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Signature:

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Levin Arnsperger

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Date

In the Shadow of the Plot:  
Representations of Muslim Terrorists in 9/11 Literature

By

Levin Arnsperger  
Doctor of Philosophy

English

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Walter Kalaidjian, Ph.D.  
Advisor

---

Michael Elliott, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Craig Womack, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

Accepted:

---

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.  
Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

---

Date

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Representations of Muslim Terrorists in 9/11 Literature

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Levin Arnsperger  
M.A., Freie Universität Berlin, 2007

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An abstract of  
a dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the  
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University  
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## Abstract

### In the Shadow of the Plot: Representations of Muslim Terrorists in 9/11 Literature

By Levin Arnspenger

In my dissertation, I examine terrorist literature: contemporary American and British writings that incorporate representations of Muslim terrorists and that evoke the events of September 11, 2001. In these texts, the fictional Muslim terrorist arguably occupies a place of belonging and non-belonging, located outside and within Western society. In an attendant process, the terrorist is at once demonized and humanized, as the texts create a tense bond of hospitality/hostility in configuring the terrorist's encounter with the West. Terrorist literature accesses the terrorist's mindset, displaying his ordinariness, but it also perpetuates a rhetoric of difference and of a clash of cultures, pitting guest against host.

The selected primary texts include novels by Sherman Alexie, Andre Dubus, Don DeLillo, Jarett Kobek, and John Updike, short stories by Alexie and Martin Amis, and a play by Allan Havis – in addition to a poem by Tom Clark and a short story by Updike. Aside from studying intersections and differences between these texts as well as investigating strategies of explicating the violent act, I focus on renderings of the Muslim perpetrator's consciousness, employing narratological theories by Alan Palmer and Dorrit Cohn. These reproductions of imaginary emotions and beliefs often impose on the characters the authors' Orientalist perceptions of Islam.

Terrorism appears in the analyzed texts as based in part on the – actual and perceived – incompatibility of cultures. Besides identifying this relational facet of terrorism, most of terrorist literature associates violence with conflicts emerging within an Islamic sphere. The male Muslim perpetrators experience an internal struggle generated by a restrictive religious and socio-cultural environment. This struggle is expressed via the characters' emotional or physical suffering, linked to their challenged sexuality and masculinity. To carve out the queering, feminizing, and othering of Muslim terrorists in contemporary literature, I place, for example, Michael Kimmel in conversation with Jasbir Puar.

The reader of terrorist literature is asked to draw a vector from individual beliefs and pathologies to a perpetrator's actions. The violent act is usually prefigured as the culmination of the texts, and it is the task of the reader to trace the thread that binds together the protagonist's experiences, emotions, and actions. An analysis of terrorist literature thus hinges on matters of hermeneutics and epistemology. The terrorists, some of them entirely fictitious, others fictionalized versions of actual hijacker-pilots, endeavor to understand their own tenuous place vis-à-vis the West and the terrorist plot. For readers, the apprehension of the fictional perpetrator's movements and motivations – the reconstruction of his trajectory – encompasses the integration of contemporary discourses on Islam and terrorism with the narrative's perspectives, but it also includes the braiding of specific plot elements with the terrorist act. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur, I demonstrate the retrospective and yet anticipatory process of sense-making or emplotment, a process that configures, from narration and dialogues, the imaginary Muslim terrorist's path.

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## Acknowledgments

Forty years ago, my mother received her doctorate from the Freie Universität Berlin. Until the early stages of her illness, while she was still articulate and emotionally present, she would proudly show me her dissertation on the French Tel Quel group and a transcript that contained the name of Jacques Derrida, her teacher in Paris. It is perhaps inevitable that I would myself turn, decades later, to Kristeva, Derrida, and to my mother's love of literature and foreign languages, a love shared by my father. My parents have passed on to me these passions and an intellectual curiosity. Both of them have also offered me unwavering support. So has Regine, who is my mother as well. Danke euch.

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For M, P & T



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## ***Introduction***

### ***Configuring the Muslim Terrorist***

*“I have never met a terrorist who considered him/herself either immoral or amoral. Quite the contrary. When not acting as terrorists they practice as much or as little morality in their daily lives as most of the rest of us.”*

--- Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want* (34)

### **Writers and Terrorists**

America had its “Laureate of Terror” long before September 11, 2001. Martin Amis’s moniker for Don DeLillo, chronicler of environmental and man-made disasters, arguably fits the Bronx-born author better than any of his contemporaries.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, DeLillo’s 9/11 novel *Falling Man* (2007) is merely one among many fictional journeys into a world of calamity, upheaval, and terror – from *Players* (1977) to *Mao II* (1991), from “Baader-Meinhof” (2002) to *Falling Man*.

In a darkly prescient passage of *Mao II*, disillusioned writer Bill Gray and photographer Brita Nilsson ponder the “doubleness” of the Twin Towers in New York City. Nilsson, who shifted from documenting destruction to portraying successful writers (as well as, poignantly, their self-destruction), suggests that the size of the towers is “deadly.” She continues: “But having two of them is like a comment, it’s like a dialogue, only I don’t know what they’re saying” (40). The duplication of an already solid, unyielding edifice certainly lent the World Trade Center a terrifying power; yet the

towers' monotony, barrenness, and sheer force also appear illegible and incomprehensible.

Aside from commenting on the alleged architectural obscenity, what Nilsson may hint at is that the complex flows of capital, symbolized by the WTC, are impossible to grasp. What transpires behind the opaque façade of the towers remains indeed hidden, in a practical, not a conspiratorial sense. The photographer's opinion intersects with Jean Baudrillard's argument that the Twin Towers invited their own suicide (see Chapter 1). Nilsson's statement points to the towers' destruction – to eradicate the horror and incomprehension these buildings provoke.

The philosophical dialogue between Gray and Nilsson, set in 1989, continues to foreshadow events of 2001. The novelist switches topics to address the relationship between writers and terrorists, one of the key themes of *Mao II*: "Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory" (41). At a later point, Gray tells George Haddad, a Maoist activist/terrorist: "Beckett is the last writer to shape the way we think and see. After him, the major work involves midair explosions and crumbling buildings. This is the new tragic narrative" (157). If terrorists have indeed replaced novelists as the new "heroes" of society (Gray of course nostalgically exaggerates the former power of novelists and perhaps even the current power of terrorists), shaping our way of life, our outlook on life, and our thought-processes, then we need to *read* terrorists. And who better to accomplish this task than novelists, the terrorists' ultimate foes in *Mao II*?

Writers have taken up the challenge of reading terrorists at least since the nineteenth century. While Joseph Conrad's *Secret Agent* (1907) received a great deal of attention after the September 11, 2001 attacks and is generally considered a prime example of "terrorist fiction," as Margaret Scanlan coins this genre, decades earlier a Russian writer employed fiction's power to analyze a wicked human mind (2). Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Demons* (1872) is frequently cited as the first attempt at imagining the mindset of people "violently targeting civilians for political purposes," to use Louise Richardson's definition of terrorism (20). In her analysis of Dostoevsky's novel, Nina Pelikan Straus emphasizes that fiction has the capacity to explore the "darkest motives of individuals." She continues: "Individuals who would plan or commit a terrorist act are of a complexity that requires not social science but Russian fiction to comprehend them" (198). In the following chapters, I will examine not Russian fiction but equally arresting American and British "terrorist literature", which dissects the minds and bodies of Muslim perpetrators in texts written after and reflecting September 11.

### **Scope and Arguments: Humanizing the Inhuman**

As Scanlan writes, "to call people terrorists is to condemn them" (6). The works of contemporary Anglophone literature I study in this dissertation do not all employ the term "terrorist" in referring to the Muslim suicide-murderers depicted on their pages; however, the texts certainly evoke post-9/11 narratives on Islamic fundamentalism

articulated in media and public discourse as well as in other works of fiction and non-fiction. What I call “terrorist literature” implicitly and explicitly condemns the terrorist-protagonists and their socio-cultural inheritance, but it also serves to apprehend and humanize them.

The fictional terrorists are invested with a range of emotions, with most of the characters displaying a blend of callousness, viciousness, misogyny, and a restrained, troubled sexuality.<sup>ii</sup> Mapping the pattern of othering in selected September 11 literature, I will interrogate the texts’ configurations of Muslim alterity (and the effect of these configuration), but I will also identify intersections between the various texts as well as between the texts and ongoing discourses about Islam and terrorism. Much of terrorist literature incorporates, for example, a notion of the Muslim militants “as either feminine or deviant in their masculinity,” to use Rebecca Carpenter’s words (144). Terrorist literature appears to correlate violent acts with issues of gender and sexuality arising from Islamic principles; to put it differently, the narratives prompt the reader to carve out such a correlation by negotiating the connection between the terrorist attack and the incidents, dialogues, and motifs developed throughout a text.

Examining contemporary terrorist literature, I focus on fictional works that directly address or evoke the events of September 11, 2001, and incorporate representations of Muslim and Arab terrorists.<sup>iii</sup> The term “terrorist literature” refers to literary works portraying a fictionalized or fictitious “terrorist”, who commits or plans a violent murder-suicide targeting civilians – strangers to him. As an umbrella term, “terrorist literature” is more appropriate for my purposes than “terrorist fiction”, for my

dissertation encompasses one play, in addition to several novels and short stories (as well as one poem in my coda).

After a first chapter introducing the central concepts underlying my arguments and close readings, I will discuss in my second chapter Martin Amis's short story "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" (2008), Allan Havis's play *Three Nights in Prague* (2004), and Jarett Kobek's novel *ATTA* (2011).<sup>iv</sup> In the third chapter, I will analyze Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* and Andre Dubus III's novel *The Garden of Last Days* (2008), and in my fourth chapter, I will offer readings of John Updike's novel *Terrorist* (2006) as well as of Sherman Alexie's novel *Flight* (2007) and his short story "Can I Get a Witness?" (2003).

All of these works are penned by male authors, a curious fact that does not reflect a deliberate choice to exclude female voices, but is due to my decision to focus primarily on American literature. To my knowledge, no female American (or British) author has ventured to offer a fictional account of Islamic terrorists after September 11; the only possible exception is Moroccan-American writer Laila Lalami's *Secret Son* (2009), which focuses primarily on bombings in Casablanca and is thus not directly related to the works discuss in this dissertation. In light of this lopsidedness, it is striking that the texts I analyze tend to emphasize the characters' family relations and sexuality. These male Western writers arguably set out to champion heteronormative American/European masculinity but also sexual tolerance, contrasting Western values and masculinity with the feminine as well as intolerant Muslims depicted in their works.<sup>v</sup>

None of the texts, of course, can be reduced to the presentation of the perpetrators. Novels such as *Falling Man* and *Flight* devote only small sections to the

terrorist plot. A more narrow understanding of terrorist literature as comprising works centering on terrorists (with the terrorist as the main protagonist), would therefore exclude several of the selected texts. I am committed to the term “terrorist literature” because it allows me to underscore connections between a range of contemporary literary approaches to September 11, Islam, terrorism, and Islamic fundamentalism.

The chapters are divided according to the configuration of the Muslim terrorist, principally his relation to historical figures as well as his participation (or “membership”) in American society, and the attendant construction of his difference or sameness compared to “us”. The second chapter is distinguished from the other chapters in its focus on an actual individual; this historicity shapes the configuration of the terrorist and his place vis-à-vis his Western host societies (primarily the United States and Germany). In representing or recreating the 9/11 ringleader Mohamed Atta, the texts by Havis, Kobek, and Amis are entrenched in the discourse surrounding the real hijackers of September 11, perhaps more so than the works that imagine the path of a fictitious terrorist. In other words, by naming their protagonist after an actual terrorist, the three writers engage with the response to the man who has become one of *the* face 9/11. Atta’s body and mind become sites of negotiation between the author and the historical persona of Mohamed Atta (or rather perceptions of this persona, based on documentary evidence and prevalent notions of Islamic fundamentalists). As a version of the actual Atta, the fictionalized Atta represents evil or an act of evil, submitted to a literary process of dehumanization expressed in motifs of monstrosity and malice.<sup>vi</sup>

DeLillo's *Falling Man* and Dubus's *The Garden of Last Days* resemble the Atta narratives regarding some of the traits assigned to the terrorists, including a repression of desires and an aversion towards manifestations of Western culture's – supposed – depravity. The novels, however, also show the characters Hammad (*Falling Man*) and Bassam (*The Garden of Last Days*) to be self-reflective and even prepared to question the difference between themselves and the people they meet in the West. This perception of difference lies at the heart of the ideology of the Muslim terrorists depicted in contemporary literature.

As fictitious terrorists, the roles of Bassam and Hammad in the terrorist plot are not fixed, which distinguishes them from the fictionalized Atta, whose position as leader of the hijackers is predetermined. The fictitiousness of the characters allows DeLillo and Dubus to inject them with doubts, juxtaposing them with the committed Atta, who indeed appears briefly in both *Falling Man* and *The Garden of Last Days*. Moreover, these fictitious terrorists seem to mirror the narrator's and reader's location as being inside the terrorist plot of 9/11 without belonging to it (since we do not of course have access to the plot and the fictitious terrorists are not representing historical individuals).

In Chapter 4, the fictitious terrorists are all American – domestic – terrorists, recent immigrants or sons of immigrants. While Updike's protagonist Ahmad (in *Terrorist*) and Alexie's Abbad (in *Flight*) share characteristics with their counterparts, especially in their struggles to apprehend their own masculinity, they are distinct in that they form part of the American fabric – unlike the temporary "guests" described in the previous chapters. Ahmad, Abbad, and an unnamed Syrian-American suicide bomber



interrogate America's multi-cultural framework, in that these Muslim terrorists or would-be-terrorists seem to be products of the United States' apparent tolerance and openness to all cultures and religions; yet their violent projects also jeopardize this multi-ethnic enterprise and expose its vulnerability.

The United States, then, is shown to be vulnerable in the selected examples of terrorist literature, as the texts arguably reveal terrorism to develop on account of structures and ideologies arising internally and externally, in an exchange or conflict between an aggressive Islamic fundamentalism and an open-minded and hospitable though also imperfect, corrupt Western culture. Terrorism thus emerges at the nexus of cultures as well as, in a related process delineated by terrorist literature, as a result of the incapacity of Muslim cultures to (peacefully) cope with internal challenges. The alterity of the fictional terrorist materializes in his struggle with personal, domestic pain, a struggle that is projected outward.

In other words, I suggest that the interplay and conflict between different belief systems as well as the recognition and articulation of these differences by the perpetrator-protagonist and other characters (in addition to the narrator himself) create a framework for violence. The works I examine therefore indicate that terrorism is based on both the actual and the perceived incompatibility and opposition of cultures. Quite evidently, terrorist literature endeavors to identify the place of Islam and Islamic fundamentalism in (inside) the West, but it also perpetuates a rhetoric of difference and of a clash of cultures – in a conflict between pitting an unwelcome, hostile guest against a hospitable host.

To be sure, terrorist literature demonstrates that the opposition between cultures and the alterity of the terrorist are not absolute concepts: in Updike's and Alexie's stories, the Muslim perpetrator can claim American citizenship, personifying Islam's location as part of the West, while in DeLillo's and Dubus's novels the Muslim terrorist approaches, physically and emotionally, American (and, in *Falling Man*, German) culture. Furthermore, despite the often reductive configuration of the terrorist, despite the emphasis on his otherness throughout terrorist literature, he is also humanized in these texts. The figure of the terrorist is portrayed in affecting moments of desire and pain, hatred and compassion; he is integrated – albeit barely so – into permanent as well as transient communities, alongside family, friends, and collaborators. Countering and accompanying a narrative movement of othering – which is an “act of exclusion,” Versluys notes – is therefore a humanization of the Muslim perpetrator (150). The terrorist occupies a place both external to “our” society or moral community and as very much part of it.

In the Atta narratives, the Egyptian's position at the boundary between cultures and indeed between humanity and inhumanity is implied, a function of the narration as it were: Atta might exhibit self-righteous, eccentric, and merciless behavior, but the presentations of his mindset and emotions also signal his very human vulnerability (often related to repressed, confused sexuality). In *Falling Man* and *The Garden of Last Days*, the fictitious terrorist himself contemplates embracing “humanity” and Western culture – or continuing on the road to ruthless violence as part of a fundamentalist plot.

In “Can I Get a Witness?” and *Terrorist*, the perpetrator’s mixed heritage and inner torment illustrate the simultaneity of belonging and non-belonging.<sup>vii</sup>

The various settings of the selected works of terrorist literature exemplify the interaction between cultures but also the separation or isolation of the terrorist. The terrorist is predominantly shown in enclosed spaces that limit his contact with other people: these spaces include hotel/motel rooms, apartments, the cab of a truck, a VIP room in a strip club, a small prayer room, and various planes (including, of course, the planes used as weapons). The focus on a domestic, private sphere, often one where the terrorists seek cover and prepare the attack, allows for an engagement with the perpetrator’s thoughts and feelings. It appears as if the writers create a framework for sincere, intimate (of course still imaginary) “revelations” and insights. In a way, the Muslim terrorists are thus domesticated, reduced to their personal struggles, though these struggles have a wider significance, as they arguably represent internal conflicts of Islamic cultures – regarding morality, sexuality, politics, and religion; it is at least evident that most of the fictional Muslim terrorists are influenced by a particular understanding or form of Islamic culture – and by religious, Qur’anic vocabulary.

As this last point suggests, the personal challenges faced by the perpetrators in terrorist literature are certainly intertwined with broader religious and cultural concepts, for instance about women, entertainment, and violence. In the texts, these concepts are linked to Islamic doctrine, to religious and political leaders spreading anti-Western messages, and to a terrorist network. All these groups and ideas transcend borders, a pattern conveyed in the works of terrorist literature through varying settings

of the narrated scenes (as opposed to embedded scenes), through the terrorist-protagonist's reminiscences about their missions and voyages in the Caucasus, South Asia, and elsewhere, and through assigning a range of national origins to the characters. With references to Afghanistan, Germany, Egypt, the Czech Republic, the United States, Ethiopia, Syria, and other nations, the selected texts traverse the globe – and associate the terrorist plot with global movements.

With the exception of a few passages, for instance in *The Garden of Last Days*, the recognition of globalization as a phenomenon that implicates Arab terrorists as much as American corporations does not involve the analysis of U.S. and European policies in the Middle East and elsewhere. Dubus's novel contains a reference to the cooperation between the Saudi regime and the U.S. government, but aside from an occasional dialogue or a couple of lines in the presentation of a character's consciousness, American foreign policy pre- and post-9/11 remains largely outside the scope of *The Garden of Last Days* and the other texts.<sup>viii</sup> The focus is evidently on Islam's or the Arab world's internal challenges, as exemplified in the terrorist's struggle with sexuality (indicative of orthodox Islamic principles policing moral choices), or in the emblematic conflict between the terrorist and his father about interpretations of the Qur'an or about the son's achievements. This last motif, appearing for instance in *Terrorist*, *ATTA*, and *The Garden of Last Days*, reveals the separation from the original home (mirrored by the separation from the new, temporary home) and also symbolizes tensions about moral and political issues in Arab countries or Muslim communities. The idea of home thus relates to the mind and body of the terrorist, his current place of

habitation (U.S., Europe), and the familial home; each of these homes seems to cause the terrorist pain, compelling him to escape, to break out of his shell.

In the texts I analyze, American society certainly faces internal crises as well – ubiquitous violence (e.g. in “Can I Get a Witness?”), alleged moral decay (e.g. in *Terrorist*), weakened interpersonal bonds (e.g. in *Falling Man*). For the most part, however, these crises seem related not so much to limitations and doctrines of intolerance as in the case of the Muslim characters or the Islamic and Islamist communities they participate in; rather, it is tolerance and openness, both in terms of ethnic diversity and in terms of permissible behavior, that appears to mar Americans. What the American writers – as well as British author Martin Amis – construct in their works of terrorist literature is a form of self-criticism regarding liberal policies and the supposed lack of solid moral values. In combination with the (Orientalist) stereotyping of Islam, such introspection amounts to an appeal for a more cohesive society and to a critical reflection on the presence of “difference” in the West. But again, the writers do not interrogate or critique the effect of Western policies in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. Terrorism becomes a function of internal Arab or Muslim conflicts, and it is aided or triggered by a European and American socio-cultural framework, both by allowing the terrorist inside the home and by activating antagonism against Western values. Terrorist literature, however, does not quite acknowledge the power relations among Europe, the United States, and countries of the Islamic world, for example as reflected in cross-border conflicts, trade and investment, and political involvement.

Tellingly, as my selection of texts demonstrates, a host of American and British authors assume the task, as outside observers, of providing insights into the mindset of Muslim terrorists. They “read” Muslim militants, creating narratives that cast a negative light on Islamic principles. The authors interpret the Other in a seldom careful manner that seems outdated after decades of postcolonial literature offering counterpoints against Western appropriations.<sup>ix</sup> In fact, is the very observation and construction of Arab and Muslim spheres – this imposition of a set of beliefs – that renders many of the works of terrorist literature ethically problematic. Drawing on Mita Banerjee and Linda Alcoff, Birgit Däwes points out that this act of speaking for others and the adoption of one of the Muslim perpetrators’ perspectives in the “American 9/11 hijacker narrative” constitutes a “problematic self-assertion of supremacy” (*Ground Zero Fiction* 283, see also *ibid.* 21). Presenting an insider perspective, terrorist literature conveys the message that suspicion towards Muslims is warranted.

