarian community around shared forms of living and playing.

From the level of individual sentences to that of the political and economic forces it represents, *Netherland* would seem to narrate the emergence of a cosmopolitan situation that finds its culmination and truest expression in the game of cricket. Yet this remains an unsatisfactory reading of the novel. While the largest part of *Netherland* is dedicated to unfolding and developing a non-identitarian cosmopolitanism, it is also true that the novel brackets this vision in various ways and interrogates its efficacy and sustainability. The story is constructed as a retrospective narrative beginning with the discovery of Chuck's body in the waters of the Gowanus Canal: his non-narrated death would bring to a close the novel's cosmopolitan narrative if it had not ended even earlier with Hans's departure from New York and reunification with his family in London. Beginning with its own ending, *Netherland* raises questions about what kind of relationship to develop towards the bracketed memory of a cosmopolitan experience. Memory, we are told, mows "the grassy past to manageable proportions" (2). Even the past is marred by the trauma of loss. Hans offers this as a general observation as easily pertinent to "a cracked fingernail" (3) as the 9/11 event, but the most obvious and immediate referent here is Chuck and their shared past, the former already becoming a "transitory figure" (3) in Hans's memory.

Hans's reaction to the news of Chuck's death reveals that he was obviously more than a transitional acquaintance. Hans's retrospective reverie can certainly be read as an attempt to negotiate and work through the sense of loss initiated by the news of Chuck's death, a death that compounds the earlier loss of their friendship. But restoring the "past to manageable proportions" is an apt summation as well of a passage that comes late in the novel. Navigating satellite images of Brooklyn on Google Maps, Hans zooms in on Chuck's cricket field, now "just ... a field" (334). Struggling with a number of unspecified reactions, Hans zooms out until all he sees is the planet as a whole: "There is no sign of nations, no signs of the work of man. The USA as such is nowhere to be seen" (335). No one lives in the world, or rather globe, of Google maps. At the moment when the globe comes into view the possibility of a cosmopolitan community is refused and supplanted by a simulated image of a shared, yet emptied out world. In one sense, this passage offers us a hyperbolic version of Hans's experience of dislocation and distance throughout the text: it echoes his earlier experience of flying over Iraq and being entranced by the lights shining up from the apparently "placeless darkness" down below (128). But zooming out from an empty cricket field to a view of the planet available only from a vantage point bereft of humanity is also a movement that consigns the cricket field, Chuck, and the convivial cosmopolitanism of New York to a position of invisibility. These are bracketed, cut down to size, and replaced with a technologically rather than humanly mediated vision of a cosmopolitan non-place. This vision is incommensurable with the memories recovered in the novel's reveries, as well as with the constellations enumerated by its paratactic lists: these lists

testify, after all, to the existence of an internally differentiated globe. Yet its existence provides a corrosive counterpoint to the cosmopolitan humanism easily available to the novel and its readers for the duration of much of the narrative.

O'Neill refuses to sustain the focalizing perspective suggested by Google maps during the remainder of the text. In fact, the remainder of the novel can be read as an attempt to insert the human and communal into this perspective. Meeting his family at the London Eye, a giant Ferris wheel on the banks of the Thames, Hans rises with the wheel and as he rises the city becomes unrecognizable, apparently as bereft of life as the globe unveiled by Google maps. In the last of the metonymic associations driving the novel, Hans recalls approaching New York City via the Staten Island Ferry with his mother, a trajectory which duplicates that of generations of immigrants. In a reversal of the "balloonist vantage point" suggested by Google maps and the Ferris wheel ride, Hans looks up at the still-standing World Trade Center and the day is transformed into an impressionistic vision of a shared "promise": "I can state that I wasn't the only person on that ferry ... to make out and accept an extraordinary promise in what we saw — the tall approaching cape, a people risen in light" (339). There is much to be said about this melancholic evocation of a common immigrant fantasy, one also shared by Chuck, articulated in relation to pre-9/11 New York. It might be the case that O'Neill brackets this fantasy as belonging to the past rather than present, in the same way as the cosmopolitan life figured by cricket is relegated to the recesses of memory. Perhaps even more interesting is that when Hans looks at his mother next to him on the ferry she is also watching him, rather than the approaching city, and seeing him seeing.