As Western writers from Updike to DeLillo claim knowledge and understanding of the consciousness and beliefs of the Muslim Other, the question arises whether anyone talks back. One set of contemporary texts critiques post-9/11 paranoia; examples include Yussef El Guindi’s play *Back of the Throat* (first performed in 2006), Mohsen Hamid’s novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), and Amy Waldman’s *Submission* (2011).<sup>x</sup> Of these last three writers, one is Jewish-American (Waldman), one Pakistani-British (Hamid), and one Egyptian-American (El Guindi). It is certainly striking that they challenge the link between Islam and terrorism, whereas Euro-American authors assembled in this dissertation resort to Orientalist readings hostile to Islam.

Another group of texts, which could be considered in a separate, future study, encompasses recent narratives by Muslim and Arab authors who present the consciousness and paths of terrorists. Over the past decade, several European-Muslim, North African, and Middle Eastern writers have composed fictional (e.g. Turki Al-Hamad or Yasmine Khadra) and non-fictional (e.g. by Ed Husain) accounts on terrorists and their ideologies. Many of these authors, writing in French, Arabic, and English, are not only as far removed from fundamentalist networks as the writers studied in this dissertation, but they also reiterate some familiar tropes about Islamist and fundamentalist thought. I will briefly return to this discussion on “native” renderings of terrorists in Chapter 1.

Of course not all of the texts examined in the following chapters are authored by European or Euro-American writers. Sherman Alexie is, at first glance, a unique case. A Spokane writer, his stories primarily unfold on or near the Spokane Reservation in Washington State. His short story “Can I Get a Witness?” and his novel *Flight* are not set in New York, Florida, Europe, or the Middle East, but in Seattle (except for some scenes in *Flight* that are set in Chicago).<sup>xi</sup> Neither in the relevant section of *Flight* nor in “Can I Get a Witness?” does “Indian-ness” actually play a major role, even though the protagonist of the short story is a member of the Spokane tribe.<sup>xii</sup> Alexie does not explicitly address the condition of Native Americans after September 11 in the passages I analyze. Instead, he emphasizes the omnipresence of violence between and across ethnic groups, in addition to asserting that domestic violence – hidden violence – permeates American society.

Alexie also participates in a discourse hostile to Islam – Steven Salaita speaks of Liberal Orientalism – by integrating Muslim suicide-murderers into his narratives and endowing one of them (Abbad in *Flight*) with a challenged masculine identity and traits familiar from other texts of terrorist literature. In his short story “Flight Patterns”, which similarly explores the post-9/11 atmosphere in the United States, Alexie’s protagonist expresses support for racial profiling measures targeting Muslims, another example of the author’s dubious treatment of Muslims (or Muslim/Arab Americans) in his writings. As his stories suggest, however, Alexie is also weary of xenophobic and paranoid rhetoric. *Flight* and “Can I Get a Witness?” in particular emphasize the paradox of the Muslim terrorist’s place as both inside “our” society and external to it.

Set in or near Seattle, Alexie’s three texts on the one hand focus on local particularities, but on the other hand demonstrate the universality of vices (and indeed, much of the pertinent section in *Flight* is void of local markers). The texts also delineate quite mundane, domestic arguments between friends, strangers, and lovers. This apparent distance from global developments is countered by the depiction of public, visible events in *Flight* and “Can I Get a Witness?” – as well as in “Flight Patterns”. In each case, a violent act by a Muslim character hurls the protagonists from a private environment, from their private conflicts into a global discourse about terrorism.

Similar movements between public and private moments occur in other texts of terrorist literature, including *Falling Man*, *The Garden of Last Days*, and *Terrorist*. These novels are set in New York, Florida, and New Jersey respectively; all describe the impact of terrorism – or its threat – on individuals in these communities. Further underscoring



these intersections between the world of the terrorists and the world of seemingly ordinary Americans and Europeans, the texts describe human interactions between the two supposedly separate spheres.

Multiple critics have noted this “transference of the public into the personal” in 9/11 literature (Banita, *Plotting Justice* 110), the “juxtaposition without convergence” of the “ambient personal and public world” (Versluys 34, discussing *Falling Man*), and the retreat of 9/11 fiction into “domestic detail” (R. Gray, “Open Doors” 134). I suggest that the inclusion of domestic, local detail, of identifiable places, underscores my argument regarding the humanization of the terrorist – as figures that are not enigmatic, unfathomable beings, but rather embedded in specific locales. In addition, terrorist literature assembles personal, private moments to demonstrate not only the consequences but the roots of historical events.

This reciprocal effect is key to understanding the configuration of the figure of the Muslim terrorist – and his motivations – in 9/11 literature. The fictionalized Atta and the fictitious terrorists experience small humiliations and conflicts, which seem related to horrendous deeds. Similarly, but also in contrast, many of the non-Muslim characters (i.e. the witnesses and survivors of terrorism) react to personal crises by committing acts of emotional or physical violence – small-scale violence symbolizing larger incidents. *Flight* illustrates the equation, via allegorical transference, of minor domestic violence with terrorist attacks by describing a string of model air plane crashes in the first sections of the novel, followed by an account of Abbad’s suicide attack (crashing an

airplane into downtown Chicago). The difference between the crashes is one of scale not of essence.

Such a foreshadowing of the terrorist act is a crucial facet of most of the examples of terrorist literature I examine, often in combination with a retrospective gesture. Since the terrorist attack can, in most of the texts, be anticipated by the reader, each of the Muslim terrorist's personal crises is a piece that the reader is invited to add to the puzzle explaining the character's violent act; in other words, we consider what does happen in light of what we know will happen in the narrative. As readers, we simultaneously look ahead to the prefigured event and move backwards from this already known event to understand how public violence originates in individual conflicts.<sup>xiii</sup> As the outcome of the terrorist plot is known to the reader, the imposition of coherence onto the narrative plot (again, constructing the significance of incidents for later developments) occurs not retroactively, but instead simultaneously with the unfolding of the story. I will further discuss this process in Chapter 1.

The exemplars of terrorist literature examined in Chapter 4 depart from this framework, as they do not depict the preparation for the September 11 attacks; however, these texts likewise emphasize the narrative's – and the reader's – configuration of the figure of the terrorist through a process of attributing motives based on textual elements.<sup>xiv</sup> In this complex fashion, terrorist literature imagines the minds and motifs of fictional terrorists and their underlying ideologies, drawing attention to methods of apprehending and interpreting a fictional character's actions. Even if we cannot gain a profound understanding of an actual criminal's actions from

literature, terrorist fiction still aids the reader in reflecting on the challenge inherent in comprehending another human being, another mind.

Engaging with a writer's insights into a terrorist's consciousness and with the hermeneutic and ethical issues associated with this construction of consciousness, I am also cognizant of the fact that a writer's own socio-cultural conceptions shape the fictional terrorist, imposing a particular narrative onto the individual. As I have indicated, the authors represented in this dissertation appear invested in perpetuating familiar perspectives on Islam and Muslim terrorists.<sup>xv</sup> They employ existing tropes to structure their portrayals of the Muslim characters, imagining a mindset that both explains a violent act and builds on Orientalist notions, both novel and established.

According to Dorrit Cohn, "the singular power possessed by the novelist" is that of the "creator of beings whose inner lives he can reveal at will" (4). The authors of terrorist literature integrate historical evidence, but they also interpret and alter it to create their own narratives of terrorism. The very incorporation and reinvention of history and the focus on the mundane acts of the fictional terrorists (preceding the attacks), whom we encounter in "real life" only through their final, fatal deed, lends the texts the semblance of insider accounts; they supposedly disclose a truth behind the scenes. As Cohn writes, teasing out the import of historical fiction: "Quite aside from the hidden *matter* such a novel may revealingly invent, it is its irreverent *manner* that gives piquancy to fictionalized biography, and adds shock value to a narrative that presents a famous mind by purely fictional techniques" (5). By showing the (imaginary) terrorist

mind from the inside, a writer can present a critical view of the character, but also invite empathy, even identification.

Literary incarnations of Muslim terrorists are therefore at least in part idiosyncratic products of the writer's engagement with contemporary images of terrorists, with historical research, and with assumptions about conflicts and ideologies within networks of militant "Islamists". Allan Havis for instance exploits in *Three Nights in Prague* an unfounded rumor on Atta's supposed sojourn in Prague. Martin Amis's "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" reflects the writer's anti-religious, anti-Islamic stance. Martin Randall articulates the critic's quandary when confronted with narrative facets that do not quite connect the story to the events at its center: "[I]f this imagined Atta is both a recognisably 'Amis-ian' male protagonist and a vehicle for satire (or rather a vehicle for Amis' theories on Islamism), what is being said about 9/11?" (52). For my purposes, the question should be rephrased as: if the traits and comportment of the Muslim character in terrorist literature prefigure the terrorist attack, what does Amis's short story propose about Western notions of the origins of 9/11? In a nutshell, "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" conveys the sense that (some) Western observers are obsessed with the physical and emotional discomfort of Muslim militants, with their internal pain, but the story also indicates the authorial endeavor to control the conversation about the terrorists, to imbue it with one's own perspective.

While these observations seem to support Cohn's assertion of the writer's singular power, surely the gravity of the historical event of September 11, in addition to the frequently vengeful and vicious tone of media, public, and political responses,

restrains a writer's approach to the fictional terrorist. This limitation is arguably even more pronounced or present if the character carries the name of an actual hijacker. Consequently, several of the writers focus on a fictitious terrorist, involved in a fictionalized 9/11 plot or a completely imaginary plot. The writers thus eschew to a limited extent the authority of contemporary images on the terrorists of September 11, i.e. a discourse involving a vilification of the nineteen hijackers, but especially of the individuals more widely known, including Mohamed Atta.

On account of these concurrent, even competing processes of authorial and public (or mediatized) conceptions of terrorists, I take intentional, symptomatic, and adaptive approaches to the texts, to use H. Porter Abbott's terms. Since the possible meanings and indeed effects or ramifications of texts are not all evident, I frequently resort to "creating a reading by adaptation," making meaning out of a narrative by drawing on ideas and texts I see as facilitating a better understanding – or indeed a creative interpretation – of the main text (Abbott 108). Each text also expresses "symptomatically the conditions out of which it arises," meaning both a socio-cultural framework and specific strands of contemporary discourse (Abbott 105). My symptomatic reading involves the consideration of some paratextual material as well as a reflection on prevailing concepts on Islam and Muslim terrorism in non-fictional and fictional texts (and public conversations) following September 11. As an author constructs a different image of the terrorists, I am additionally using an intentional approach: which notions of Islam(ism) and of terrorism's origins does the author project onto the character? In elaborating on the possible meaning and purpose of each text's

characterization of the terrorist, I do not endeavor to identify the actual author's hidden intentions. Rather, I view an intentional reading as a means to delineate the authorial process of configuring terrorists and compare different approaches to terrorists in literature. Simply put, my blending of approaches to reading literature recognizes that the configuration of fictional terrorists originates in (implied) author, reader, and texts.

### **Scholarship on September 11 Literature – An Overview**

By now, literary critics face a mountain of plays, novels, short stories, and poetry on the events of September 11, 2001. The mountain began to be formed decades ago. As *Mao II* demonstrates, numerous works published before 2001 anticipated the events of New York and Washington. The tableaux in the frequently cited W.H. Auden's "September 1, 1939" seem to depict the New York of 2001 more than the New York of 1939. E.B. White's 1949 essay *Here Is New York* expresses concern about the fragility of the Empire State Building, which, after all, has already been "hit by an airplane in a fog" (23). Another example, Paul Auster's apocalyptic novel *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), envisages a devastation and despair similar to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) or Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), which reflect the fear engendered by September 11 as well as the realization of an impending environmental catastrophe.

Much of post-9/11 literature, that is literature published after 2001, cannot be properly called 9/11 literature; in other words, as significant as the attacks might have

been for American and world politics, they do not feature prominently in a majority of contemporary American and non-American literary works. Even in the segment of recent writing that reacts to the attacks, only a few novels, plays, and short stories place the events at the center of their plot. In a number of texts, 9/11 is mentioned, looming in the background, but is never granted a prominent position. Siri Hustvedt's *The Sorrows of an American* (2008), for instance, includes brief allusions to September 11, while her husband Paul Auster's *Brooklyn Follies* (2005) concludes minutes before the attacks. Both books can certainly be situated in a cultural context that was informed and to some degree shaped by the terrorist acts; yet both books are, appropriately so, concerned with a multitude of other significant public and private developments. In short, the field of 9/11 literature contains a range of responses, discussing the disaster of September 11 in varying detail.

Offering a typology of the 9/11 novel, Birgit Däwes identifies five overlapping strategies to turn this event – which seemed to many observers “like” a fiction, a gruesome product of the entertainment industry – into a topic of fiction (“The Obliging Imagination Set Free,” 73-82): 1) mimesis (an attempt to realistically present individual experiences in and around the World Trade Center); 2) ellipsis or implication (indirect or limited references to September 11); 3) appropriation (adoption of a terrorist’s perspective, which is of course my main concern); 4) symbolic instrumentalization (9/11 becomes the backdrop to an interpersonal crisis unfolding in the novel); 5) experimental defamiliarization (formal and structural experimentation through an unusual combination of literary genres and techniques).<sup>xvi</sup> As Däwes herself acknowledges, an

individual work of literature may fit into several different categories, but her typology is still useful, as it appears to cover much of the field of 9/11 fiction, even if we take poetry and non-American literature into account.

Other scholars have opted for more critical, evaluative categorizations. Richard Gray, for instance, creates a hierarchy in *After the Fall* (2011), dividing the field into more or less successful approaches to September 11: in the first category he places narratives that look inward – focusing on domestic and national spaces – as well as backward - using traditional literary techniques and linking 9/11 to other historical events. In contrast, more future-oriented narratives that cross national and genre boundaries find Gray's approval. True, intense conflict – dissolution and disillusionment – in a domestic and familiar space can symbolize a crisis of a greater scope. However, Gray's study plausibly argues that a return to the imagery of home and domesticity can trigger unwelcome associations with the Bush administration's nationalist agenda and with its emphasis on defending the home(land). Then again, many of the primary texts under scrutiny in my study track the terrorist in his domestic space in order to emphasize the significance of inner struggles – as well as personal relations – for an approach to the roots of terror.

Likewise passing a value-judgment, Brandon Kempner criticizes contemporary Irish and English writers such as Seamus Heaney ("Anything Can Happen", 2004) and Ian McEwan (*Saturday*, 2005) for taking recourse to classical Western literature and philosophy to work through the events of 2001. Kempner advocates for a "forward-looking humanism described by Said" as opposed to "exclusionary forms of humanism."



He laments the neo-colonialism supposedly surfacing in literature embracing “a mode of nostalgia which re-articulates older, humanist ideas about interiority and the explanatory power of literature” (72).

Novels such as *Saturday* indeed seem to believe in the capacity of Western philosophy and art to resolve conflicts, and Heaney’s “Anything Can Happen” does celebrate the power of European mythology to offer answers in a global crisis. Kempner presents a valid point in so far as the retreat into familiar stories presumes a predominance of the West that borders on narrow-mindedness; the retreat foregoes the opportunity to reach across borders at least in an imaginative move. Yet McEwan’s novel can also be seen as a critical, ironic commentary on literature’s supposed influence and on Western desire to wield power over “Others”. Heaney’s version of Horace’s *Odes*, placed alongside translations in multiple languages, in turn aptly underscores the uncertainty prevailing after the attacks – as the terrorist act was not only horrific in itself but also generated horror at what is to come, at the infinite possibilities of future terror. In short, Gray’s and Kempner’s verdicts might be short-sighted, though alternative perspectives on terrorism are indeed indispensable – perspectives offered by a novel such as Mohsen Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* situated outside a Western, European sphere.<sup>xvii</sup>

In an article less belligerent than Gray’s and Kempner’s analyses, Anneka Eschvan Kan examines theatrical responses to the events of New York and Washington. She distinguishes three different phases, suggesting that plays produced in the immediate aftermath centered on the attacks themselves, emphasizing the act of witnessing and

endeavoring to create a “community of mourners” (128). During the second wave, a process of detachment took place, as playwrights incorporated the attacks into stories of loss and conflict. As the temporal distance to the events grew, so did the thematic distance to September 11; in later plays, Esch-van Kan maintains, the rhetoric of grief became much less prominent, as the political effects of 9/11 moved to the center of dramatic reflection (127-142). While not much may have changed in American theater, a few innovative plays stand out among a large number of rather conventional works. Near the end of the 2005 play *National Circus and Passion Play of the Correct Moment*, produced by the Bread and Puppet Theatre, performers and puppets fall to the ground, reflecting in this poignant scene both the falling bodies of September 11 and the bombings – and casualties – of Iraq and Afghanistan (see Esch-van Kan 138-39). In an earlier discussion of 9/11 fiction, Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn arrive at a conclusion similar to Esch-van Kan’s argument:

Like the first poems after 9/11, early narratives and plays grappled with representing 9/11, but as distance from the events has increased, later texts have registered the reverberations of 9/11, framing representations of the events, if they are depicted at all, within narratives that are weighted towards depicting the aftermath. (4)

Initially (but of course later as well), many writers expressed anxiety over representing the enormous events of September 11. In a well-known interview with Giovanna Borradori that took place shortly after the catastrophe, Derrida asserts that the utilization of the date (a metonymy) to denote several interconnected disasters

“points out the unqualifiable by recognizing that we do not recognize or even cognize ... what we are talking about” (Borradori 86). In his preface to the 2002 collection of poetry, *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond*, William Heyen likewise reflects upon this anxiety over writing and talking about a series of catastrophic events that terrified the general public, yet affected a few individuals in particular: “But who has any right at such a time to say anything at all? What person who was not there or did not lose a family member or friend has a right to talk personally? I doubt that there will be a contributor to this book who has not asked himself or herself this question” (xi).

As many others have done, Heyen cites Adorno’s claim that writing poetry after Auschwitz is a barbaric undertaking. Yet literature (fiction and non-fiction) interpreting and reflecting September 11 has grown considerably since Heyen penned these words; Holocaust literature of course likewise comprises a vast amount of novels, plays, poems, and of course memoirs. In exploring seemingly incomprehensible events, writers confront the challenge of having to overcome horror, speechlessness, and helplessness only to face the fact that the existing language and genres limit their capacity – or are simply inadequate – to process those unprecedented events.<sup>xviii</sup> In contrast to the Holocaust, September 11 was designed as a spectacle for the media and a global audience – it was a frightful show which revealed (through its explicit, shocking manner) and simultaneously masked (by concealing most victims) a dreadfully real event, a “pure event,” as Baudrillard calls it in “The Spirit of Terrorism” (5).<sup>xix</sup> Slavoj Žižek writes in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*: “This is what the compelling image of the collapse of the WTC was: an image, a semblance, an ‘effect’, which at the same time, delivered ‘the

thing itself” (19). According to Žižek, “[i]t is not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality (i.e. the symbolic coordinates which determine what we experience as reality)” (16). The catastrophe of September 11, 2001, may have been imagined in cultural artifacts (for example disaster movies), but arguably only a few conceptualized it as possible in reality. The event remained a fantasy or nightmare even as it became real – and thus extended or, in Žižek’s formulation, “shattered” reality. To put it differently, the attacks expanded the realm of possible realities and also seemed to limit fiction’s capacity to be “unrealistic”, to imagine impossible scenarios.

In the Borradori interview, Derrida maintains that the catastrophe had already been anticipated, even integrated into existing socio-cultural narratives. Witnessing the planes crashing into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, we were rendered speechless, as we were unable to determine and categorize the event. Our reaction to the event was anticipated, however; it had already been structured by our “techno-socio-political machine.” The “feeling” following the attacks “is actually less spontaneous than it appears: it is to a large extent conditioned, constituted, if not actually constructed, circulated at any rate through the media” (Borradori 86). Disaster movies and other popular cultural productions prepared us for September 11 by demonstrating, for example, a range of proper emotions and reactions, but art arguably to some extent ushered in the event itself by showing to the world what could one day be real. In addition, media and politics prepared – or rather policed – people’s reactions, especially in the United States but in other countries as well, informing us about correct

behavior and appropriate verbal responses. Similar to more private moments of tragedy and grief, we knew what to do, but we were in this case also told what to do.

We may have been prepared for the events and we may have been informed over time about each detail of the attacks, but anticipation and knowledge of the terror did not completely replace imagination. What could still be imagined, what had to be imagined because it remained unverifiable, were the emotions and experiences of victims and perpetrators. Simon Armitage's long poem *Out of the Blue* (200) traces the struggles of victims and survivors in the Twin Towers, whereas Frédéric Beigbeder, among others, describes the last few minutes of victims stuck in the WTC restaurant in his experimental novel *Windows on the World* (2005).

A few scholars have scrutinized 9/11 literature with a focus on the perpetrators. Kristiaan Versluys, for instance, presents a brief summary of recent literary engagement with terrorists in his *Out of the Blue* (2009) and Sascha Pöhlmann examines in a 2010 article the representation of the hijackers in De Lillo's *Falling Man*. Jörg Thomas Richter and Birgit Däwes have written what are perhaps the only extended scholarly treatments of the theme of 9/11 terrorists to date, aside from Jessica Zeltner's dissertation *When the Center Fell Apart* (2012). While both articles are valuable resources, they are naturally much more limited in scope than my dissertation.