Subsequently, the narration snaps back to the present, with Hans duplicating his mother's gaze, looking at his son Jake urging him to "Look! ... See, Daddy." Hans, with the reader, turns "to look for what it is we're supposed to be seeing" (340). *Netherland* is concerned throughout with the act of looking through someone else's eyes, most conspicuously when Hans sees New York through the mediating gaze of Chuck. It might not be going too far to say that if cricket is exemplary of a kind of bottom-up cosmopolitanism in the novel, then this mode of looking is its necessary supplement: it transforms a cosmopolitan structure into a series of ongoing affects and attachments. It also stands in sharp contrast to the solitary gaze called upon by Google maps, as O'Neill's juxtaposition of the Ferris wheel and the Staten Island ferry makes clear. But rather than straightforwardly deciding for the shared perspective of those gazing at New York from the ferry, a decision that would amount to a re-assertion of cosmopolitan possibilities within the novel, O'Neill complicates matters by privileging a series of familial looks: those between mother and son, and father and son. In this genealogy, it is with the family that we see. Like Chuck being laid to rest in Trinidad "with his people" (313), Hans's itinerant gaze is tamed, disassociated from his time with strangers in New York, and firmly re-established within the network of the family. *Netherland* ends before the reader sees what Hans's son is urging him to look at, but O'Neill's veering in this direction in the final pages, with Hans finding a human alternative to Google maps in the mediations offered by his family, asks of us to consider whether the novel does not favor a kind of homecoming rather than cosmopolitan itinerancy. That is to say, the novel brackets transnational and cosmopolitan possibilities in favor of re-establishing an identitarian sense of community. From this perspective, Hans occupies a present from whose vantage point cosmopolitan possibilities appear as melancholic manifestations of a past cut down to "manageable proportions."

Some of the more unsettling images in *Netherland* involve the invisible becoming visible: tribes emerging from the forest, bodies rising from the water, a naked man appearing in the woods, steam and flames erupting from manhole covers, and, in one instance, "a foul mechanical dark" becoming visible between the undercarriage of a taxi and the road (88). Likewise, the end of the novel calls upon us to look at the cracks in the cosmopolitan fantasy it offers the reader, a fantasy as durable and invulnerable as the New York visible from the Staten Island ferry. If so, it would be a mistake to suggest that it is only in its final pages that the novel offers an account of the vulnerability of cosmopolitan formations. Counter-currents antithetical to cosmopolitan discourses are catalogued from its opening pages. Hans's wife, Rachel returns to London in fear of another event like 9/11, and there are also mentions of increased security measures, of problems with green cards and bureaucracies dispensing identity documents, of looming financial scandals and collapses. Almost

imperceptibly, the reader is made aware of Chuck's involvement with gangster activities, of the ongoing war on terror and Iraq. In other words, these are pushed to the background of the narrative, cited but swerved away from, much like when Hans transforms a view of Iraq into a series of lights in a disembodied darkness. *Netherland* does not perform an outright rejection of cosmopolitan prospects or make a clear and uncomplicated retrograde turn towards identitarian politics and the reaffirmation of an attachment to the nation-state. But it does pose questions about cosmopolitan circulations and networks within the contexts of the United States's war on terror and the shifting political economy of the globe: neither repudiating cosmopolitanism nor celebrating its liberating possibilities, it takes it up as a problem, a precarious possibility evanescent yet worth returning to and working through, even if, perhaps, only to cut it down to size.

Like *Netherland*, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* also looks at the nation with an estranged gaze. In Mpe's novel this is the product of a series of narrative devices which locate the story simultaneously within and outside both the geopolitical boundaries of the nation and the conventions of realist fiction. If on the one hand *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* breaks with canonical realism through the adoption of a narrative form that can be associated with a version of "magical realism ... drawn from African tale-telling traditions" (Green 6), at the same time it provides a detailed photographic representation of the places and social dramas that constitute contemporary South African reality, from the eruption of xenophobia to the AIDS pandemic. And yet, even as the narrative zooms in on post-apartheid South Africa, it articulates a cosmopolitan desire to bracket and transcend the coordinates of the nation.