In an article published in 2011 in the German journal *American Studies/Amerikastudien*, Däwes offers brief interpretations of *Terrorist*, *Falling Man*, and "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta", which she repeats in modified form in her book *Ground Zero Fiction*. She argues that appropriations of the terrorists' perspectives

challenge or confirm the frequently asserted distinction between “us” and “them”, or even avoid broader political debates by insisting on the abnormality of the individual terrorist. Däwes regards this appropriation as one means “to negotiate the role of aesthetics in the recovery of trauma” (514). As I have myself indicated earlier, by taking a terrorist’s point of view, a fiction writer certainly assumes a degree of control over the violent narrative created by the terrorists, thus arguably alleviating our feeling of helplessness and powerlessness in the face of destruction and death.

Jörg Thomas Richter, writing in 2008, focuses on well-known and lesser known texts that offer fictional constructions of terrorists’ lives, what he calls “Terroristenphantasien” and “Terroristenerzählungen” – terrorist fantasies or terrorist narratives (112).<sup>xx</sup> He associates these narratives with the genre of the jeremiad; a jeremiad laments a society’s struggles, but it also describes the religiously charged errand to overcome the misery and often ends on a hopeful, forward-looking note. While Richter acknowledges that many contemporary texts do not fit this pattern, he argues that the jeremiad as a theme permeates recent fiction, including *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Terrorist*. Richter’s reference to the jeremiad tradition is certainly useful, but one might also regard these two and other texts featuring (supposed) terrorists as twisted coming-of-age stories or Bildungsromane, describing the maturing, or stalled maturing of Muslim militants.

A number of studies, including Margaret Scanlan’s *Plotting Terror* (2001), Alex Houen’s *Terrorism and Modern Literature* (2002), and John Moran’s *The Solution of the Fist* (2009), all focus on the representations of terrorists and terrorism in literature; they

examine nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers such as Dostoevsky and Conrad as well as contemporary authors, for instance De Lillo and Ciaran Carson. The three studies explore the intersections between literature and terrorism, but there are only a few overlaps with my dissertation project in terms of primary texts.

By offering an analysis of post-9/11 terrorist literature, I demonstrate how American – and British – literature delineates the path of terrorism through an engagement with the Muslim terrorist's familial, emotional, and corporeal conflicts, rather than via an emphasis on geopolitical developments. The moments of personal challenge seem to symbolize a painful negotiation of oppressive fundamentalist principles as well as apparently offensive Western values. Terrorist literature thus focuses on a rhetoric of alterity, embedded in the mutual observation and interaction between Muslim terrorists and the representatives of – certainly heterogeneous – Western, Judeo-Christian cultures. This process of apprehending the Other includes the (implied) authors and their humanization of the Muslim terrorists, accompanied by a projection of often Orientalist imagery onto these characters. My contribution to the study of September 11 literature consists thus in engendering a better understanding of fictional constructions of terrorism; moreover, my discussion importantly reveals that on both sides in the apparent clash of cultures gestured at in terrorist literature, the vilification of the Other is countered by, and also rooted in, the encounter with the Other.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> “Laureate of Terror” is the title of Amis’s five-page portrait of Don DeLillo in *The New Yorker* issue of November 21, 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> There is at least one exception, Alexie’s “Can I Get a Witness?”

<sup>iii</sup> Most of the characters are also of Arab origin, though in Sherman Alexie’s *Flight*, the perpetrator is an Ethiopian American (thus not an Arab).

<sup>iv</sup> Martin Amis is an exception in this group of American writers; I included him primarily because the British author has been a very vocal presence in the discourse on terrorists and because his story encompasses a minute discussion of Mohamed Atta’s mind.

<sup>v</sup> Terrorist literature interrogates the terrorist’s masculinity, heterosexuality, and virility. Updike’s Ahmad is a sexually inexperienced high-school graduate who grew up without his father; Havis’s Atta asks for a female prostitute to come to his hotel room but in fact seeks to be with a male prostitute – he purportedly “hates his sexuality” (224); Amis’s version of Atta is clumsy, stern, and vicious – this Atta does not “believe in the virgins” promised to martyrs after death, and he is disgusted not attracted by women (102).

<sup>vi</sup> Atta emerges as an individual who is removed from this world, for whom this world is an illusion and thus not a worthy, pleasant place (see for example Amis 102). His detachment from his current existence also involves a detachment from human life – and death. This stance is expressed in the last scene of DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, set on one of the doomed planes, where Atta is said to “welcome the blood” of the crew (238). Curiously, in Kobek’s *ATTA*, he demonstrates disgust at seeing the blood of the pilot, though this is not a sign of pity – rather, it is another moment revealing the fictionalized Atta’s challenging relationship to the body (157).

<sup>vii</sup> In *Flight*, it is the status as an immigrant that places the character Abbad between cultures.

<sup>viii</sup> One may certainly see certain motifs as allegories hinting at America’s global role or at other issues of regional or global significance. Does the recurring reference to a character’s loss of home perhaps also constitute an allusion to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, rather than a signal of the character’s stunted development and of Islamic/Arab culture’s gradual decay (lack of stability)?

<sup>ix</sup> Though a powerful terrorist network implicated in global streams of capital and people does not seem to represent the “subaltern”, objectified and suppressed by colonial regimes, the actual conspirators grew up in a context that cannot be divorced from a colonial context. Many of the countries referenced in terrorist literature (including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Iraq) have certainly been affected by colonial and neo-colonial politics.

<sup>x</sup> Horror at the events of 9/11 and fear of impending terrorist acts has translated into widespread suspicion of and even aversion towards Muslims in the U.S. If it is not Islam in general that serves as target, then it is a perceived section of the faithful. “Since the actual hijackers of September 11 evaded U.S. jurisdiction by suicide,” Birgit Däwes notes, “the steadily increasing feelings of anxiety and anger have thus been directed at an abstract enemy, which includes manifestations ranging from the specific individual figure of Osama bin Laden, via revivals of ‘orientalism’ (Said) to the wholesale discrediting of Islam as such” (*Ground Zero Fiction* 205). In Martin Randall’s words, consequences of the attacks “include the massive investment in security and surveillance, the rise of anti-Islamic sentiment and a more general mood of paranoia, fear and political instability” (1).

<sup>xi</sup> In both texts, the suicidal attack is configured as an individual act; I will show in Chapter 4 how the two incidents still evoke the events of 9/11.

<sup>xii</sup> *Flight* describes dream-like time travels that take the Native protagonist Zits/Michael to places of historical significance across the United States, where Michael “awakens” in the bodies of alternately Native and white characters

<sup>xiii</sup> According to Michael André Bernstein, “Backshadowing endows the past with the coherence of an inevitable and linear unfolding; it works by a kind of retroactive foreshadowing in which the shared



knowledge of the outcome of a series of events by narrator and listener is used to judge the participants in those events *as though they too should have known what was to come.*"

<sup>xiv</sup> As I have mentioned earlier, these elements or individual incidents are bound up with a set of prevalent perspectives on Islam and the relationship between Islam and West, for instance the notion of Muslim males and Islam generally as repressed, misogynistic, and violent.

<sup>xv</sup> Each reader will of course work with and understand these revelations differently.

<sup>xvi</sup> Däwes elaborates on this distinction in her monumental study, *Ground Zero Fiction* (2011), probably the first comprehensive survey of – by now more than 150 – American novels on September 11. She identifies six novelistic modes of approaching Ground Zero: "metonymic, salvational, diagnostic, appropriative, symbolic, and writerly" (20). Other major monographs tracing the arc of 9/11 literature include Richard Gray's *After the Fall* (2011), Martin Randall's *9/11 and the Literature of Terror* (2011), and Kristiaan Versluys's *Out of the Blue* (2009). Several of the numerous collections of essays on 9/11 fiction have proven particularly useful: *Literature after 9/11* (2008), edited by Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn, *Nine Eleven* (2008), edited by Ingo Irlsiger and Christoph Jürgensen, and *From Solidarity to Schisms* (2009), edited by Cara Cilano. All of these studies are referenced in this or later chapters of this dissertation.

<sup>xvii</sup> What is often referred to with the metonymy or code of 9/11 was not solely an American catastrophe; it was a global event "with industries, financial markets, jobs, and political alliances being immediately affected worldwide," in Alex Houen's words (5). The events of September 11 affected diplomatic relations, security measures, and streams of capital around the world. In the United States, Afghanistan, and Iraq (and in other countries as well) the attacks and the reactions to them led to thousands of deaths and injuries. The victims of the attacks themselves came from 86 countries. Aside from the diversity of the victims and the global consequences of 9/11, the incident itself, Mark Juergensmeyer writes, "was global in its impact, in large part because of the worldwide and instantaneous coverage of transnational news media" (30). Finally, globalization – the increasing number of interconnections and interactions between people, capital, and information – contributed to the immense impact of September 11 but can also be regarded as one of its causes.

<sup>xviii</sup> In the same vein, Christoph Deupmann notes: "Schamis Rede von der 'Metaphernfalle' verdeutlicht nur die Interferenz zwischen geschichtlich präparierter Sprache und inkommensuralem, instantanem Ereignis, die zum Sagbarkeitsparadox auch des 11. Septembers gehört" (22). My translation: "Schami's term of the "metaphor trap" underscores the relationship between historically prepared language and incommensurate, incompatible, instantaneous event, which belongs to the paradox of "sayability" even of September 11."

<sup>xix</sup> To return to my initial comparison between terrorists and novelists: terrorists try to control the space of symbols, while novelists inhabit this space to interrogate the terrorists' very pursuit of this apparent power of signification.

<sup>xx</sup> Alternative translations would be terrorists' fantasies and terrorists' narratives.

## ***Chapter 1***

### ***The Terrorist, the Text, and the Critic***

*“But even in real time, knowing that we were watching a unique act of devastation, the scenes before our eyes seemed familiar and unreal.”*

--- Claire Kahane, “Uncanny Sights” (107)

#### **The Emplotment of Terror**

In this chapter, I will introduce and interrogate some of the common strategies in constructing the otherness of Muslims, both in Western thought generally and in recent terrorist literature specifically. Many of the depictions of the ideology and personality of the fictional terrorists-protagonists are interwoven with Western discourses on Islam, bearing at the same time also the mark of the author’s endeavor to reimagine the relationship between terrorism and the – in themselves heterogeneous – entities of Islam and the West.<sup>i</sup> In discussing these patterns, I will examine the meaning and applicability of the term “terrorist” as well as of other key concepts related to the framing and characterization of the Muslim perpetrator. In particular, I will address the import of notions of alterity, hospitality, sexuality, and emplotment for my dissertation.

It is on the basis of the very interplay between particular story elements or incidents and political as well as culturalist<sup>ii</sup> configurations of the fictional terrorists (articulated explicitly or implicitly in the text) that the reader is invited to create a logical

sequence that explains or interprets the terrorist act. What emerge from my readings are possible or probable narratives, to use Paul Ricoeur's terminology from the second volume of *Time and Narrative*: "It is the function of a plot to bend the logic of possible acts toward a logic of probable narratives." Adding that the plot is a movement, he argues that "to know all the places capable of being assumed [referring to the positions in a causal sequence of particular elements of the narrative] ... is not yet to know any plot whatsoever. ... Chronology and configuration, muthos and dianoia, must also be brought into play" (43). Ricoeur maintains that a reading or analysis of a narrative does not so much form a simple sequence of particular scenes and incidents leading to the ending; instead, they constitute a complicated sense-making activity he calls emplotment: "In short, emplotment is the operation that draws a configuration out of a simple succession" (*Time and Narrative*, Vol. I, 65). This configurational act or emplotment, Ricoeur writes, consists of "grasping together" the story's incidents (66).

Following this notion of the "grasping together," I focus in my readings of terrorist literature's and my interpretation of the narrative plot and integrated terrorist plot on moments that reveal the characters' reflections and vacillations regarding their suicidal project, on motifs that suggest or reject a particular rationale for violence, on incidents that affirm or discourage the terrorist's objective, and on characters that interrogate the terrorist plot. While this chapter addresses possible origins of terrorism, I thus caution that a grasping together of plot elements of course does not equate a direct connection from, for example, a scene discussing a terrorist's argument with his father to his murder-suicide.

Transferring these ideas to the contemporary discourse connecting Islamic cultures and terrorism, Olivier Roy claims that “the culturalist approach [to Islam] has been reinforced by recent tragic events, and more precisely by the way in which observers, politicians and public opinion are trying to cast these events into an intelligible conceptual framework that might explain the incomprehensible” (16). Readers of terrorist literature are presumably no different, as our interpretation of the fictional terrorist’s characteristics and experiences as well as of his “alien” belief system is shaped by the anticipation of the terrorist act, and vice versa.

The narrative plot is thus interlocked with the terrorist plot. “Surely no terrorist attack,” Georgiana Banita’s insists in an essay on emplotment in 9/11 fiction, “can succeed or even come into being without some measure of plotting, that is, scheming, conspiring, and thoughtful planning. Narrative similarly depends on a plot to buttress its other aspects” (“Middle Hours” 213). She continues: “Although there are exceptions ... the preference for tightly plotted structures in narrating 9/11 comes as no surprise in light of the terrorist attack’s own reliance on plotting and of the profoundly eventual nature of terrorism itself.” The reader’s perception of the development of the terrorist plot depends on incidents that apparently propel the terrorist towards the suicide attack. These incidents are primarily conveyed by the perpetrator himself, in his voice. I will therefore consider different techniques of thought presentation – and, in the case of Havis’s play, characterization through dialogue – that disclose the imaginary terrorist’s intentions and beliefs, incorporating a simultaneous narratorial movement of ironizing or othering and approaching the character.

The emotions and encounters attributed to the fictional terrorist not only evoke socio-cultural and geopolitical discourses as well as theories by Puar, Kristeva, Derrida, and others. The portrait of the terrorist also reflects a relationship between the character and the (implied) author, who provides a space or home for the terrorist in the storyworld, yet also stresses that within this storyworld, the terrorist occupies a separate space. As in any historical fiction, the fictionalized character becomes a vessel for a range of convictions and sentiments – similar to the host society in the storyworld, the text itself can become a hostile home. By incorporating fictitious moments and fictitious characters not part of the historical record, an author can inculcate the narrative with views that may seem either aggressive or indeed subversive vis-à-vis the dominant discourse about Islamic terrorism.

9/11 fiction certainly defies easy generalizations about the encounter with the Other: Updike's protagonist in *Terrorist*, for instance, modifies his destructive plans when confronted with alterity, whereas DeLillo's Hammad recognizes the kindness of Americans. Even though Hammad continues to participate in the plot, he reveals concern for the Other and seems moved by the experience of difference. In contrast, Amis's Atta refuses to even engage with Americans and betrays excessive resentment towards women. The encounter between communities who engage in a mutual process of othering and hostility (as well as, curiously, hospitality) thus constitutes a central aspect of 9/11 fiction.

Indeed, the alternation between the Other's accessibility and inaccessibility as well as the oscillation between confrontation and compassion with this Other are

arguably at the core of the selected texts; by Other, I mean here the supposed stranger from a Western as well as from the Islamic terrorist's perspective. The Other is close and afar (alien), for terrorists, readers, and implied author. As the assignment of the status of otherness switches between "us" (the victims, the West) and "them" (the perpetrators), such categories are problematized. Boundaries between communities are negotiated within the text but also between characters, readers, and author. In embarking on an engagement with the unwieldy idea of alterity, I will unpack this sense of boundaries between various communities in terrorist literature.

### **The Foreigner Within Us**

The entity of the Other has evolved into a key theme of philosophical and literary debates, moving beyond the realm of ethnological scholarship (Rehbein 23). According to Bernhard Waldenfels, whose *The Question of the Other* (2007) crystallizes and advances main arguments and theories on otherness, "it is only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the question of alienness or otherness becomes a central philosophical issue" (4). One of the milestones of this development is Emmanuel Lévinas's conceptualization of alterity, as expressed for example in the essays collected in *Altérité et transcendance* (1995), published in English translation 1999 as *Alterity and Transcendence*. The encounter of the Other – or with the face (*visage*) of the Other – is for Lévinas primarily marked by benevolence: "J'insiste donc sur la primauté de la relation bienveillante à

l'égard d'autrui. Quand bien même il y aurait malveillance de la part de l'autre, l'attention, l'accueil de l'autre, comme sa reconnaissance marque cette antériorité du bien sur le mal" (109).<sup>iii</sup>

As Seyla Benhabib notes, Lévinas – as well as Derrida, who draws on his countryman's writings – regards the ethical encounter with the Other as an act of “fundamental welcoming” (Benhabib 157). Lévinas suggests that the meeting with the Other reminds “me” of a sense of responsibility for the Other, an emotion associated with sociality and also with love (see e.g. Lévinas 44-46 and 49-50). The existence of a social system becomes especially obvious when we recognize that there is not just “I” and “You” but also a third person (and many others, of course), which leads us to the question of “how to compare others – unique and incomparable” (102), or in the original: “Comment comparer les autres, uniques et incomparables?” (112). Lévinas links the confrontation with the Other to the confrontation with God; the unattainable alterity of the other human being is also the unattainable alterity of God. Judeo-Christian traditions undergird Lévinas's philosophy; he contends for instance that the face of the Other might be exposed and weak, but that in its commandment of “Thou shalt not kill” – or “Tu ne tueras point” – it reveals its authority (114).<sup>iv</sup>

It is of course precisely the commandment against killing that the terrorist threatens to breach. For the terrorist, the (face of the) Other apparently incites not good-will, not responsibility, but hatred and the desire to murder. Or does it? In a few of the texts, it becomes evident that precisely the encounter with the Other generates hesitation in the terrorist, who comes to recognize the benevolence of the Other.

In turn, terrorist fiction identifies the terrorist as a non-benevolent Other. The fictional terrorist is “forced” by the implied author to struggle with his otherness, suffering emotionally and physically (see for example the stories by Amis, Kobek, and Dubus); the conditions of otherness, including his repression of desires and pleasures, appear to consume him. In Havis’s play, the character Dolni describes Atta as a “sick” (223) and “injured person” who turns to violence because he “can’t make his life better” (219). Atta’s reaction to his pain signifies in *Three Nights in Prague* the “scar inside the Arab mind” (219), as Dolni himself explains. Other texts similarly insist on deep emotional wounds inside the Arab and Muslim characters, which fail to heal or vanish entirely. In the process of appropriating the perpetrator, terrorist literature thus injects the character with physical and emotional pain, which is ultimately the pain of a religion (and a culture) allegedly suffering from the repression of human liberties and from the encroachment of liberal, Western ideas.

Terrorist literature thus reveals the authority, the threat, and also the weakness that constitute Mohamed Atta and other perpetrators. The visible actions of the fictional (and actual) terrorists suggest self-righteousness as well as self-confidence, which imply, along with the will to enact a violent plan, a degree of power on the part of the characters. There is, however, in each work of terrorist literature a sense of (physical or emotional) weakness and uncertainty that arises within the characters – again, a possible reference to internal contradictions and conflicts in repressive Islamic communities. Focusing at least in part on the failings and struggles of the terrorist – in addition to his hatred for what is the Other from his perspective – these texts



paradoxically invite identification with this character even as they insist on his strangeness. Engaging with the Other by verbalizing a fictitious or fictionalized terrorist's mindset might be a form of co-opting (akin to what occurs in much of historical fiction), but it also amounts to a discursive *hospitality* – letting the Other speak and allowing the foreign and foreigner to enter the realm of our imagination.<sup>v</sup>

In her work *Etrangers à nous-mêmes* or *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva draws our attention to a curious paradox: we are all foreign to ourselves, the “[l’]étranger est en nous” (the foreigner is within us), but we generally fear Others – people from other cultures, people who are different from us (283).<sup>vi</sup> The fear and discomfort stems in part from ignorance about the division within ourselves, Kristeva suggests: “Comment pourrait-on tolérer un étranger si l’on ne se sait pas étranger à soi-même?” (269).<sup>vii</sup> The fear of the foreigner surely also originates in the fact that the encounter with the Other calls into question the “we” – the identity, even the customs of our group – and demonstrates that there are alternatives to our ways of life and being. As Adam Philipps phrases it in his preface to *Intimacies*, co-authored with Leo Bersani: “Difference is the one thing we cannot bear” (viii).

Revealing the minds of Muslim terrorists, as they interrogate American and European values, policies, and ideologies, turns the other, Western, usually non-Muslim characters into foreigners. Moreover, exploring a terrorist's viewpoint engenders self-reflexivity; since the protagonists are shown to have complex perceptions of themselves and of other individuals, readers of terrorist literature are forced to confront these emotions. Rather than simply condemning the 9/11 hijackers as insane, cold-blooded

murderers, readers – and authors – have to consider the Other as human and may even empathize with him. To return to Kristeva: “Le choc de l’autre, l’identification du moi avec ce bon ou mauvais autre qui viole les limites fragiles du moi incertain, seraient donc à la source d’une inquiétante étrangeté dont l’aspect excessif, représenté en littérature, ne saurait cacher la permanence dans la dynamique psychique ‘normale’” (278).<sup>viii</sup> Transferring these lines to my analysis of terrorist literature, I suggest that as readers, our defenses against the alien terrorist crumble, as we forge a “conflictual bond” with the character; he becomes close to us and also forces us to reckon with our own strangeness (188).