The novel opens with the 1998 soccer World Cup, the first to which the South African national team Bafana Bafana — Zulu for "the boys the boys" — was admitted after the lengthy anti-apartheid boycott of South African sport by the international community: "If you were still alive, Refentše, child of Tiragalong, you would be glad that Bafana Bafana lost to France in the 1998 Soccer World Cup Fiasco" (1). This is how the narrative voice addresses the protagonist before accompanying the reader into Hillbrow, the most densely populated neighborhood in Johannesburg's inner-city. From there, the first chapter, titled "Hillbrow: The Map," sends us back to the celebrations for Bafana Bafana's victory against Ivory Coast in 1995, soon after the birth of the "new" South Africa:

You would recall the child, possibly seven years old or so, who got hit by a car. Her mid-air screams still ring in your memory. When she hit the concrete pavements of Hillbrow, her screams died with her ... The traffic cops, arriving a few minutes later, found that the season of arrest had already passed. Most people, after the momentary stunned silence of witnessing the sour fruits of soccer victory, resumed their singing. *Shosholosa* ... *Shosholosa* ... drowned the choking sobs of the deceased child's mother ... Welcome to our Hillbrow! you heard one man say to his female companion, who was a seeming newcomer to this place of bustling activity, visiting it for the first time since the conspiracy between her parents and fate decided to usher her presence onto the face of the Earth. (2)

Through the juxtaposition of the scene of jubilation for the soccer victory, complete with the singing of the famous struggle song *Shosholosa*, and the death of the child, the novel introduces what will become one of the central themes of the narrative: the "sour fruits" of nationalism. As a counterpoint to this and the following scenes of the opening chapter, we then have the repetition of the phrase "welcome to our Hillbrow." It is the refrain that welcomes the reader and the protagonists to the neighborhood that emblemizes the urban decay and rampaging criminality for which Johannesburg's inner-city has become notorious, but which is also a place where the mass influx first of those who during the apartheid regime were classified as blacks, Indians, and coloreds, and later of a great number of immigrants from other African regions has created one of South Africa's most cosmopolitan areas.

In this finely crafted opening sequence, Refentše, the young protagonist who in order to pursue his academic studies has migrated to Johannesburg from the small rural village of Tiragalong, is accompanied by the narrative voice in his daily walk from Hillbrow to the metropolitan campus of the University of the Witwatersrand. With a splitting of temporalities that reminds of many a modernist novel, the urban crossing also becomes a journey into memory. It prompts reminiscences of the first stories about Hillbrow, the "menacing monster," heard from the migrants who came back to visit Tiragalong and of the "children of Tiragalong" who did not come back, swallowed by the irresistible "lure of the monster" (3). These are followed by the recollection of the protagonist's first direct experiences of the streets, the places, and the inhabitants of Hillbrow, and above all of their

xenophobic hatred of *makwerekwere* (the derogatory onomatopoeia used to single out foreigners, derived from the sound *kwere kwere*, which according to local prejudice other Africans make when they speak their strange languages), thus building up to a crescendo which culminates with the upbeat stream of consciousness that, immediately after a reference to the suicide of the protagonist, closes the opening chapter:

the streets of Hillbrow and Berea and Braamfontein overflowing with *Makwerekwere* come to pursue green pastures after hearing that Rolihlahla Mandela welcomes guests and visitors unlike his predecessors who erected deadly electric wire fences around the boundaries of South Africa trying to keep out the barbarians from Mozambique Zaïre Nigeria Congo Ivory Coast Zimbabwe Angola Zambia from all over Africa fleeing their war-thorn countries populated with starvation like Ethiopia ... *Makwerekwere* stretching their legs and spreading like pumpkin plants filling every corner of our city and turning each patch into a Hillbrow coming to take our jobs in the new democratic rainbowism of African Renaissance that threatened the future of the locals Bafana Bafana fans momentarily forgetting xenophobia and investing their hopes in the national team whose entry into the World Cup was its first attempt in such matters the fans also investing in the Moroccan team the Nigerian Super Eagles and singing at least they are African unlike the French the English the Danes and all that jazz and xenophobia ... All these things that you have heard seen heard about felt smelt believed disbelieved shirked embraced brewing in your consciousness would find chilling haunting echoes in the simple words ... Welcome to our Hillbrow. (26-27)

"Welcome to Our Hillbrow": this is the place from where originates the melodramatic story that involves the protagonist, Refentše, and his circle of lovers, friends, and family relations. Refentše's suicide causes the killing of his mother, accused by the people of Tiragalong of having practiced a deadly witchcraft that destroyed her son's brain (43), which is followed by the suicide of his girlfriend Lerato, and finally by the death of the first "Bone" of Refentše's "Heart," Refilwe, who after moving to Oxford to pursue her postgraduate studies discovers that she has contracted AIDS (independently of her new Nigerian lover who, like Refilwe, is at the terminal stage of the illness). The final chapter, "The Returnee," opens with Refilwe's return to Tiragalong, where she prepares to die surrounded by the prejudices about *makwerekwere* and a stigmatized illness she had herself contributed to disseminate before she left. Her last move is to join Refentše and the other protagonists of the story in "Heaven," where she is welcomed by the closing words of the book: "Refilwe, Child of our World and other Worlds ... Welcome to our Heaven" (124).

The final and the other welcomes are extended by the unusual second person singular of the narrative voice, which corresponds neither to an extradiegetic narrator nor to "the intradiegetic 'you' of the monologue or epistolary form" (Green 9). Rather, it incorporates both the addresser and the addressee: the unnamed narrator addressing the characters and the characters being addressed. This is also the fictional device from which originates the cosmopolitan humanism Mpe strives to promote. The second person singular with which the narrative voice first interpellates the protagonist, Refentše, in fact corresponds to an inclusive you that, as the various narrative threads unravel, is extended to other characters in the story, most notably Refilwe, so as to create a network of relationships that keeps expanding and giving shape to a belonging community that comes to constitute an alternative to the one represented by the nation – being South Africa tellingly absent from the names of places to which the characters are welcomed (see Green 6-8; Dannenberg 46-48). In this sense, the use of the second person singular mirrors that of the inclusive possessive "our" as a refrain to the narrative. There are therefore two questions the reader cannot escape: who is it that welcomes the characters, as well as the reader, to "our" Hillbrow? And therefore, "whose" Hillbrow? (see Hoad 332; Myambo 74).

The answer to both questions is to be found in the way the novel invites us to rethink the notion of citizenship. *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* strives to promote a cosmopolitan and inclusive version of belonging, metonymically represented by Hillbrow, wherein the places that constitute the nation become sites of dwelling for a community open to all of those who choose them as their permanent or temporary abode. As with the addressees of the narrative voice, the concentric circles of inclusion created by the possessive pronoun "our" also progressively expand, so that after "our Hillbrow" we have "our Oxford," "our England" and "our Heathrow" (100-02). These are, however, all places characterized both by the transnational composition of the people who inhabit or pass through them and by the prejudices of the locals towards the "foreigners" who have arrived to occupy what they consider their land: "Our Heathrow strongly reminded Refilwe of our Hillbrow and the xenophobia it

engendered. She learnt there, at out Heathrow, that there was another word for foreigners that was not very different in connotation from *Makwerekwere* ... Except that it was a much more widely used term: "Africans" (102). The open inclusivity of the possessive pronoun "our" thus comes constantly into conflict with the barriers created by the identitarian outbursts that in Hillbrow, Heathrow, England, or Oxford reestablish those divisions between us and them the narrative voice tries at every step to overcome by integrating places and identities: "Hillbrow in Hillbrow. Hillbrow in Cape Town. Cape Town in Hillbrow. Oxford in both. Both in Oxford. Welcome to our All" (104).