Drawing on Lévinas, Judith Butler asserts in her discussion of post-9/11 discourse that the inhuman’s face is either shown up close, in its very savage-ness, or it is absolutely erased, rendered invisible (147-49). In the works of 9/11 literature I am considering in my project, the reader seems to encounter the first kind of depiction, the examination of the terrorist in his inhumanity; however, the meticulousness of the description also humanizes the terrorist. The reader not only sees the terrorist’s face but also learns about his emotions and passions. A balancing act occurs between dehumanization and humanization, or rather, between an exteriorization of the terrorist and his integration (into “our” sphere). This negotiation is exemplified in a scene in Amis’s “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta,” set in Atta’s hotel bathroom in Portland, Maine: “The worst was yet to come: shaving. Shaving was the worst because it necessarily involved him in the contemplation of his own face (...): the face of Muhammad Atta. (...) The detestation, the detestation of everything, was being sculpted

on it, from within" (97). The stereotype of a frustrated, possibly self-hating Islamist is invoked here; the fictionalized Atta is a detestable individual, even despicable to himself. To return to Kristeva, the terrorists in 9/11 literature are alien not only to the reader but also to themselves.

Yet the scene also compels the reader to contemplate the face of Atta in an intimate, even vulnerable moment. Sascha Pöhlmann claims that Amis succeeds in humanizing the terrorist; according to Pöhlmann, "Since the terrorist is no mere monster here, it is impossible to give a simple explanation for terrorism as something outside the sphere of ideologically conceivable human actions" (62). The tension between this reading and Butler's argument is evident. In Pöhlmann's view, the narrator's decision to show Atta's face up close humanizes the 9/11 ringleader, whereas Butler would likely claim that the opposite is true. I suggest that both Pöhlmann's and Butler's arguments are valid, in that the presentation of Atta's private space provides, on the one hand, a sense of the character as an ordinary individual. The scene does, on the other hand, support Butler's theory that closeness serves to emphasize the Other's savage-ness; evil, from this perspective, becomes legible and palpable through the minute description of Atta's ailments and ire (other passages in Amis's story offer further repulsive details).

Moreover, the views of Pöhlmann and Butler are only diametrically opposed if we accept the existence of a human-inhuman dichotomy. Does Atta's monstrosity, as inferred from both our knowledge of his actions and from the depiction of his detesting, detestable self, negate his humanity? Indeed, my assertion that much of terrorist

literature after 9/11 vacillates between humanizing and dehumanizing the terrorist, relies on the notion that we can clearly distinguish between these two categories. Yet the facets of a fictional terrorist that might be regarded as inhuman, a lack of empathy for other humans as well as murderous instincts among other aspects, also constitute common ingredients of human-ness. Exhibiting murderers up close, as Butler insists, may divulge their savage-ness, but the literary intrusion into the (imaginary) intimate space of terrorists also discloses that they are truly human. The observation that humans carry within them the seeds of cruel, murderous – apparently inhuman – behavior not only destabilizes the notion of what Kofi Annan termed a “community of humanity” (after 9/11) but has also implications for terrorist literature (qtd. in Houen 5).

9/11 literature largely avoids definite labeling of terrorists; the texts clearly struggle with the fact that humanity and inhumanity go hand in hand and that literature can hardly engage with the life story of a terrorist without conceding their similarity to other humans. Amis’s narrator can offer a degrading extradiegetic commentary about the fictionalized Atta, and Updike can imbue his Muslim would-be-terrorist with hatred towards infidels, but such gestures do not preclude a humanization of the characters. Arguably, any character developed even minimally in a fictional text assumes a human face; an imaginary character, even if he represents a terrorist, carries a semblance of humanity as a figure that inhabits a space within the possible world, which is in turn a version of the real world.

In spite of their instability, the terms “human” and “inhuman” retain their utility in that they seem to reflect an impulse in public and literary discourse to frame the

Islamic terrorists as external to “us”, to Western society (the West’s own heterogeneity in terms of cultural and moral values is barely acknowledged by terrorist literature).<sup>ix</sup> At the same time, in accessing the terrorist’s personality, the works of terrorist literature diminish and abolish the character’s “alienness.” Hence Waldenfels’s thesis that a “determined, explained, or understood alien” ceases to be alien (16).<sup>x</sup> On the other hand, a fictional human being is always alien: the construction or depiction of a character’s mind and body only amounts to imaginary intimacy.

The terrorist himself certainly perpetuates his exteriority vis-à-vis a presumably liberal West through word and action (derision of women, violence, etc.) – characters such as DeLillo’s Hammad, Dubus’s Bassam, and Updike’s Ahmad also perceive and address in dialogues and thought representation their alienness. Leif Grössinger insists in his analysis of *Falling Man* that the terrorists’ “claim to stand outside society is jeopardized by the problems they encounter in renouncing Western culture not so much in their minds as in their daily lives” (85). The designated hijacker Hammad, for example, does not seem completely at ease with being “exterior”. Sensing that the boundary between “his” sphere of the Islamic conspirators and the host society surrounding them is permeable, he questions his decision to participate in the terrorist plot. The friend/enemy opposition, which provides a basis for identity construction and the terrorist’s identity (though not necessarily that of the West), is interrogated through the encounter with his enemy and through the confrontation with the terrorist’s own worldly desires (in Hammad’s case, a woman he loves).<sup>xi</sup>

## Good Muslims and Bad Muslims

The works of terrorist literature assign the fictional terrorists to a Muslim culture, with most of them (Alexie's characters but also Amis's Atta are exceptions) professing a connection to the principles of Islam. As texts such as Dubus's and DeLillo's novels indicate, however, the borders between Islam and the West are blurred, in these two cases on account of the very human emotions shared by the members of each entity and through their presence in the same physical space. These two novels as well as the other works likewise cross borders by highlighting the transnational nature of the – fictional and actual – conspiracies. Spanning the globe from Saudi Arabia to Prague, from Hamburg to New York, from Florida to Afghanistan, and from Iraq to Yemen, the personal affiliations and journeys of the terrorists convey a sense of a worldwide network of militants.

The international relationships and exchanges among terrorist groups additionally reveal the workings of globalization, as interactions between people, capital, and information have been simplified. As the texts demonstrate, such migrations also contributed to or facilitated the attacks.<sup>xii</sup> Though the movements of the Muslim protagonists are well-documented in terrorist literature, the effect of Western policies in the Middle East, Arab world, and South Asia is a less prominent aspect of these texts.

These policies, encompassing a range of economic, military, and cultural interests, are of course also shaped by the presence of Islam in the West. Muslim and

Arab communities are an integral part of American and European societies. As French philosopher Olivier Roy points out in *Globalized Islam*, “Islam is less and less ascribed to a specific territory and civilisational area” and the Islam has become a “Western religion, not through military conquest or mass conversions but as a consequence of the rapid and voluntary displacement of millions of people looking for jobs in Europe or a better life in the United States” (18, 17).<sup>xiii</sup> However, such presence of Muslims in the West has not altered their religion’s status in many observers’ eyes. According to Roy, “Since 9/11 the same clichés regarding Islam have been at work in the intellectual debate on both sides of the Atlantic.” Despite the difference “in the historical backgrounds of the United States and Western Europe, and in the sociological composition of the Muslim population, now we can speak of a common Western approach to Islam” (17). Just as Muslim fundamentalists promote and proclaim one homogeneous global community of Muslims, in contemporary Western debates on Muslims “Islam is seen as a discrete entity, a coherent and closed set of beliefs, values and anthropological patterns embodied in a common society, history, and territory, which allows us to use the term as an explanatory concept for almost everything involving Muslims” (Roy 9).<sup>xiv</sup>

Palestinian-American poet Suheir Hammad likewise reminds us in her multilayered, belligerent poem, “first writing since”, that Muslims have been condemned as a group for 9/11, while “we did not vilify all white men when mcveigh bombed oklahoma” (sec. 5). Importantly, Hammad’s poem addresses the relationship between the “labelling group and the labelled,” to borrow a phrase from Dutch sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse. The labeling group in a post-9/11 world comprises

Western media outlets, politicians, and writers, while the labeled are Muslims in both East and West.<sup>xv</sup> More generally, Muslims have filled the role of the violent Other for centuries in the Western world. Thus, while Nederveen Pieterse maintains that “*otherness is historical*” and that the “process character of images of otherness is an indication of shifting social relations and patterns of hegemony,” there are continuities in the selection and framing of Others (233, italics his).

The Western perception of Muslims as culturally backward Others – echoing in modified fashion the othering of the West by Muslim extremists and Islamists – is not a novel phenomenon, even though the events of September 11 and subsequent bombings in London, Bali, and elsewhere have arguably cemented and reconfigured that image. Samuel Huntington’s theory of the clash of civilizations experienced a resurgence in the aftermath of the events in New York City and Washington, in spite of the fact that, as Nash notes, “one third of the world’s Muslims live as members of minorities outside of the Muslim world” (9).<sup>xvi</sup>

In light of the braiding of Islam and West, it is impossible to see them as clearly defined opposites. I still continue to use in my dissertation the terms “West” and “Islam”, primarily on account of the discursive phenomenon of stereotyping and condemnation, which is perpetuated but also problematized in terrorist literature, rather than on the basis of socio-cultural data. Though many of the texts I examine indeed engage with the perpetrator-protagonist in a detailed, even empathetic fashion, they likewise attribute a fairly uniform set of beliefs to Muslim terrorists and thus to the communities and doctrines that presumably form their thought. Implicitly or explicitly,



most of terrorist literature assigns the responsibility for the violent act to Muslim cultures and the Qur'an – or interpretations of Islam's sacred text.

Among the writers I discuss in this dissertation, Martin Amis has perhaps been the most vocal in his articulation of criticism and contempt for Islam and in particular Islamists, a disdain palpable in both his non-fiction and his fiction (as I will illustrate in Chapter 2). In a 2007 newspaper article, Amis argues that Islamists have created a “cult of death” and compares radical Islamism to Nazism and Bolshevism (*9/11 and the Cult of Death*). Part of a group of atheist writers, alongside Ian McEwan and Salman Rushdie, Amis appears to wage a verbal war on religion and especially Islam. In an essay entitled “Terror and Boredom: The Dependent Mind”, included in his 2008 collection *The Second Plane*, Amis emphasizes the “extreme incuriosity of Islamic culture” (79), the lack of an “impulse towards rational inquiry” in Muslim men (89), and the “totalist” nature of Islam (78).

Crossing the Channel, one encounters Jean Baudrillard, who brands Islam in *L'esprit du terrorisme* (2002) or *The Spirit of Terrorism* as “un ennemi fantomatique” (22) – as the world's “ghostly enemy” (15, in the English version). This enemy emerged after the end of the Cold War, “filtrant partout comme un virus, surgissant de tous les interstices de la puissance” (23) – “slipping in everywhere like a virus, welling up from all the interstices of power” (15). Baudrillard concedes, however, that Islam was merely “le front mouvant de cristallisation de cet antagonisme” (23) – “the moving front along which the antagonism crystallized” (15); this antagonism now envelops everyone precisely because the former “Evil” vanished with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

A host of movies and fictional as well as non-fictional texts raise the specter of radical Islam, spreading suspicion of Muslims living in Europe and the United States. In his acerbic analysis of the German movie *The Friend* (2003), Gavin Hicks writes:

In the end, the terrorist with a human face is merely a redrawing of the Islamist caricature. He may walk amongst us, speaking a language of tolerance, but quietly plans violent martyrdom. With such a filmic representation, suspicion is painted on the face of every brown Muslim in Germany, and thus can a single character come to embody one billion Muslims. And condemn them. (143)

In their more complex, sophisticated works, the Egyptian-American author Yusef El Guindi and the Pakistani-British writer Mohsen Hamid both critique and perpetuate this paranoia. El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* and Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* inquire whether there is a formula for a trusted, welcomed individual in the U.S. and whether Muslims can hope to attain this status. The play and the novel appear to engage with the popular distinction between “good Muslims” and “bad Muslims”. As Mahmood Mamdani explains, “[f]rom this point of view, ‘bad Muslims’ were clearly responsible for terrorism,” while “‘good Muslims’ were anxious to clear their names and consciences of this horrible crime and would undoubtedly support ‘us’ in a war against ‘them’” (15). In the context of the so-called war on terror, the neo-conservative government’s rhetoric constructed a dichotomy that drove Muslims in the United States and Islamic countries more generally into a corner.

To be sure, not all of 9/11 literature or of the subgenre of terrorist literature mirrors what might be perceived as the hegemonic discourse of marking Muslim

terrorists in particular, and more conservative, outspoken Muslims in general, as evil, inhuman “Others”; in fact, many of the texts resist such a simplistic view.<sup>xvii</sup> Even Martin Amis’s short story “The Last Days of Mohammad Atta”, which contains anti-Islamic commentary and reiterates components of the author’s hostile non-fiction, leaves the reader with a sense of ambiguity. Approaching its subject in a vindictive manner, the short story dissects Atta’s inner life, exposing his emotional conflicts and his physical infirmity; the implied author presumes knowledge of the terrorist’s rationale and bars Atta from finding solace in death, as his final hours are replicated eternally. Yet the story’s open ending also implies the impossibility of passing a final verdict either on the terrorists or on the events of September 11. The terrorists are elusive even for those who can grasp them by means of imaginary narratives.

This story originated in the mind of the same writer who tells us a few pages earlier in the essay “Terror and Boredom” – both texts are included in *The Second Plane* – that “the West had no views whatever about Islam per se before September 11” (63). One sentence (spoken in jest we hope) erases centuries of strained relations between Christianity and Islam and can easily be invalidated. In the beginning of *The New Orientalists* (2007), an enlightening study of recent literary depictions of Islam, Ian Almond reaches back into the nineteenth century and beyond to demonstrate that “Islam traditionally occupied the peculiar place of historical opposition to both European Christianity and modernity” (10). In a chapter on Nietzsche, Almond lists some of the nineteenth century stereotypes of Islam common in Europe: “Islam is incapable of democracy, fanatical, warlike, frauenfeindlich [misogynistic], socially unjust” (11).<sup>xviii</sup> Not

much has changed in Western perspectives on Islam, one ventures to add. The rupture of September 11 produced more cross-cultural ruptures, rather than establishing a community of grief across borders; at the same time, the event intensified a negative discourse on Islam that had begun long before.

Apparently, inhabitants of Western societies need Muslims (and Arabs) as Others to establish a stable “Western”, non-Muslim identity. Gil Anidjar maintains that, “Without this enemy par excellence that is Islam, Europe, Christian Europe, would not or no longer exist” (49). Navid Kermani likewise insists that across Western Europe, Islam has been configured as the Other against which to create an identity (35). Similarly, Christian-Jewish, white America may need Islam as an entity to define its identity, culture, and values. “Opposing a unitary American ‘Us’ to an equally homogeneous ‘Them,’” Sirène Harb writes, the logic of associating Americanness with whiteness “insists that Arabs and Muslims have never been and can never be part of America, since they do not have the same values of democracy and morality as Americans” (23).

Echoing these observations, Anidjar argues that Islam has been “historically constituted as exteriority” (xvi). This exterior belief system becomes an individualized, perhaps even humanized Other in recent fiction. The exteriorized entity is figuratively embraced, becoming known and knowable. Anidjar suggests that we claim the enemy, that we hold on to him as to a material possession: “Whatever or whoever the enemy may be, the enemy matters to the extent that the enemy is mine” (76). Bernhard Waldenfels likewise speaks of a “process of appropriation” of the Other (16). The act of othering thus seems to involve not only separation, but also hostility and even

domination; arguably, narratives about fictional terrorists similarly appropriate the Other, imposing a Western perspective on the Muslim or Arab militant.

But is Islam the inevitable Other? As I have mentioned earlier, Islam has arrived in the West, has become part of the West, at the latest with the late twentieth-century advent in North America and Europe of many immigrants from Muslim-dominated countries (the Iberian peninsula, of course, has a millennium-old history of Muslim presence). Muslim immigrants as well as American-born or European-born Muslims participate in Western discourses and communities. The 9/11 hijackers themselves spent years in Western countries, learned European languages, and had friendships and romantic relationships in their temporary homes.

Similarly, the fictional characters examined in this dissertation engage with Western societies in diverse ways. They pretend to blend in (e.g. Atta in Updike's short story "The Varieties of Religious Experience", briefly discussed in Chapter 3) or indeed sincerely attempt to interact with members of seemingly alien communities (see the awkward efforts of Dubus's to "discover" his host society). Ahmad, the protagonist in Updike's *Terrorist*, is the son of an immigrant; as Kristiaan Versluys emphasizes, Ahmad "is not a foreign-born immigrant or visitor but an American-born youngster" (172). His involvement in the terrorist plot is framed as in part the product of a multicultural, all-too-open American society (172).

The Muslim characters in terrorist literature are outsiders to the West, unable or unwilling to fully integrate, but they are not completely outside or separated from the West ("untouched" by it, as it were), to reiterate a key point. According to the texts I

analyze, terrorism materializes in the interstices between personal, inner-cultural, and cross-cultural challenges, with the perpetrators navigating narratives of belonging and non-belonging to the West. Indeed, several of the characters, including Bassam, Ahmad, and DeLillo's Hammad, acknowledge the choice between life as part of American society and death as part of the terrorist plot.

Though these characters understand the possibility of leaving the plot, their religion, or the interpretation of its doctrine, compels the terrorists to pursue the route to violence. The main issue then is Islam. As quotes in the novels by DeLillo or Updike insinuate, the Qur'an discourages doubt and encourage violence. Besides conveying this negative image of Islamic texts, terrorist literature highlights Muslim society's appalling socio-cultural restrictions, convictions, and repressed ways of life – articulated and embodied by the Muslim militants.

The unpleasant facet of contemporary terrorist literature, however, is not that most – albeit not all – of the terrorists are depicted as subscribing to a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam and to a set of dreadful concepts about women specifically and society in general. Instead, the issue is that there are very few counter examples of characters that present alternative visions of Muslim life and culture. The apparently less religious fathers of the versions of Mohamed Atta, of Bassam (*The Garden of Last Days*), and of Ahmad (*Terrorist*) are overbearing and unaffectionate figures, affirming rather than undermining a clichéd view of Muslim manhood. They may discourage the pilgrimage to Mecca (*ATTA*) or advocate a more nuanced view of jihad than their sons

(e.g. *The Garden of Last Days*), yet these are just brief moments, hardly competing with a largely negative perspective on Islam and Muslim society.

Most of the texts I analyze do not take or propose a nuanced approach to Muslim culture or Islam; quotes from the Qur'an and Mohamed's teachings are integrated without presenting contexts or possible meanings.<sup>xix</sup> Terrorist literature "reduces" characters, it reduces Islam. Aside from a few brief passages in the other texts, Updike's *Terrorist* is the only work attempting to present the context and ambiguity of at least some lines from the Qur'an, a text that is, to use Roy's words, open to "argument and interpretation" (10). However, in the exchanges between Shaikh Rashid and Ahmad on the meaning of certain suras, the fundamentalist interpretation of Qur'anic verses prevails (see e.g. 62, 228). The protagonist himself realizes that he must not doubt his imam's narrow readings, for "it was not Ahmad's role to argue; it was his to learn, to submit to his own place in Islam's vast structure, visible and invisible" (77). Islam appears as an overbearing, stifling religion, linked to intolerance and callousness. Updike's approach may be intended to suggest Ahmad's and Shaikh Rashid's ideological and philosophical blindness, but it also precludes alternative viewpoints, which are granted very little room in the novel and only gain significance in its concluding scene. Updike's rather superficial presentation of the Qur'an and Islam's tenets resembles the stance on Islam and its adherents in the writings of Amis, Havis, DeLillo, and the other authors discussed herein. As Edward Said suggests in his afterword to the 1994 edition of *Orientalism*, clichés about Islam abound even at the end of the twentieth-century century – and in the new one, as we know (see e.g. 343).

## Violence for Political Purposes: The Origins and Aims of Terror

Islam is the issue: conclusions about the fictional terrorists' motivations inevitably involve their religious and ethnic background. Most texts hint at the perpetrators' hatred for Western values and societies, which coincide with the endeavor to unravel personal challenges through the violent act; these challenges in turn seem to originate in socio-cultural restraints and internal conflicts in Muslim cultures. In preparation for my analyses of the primary texts, I will briefly explore in this section definitions of terrorism as well as theories about the roots of terror, with a focus on how these conceptualizations are problematized by terrorist literature.

To reiterate my earlier statement, the trajectory of terrorism is articulated in a negotiation between implied author, reader, and discourses on terrorism. In other words, linkages between a fictional perpetrator's personal interactions as well as beliefs and his eventual murderous act might not be explicit in terrorist literature, but are constructed by the reader based on the implied author's invoking of familiar concepts about terrorists (which in turn might be erroneous of course). The reader presumably understands the import of these motifs regarding the terrorist act, though she may not agree with the conclusion.

In Amis's short story and to a limited extent in Updike's *Terrorist*, causal connections are indeed identified explicitly, while in other stories, it remains solely up to the reader to identify or construct causality. An example of the latter case would be Havis's *Three Nights in Prague*, where Atta is resentful towards the West, mistrustful of



women, and intrinsically violent; this depiction repeats and crystallizes claims about terrorism in contemporary discourses, but it is mainly the reader's task, aided by the statements of other characters in the play, to forge the causal sequence leading to the attack. Part of the objective of this chapter, then, is to create the theoretical foundation for understanding this process of constructing fictional terrorists.

"Terrorist" of course is a loaded term that signifies (it can refer to horrific, spectacular violence with civilian victims) as much as it obscures (violence by "terrorists" can in truth be a last resort in a legitimate resistance fight). I use this term to describe a sub-genre of Anglophone September 11 literature because it is commonly applied to the hijackers of 9/11, because it evokes a rhetoric of condemning the Muslim Other that is echoed in terrorist literature, because it suggests a propensity for violence shared by the selected fictional terrorists, and because it conjures an act where victim and perpetrator are unknown to each other. This last factor is crucial, since it is specifically the lack of intimate knowledge of the Other (Islam and Islamic terrorists) that seems to be both the *raison d'être* and the challenge for Western terrorist literature and its readers; it is similarly the encounter with the misread, even unknown Other (societies and inhabitants of the West) that compels many of the fictional terrorists to rethink and/or maintain their involvement in the plot.

I thus hold on to "terrorist" as the most appropriate term for a discussion of this segment of 9/11 literature. Alternative terms, which I indeed use several times in my dissertation but which are not equally suitable as umbrella terms, include "extremist", an unspecific word connoting radical views on a political, cultural, or religious matter;

“Islamic fundamentalist”, which can simply imply fidelity to the pillars of Islam, though it is often equated with militancy, as Daniel Varisco notes (39); and “Islamist” or “radical Islamist”, which refers to a fervent commitment to public action – possibly but not necessarily involving violence – in pursuit of an Islamic agenda, to slightly tweak Donald Emerson’s definition of the term (27).<sup>xx</sup> A central distinction between terrorists and these other groupings lies in terrorists’ avoidance of public activities or visibility in the public sphere until the highly visible, spectacular act. Their representation in literature often focuses on the terrorists’ interiority, on their minds and their private interactions, even on their retreat from society, and less on exteriority or actions.<sup>xxi</sup>

What and who is a terrorist? Schmid lists more than 250 definitions of the term “terrorism” in his meticulous *Routledge Handbook on Terrorism*, quoting authorities on the subject from Maximilien Robespierre to Michael Walzer (99-148). Distilling the centuries-old argument(s) about terrorism, Schmid offers a fairly concise “revised academic consensus definition,” the first part of which reads as follows:

Terrorism refers on the one hand to a **doctrine** about the presumed effectiveness of a special form or tactic of fear-generating, coercive political violence and, on the other hand, to a conspiratorial **practice** of calculated demonstrative, direct violent action without legal or moral restraints, targeting mainly civilians and non-combatants, performed for its propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties. (86, emphasis his)

The notion of conspiratorial practice implies that terrorists are distinguished by their retreat from society and their secret interactions with like-minded people. Accordingly,

fictional terrorists are frequently placed in a domestic or private environment, interacting with their collaborators but separated from society. Stressing this sense of a distinct community, Louise Richardson writes: “As with terrorists generally, the necessary components for suicide operations are a disaffected individual, a supportive community, and a legitimizing ideology” (135).

While seemingly separated from society, the fictional terrorist also experiences moments of confrontations with the West, which become integral components of the construction of the perpetrator. In these encounters, the distance between the two ideologies is made apparent to reader and protagonist; however, the artificiality of this distance or difference becomes evident as well. To quote Hammad, the hijacker in DeLillo’s *Falling Man*: “What is the difference between you and all the others, outside our space?” (83). The negotiation and tension between these two spheres as well as the conflicts within the spaces propel the development of the fictional terrorist as a character who is not quite external to the West.

To be sure, most of the Muslim terrorists in 9/11 literature consider the West a “devilish country,” to quote the version of Mohamed Atta presented in Updike’s short story “Varieties of Religious Experience” (92). This resentment of the West thus emerges as a prime factor in Islamic terrorism, both in political analyses of actual terrorists and as configured by literary representations of the perpetrators’ minds and actions.

Alongside fury about Western culture and policies, terrorist literature suggests several other, interrelated reasons for (and facets of) the suicide-murders. Personal pathologies and emotional conflicts, often linked to unusual perspectives on gender and

sexuality, are central factors, arguably symbolizing Islamic societies' internal struggles and prevailing cultures of repression. Nearly all of the texts discuss the personal challenges of the Muslim or Arab character, in the form of social ineptness or corporeal deficiencies. A connected motif is the perpetrator's endeavor to purify contemporary societies, in particular Islamic societies themselves – the concern about Western excesses expressed by Updike's Atta implies the desire to shore up his own community against such intemperance.

In several of the texts, including Amis's story and DeLillo's novel, the terrorist plot is described as without a purpose, as a project leading towards violence for its own sake. Alexie's "Can I Get a Witness?" likewise offers a void where the reader may otherwise presume the articulation of a motive. Nonetheless, this story, Alexie's novel *Flight*, and Updike's *Terrorist* also insist on the development of terrorism from the clash between multiculturalist ideals and Muslim/Arab beliefs and ways of life.

Alexie's and Updike's narratives – and in some moments also Dubus's novel – additionally stress the element of visibility in the planned terrorist act. The target is in each case a symbolic node of commerce and community (urban, multicultural), presumably to cause a disruption of ordinary life in a spectacular fashion and render visible the terrorist and the forces he represents at the same moment that he disappears. In the words of Dubus's protagonist Bassam, addressing the dancer April: "Someday, Insha'Allah, you will know me. ... Everyone will" (202). Bassam and several his counterparts in the other texts appear convinced that they will be rewarded in the afterlife and that the survivors (in particular the terrorist's father assumes a prominent

role) will stand in awe of the martyr. Updike's Ahmad intends to sacrifice himself in the effort to gain a new, higher status of significance: "After a life of barely belonging, he is on the shaky verge of a radiant centrality" (*Terrorist* 234).

Yet Ahmad never assumes the desired centrality, in part because he recognizes the flaws in his own interpretation of the Qur'an and in his perspective on humanity. The failure of Amis's version of the terrorist is configured differently: the end of Amis's story, when Atta submits to the eternal recurrence of pain and death, epitomizes the failure of the terrorists – and perhaps the failure of Islam – to actually alter the course of the world. Moreover, the story reflects the capacity of the community of Western writers and readers to pass judgment on the terrorists posthumously (though with what effect is a different question). Indeed, just as the terrorist is motivated by his own reading or interpretation of Islam, Western society, his own mind, and the anticipated effect of his actions, terrorist literature constitutes a reading or evaluation of the terrorist.

Presenting excerpts from scholarship in terrorism studies and international relations, I bring contemporary concepts about this form of political violence into conversation with the impulses and beliefs of terrorists in 9/11 fiction (and drama). Rather than examining the value or validity of the messages on Islamic terrorism advanced in terrorist literature, I endeavor to understand the place of this literature in contemporary discourse on terrorism. Not surprisingly, each text touches a distinct set of cultural, academic, and political debates; this and subsequent sections thus serve to contextualize the short stories, plays, and novels closely interpreted in later chapters.

An obvious context for terrorist literature is the role of the United States and other Western nations in the Middle East and the Islamic world. This historical and political background is evoked in terrorist literature via fleeting experiences of the perpetrator (for example Atta's meetings with Osama bin Laden and with a Palestinian woman in *ATTA*) and via the various locations of the main narratives (Florida, Hamburg, Massachusetts, etc.). Yet the texts barely elucidate geopolitical struggles such as the Middle East Conflict, the Gulf Wars, and military interventions in Afghanistan. In an exemplary, flippant fashion, *The Garden of Last Days* presents a sadly abbreviated reference to these military and civilian conflicts: "Meanwhile the Zionist/Crusader alliance slaughter their Muslim brothers and sisters in Chechnya and Kashmir, Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Palestine" (257).

Nevertheless, though he stops short of incorporating a political debate into his novel, Dubus manages through this and a couple of other lines in the same section to invoke the ramifications of Saudi Arabia's collaboration with the United States, a collaboration embodied by protagonist Bassam's father: "Because Ahmad al-Jizani, builder of air bases for the kufar, he has forgotten the Creator, the Mighty, the Sustainer. As have so many others across the kingdom" (256-7). In light of this passage, it is a revival of Islamic strength and a striving for a homogeneous, non-Western Islamic culture that is sought by fundamentalists, who seem to capitalize on America's co-opting of foreign regimes to pursue economic and political interests. Terrorist literature has too few of these moments of enlightenment that may lead to self-reflection, as opposed to condemnation of the Other.

In fact, according to Mahmood Mamdani, 9/11 came out of recent history, “that of the late Cold War” (11).<sup>xxii</sup> Mamdani argues that the terrorists were not necessarily religious extremists but rather part of a political movement launched by activists such as Sayyid Qutb; the movement, Mamdani’s insists, gained particular strength thanks to the American support of Islamists in the 1980s, when the U.S. opted for proxy wars over direct American involvement, for example in Afghanistan (see e.g. 56-62). He argues that terrorism emerges in a country from a combination of specific domestic circumstances and foreign influences: “the homegrown product [of terrorism] could not have flourished except in a global environment where at least one superpower turned a blind eye to ‘its’ terror” (252). Mamdani essentially dismisses allegations of a religious basis of so-called Islamic terror, stating that “Bin Laden is a politician, not a theologian” and that those “who embrace him do so politically.” He adds: “Both Bush and bin Laden employ a religious language, the language of good and evil, the language of no compromise” (254).

John Gray likewise emphasizes the parallels between these two actors and the ideologies they subscribe to: “Like Marxists and neo-liberals, radical Islamists see history as a prelude to a new world. All are convinced they can remake the human condition. If there is a uniquely modern myth, this is it” (3). American and British authors of terrorist literature elide the apparent similarities between the rhetoric of champions of Western civilization’s global expansion and that of Osama bin Laden’s oppositional perspective; Osama bin Laden is invoked several times, even appears as a character in *ATTA*, but

America's neo-imperialist policies (pre- or even post-9/11) are barely interrogated in the texts – except by the terrorists themselves.

One response to the almost pleading question of “Why do they hate us?” is thus that Western societies are perceived by Islamic terrorists as opponents in a competition over the refashioning of global structures. Al-Qaida's masterminds are convinced, in John Gray's words, that “a wholly new world brought into being by acts of terror” (20-1). The status quo is what terrorism targets – hence Fawzia Afzal-Khan's argument that the root causes of terrorism are “corporate capitalism” as well as globalization (5).

The facilitation of transnational exchanges of goods, information, and people, movements delineated in much of terrorist literature, actually aids the Al-Qaida network; the terrorists are arguably more implicated in globalization than Afzal-Khan concedes in her introduction to a collection of Muslim women's writings, entitled *Shattering the Stereotypes*.

Presenting a salient critique of the problematic distinction or “illusory gap” between “technocratic (post)modernity” and “Islamist terror,” Samuel Thomas underscores the implication of both the Al-Qaeda network and its proclaimed enemies in the processes commonly termed globalization (428). Two seemingly dissimilar groupings, postmodern Western capitalists and supposedly backward fundamentalist fanatics (us and them), both rely on and promote transnational flows of capital and information. In his article “Outtakes and Outrage: The Means and Ends of Suicide Terror”, Thomas suggests that Al-Qaeda is “inseparable from and made possible by the very structures it purports to resist on ‘fundamentalist’ grounds” (428). He adds:



“Identifying Al Qaeda as such [a global multinational] partly accounts for the intricate looping, the weird combination of closeness and distance, identification and disavowal, that characterizes the mediation of (and response to) terrorist attacks.” As much as Amis would like to consign radical Islamists or jihadists to the medieval world, they are firmly planted in the modern world, not only in the sense that terrorism “finds its roots in both the revolutionary impulses and economic deregulation that define the Western societies now celebrated as ‘liberal’” (Thomas 436).

Terrorist violence also depends heavily, Thomas notes, “on an advanced engagement with science, economics, global geopolitics, and the mass media” (428). Fundamentalist Islam might summon traditions and rules long abandoned by other branches of this or other religions, but the individuals that carry out atrocities in its name embrace – need to embrace – the systems of today. The antagonists in the war on terror are far away from each other, yet conspicuously close.

Afzal-Khan correctly asserts, however, that Middle Eastern societies have barely benefited from these transnational processes and continued neo-colonialist policies. Afzal-Khan thus claims that religious fundamentalism is the symptom of a “malaise of unequal power-sharing” (5). She agrees with Arundathi Roy, who (in)famously asked: “Isn’t it surprising that September 11 didn’t happen earlier? Why don’t they hate us more than they do?” (qtd. in Afzal-Khan 6).

Offering yet another perspective, Fathali Moghaddam focuses on “internal” causes of terrorism, suggesting that Islamic terrorism is an expression of a deep crisis of identity among Islamic communities, paralyzing moderate movements (xi). Moghaddam,

however, does seem to acknowledge the significance of global interactions in the emergence of terrorism and in the genesis of hatred. According to Moghaddam, Al Qaeda aims to force U.S. troops out of Muslim lands and stop U.S. support for Israel and Middle Eastern puppet regimes.

On a more philosophical plane, Baudrillard maintains that terrorism is in fact senseless, that it invents nothing and inaugurates nothing (*Power Inferno* 35). In his compelling study, *The Solution of the Fist*, John Moran similarly dismisses contemporary – and supposedly ineffective – attempts to “separate fact from value in an effort to isolate the observable and measurable causal variables of terrorism” (2). Moran writes that in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia, which is according to him the cradle of terrorism while France was its birthplace, many terrorists were “self-proclaimed nihilists” (1). In Moran’s view, terrorism’s “fundamentally violent and nihilist essence was clear to all” in Dostoevsky’s times; the contemporary terrorist, however, has “convinced himself and others that he is something he is not” (2). Today we ought to read Dostoevsky’s *The Demons*, Moran insists, which shows terrorists to be “only interested in political power” (6).<sup>xiii</sup> Any terrorist’s announcement of a supposed religious or social goal is for Dostoevsky – and Moran – a ruse.

Osama bin Laden himself claimed that the purpose of the September 11 attacks was the destruction of the World Trade Centers as symbols. In a November 2001 interview with Hamid Mir, he stated: “The 11 September attacks were not targeted at women and children. The real targets were America’s icons of military and economic power” (qtd. in Houen 3). Thomas Perry Thornton similarly suggests that the terrorist

deed is a “symbolic act designed to influence political behavior by extranormal means, entailing the use or threat of violence” (73). The 9/11 attacks were certainly a deliberate spectacle, intended to be globally broadcast and disseminated in the media. A few scenes of terrorist literature, for instance in Dubus’s and Updike’s novels, address the desire of the fictional character to commit a deed that will grant him posthumous fame, not so much to spread fear or affect political decisions, but rather it seems to challenge the father figure, to counter underestimation and humiliation suffered in childhood.

Even though 9/11 literature does not arrive at – nor does it always seek – a satisfactory rationalization of terrorism, I have suggested that there are several lines of “criminal reasoning” that permeate terrorist literature, including the West’s perceived oppression of Arabs and Muslims, and the terrorist’s struggle for self-fulfillment. The first point refers to the perception of the West as a corrupt, alien culture, whereas the latter point indicates the role of family, gender, and sexuality in the fictional terrorist’s decision to become an assassin. Implicitly, fictional terrorists grant violence, and in particular what is perhaps the most transgressive form of violence, a suicidal attack, the power of transforming them into men. They seek violence to liberate themselves from a dominating father-figure and an insufficient self. Joining a terrorist group and carrying out a terrorist attack thus releases the “new man” from his past. This rite of passage ends with death, death arguably not in search of heroism but transcendence and liberation.

### **Host, Hostile, Hostage: The Vagaries of Hospitality**

Traditional Christian-Jewish values, traditional America have lost their power, Updike's novel *Terrorist* contends, or at least they are about to do so; voting power in New Prospect, New Jersey, has "shifted from white to black and now to Hispanics." The country has to accommodate other religions besides Christianity: the benediction at the local high-school graduation "is offered by a Catholic priest and, as a sop to the Muslim community, an imam" (111). While Updike's narrative does not seem to dismiss or deride its Muslim protagonist's religiosity or firm values, it laments Ahmad's interpretation of religion – conservative Islam is configured as incompatible with traditional American culture. Its presence is an indicator of the United States' openness to new ideologies and immigrants as well as an indicator for an erosion of values that prompts people to seek stability and firm beliefs. According to David Simpson, Updike's "desire to put himself into the mind of a young would-be jihadist (although the title word is terrorist) seems to be enabled by a strong authorial identification with the critique of a modern America without meaningful faith or moral conviction" (219). The host America has lost control over its guests. Instead of providing clear values and limits, anything is allowed and anyone is welcome(d). Above all, as a result of its openness, America is "so defenseless," to use the words of the character Hermione. The sister-in-law of Jack Levy, Ahmad's high school counselor, claims: "Everything the modern free world has achieved is so fragile" (132).<sup>xxiv</sup>

Updike's novel as well as Sherman Alexie's short stories seem to reflect and advocate tolerance towards Muslims, Arabs, and other individuals of non-Christian, non-European heritage, but this tolerance that does not entail an invitation to "belong" to the community. In fact, these groups remain the potentially dangerous Other. In his conversation with Giovanna Borradori, Derrida notes that the American discourse of tolerance involves "always a kind of condescension" (Borradori 127). According to Derrida, the reasoning proceeds as follows: "I am leaving you my place at home, but do not forget it is my home" (127). In 9/11 fiction, such articulations of tolerance and limited hospitality determine the Muslim characters' positions in the societies of Europe and America. They experience hospitality, and some of the fictional terrorists even recognize the artificiality of boundaries between themselves and the host society; yet the logic of the plot recreates or reaffirms this boundary, insisting on the non-belonging of (radical) Muslims. The very inevitability of the terrorist plot or, in some cases, the terrorists' own absolute commitment to separation, keeps the terrorists exterior. At the same time, their own inner conflicts and suffering also alienates them from their own body and mind: they are strangers to themselves, to their own physical, mental home.

Stopping short of suggesting an authorial battle against the fictional perpetrator, I suggest that the Muslim protagonist is veritably injected by the author with pain and uncertainty, in a gesture of distancing or hostility. Terrorist literature's mark of hospitality – offering the terrorist a space, a voice in fiction – is therefore counteracted by a narrative of Islam's internal challenge and by the framing of Muslim as exterior.

This textual hostility is entwined with a political, socio-cultural discourse on Islamic culture's incompatibility with Western traditions.

In the same vein, Seyla Benhabib writes, discussing Derrida's concept of hospitality: "Hospitality is interlaced with hostility. For Derrida, this interlacing continues even after the 'initial' moment of encounter; even after the other is admitted into our land, our city, our home, there is still a gap, a hiatus, between the acceptance of the other through hospitality and the rejection of him/her as one who does not belong to us, who is not one of us" (156). Similarly, Navid Kermani wonders in his reflections on European policies towards immigrants why Muslims are frequently spoken of in the media as "they," as if Muslims are not "us," as if Muslims are not part "our" society (27).

Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), which is not strictly about terrorists but could be seen as an allegory of Islamic terror, conveys the message that the best way to remove the danger posed by the unwelcomed stranger is to eliminate the stranger and, more specifically, his difference, his very strangeness. In McEwan's novel, an ordinary criminal arguably represents non-Western ideas, specifically Islam and Islamism, which are supposed to remain outside the Western homeland. *Saturday* evokes the idea that the presumed openness of Western societies allows individuals that are perceived as strangers, for example Muslims from the Middle East or South Asia, to enter and ultimately change Europe – or America. The novel depicts a "guest" (or "terrorist") who abuses the host.

Some of the texts I analyze likewise seem to bolster Derrida's proposition that hospitality becomes problematic when it is "as if the master, qua master, were prisoner

of his place and his power, of his ipseity, of his subjectivity (his subjectivity is hostage)” (*Of Hospitality* 123). In other words, the duties associated with hospitality bind and constrain the host, who has to relinquish power to the guest precisely because he allows the guest into his realm of power. The host’s status and his granting of hospitality become liabilities for him, as is evident in Updike’s *Terrorist* and Alexie’s writings, where the guest or Other exploits the openness of American society. In Dubus’s *The Garden of Last Days*, this hospitality stirs the designated perpetrator Bassam, forcing him to reconsider his own position, leading him to wonder whether he could become part of this society.

When a fictional terrorist such as Bassam contemplates the possibility of embracing the United States and of overcoming the notion of the West’s alterity that seems to confine him to his own hatred, then it is easy to see the author’s intent to discover decency and the potential for redemption in what a reader may otherwise expect to be an evil perpetrator. As I have mentioned before, authorial power is also employed in a more aggressive fashion, for example in Martin Amis’s short story, which appears keen to contain the terrorist – to reduce the terrorist’s apparent potency and to qualify his perceived “success”. Not surprisingly, the fictional terrorist is in part a projection of authorial desires and beliefs, as the character is imbued with particular objectives (seeking death but also in some cases craving the richness of life) and problems (a repressed sexuality for example) that register those beliefs. By grafting onto the terrorist a specific identity through dialogues, mind-narration, and extradiegetic commentary, American and British authors of terrorist literature articulate a view on

Islam that accords with prevalent conceptions of Islam and with their own convictions. Islam is contained, or, to avoid the analogy with Cold War politics, restrained.