This is the conflict that produces and is reverberated by the performative ambiguity in Mpe's use of the possessive pronoun "our," which encapsulates the tension between the novel's utopian impulse and the defensive identitarian closures of the inhabitants of the places that symbolize and embody both the possibility of an inclusive cosmopolitanism and its negation. It is only in "our Heaven" (124), the place where the narrative voice welcomes Refilwe in the last sentence of the novel, that a version of an "us" that knows no boundaries is realized. This is a place where reality is constituted by what "exists in the imagination of those who commemorate our worldly life" and who "through the stories that they tell of us, continue to celebrate or condemn our existence even after we have passed on from this Earth" (123-24). It is, therefore, a space located in memory, in the world of story-telling and literature, which is metafictionally represented through the reference to the main characters who reunite in Heaven to "discuss ways of turning their spoken and unspoken thoughts into written fictions and poems" (113). The utopian impulse of the novel and its tragic dimension are therefore complementary to each other, for the narrative intimates that the radical cosmopolitanism it strives to promote can only be actualized in an imaginary world far removed from reality. But even so, if this denouement can be read as a metaphorization and idealistic abstraction of a cosmopolitan or multicultural ideal that does not manage to achieve a properly political dimension (see Myambo; Green), *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* still brings to our attention some of the political and social tensions which traverse contemporary South Africa and that reveal themselves in Johannesburg's inner-city (see Simone; Landau). In particular, Mpe's novel articulates the immanence of the conflict between a defensive identitarian politics and contingent forms of life in common that subvert its privileged points of reference. Hence the irony encapsulated by the narrative voice, which in the very moment that welcomes us to "our Hillbrow" or "our Heathrow" recalls both the forms of exclusion that characterize these places and the precarious and constantly evolving forms of communal life which unsettle the national and identitarian attachments that also constitute them. *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* thus brings to the fore not so much the failure of a "politics of hospitality" — whose limit is represented by its constitutive assumption that the nation-state or its citizens have the right to either welcome or exclude (see Mezzadra 106-07) — but the present difficulties in imagining a postnational and post-identitarian politics that would actualize a new conception of citizenship, and that instead of an exclusive idea of belonging would valorize what Sandro Mezzadra describes as "the common experience of not belonging, the collective claim to an irrepressible difference" (77).

The forms of cosmopolitan desire to which *Netherland* and *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* give voice are the ground we have identified for the relations that justify a comparative reading of these two novels. This desire is rooted in and shaped by the different forms of precarity that invest the social and affective spheres of contemporary life in the United States and South Africa, or, more explicitly, in New York and Johannesburg's inner-city. What we attempt to highlight is not so much that these two novels are representative of a transnational turn in literary production that corresponds to its increasingly embracing a cosmopolitan ethics or the multiple forms of cultural and linguistic hybridization which characterize social life in the age of globalization. This is not to say that the two novels do not speak to all of this, but they take cosmopolitanism and the forms of collective (dis)identification and community it prefigures as a precarious prospect, a possibility both opened up and under siege by the present. They supplement contemporary debates about cosmopolitanism and literature by reframing cosmopolitanism within the context of counter-currents which seek to reassert the centrality of national identifications and identitarian formations.

Welcome to Our Hillbrow interrogates the notions of national identity and belonging by exposing the exclusive forms of collective identification on which they are based. To the regressive politics of these cultural formations Mpe's novel opposes the poetic, rather than political, alternative of a world

revealed as an imaginary one. *Netherland* too takes a poetic alternative to conventional forms of community as its subject matter, a form that can be identified in many respects with the game of cricket. The problem it gives shape to is one of how to remain faithful to and sustain a fantasy of the cosmopolitan and how to do so within contexts which reveal the tension between the sustainability and vulnerability of cosmopolitan attachments. At the same time, the two novels do not perform a straightforward refusal of the possibility of cosmopolitan modes of life. Indeed, the performative force of the "our" articulated in *Welcome to Hillbrow* and the cosmopolitan desires evident in the paratactic lists and the game of cricket in *Netherland* summon the reader to reinvest in cosmopolitan possibilities and to retain fidelity to a "precarious" cosmopolitanism. The more or less implicit and certainly unresolved problem to which both novels direct us is therefore the possibility of actualizing as yet unimagined forms of community based on new processes of subjectification and ways of conceiving "us." "We" — as Antonio Negri writes in *Inventare il comune* — "is the name of a horizon, of becoming" (204). *Netherland* and *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* contribute to imagining this new horizon and process of becoming by inviting us to reflect on the possibility of constituting an "us" that transcends existing identitarian parameters, while at the same time making us aware that nothing is as precarious as "us."

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