The textual construction of the terrorists may harbor its own ethical risks, as the perpetrator becomes a figure of identification. It appears, however, that the pain, hatred, and insecurity consuming the fictional perpetrators demonstrate that the resentment expressed through violence stems from inner conflicts projected outward, not so much from Western policies *per se*. Despite depravity, violence, and consumerism, the United States assumes in these texts a socio-cultural superiority. The stories by Alexie and Updike in particular may depict conflicts within the U.S., yet they do not suggest that a foreign system should be introduced to the country; in contrast, all of the narratives indicate that the sick, injured, insecure, and immature fictional terrorists ought to accept a different ideology and culture, even a different religion that apparently encourages tolerance and doubt (DeLillo's *Falling Man* for instance denies Islam either faculty). They are strangers, Others, whose violent deeds and conflicted emotions reveal the risks but also the value of Western hospitality.

The texts themselves therefore address the hospitality towards the Other in the storyworld, but they also become spaces of (in)hospitality themselves. This curious relationship between authors, texts, and fictional terrorists is partially a function of the origin of the writers I study in this dissertation. An author can never avoid speaking for others, of course, and it would be naïve to assume that novels about radical Islamists by Algerian writers such as Slimane Benaïssa and Yasmina Khadra or Moroccan writers, for example Mahi Binebine, are more authentic or express the truth about what Muslim



extremists may believe or think. Nevertheless, aside from the fact that the use of the Qur'an and the description of Islamic cultures in writings by these North African authors bear greater originality and variety, what is at stake in the Anglophone texts examined in my dissertation is a long-standing tradition of American and European authors speaking for and about the Orient. Such Orientalist acts of silencing and assertions of authority, familiar from scholarship and fiction, are continued in some of the works of 9/11 literature.

In revisiting Said's and Almond's discussions of Orientalism in past and present, I am particularly intrigued by their emphasis on Orientalism as a scholarly field and "style of thought" (Said 2) that serves not (only) to define the Orient but the West (see e.g. Said 1, 12). Almond mentions the "Orientalist paradigm of a European interest in the non-European as a means to self-knowledge" (183).<sup>xxv</sup> Discourses of alterity of course recognize that concern with the Other leads to revelations about the Self. Ernst Van Alphen writes that a hermeneutical approach to otherness determines that the content of the Other can only be defined in terms of "us," in terms of what the Other is not (2). From a psychoanalytic perspective, the Other is the return of that which has been repressed (12). Van Alphen concludes his compelling essay on "The Other Within" with the striking statement that the "only way to know the other is by letting the other speak about me, by giving the other the position of 'I'" (15). Even though discussing the Other may lead to self-knowledge, only granting the Other agency to voice his or her perspective in conversation with us may provide us with insights into the Other's train of thought. But in our case, what would such a gesture entail? Videos by Al-Qaeda

leaders or by memoirs written by former terrorists or Islamists – Ed Husain for instance – are subject to mechanisms of manipulation and imagination as well; such artifacts' epistemological and hermeneutical value in an engagement with terrorism may not be more substantial than that of an outsider perspective expressed in non-fiction or fiction.

At the same time, Francophone writers from North Africa may imagine Muslim terrorists in a distinct and perhaps more politically complex fashion than Anglophone writers, but they also could not claim to represent the Other (they are not members of terrorist networks, after all). Ultimately, terrorist literature cannot actually let the Other speak; however, it envisions, in an interplay with authorial and cultural preconceptions, how a terrorist in the possible world of fiction articulates, affirms, and negotiates his alterity as well as his absorption in a seemingly inescapable plot.<sup>xxvi</sup>

### **The Scar Inside the Arab Mind**

The configuration of this terrorist plot, interlaced with the narrative plot, occurs in part on the basis of passages describing the physical weakness, emotional pain, and sexual innocence of all of the Muslim terrorists studied in this dissertation. In other words, these characteristics, linked to specific conflicts and experiences in the character's past, constitute prominent narrative components that are evidently interconnected with the imaginary terrorist's pursuit of a violent act. Such representations seem to be partially rooted in scholarship on terrorism, for instance

research about the personalities of the 9/11 hijackers by Lawrence Wright and Terry McDermott; yet the traits attributed to Atta and his peers in literature also derive their purchase from a well-established discourse on repressed, deviant, and discontented Muslim men.

It is thus not surprising that terrorist literature, unclothing the fictional perpetrators, often depicts these characters as deviating from supposedly normal sexual and social behavior. Often stiff and unbending, they resent women, reject sexual contact with them, and tend to struggle with their own sexuality. The terrorists of recent literature are dissatisfied and indeed emasculated, as Michael Kimmel puts it in a key text on the mindset and background of violent, apparently deranged human beings, comparing Mohamed Atta, Timothy McVeigh, Osama bin Laden, and Adolf Hitler.

Michael Kimmel asserts in “Gender, Class, and Terrorism” that the failure to succeed in his profession aggravated Mohamed Atta’s sense of humiliation and emasculation (B11). A homophobic society discouraging sexual diversity, Kimmel argues, can implant fear and insecurity in a homosexual man, forcing him to search for a suitable outlet; thus are potentially engendered resentment and violence. Kimmel’s thesis – and Jasbir Puar’s rebuttal, which I will summarize shortly – address the prevalent but contested notion that behavioral codes and, specifically, Islamic norms create a seedbed for terrorism.

In his article, “Gender, Class, and Terrorism”, published in February 2002 in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Michael Kimmel compares in a bold analysis the criminal minds of McVeigh, Hitler, Atta (and, in less detail, Osama bin Laden). He suggests that

each of these three men struggled with their respective society's expectations, resorting to violence in an attempt to compensate for their own failings *as men*. They all may have been homosexuals, unable to come out of the closet due to the hegemonic heteronormativity in their societies; what is relevant, Kimmel writes, "is not the possible fact of Hitler's or Atta's gayness, but the shame and fear that surround homosexuality in societies that refuse to acknowledge sexual diversity." Kimmel maintains that gender carries even greater significance for a construction of psychograms of the triad: "What unites Atta, McVeigh, and Hitler is not their repressed sexual orientation but gender – their masculinity, their sense of masculine entitlement, and their thwarted ambitions. They accepted cultural definitions of masculinity, and needed someone to blame when they felt that they failed to measure up." With apparent satisfaction, Kimmel adds: "All three failed at their chosen professions" (B11).

Jasbir Puar counters Kimmel's arguments in her complex and influential work, *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), maintaining that Kimmel presents a skewed, imprecise perception of sexual norms across the world. According to Puar, Kimmel ignores cultural differences between individual countries in South Asia and the Middle East, as he assumes the prevalence of a heteronormative gender regime across the Arab and Islamic world. Kimmel claims with respect to the hijackers: "Central to their political ideology is the recovery of manhood from the emasculating politics of globalization" (B11). In Puar's view, Kimmel thus "universalizes the plight of emasculated manhood through essentializing a global heteromale identity and presuming the global hegemony of a normative sex-gender-desire triad, not to mention a crude Marxist

version of class affinity.” “Once again,” Puar writes, “there is a misreading of gender in Afghanistan as strictly heteronormative, as distinct from a mixture of homosocial and heterosocial milieus.” Avoiding Kimmel’s error of reducing Atta’s socialization to his time in Afghanistan, Puar adds: “This, of course, does not even begin to attend to Atta’s time in Germany, nor his upbringing in Cairo” (58).

These theoretical interventions, echoed, resisted, and sharpened by the texts analyzed in my dissertation, highlight the terrorist’s very difference from the West, but also his vulnerability. Similarly, the emphasis on the Muslim terrorist’s inhibited, non-normative sexuality in contemporary short stories, plays, and novels signifies the status of radical Islamists and Muslims in general as alien to the American, Western body politic. Of course, the selected texts do not draw a straight line from sexual despair or emotional discontent to violence, but they invite such readings by incorporating specific experiences or emotions into the portrait of the terrorist. Allan Havis’s play is arguably an exception, as one of the characters claims that Atta’s penchant for violence obviously springs from an unfulfilled life of frustrations (*Three Nights in Prague* again and again reveals Atta’s bitterness and aggression), from a “scar inside the Arab mind” (219).

In other works of terrorist literature, the reader has to grasp together diverse elements to create a meaningful sequence. In Sherman Alexie’s *Flight*, Abbad, who crashes a plane into Chicago, reveals to the main protagonist Jimmy that his wife is in control at home, and he also recounts a humiliation inflicted by an American flight instructor – who insulted him by calling him a “sand nigger” (111). Abbad’s revelations, while not explicitly indicating that male powerlessness and the suffering of personal

insults produce terrorist acts, reiterate common motifs or discursive patterns about Muslims and thus function as narrative prefigurations of Abbad's murder-suicide.

In Dubus's *The Garden of Last Days*, sexuality, physicality, and family are likewise entwined with violence and terror. The protagonist Bassam, as Birgit Däwes notes in *Ground Zero Fiction*, is "both repelled and fascinated by the female American body" (268). Prior to embarking on the suicide mission of September 11, he visits a strip club, where he produces wads of cash in a VIP room in an attempt to decipher the strippers' bodies and his own emotions. He demands nudity from the women, yet reveals no excitement once the women disrobe. Bassam's notion of sexuality has not taken final shape, and he covers his insecurity vis-à-vis the strippers with roughness. The roots of his discomfort and his determination to participate in a terrorist act can possibly be found in his childhood: the book suggests that constant anguish under a strict, unyielding father, combined with the observation of a public execution in his native Saudi-Arabia, traumatized and radicalized Bassam. It appears as if such plot elements are prerequisites, necessary in other words in order to render a violent act intelligible to the reader.

Similarly, the Mohamed Atta as imagined by Kobek suffers from a dominant, authoritarian father, who frequently bars him from leaving the house. In *ATTA*, the relationships of the terrorist-in-the-making with women are essentially confined to one brief encounter with a Palestinian refugee in Syria. Atta is reticent to even engage with her at first, but she takes the initiative and indeed forces him to confront his masculinity. As soon as she reveals her distrust in religion, however, he turns his back on

her – before their relationship enters a stage of intimacy. Atta is shunning both closeness and deviant behavior (deviant from orthodox Islam), even as he himself recognizes his own difference. His propensity for violence may therefore be rooted, according to the narrative, in the interconnected challenges of traumatic childhood experiences, an unrelenting faith, and his inability to negotiate beliefs with desires. As the fictionalized Atta's professional and personal ambitions are thwarted, he attempts to transcend this world. Immersing himself into Disney movies, absorbed by an enigmatic, imposing inner voice, he escapes into an imaginary realm, from which he ultimately exacts dreadful violence.

### **Fictional and Actual Terrorists: History and Literature**

*ATTA* and other texts of terrorist literature mingle documented incidents and fictionalized versions of actual individuals with fictitious occurrences, revealing the novel's status as a kind of historical fiction. Kobek's novel presents a storyworld that *approaches* events and actors of recent history. Assigning Atta to a space between fiction and reality/history, we can term him and his counterparts in the other texts variants of real-life terrorists in a "possible world" – here I am calling to mind possible-world theorists such as Lubomir Doležel. No historical evidence exists for many of the events and dialogues related in *ATTA*, but in the context of the novel, they could conceivably happen to the fictionalized hijacker.

Doležel wants to reintroduce the recently suspended differentiation between fiction and historiography. In *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History*, he recalls that Frank Kermode, Roland Barthes, Hayden White, and others have laid the foundation for the current understanding of history as a textual artifact. While Doležel admits the cogency of their claims regarding the similarity between the two fields, at least in terms of the textual level of narrative, he insists that there is a difference in terms of the “worlds” presented by novelists and historians:

Both fiction and historiography construct possible worlds. However, in their modes of construction, in their functions, and in their structural and semantic properties the two kinds of possible worlds show fundamental differences. The possible worlds framework enables us to reassert the status of historiography as an activity of *noesis*: its possible worlds are models of the actual past. Fiction making is an activity of *poiesis*: fictional worlds are imaginary possible alternatives to the actual world. (viii)

One may now claim that Doležel ignores historical fiction (which arguably encompasses at least some of the works of terrorist literature I am examining), a genre that may also seem to engender models of the actual past. Doležel addresses this issue, however, insisting on the difference between fiction and historiography:

A possible world in which counterparts of historical persons cohabit, interact, and communicate with fictional persons is not a historical world.

Fictional and historical worlds are inhabited, not by real, actual people, but by their possible counterparts. Yet there is a major difference between the fictional



and the historical treatment of transworld identity. Fiction makers practice a radically nonessentialist semantics; they can alter all, even the basic, individuating properties of the actual-past persons when transposing them into a fictional world. Verisimilitude is a requirement of a certain poetics of fiction, not a universal principle of fiction making. (36-37)

While a historian is thus expected to rely on documented evidence – though she may not always do so and indeed may fill in gaps with her conjectures – the same is not necessarily true for a fiction writer. Readers and critics, however, tend to demand historical accuracy in fiction and even point out errors and gaps if they oppose the political or cultural gestures the text is making on account of these alterations of history; Doležel perhaps underestimates the force of readers and critics faulting a writer for his work's historical imprecision.

Similarly, as I will further explicate in Chapter 3, the choice to include the fictionalized version of an actual terrorist may impose particular restrictions on the author, or at least carry specific challenges. As terrorist literature constructs a possible world that presents the face, the mind of the Other, a process of identification is set in motion – the evil Other obtains a mind, a face; recalling Lévinas, Georgina Banita asserts that the face as the “touchstone of ethical thinking” renders it impossible to remain indifferent to the Other (Banita, *Plotting Justice* 257). The intense emotions that the actual terrorists evoke certainly influence fiction writers, and the depiction of the terrorists thus does not occur in as “free” of a space as Doležel's reflections imply.

It is perhaps as a result of the restraints on historical fiction that uses the names of historical persons that writers such as DeLillo, Dubus, and (in a different framework) Updike and Alexie center their writings on fictitious terrorists. They at least partially separate the character from the charged discourse surrounding the historical Atta and the other actual hijackers of September 11. While I agree with some of Doležel's arguments about distinctions between modes of addressing history – incorporating fictitious characters alongside versions of actual people, for instance, is at least more acceptable and common in fiction than in historiography – I am thus more hesitant to agree with all of his concepts, especially when we consider terrorist literature in the framework of historical fiction.<sup>xxvii</sup>

In both fiction and historiography, we certainly encounter the attempt of the author or the invitation to the reader to form a coherent story from fragments of existence. The texts discussed in this dissertation narrativize the lives of terrorists, and in doing so, they examine our manner of casting a life story into the mold of a narrative, into a journey. According to Hayden White, speaking about historiography (which again, he likens to fiction), "Narrative becomes a *problem* only when we wish to give to *real* events the *form* of a story. It is because real events do not offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult" (4). Terrorist literature as a form of historical fiction<sup>xxviii</sup> transforms actual events into incidents transpiring in possible worlds and adds "new" events as well as the protagonist's dreams, desires, thoughts, and actions. Yet it does not necessarily by itself – explicitly that is – fashion a meaningful, coherent story from these various events in the fictionalized or fictitious perpetrator's life. It is up to

the reader, or the community of readers, to draw connections between diverse components of the narrative, thus endowing the narrative (and the terrorist) plot with coherence and meaning. Historical fiction about terrorist attacks arguably arises, and I again borrow here from Hayden White's discussion of historiography's penchant for narrativization, "out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary" (23). Alexie's and Updike's writings, while not historical fiction per se (aside from the first sections of *Flight*, which I do not analyze in depth), likewise spring from a similar keenness to discover order in a sequence leading to a transgressive, unfathomable act, and they certainly ignite that very desire in the readers.

### **Transparent Minds?**

In the process of tying together different passages of a work of terrorist literature to arrive at a meaningful arrangement, the reader inevitably engages with the protagonist's mindset. While all fiction arguably capitalizes on the audience's "evolved cognitive eagerness to construct a state of mind behind a behavior," to quote the key contention of Lisa Zunshine's pioneering study *Why Do We Read Fiction?*, fiction depicting perpetrators presents a special case (25). In a process of emplotment, terrorist literature assembles feelings, convictions, and thoughts that may then be subsumed into a narrative explicating a violent act, an act begging the question of motivation; the

interlacing of terrorist plot and narrative plot derives from and exploits the human impulse to create an explanatory framework for any behavior, especially violent deeds.

Terrorist literature allows (imaginary) access to enigmatic, purportedly evil personalities. “We like reading fiction,” Zunshine proclaims, “because it lets us try on different mental states and seems to provide intimate access to the thoughts, intentions, and feelings of other people in our social environment (even if those people do not really exist and the social environment that we share with them is an illusion)” (25). Curiously, the texts I examine in the following chapters provide access to people with whom we do not endeavor to be associated, whom we are not keen on counting as part of our social environment. As I have indicated, what distinguishes these works is precisely this tension between accessing the terrorist through a fictional representation, configuring him as a temporary “guest” in a Western society both hospitable and hostile, and framing him as different.

This representation of the terrorist primarily occurs through a more distanced characterization and a rather intimate thought presentation, both of which address the character’s disposition (see Alan Palmer 43). At other times, the terrorist's character or disposition has to be inferred from external manifestations, for example the character’s comportment and speech (especially in Havis’s play, this is a key aspect of course), other characters’ verdicts (*Three Nights in Prague* and *The Garden of Last Days* are good examples), or from the terrorist's own first-person narration (solely in *ATTA* and to a limited extent in *Terrorist*). With the exception of sections of Kobek’s novel, the narrator

assumes an extradiegetic position: he or she “is situated outside any of the diegetic levels of a narrative” (Abbott 231).

The consciousness of the terrorist – his convictions and desires for example – as well as his physical sensations are therefore conveyed through a range of stylistic devices. One common technique for making the mind transparent is what Alan Palmer terms “thought report” (13) and Dorrit Cohn calls “psycho-narration” (11-12); these phrases refer to a narrator discussing a character’s mind in a form of indirect speech, usually rendered in a rather formal style separating the language from that of the character. Palmer’s example reads as follows: “The train pulled away. He wondered why he was still waiting for her” (13). Or in Updike’s *Terrorist*: “Ahmad fears these superfluous sentences will not be understood, and he blushes, there in the dark” (192).

Palmer’s other two categories are direct thought (quoted monologue for Cohn), a presentation of consciousness in first person without any tags, and free indirect thought (Cohn’s narrated monologue), a third-person narration of consciousness expressed in the language of the character. This last technique appears like a monologue in its vocabulary, but it maintains the grammatical form of a thought report. A quoted monologue, in Cohn’s terms, would be: “Am I late?” In psycho-narration, this could be rendered as: “He wondered if he was late.” The same phrase as a narrated monologue sits in between these two other versions: “Was he late?” (see Cohn 105).

Unlike Cohn and Palmer assert, the distinction between thought report and free indirect thought is not always an easy one, and it appears that a mixture of the first and the last form is common in terrorist literature. Consider the following two examples,

which blend the vocabulary of the character with more formal vocabulary closer to standard narration – avoiding colloquialism, exclamations, and other elements associated with direct thought or quoted monologue: “Bassam does not look at her. And he will not look at her. The time for looking is over. The time of living so haram is through. ... The curtain is parted by one of the men paid to protect these whores ...” (*The Garden of Last Days* 260). Bassam’s emotions at the end of a night at a strip club are verbalized in third-person narration, but the use of the Arabic word for “forbidden” and of a derogatory English term to denote the nude dancers reveals that this is Bassam’s voice, not that of the extradiegetic narrator. While this juxtaposition seems to present the passage as an example of free indirect thought, the fact that Bassam’s thoughts are rendered in mostly correct English and does not include questions or exclamations – typical of a reproduction of a fictional character’s stream of thoughts – moves it closer to thought report.

In one of the analyzed texts, Kobek’s *ATTA*, we encounter a blend of techniques. In half of its chapters, the novel employs direct thought or quoted monologue, fusing the narrator’s consciousness “with the consciousness he narrates” (Cohn 26). In the other chapters, thought report and free indirect thought prevail, but again these two modes are sometimes difficult to parse from each other. Intrigued by the *Jungle Book* movie, Atta decides to read a critical biography of Walt Disney: “Atta sits at a wooden table and reads of Hollywood’s Dark Prince. The book tells him many things. Of Disney’s hate for Jews, a personal virtue of which the author thoroughly disapproves” (61).<sup>xxix</sup> None of this appears to be an example for free indirect thought; it does not read like a

monologue in terms of its vocabulary. However, the last sentence excludes words that would indicate that this is the narrator speaking; instead, Atta's voice and beliefs are articulated in this sentence without the extradiegetic narrator's intervention – as would be the case in an ordinary thought report such as the following, alternative sentence: "Atta deems Disney's hate for Jews a personal virtue."

The three techniques therefore cannot always be clearly demarcated. What is evident in these examples of terrorist literature, however, is that the seemingly intimate access to a character's emotions and thoughts is coupled with a distancing effect, creating a gap between narrator and character (as well as between character and reader). With the techniques of psycho-narration and a modified narrated monologue predominating, terrorist literature eschews the greater identification that may accompany first-person narration. To be sure, *any* form of focalization – and any of the three modes of thought presentation described here – can discredit the focalized character's beliefs and his reliability; yet the added effect of the narratorial distancing, this acknowledgment by the narrator (and implied author) of not quite inhabiting the mind of the terrorist, reveals the critical import of the utilization of psycho-narration/thought report and narrated monologue/free indirect thought.

The choice of techniques in terrorist literature therefore confirms my argument that the texts vacillate between defamiliarizing or exteriorizing the terrorist and empathizing with or attempting to apprehend this Other. In other words, the two excerpts as well as many other passages in the analyzed works illustrate that the narration of the fictional terrorist's consciousness both attaches the narrative to the

perpetrator and frequently – through the attribution of offensive, unusual, or simply foreign vocabulary – affirms his alterity. The texts of terrorist literature thus, to return to the language of hospitality, “host” the terrorist but also reveal his hostility.

Consequently, the different forms of thought representation contribute to the othering of the terrorist, but they also show the terrorist’s view of Western (primarily American) society as a hostile, “other” entity from their perspective. In this doubling of visions of alterity, the teleological perspective linking the terrorist’s contemplations to the inevitable conclusion of the terrorist act (in most of the texts) becomes palpable. To put it differently, the objectives of the terrorists or their motivations for the violent act are indicated in dialogues as well as rare descriptive portrayals articulated by the extradiegetic narrator, but they are also directly or indirectly reflected in vocabulary integrated into representations (rendered in different techniques) of the terrorist’s thought process. The texts thus frequently relinquish the characterization of the character planning and/or committing a violent act to his “own voice”, unveiling his intentions and principles. In sum, the terrorist plot and its context is primarily embedded in conversations amongst characters as well as in implicit characterizations via the imaginary terrorist (whether in first-person or third-person), not in detached portrayals.

I will delineate this process over the following chapters, ending this chapter with a brief comment on the depiction of protagonist Ahmad’s physical development at the outset of Updike’s *Terrorist*: “In the year past he has grown three inches, to six feet – more unseen materialist forces, working their will upon him. He will not grow any taller,



he thinks, in this life or the next. *If there is a next*, an inner devil murmurs. What evidence beyond the Prophet's blazing and divinely inspired words proves that there is a next?" (5). The quoted excerpt from the novel begins with an account about the appearance of the character, but this apparently neutral statement is immediately refracted by religious rhetoric, exemplifying the character's immersion in Islamic doctrine or principles. The passage then divulges Ahmad's secret, largely repressed doubts about his belief system. Importantly, the narrative approaches this would-be-terrorist by using free indirect thought or narrated monologue, demonstrating the character's alterity through his language, moving in the shadow of the plot as it were. Aiding in the creation of a conceptual framework that makes violence intelligible, the mode of rendering consciousness is evidently a significant aspect in terrorist literature's configuration of the (would-be)perpetrator as accessible and alien.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> These terms simplify matters, of course. Islam, after all, is part of the West. Moreover, Islamic principles are interpreted differently by individual Muslims and they are interpreted differently by particular Muslim societies (see Roy 10). The actual ambiguity and openness of the Qur'an and the embeddedness of Islam in given cultures (see Roy 25) finds some recognition in terrorist literature, as the radical imam in *Terrorist* and Kobek's Atta – in the role of teacher in a Hamburg mosque – lose followers on account of their fundamentalist teachings. In passages from Dubus's *The Garden of Last Days* for example, it is evident that a less devout Muslim such as Bassam's father is equated with a more moderate interpretation of Islam. In short, peaceful but observant Muslims who may offer their own specific interpretations of Islam's sacred text(s) are largely absent. Conversely, not all of the perpetrators described in terrorist literature are following the same strict regime that the fictionalized Mohamed Atta pursues. The perpetrators are tied together primarily by the plot and by a network of fundamentalists; some of them, including Ziad Jarrah in *ATTA* or Tariq in Dubus's novel, rather superficially subscribe to a specific Islamic ideology – which is inflexible and at odds with the desires of young men.

<sup>ii</sup> Culturalist approaches “overemphasize the role of Islam in contemporary societies” and “fail because they see a culture as a homogeneous set of values” (Roy 14, 15). In terrorist literature, cultural differences between, for example, a Syrian, an Egyptian, and a Lebanese Muslim are barely integrated into the texts, but individual terrorists for instance in *ATTA* or *The Garden of Last Days* do take diverse approaches to the adherence of Islamic principles; this variety indicates in terrorist literature not only the diversity of values among Muslims but arguably – and perhaps primarily – the lack of coherence and discipline among the hijackers in the face of the supposed enemy. In my dissertation, I examine how particular works of terrorist literature interrogate Islam's religious texts and doctrines as well as the protagonists' interpretations of these texts; terrorist literature clearly assigns a set of values and ideas to the fundamentalists, linking these to Islam.

<sup>iii</sup> Michael B. Smith's translation is as follows: “I therefore insist on the primacy of the well-intentioned relation toward the other. Even when there may be ill will on the other's part, the attention, the receiving of the other, like his recognition, marks the priority of good in relation to evil” (98).

<sup>iv</sup> The Other and God seem indeed related in Lévinas's work, both encouraging a transcendence beyond one's own small sphere, one's own being.

<sup>v</sup> The question arises here whether writing a literary text about Islamic terrorists – and interpreting this literature – carries with it an ethical responsibility. Lévinas's notion of responsibility, even love for the Other is challenged by terrorist literature.

<sup>vi</sup> The relevant passage in the English translation by Leon Rudiez reads as follows: “In the fascinated rejection that the foreigner arouses in us, there is a share of uncanny strangeness in the sense of the depersonalization that Freud discovered in it, and which takes up again our infantile desires and fears of the other – the other of death, the of woman, the other of uncontrollable drive. The foreigner is within us” (191).

<sup>vii</sup> Here is the sentence in the English translation: “How could one tolerate a foreigner if one did not know one was a stranger to oneself?” (182). Of course, Kristeva's writings are steeped in a psychoanalytical discourse, which I am barely touching in my dissertation. In the same passage, Kristeva writes: “Psychoanalysis is ... experienced as a journey into the strangeness of the other and of oneself, toward an ethics of respect for the irreconcilable” (182). It is not just a new conceptualization with the Other that Kristeva pursues, but a reevaluation of the Self as Other.

<sup>viii</sup> “The clash with the other, the identification of the self with that good or bad other that transgresses the fragile boundaries of the uncertain self, would thus be at the source of an uncanny strangeness whose excessive features, as represented in literature, cannot hide its permanent presence in ‘normal’ psychical dynamics” (188-9).

<sup>ix</sup> In his sharp study, *Globalized Islam*, Olivier Roy notes the tendency to regard the West as a homogeneous entity, which makes it easier to propose a clash of civilizations between the Christian,

enlightened West and militant, premodern Islam: “The perception of the opposition between the West and Islam in terms of a debate on ‘value’ (are they Western or universal?) is biased because Western values are seen in the West as being consensual, which is nonsense. ... The dominant and final consensus in the West is about institutions, not values” (14-5).

<sup>x</sup> A related question arises: is Atta an “Other” but not an “alien”, as it were? I am referring here to Waldenfels’s distinction between the Other and the alien. The concept of the Other merely highlights a difference between the one and the Other, Waldenfels writes: “From the viewpoint of a ‘third’ party who draws the distinction, both sides are at the same distance, just as in the case of the judge or the arbitrator who makes a neutral decision, standing above the parties involved” (7). The alien, however, stands elsewhere, he/she “arises from elsewhere” and refers to the Self, “to myself or to ourselves” (7). Waldenfels states that the alien is outside our sphere, whereas the Other can be in our sphere but is simply not me, not us. Alienness, he seems to say, is a more radical otherness. Somewhat confusingly, he uses the two terms almost interchangeably in the remainder of his lecture.

<sup>xi</sup> The drawing of boundaries to define the Self and solidify power is an impulse ingrained in human psychology and politics. With a nod to Carl Schmitt and Derrida, Chantal Mouffe points out that “in order to construct a ‘we’ it must be distinguished from a ‘them’, and that means establishing a frontier, defining an ‘enemy.’” Each community therefore delineates a “permanent ‘constitutive outside,’” an exterior to the community that makes its existence possible” (114). After September 11, the U.S. and other countries such as Britain arguably created such an *us vs. them* distinction, with the terrorists as threatening Others that – supposedly – solidified the “us” community. The terrorist became the absolute enemy, the enemy of humanity even: UN Secretary General Kofi Annan asserted that the events of September 11 were an “attack on humanity, and humanity must respond as one”; he thus appeared to exclude the attackers from the human community (qtd. in Houen 5).

<sup>xii</sup> What is denoted by the metonymy or code of 9/11 was not solely an American catastrophe; it was a global event “with industries, financial markets, jobs, and political alliances being immediately affected worldwide,” in Alex Houen’s words (5). The events of September 11 affected diplomatic relations, security measures, and streams of capital around the world; in the United States, Afghanistan, and Iraq (and in other countries as well) the attacks and the reactions to them led to thousands of deaths and injuries. The victims of the attacks themselves came from 86 countries. Aside from the diversity of the victims and the global consequences of 9/11, the incident itself, Mark Juergensmeyer writes, “was global in its impact, in large part because of the worldwide and instantaneous coverage of transnational news media” (30).

<sup>xiii</sup> Roy also offers his thoughts on the now well-established concept that terrorists and fundamentalists benefit from globalization. He traces the process of deterritorialization and deculturalization of Islam as a both a source and intended goal of internationally operating fundamentalism. Muslim religious identity is increasingly defined “beyond the very notion of culture” – there is supposedly only one specific Muslim culture (24). Fundamentalism is therefore “both a product and an agent of globalisation, because it acknowledges without nostalgia the loss of pristine cultures and sees as positive the opportunity to build a universal religious identity, delinked from any specific culture, including the Western one perceived as corrupt and decadent – a constant topic of fundamentalist literature. But maybe this last twist is the real victory of westernization” (25).

<sup>xiv</sup> Roy also criticizes this culturalist approach, which confuses “Islam as a religion” with “Muslim culture” (10). Terrorism as well as other challenges faced by and arising in Muslim communities is explained by outside observers primarily in terms of Islam – falsely so, Roy notes. But fine distinctions between Islamic principles and Muslim communities are seldom made in political literature – or in terrorist fiction.

<sup>xv</sup> Of course this is an artificial distinction – Western discourse and Western media is far from homogeneous and as I have stressed, Muslims actively participate in Western discourse. However, I am speaking of broad trends that are also visible in contemporary Anglophone literature, including fiction and drama about so-called terrorists.

<sup>xvi</sup> The participation of Muslims in Western communities, the idea of Islam as part and parcel of the West's texture, is addressed especially in Updike's *Terrorist* and Alexie's 9/11 writings, even though they also consider Muslim Americans as exterior to American society.

<sup>xvii</sup> Even if they appear to reject condescending, generalizing views of Muslims, post-9/11 terrorist fiction still remains, as Foucault may have phrased it, implicated in hegemonic discourse; this implication is evident in the fact that most of these works choose to endow their protagonists with a deeply religious agenda and identity – instead of aligning them with a political movement (with political Islam that is).

<sup>xviii</sup> In an aside, Almond adds that both Islam and Native American cultures have been seen as “chronologically outside Europe”; they are “denied any notion of development or *Geschichte* [history]” (11).

<sup>xix</sup> Other fictional Muslim terrorists such as Amis's Atta seem actually less attracted by Qur'anic thought than by fundamentalism's socio-political ideology – and its culture of death.

<sup>xx</sup> Richard Martin and Abbas Barzegar offer a useful summation of the diverse definitions of the term Islamism: “It usually refers to those Muslim social movements and attitudes that advocate the search for more purely Islamic solutions (however ambiguous this may be) to the political, economic, and cultural stresses of contemporary life” (2). What follows are several other conceptualizations of the term, all from Martin and Barzegar's volume. Islamism is associated, in Hassan Hanafi's words, with “terrorism, violence, backwardness, fanaticism, oppression, and so forth,” but it seems to be in scholarly circles primarily a term indicating political activists seeking greater influence of Islamic thought (65). There is an “Islamist spectrum,” to quote Graham Fuller, which ranges from moderate to violent Islamists, from those aligned with Communism to groups supporting a form of democracy. All of them pursue the goal of increasing Islam's significance and visibility in society, albeit with very different means (56). Expressing his disagreement with Fuller's definition of Islamism, Daniel Varisco writes in the same volume: “Fuller, like many Western commentators, would prefer that contemporary Islam follow suit with the political trajectory of contemporary Christianity in the West. (...) As long as not becoming secular in the American or European sense is a major criterion for being labeled an Islamist, the faith of Islam will continue to be misread as political rather than moral” (37).

<sup>xxi</sup> A few of the selected texts of course culminate in “action” by describing the terrorist attacks of September 11 from the perspective of a perpetrator; action here ends the narrator's life and completes the narration.

<sup>xxii</sup> In the Borradori interview, Derrida likewise insists in an aside that September 11 “is also, still, and in many respects, a distant effect of the Cold War itself, before its ‘end,’ from the time when the United States provided training and weapons, and not only in Afghanistan, to the enemies of the Soviet Union, who have now become the enemies of the U.S.” (92).

<sup>xxiii</sup> Moran echoes Dostoevsky's claim that the terrorists' destructive nihilism is in part the result of science, which has taken the “*values* out of the human decision making process” (3, italics his).

<sup>xxiv</sup> Hermione incidentally works for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), an institution unable to thwart Ahmad's terrorist attack (Jack Levy and Ahmad's own recognition of the Qur'an's supposed peacefulness prevent the attack). The DHS is one of the pillars of America's multi-faceted reaction to September 11, 2001. In his essay on “Autoimmunity”, also included in Borradori's *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, Derrida writes that the U.S. has indeed become a repressive state after 9/11 in an effort to protect itself. He claims that the extreme measures taken by the U.S. in response to the attacks have worked to “destroy its own protection, to immunize itself against its own immunity” (124).

<sup>xxv</sup> According to Said, Orientalism is an academic designation, a corporate institution and discourse, and a “style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) the ‘Occident’” (2). Because of Orientalism, Said writes, the “Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action” (3). If the problematic facet of Orientalist literature is the refusal to allow the Oriental to speak, then are not all texts authored by Westerners, especially by non-Muslims, Orientalist? How can an author allow the other to speak? How can an author avoid speaking for the other, thus in effect silencing him or her? At the risk of being prescriptive, I suggest that responsible fiction may

consist in a self-reflexive gesture exposing the problem inherent in discussing the Other; moreover, such non-Orientalist fiction possibly reveals the relationship between discourse and power, between language and power inherent in speaking about the Other. Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as well as Waldman's *The Submission* are two works that accomplish this feat.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Even the anonymous Syrian-American suicide bomber in "Can I Get a Witness?", though only briefly described, appears compelled to commit an attack by an inner voice, a motif also associated for example with the fictionalized Atta in Kobek's novel.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Another key difference is of course the existence in some fiction of entirely improbable occurrences: "The fiction makers are free to call into fictional existence any conceivable world. The borderline between physically possible and physically impossible worlds presents no obstruction to their imagination. They are equally capable of creating physically impossible worlds, called supernatural or fantastic, and physically possible worlds, called natural or realistic, as well as any combination thereof" (Doležel 37).

<sup>xxviii</sup> Strictly speaking, Alexie's short story, the relevant section of his novel, and Updike's novel do not fall into this category.

<sup>xxix</sup> Importantly, the narrative here subtly creates an image of Atta without resorting to explicit judgment. Characterization occurs implicitly.

## ***Chapter 2***

### ***The Inhuman Face?***

#### ***Versions of Mohamed Atta by***

#### ***Allan Havis, Jarett Kobek, and Martin Amis***

*“Life inside my father’s building is like a trap, like being with an amplifier of discord.”*

--- Jarett Kobek, *ATTA* (85)

#### **Atta’s Pain**

Since September 11, 2001, a small number of writers have imagined and reconstructed episodes in the life of Mohamed Atta, the ringleader of the hijackers. In this chapter, I will examine the three most extensive engagements with Atta in contemporary Anglophone literature. Martin Amis’s short story “The Last Days of Mohamed Atta”, Allan Havis’s play *Three Nights in Prague*, and Jarett Kobek’s novel *ATTA* present possible, fictional versions of the actual terrorist’s personality, combining references to historical events with configurations of Atta’s consciousness.<sup>i</sup> Aside from connecting the terrorist, similar to the other texts analyzed in this dissertation, to a set of Islamic, fundamentalist principles about appropriate moral and social behavior, what these exemplars of terrorist literature have in common is the transformation of a historical figure embodying evil into a tangible entity with petty, human problems.

The three works veritably reduce Atta's from a haunting enigma into an aberrant human, marred by the inability to perceive the import of his actions. The reduction and perhaps humanization of Atta is accompanied by a depiction of his intense misogyny, callous cruelty, and in fact a reductive worldview, traits more pronounced in Atta than in the characters of the texts discussed in my Chapters 3 and 4. The Muslim protagonist's brutality and prejudice is associated with an inner pain linked to a repressive Islamic culture that struggles with its unresolved tensions, a standard motif in terrorist literature. A crucial component of this repression is Atta's apparent failure to come to terms with his sexuality.

The fictionalized Atta's relationship to gender, sexuality, and corporeality figures prominently in the three texts. His body seems to be a burden to the Egyptian, in its frailty and its divergence from "normality" (he is, for instance, appalled by his own, apparently monstrous face). These inner struggles are interwoven with his failure to embrace humanity. Cast as a lonely figure, his emotional distance from others represents a moral distance as well – an expanse separating this "monster," as he is called by a character in Havis's drama (226), from "us" and indeed from human values.

9/11 literature has Atta spew hatred at America, the West, and Jews, as if to demonstrate the anti-Western, anti-Semitic core of Muslim terrorism. Yet this aversion against Islam's alleged enemies forms only one explanation for the attacks embedded in the three texts. Strikingly, Atta – or his different versions – does not seem to be convinced of the ultimate meaning and value of his actions. Imagining Atta's mindscapes, each of the texts depict a distressed, torn man, uncertain of his own

identity and aims. Does this uncertainty perhaps render Atta more accessible, more human?

The texts analyzed in Chapter 3 and 4 primarily focus on fictitious terrorists without historical model, arguably in order to evade at least in part the constraining, pervasive discourse about evil, inhuman terrorists; they can humanize the protagonists (endowing them with ordinary emotions enabling identification) precisely because these characters are not directly bound to images of the actual perpetrators of 9/11. While imagining the life of a historical persona, the very face of the attack in fact, the works by Kobek, Amis, and Havis likewise include moments of possible identification or perhaps pity, even presenting Atta as tender at times – and thus also vulnerable of course, a key facet of my discussion in this chapter.

Importantly, however, the three texts also yield to what might be the predominant conception of the 9/11 terrorist as excessively cruel, self-righteous, and indeed pitiless – illustrated by Atta's participation in and response to the murder of a pilot, a flight attendant, and a Czech youth, as described in the stories. Whereas most of the other narratives of terrorist literature incorporate moments of doubt, this fictionalized Atta does not seem to waver in his resolve, matching the severity of the actual Atta's visage, the most visible of the hijackers' faces. The three works may modify, ignore, and supplement the historical record, but they are tethered to the idea of the evil ringleader of September 11. Still, since Atta's embrace of violence and misogyny is also juxtaposed with descriptions of more comprehensible and familiar actions and emotions, forming a narrative gesture of humanization, the boundaries



separating the chapters are certainly permeable, reflecting a relationship of mutual clarification rather than clear distinction between the various sections and analyses.

Even within this one chapter on versions of Atta, the differences between texts are considerable of course. Atta dons a variety of garbs in the three works of post-9/11 literature discussed on the following pages; each text approaches the enigma of the engineer from Egypt with different emphases and distinct levels of complexity. Idiosyncrasies abound: Kobek has his fictionalized version of Atta analyze Disney movies, Havis sets him up with a Czech prostitute, and Amis portrays him as a cruel, hapless clown. Techniques of characterization vary as well: Kobek's novel provides detailed depictions of the fictionalized Atta's thought process through narrated monologue and quoted monologue (I use Cohn's and Palmer's terms interchangeably), while Havis's play naturally relies on dialogues and other characters' assessments of Atta; Amis's narrator intervenes by commenting about the character, otherwise primarily presenting the character's emotional landscape in embellished, even affected psycho-narration. A few passages of "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta", however, fall into the category of quoted monologue – they echo Atta's beliefs without obvious detachment from the character but they also render his consciousness in a formal vocabulary that cannot be ascribed to the character: "Here in the grotto of the mad clocksmith, was more cringing flesh and more blood – but manageably male. ... Killing was divine delight. And your suicide was just a part of the contribution you made – the massive contribution to death" (121-2).

The choice of technique to characterize the protagonist is in each case inextricably tied to the judgment and evaluation of the protagonist. Each work endeavors to reveal Atta as a human and as human, as a rather ordinary man, and each work incorporates the fictionalized Atta's perspective. In *Three Nights in Prague*, this "mimesis of consciousness" (see Cohn 9) involves dialogues revealing his beliefs and a monologue he delivers. In *ATTA*, half of the chapters consist of first-person narration whereas in the other chapters an extradiegetic narrator (not quite extradiegetic, as we will see) conveys the protagonist's disposition and emotions. "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" presents Atta's perspective in third-person narration.

As a result of this insight into the protagonist's imaginary mindscape, the fictionalized Atta becomes familiar to the reader or spectator: the terrorist turns into an accessible figure, less distanced than the standard post-9/11 media and political narrative of the evil terrorist has it. In certain moments, the audience is even invited to identify and empathize with a Mohamed Atta who is in bodily and emotional pain; his conflicts and struggles evoke compassion – and also highlight the supposed weakness of the terrorist. This portrayal incorporates an anti-Islamic rhetoric that frames the Muslim terrorist as lacking strength and personal freedom, apparently on account of the Islamic principles and cultural peculiarities that have shaped him and that are reflected in the three texts.

Short story, play, and novel thus undermine the apparent humanization and counter the fledgling subversion of dominant 9/11 narratives by depicting Atta as a weak, repressed, brutal, humorless, and misogynistic individual. The distance between

“us” and “them” alternately waxes and wanes. Or rather, approaching the “Other” also entails in these works the demonstration of the person’s non-normative or offensive disposition.

Strikingly, only Havis’s play devotes significant space to “us”, to the perspective of individuals outside the terrorist plot. The play’s Czech and Iraqi characters primarily reflect on Atta’s unusual behavior, his difference as it were. Curiously, Pavel and Dolni, the Czech father-son pair, also acknowledge their own fragility – they appear vulnerable as well. Dolni is sick and Pavel claims: “I know I’m a miserable European. Always in debt” (199). Atta responds to the perception of Dolni’s health problems with the offer of care and adoption; rather than proving his altruism, Atta, embodying a threatening Islam, arguably attempts to assume control over the physically and mentally struggling Dolni. Conversely, the European characters in the play consider Atta as a threat to be contained (218-223).

Such moments hinting at Western vulnerability are a fixture in terrorist literature – as well as 9/11 literature in general – but introspection and the consideration of possible roots of the attacks in Western policies are largely absent. Among the three works discussed in this chapter, it is again Havis’s play that constitutes an exception by engaging with the terrorist attacks’ geopolitical context. Palestinian politics, the role of the Muslim brotherhood, and the (second) Gulf War are all mentioned, though with little understanding of how American and European strategies regarding these issues may have affected the terrorist plot (202-6). Instead, the setting of some scenes near the Iraqi Embassy in Prague and the repeated association of Saddam Hussein with Al-

Qaeda demonstrate the play's subscription to a conspiracy theory about a supposed relationship between Iraq and Al-Qaeda, circumventing the notion of American and Western responsibility. The sole culpability of the perpetrators is a largely unquestioned claim in the three texts.

Pankaj Mishra's criticism of Don DeLillo's failure to address the terrorists' origins in his novel *Falling Man* applies to the group of texts assembled here as well: "But he remains strangely incurious about their pasts and their societies, and he makes little attempt to analyse, in the light of the biggest ever terrorist atrocity, the origin and appeal of political violence" (Mishra). With a couple of exceptions (the bizarre Disney motif in Kobek), political commentary is largely limited to references to Osama bin Laden's antics as well as a few statements and verbalized thoughts by the fictionalized Atta on Western and Jewish depravity. Amis certainly inserts his own, curious opinions on Islamism into the narrative, but only his non-fictional essays engage with complex questions of responsibility and blame vis-à-vis the attacks. In the short story, he rather bluntly and perhaps disingenuously insists on Islamism's cult of death as what he terms the "core reason" for the atrocious suicide-murder (see the fourth section of this chapter).

Accentuating a few facets of the fictionalized Atta, a few fragments of his imagined/imaginary life, the three works construct an idea of what characterizes a violent personality. They construct *one* violent personality, one particular terrorist; indeed, the sparse references to other fictionalized hijackers and Al-Qaeda members underpin Atta's difference or individuality. Struck by the idiosyncratic portrait of Atta in

Amis's short story, Martin Randall writes: "Thus, in many ways, Atta is entirely atypical in comparison with other jihadists and perhaps this representation speaks more of Amis's own literary concerns than of an attempt to understand the terrorist mind" (49). Havis, Kobek, and Amis do not construct an archetypal terrorist, but instead create a *possibility* (a term that I use to evoke the possible worlds theory, as outlined in this and the previous chapter). Each of the works presents a *possible biography* of an individual determined to employ violence and destroy lives.

While I have already outlined the parameters and import of this inside perspective on the terrorist, I will briefly recall some of my observations from the previous chapter. Each of the analyzed works revives the hijacker as a fictional character in order to venture on a journey into a terrorist's mind. The 9/11 ringleader extinguished not only the lives of others but also his own, burying his sentiments and beliefs, but while the actual Atta is thus absent, the fictionalized Atta in contrast assumes a striking presence in 9/11 literature. It is the body of the terrorist which, in the narratives and on stage, signifies both the factual basis of the works and their very belatedness: Atta has committed an atrocity, he has carried out his plans, and what remains for us today is the reconstruction of his life. This reconstruction becomes a vehicle to approach the terrorist; as Atta appears as a fictional body, he is transformed from a remote, incomprehensible figure, a monster even, into a human body. The humanization of a terrorist: a somewhat perilous and daring, even subversive endeavor considering the constant assertion, on the part of American (and other countries') media and government, of the otherness and evilness of terrorists.

The body of the terrorist also functions as a site of struggle with the supposed forces of evil; the body, in other words, serves as a target. Mishra notes that “[c]onstipation as well as sexual frustration torments Amis’s Mohammed Atta” – the body of the protagonist becomes the torturer-writer’s object (Mishra). Atta suffers in 9/11 literature, emotionally and physically. Aside from conflicts with his father, his sexual frustration, and frequent pain and discomfort, Atta fails to connect with society or societies around him. An outcast, he barely finds access to other human beings and remains a lonely and largely friendless figure in the three texts.

Seen as a metaphor, the portrayal of Atta as an injured, violent, repressed person demonstrates Islam’s own, intra-religious conflicts and it symbolizes the geopolitical role of Islamic terrorism in particular and of predominantly Muslim countries more broadly. The narratives of Atta presumably posit the anomaly of religious extremism and religiously dominated societies in an increasingly secular, democratic, “free” world.<sup>ii</sup> Islam is the culprit or enemy in a perceived clash of ideologies – Enlightenment versus Tradition – and the advocates of Islamic states are to be opposed, even in fiction and drama. Atta embodies the realm of theocracy and as such is characterized in mostly unsympathetic terms by Western writers, with some crucial moments of identification in between. Moreover, Atta’s corporeal discomfort implies internal problems in Muslim societies, ruled by governments depriving their citizens of fundamental rights. The terrorist’s repression of the Self – a struggle against his human nature – is mirrored by analogous social, cultural, and political processes in the Islamic world, on a larger scale.

Most strikingly, indeed, Havis, Kobek, and Amis all place the terrorist's weak, vulnerable body and the terrorist's vexed relationship to the female body at the center of their stories. They underscore not only his aggressiveness and cruelty but also his misogyny and his sexual anxieties, constructing the image of a man uncomfortable in and with his body and especially with women's bodies, which Atta considers impure and even threatening. His devotion to Islamism and to the vicious, violent plot bars him from close, physical contact with women. The three texts are in fact eager to intimate homosexual leanings on the part of their protagonist.

As the subsequent chapter on the novels by DeLillo, Updike, and Dubus will demonstrate, the Islamic terrorist in recent literature typically falls short of achieving the ideal of heteronormativity, corroborating Jasbir Puar's thesis of the always feminized, non-normative terrorist (see Chapter 1). According to Puar, contemporary discourse in the West imagines "a perversely sexualized Muslim population (pedophilic, sexually lascivious and excessive, yet perversely repressed) who refuse to properly assimilate" (20). At the same time that "Islam, the whole monolith of it, is often described as unyielding and less amenable to homosexuality than Christianity and Judaism," Muslims and in particular Muslim extremists are framed as sexually deviant, in a process that ascribes to them "Orientalist queernesses" (14, 25).

Whereas Puar is critical of reflexively associating (militant) Muslims with non-heteronormative habits and intolerant beliefs on gender and sexuality, Michael Kimmel identifies a narrative of failure, emasculation, and insecurity that Islamic terrorists share with other vilified men of history – an argument I have sketched in the previous chapter.

Kimmel considers gender, more precisely the cultural construction of gender, to be at the root of the violence committed by the 9/11 hijackers. In contrast to Puar, who scrutinizes a problematic Western discourse on the Muslim terrorist's conflicted sexuality, Kimmel attributes a problematic view of gender roles and male success to the terrorist.

Many of the works of terrorist literature subscribe to – or retell – this same narrative in their depictions of perpetrators. Among the authors discussed in this chapter, Amis and Havis in particular subscribe to stereotypical, even Orientalist images of the abnormal Muslim, giving their narratives purchase in the endeavor to demonstrate the absolute difference of Islamic terrorists, whose belief system is incompatible with tolerant Western democracies. Kobek's novel likewise depicts a man eager to escape his fantasies and overcome his perceived failures in life. It is in moments which describe the Muslim terrorist in terms of his serrated sense of self that these texts reveal their indebtedness to a familiar discourse on Islam and militant Muslim males. The fictionalized Atta is inseparable from the texts and images about Islamic terrorism that have been circulating in the wake of the attacks. Unless we take a strictly textual, formalistic approach, we have to recognize that these stories, in Frank Abbott's words, express "symptomatically the conditions out of which it arises" (105).

The similarities among the three primary texts do not undercut my argument that 9/11 literature assembles distinct types of terrorists, rather than suggesting the existence of "one violent mindset". Besides the main character Atta, each text analyzed in this and the subsequent chapter references other fictional terrorists, whose



motivations and beliefs differ from the protagonist's.<sup>iii</sup> The origin and intensity of their political opinions and their commitment to the plot distinguish the protagonists from each other. In Amis's short story, for instance, Atta reminisces about Ziad Jarrah inappropriate sexual relations and reveals his disdain for his collaborator, who does not shirk intimate relationships with the other sex. Andre Dubus likewise intuits marked differences in the moral and religious outlook of the terrorists portrayed in his novel.

Islamic terrorists in fiction therefore do not constitute a uniform group, though they share a set of habits, beliefs, challenges, and motivations – a loathing of the West, conflicted sexuality, an anti-Semitic attitude, and a determination to commit an act of violence. Their thirst for death and their supposedly evil nature are not based in a single point of origin; similarly, the writers do not create one uniform evil character – in most cases in fact, the protagonists' monstrosity beyond the terrorist attack itself seems hard to grasp. This uniqueness of each terrorist in 9/11 literature complicates the notion of an easily identifiable, evil Other with fixed traits.

Curiously, in their resentment of the West, the terrorists create themselves a uniform Other. Islam's encounter with its own Other, the West, engenders in the versions of Atta anger not introspection (in contrast to the characters described Dubus's and DeLillo's novels). In an exemplary moment addressing the antagonistic attitude of some Muslims towards the purportedly libertine West, the focalized protagonist in *ATTA* identifies the Disney company, a leitmotif in Kobek's novel, as the harbinger of American power: "Disney's arrogance assaults not only America, but the full world. Disney is the face of the Neo-Colonial. Gone are British and Belgian guns, the French

forgo fighting. In their place is a new dark prince, a man who brings Muslims to heel, conquers through blasphemy and seduction” (62).<sup>iv</sup>

The scenes that reveal Atta’s indignation with Disney as the symbol of neo-colonial, imperialist, depraved West certainly suggest a reason for the protagonist’s involvement in a terrorist plot. Yet it is up to Kobek’s readers to assume or form such linkages between thoughts and actions. In fact, Amis stands out as the one writer who explicitly states what impelled the hijackers to commit an atrocity, with his peers leaving the incomplete analysis of Atta’s rationale to the reader.

As Mishra notes, however, Amis likewise “fails to recognize that belief and ideology remain the unseen and overwhelming forces behind gaudy fantasies about virgins” (Mishra). Mishra indicates here that writers such as Amis, Updike, and De Lillo rely heavily on stereotypes of Muslims, incorporating into their stories the notorious concept of the untouched women waiting in paradise for the martyrs of Islam. Instead of engaging with contemporary narratives or arguments on the source of terrorism, the authors of the texts analyzed in the following chapters display a reductive obsession with physicality and the Islamists’ sexual preferences. These stories become a means of escaping political self-reflections in order to focus on the conflict within the Other: interrogating American and Western policies is replaced with an emphasis on repression and violence at the heart of Islamic radicalism in particular, and Islamic societies more generally.

In depicting the terrorists’ physical and emotional ordeals, the three stories frame Islamic extremism as an outcome of Islam’s incapability to accept diversity and

tolerance within its own communities. In this allegorical reading, aggressive acts against the outside ensue because the societies of the Middle East can neither endure internal disagreements, instead suppressing them or covering them up to avoid the acknowledgment of difference.<sup>v</sup>

### **One Possible Atta**

With September 11 starting to fade away from a recent event of the contemporary moment into history, the event has become part of the texture of remembrance in fiction; Mohamed Atta, then, has been transformed into a historical figure, a subject of historical fiction. Crystallizing and interrogating the discourse on terrorism and research on terrorists, “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta”, *ATTA*, and *Three Days in Prague* engage with the historical figure Atta, but also with the idea of what he is/was and what he represents. Examples of historical fiction, these three works focus on and focalize a fictionalized character with a (deceased) counterpart in the non-fictional world.

Considering the dearth of evidence on Atta’s motivations, they cannot simply rely on the historical record, nor are they bound to documentation. “The prime task of historical fiction,” Lubomír Doležel writes, “is to create fictional worlds that are alternatives to the model representations of the actual past; recall of historical knowledge is just a means of fictional-world construction” (85). Incorporating the

historical record on Mohamed Atta and his fellow conspirators, the three key texts of this chapter imagine an alternative Atta.

Historical fiction does not recreate history; it creates an alternative or possible world and thus also possible mindsets. Havis, Kobek, and Amis present one Mohamed Atta, one sensory and verbal manifestation of the actual hijacker. They do not endeavor a portrait strictly based on factual knowledge, along the lines what Walter Langer endeavored to accomplish in *The Mind of Adolf Hitler*, or – in a more creative but equally self-conscious fashion – Susan Griffin in “Our Secret” (on Heinrich Himmler). Unlike these last two authors, Havis, Kobek, and Amis do not need to defend or explain their (speculative, imaginative) presentations of Atta. They show an idea of the hijacker, with the actual Atta remaining outside and beyond the text.

At the same time and paradoxically, he is within the text, exists as a text, and is thus perhaps more intimately present than in Griffin’s and Langer’s texts, which attempt to engage with *the historical individual*, not merely *a version*.<sup>vi</sup> The fictionalized Atta embodies, from a Western perspective, the flaws and conflicts in Middle Eastern, Muslim societies, reflecting the demands of faith, which generate anguish and ultimately violence. Islam becomes a text and a fictional character – or, rather, it is materialized in text and character.

We certainly cannot hope to acquire a conclusive answer to the enigma either of Islamic terrorism or of the real Mohamed Atta’s motives by reading about a fictionalized Atta, just as Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* may not guide us to the actual Napoleon’s emotions and ideas.<sup>vii</sup> Historical fiction can, however, serve as a platform for engaging in

hypothetical musings on the contexts of an event that involved the historical persona; such narratives may then allow the reader to imagine and contemplate potentially unfamiliar or overlooked aspects of historical incidents and individuals – or they may inspire new interpretations of current phenomena. From a metadiscursive perspective, readers can infer from 9/11 literature which ideas, mental dispositions, and motivations have been ascribed to Islamic terrorists. Access to the fictionalized Atta, even though he is no more than a figment of the writers' imagination(s), does not simply encourage the reader to consider what drives a human mind to a violent act, but it reflects possibilities of configuring consciousness.

One note on my use of the term “fictionalized”: I speak of a fictionalized Atta to stress that the three texts imagine not a fictitious individual but a person who existed as a living human being. Untangling the perplexing relationship between characters evidently based on historical figures, Wolf Schmid suggests considering a literary “reproduction of the real historical figure” – Napoleon is not surprisingly his example – as a “mimesis” of the individual, as “a construction of a possible Napoleon” (31).<sup>viii</sup> The fictionalized Atta as well as characters such as Dubus's Bassam, who are modeled after terrorists, are meant to evoke real-life characters, as the choice of name and the setting indicate; the writers specifically reference an individual outside of the framework of the literary text. Framing their work as a novel, short story, or play, the writers configure imaginary versions of actual individuals, in the process modifying and supplementing the historical record, filling in gaps and integrating entirely fictitious characters.<sup>ix</sup>

## The Little Thing

Kobek's *ATTA*, published in September 2011, carries the distinction of being the only English-language novel to date that centers on Mohamed Atta. Nonetheless, *ATTA* is a relatively brief work and a quick read, as this fictional biography races through the stages of Atta's life, lingering only on a few episodes and incidents for more than a few pages. These episodes are recounted through the lens of Atta himself, or rather through the lens of the fictionalized Atta.

In half of the chapters of Kobek's novel, Atta acts as the first-person narrator, whereas in the other chapters he functions as the focalized character viewed by a non-intrusive, extradiegetic narrator. Rather than explicitly evaluating Atta's psyche and behavior (as Amis does for example), the novel supplies a characterization via a verbalization of Atta's actions and beliefs. The narrator does not completely vanish behind the screen of the focalizer Atta – he appears in phrases such as “Atta said” or “Atta thought” – but he remains “effaced” for much of the novel, to borrow a term from Dorrit Cohn's seminal 1978 study *Transparent Minds* (26).

Scarcely any information is available on the author of *ATTA*. The publisher's website presents him as the son of Turkish immigrants whose fiction has earned him a Pushcart-Prize nomination; his first novel is an experimental text on late 20<sup>th</sup>-century American culture (see “*ATTA*, Jarett Kobek”). Kobek's own website suggests that he has done research in the Middle East in preparation for the book; it also paints a picture of a writer-photographer-scholar interested in the occult.

*ATTA* has so far only garnered a few online reviews and interviews; no scholarly article or essay has addressed Kobek's work yet. The novel's interpretive history has thus just begun – unless the novel vanishes in the mass of September 11 fiction, among books of arguably lesser literary value such as Vladimir Chernozemsky's *Phase One After Zero* (2005), which likewise contains a character named Atta. On his blog "Balkans via Bohemia", Richard Byrne insists that the short novel is the best work of fiction on 9/11 (Byrne). According to Byrne, "retelling the story of 9/11 from Atta's point of view is not Kobek's only -- or even primary -- objective. One of *ATTA*'s most dazzling qualities is its amazing and thoroughly compelling (and simultaneous) transmogrification of familiar elements of Western culture -- Disney, slasher films -- **and** the critiques of it" (Byrne, emphasis his). Byrne is certainly correct in highlighting Kobek's commitment to presenting Atta's life as defined by a multifaceted engagement with Western culture. Rather than reducing his existence to an act of terror, Kobek adds complexity to our perception of a man whose public image has been unalterably shaped by his final deed.

*ATTA* invites the reader to construct a thread that binds this murderous act to the Egyptian's prior behavior and experiences. Of course, for any fictional story to be perceived as a coherent narrative, connections need to be formed – by the implied author and by the reader – between events that may not necessarily be linked. In *ATTA*, events in the hijacker's life are posited as a preparation for the 9/11 attacks; inevitably, his death becomes the climax and endpoint of the narrative plot and terrorist plot, so that his life becomes a prefiguration of his death.

Each stage in his life, each emotion, each encounter – as reconstructed or imagined by Kobek – is refracted through the prism of the September 11 attacks. The events of that day distort and even erase previous images presented of the protagonist, who ultimately remains a terrorist, even as he is shown in his roles as a son, a brother, a friend, and a colleague. Mohamed Atta's final, fatal act propels him into the category of terrorist, as he is defined solely by his end, by his suicide-murder, overshadowing and transforming his life up to the last day.

As the hijacker's life, as outlined in *ATTA*, is configured by his death, a telos is constructed. According to Christoph Bode, who draws in turn on Jürgen Habermas, "every narrative of a life labors under a suspicion: it may have submitted the past 'to the violence of a retrospective interpretation,' it may have used it for a purpose, namely to fabricate a telos for its life" (16). Reading Kobek's novel, we inevitably seek to discover on the pages a cause for Atta's decision to carry out a massive suicide attack. Similarly, in Havis's play and Amis's short story, we attempt to find reasons and explanations for Atta's act, even though the limited scope of these genres reduces our search to a few statements and scenes.

In *ATTA*, readers are presented with the entire arc of the hijacker's development, allowing – forcing – us to identify a chain of events and possibly one or more decisive incidents. As Bode writes, "for the production of sense and the generation of meaning (...) there must actually be no coincidences, seen from the end of the day." More precisely, "narrative coincidences are retrospectively transformed into a chain of causes and effects, giving rise to the illusion of fate and predestination" (16). We seek causality



and meaning in the sequence of encounters leading up to an event such as September 11. Do Atta's acts make sense retrospectively? By incorporating scenes about Atta's increasing devotion to Islam, his conflicts with his father, or his isolation in Hamburg, Kobek's novel certainly compels us to grasp these incidents as contributing factors to the protagonist's participation in a murderous plot. In the mostly teleological narratives of terrorist literature, the cataclysmic event endows seemingly minor scenes with significance; though terrorist literature asks the reader to place each incident on a narrative sequence leading to the attack, the creation of such a sequence is always a process of the imagination, of conjecture.

In Kobek's reconstruction and imagination of Atta's life, the Egyptian's trajectory (narrated in a non-linear fashion) moves from a middle-class upbringing in Cairo to a period of studying architecture in Hamburg, accompanied by research in the Syrian city of Aleppo and followed by a position at an architectural firm in Germany; in his final years before the attacks, Atta lives in Florida to attend flight school. Along with presenting these partly fictitious and partly fictionalized – i.e. entirely imaginary or based on historical research – account of Atta's life stations in Egypt, Germany, Syria, and the United States, Kobek guides his Atta between the nodes of Islam, popular Western culture, (neo-)colonialism, and urban architecture. *ATTA* evidently borrows and transforms numerous passages from Terry McDermott's *Perfect Soldiers: The Hijackers* (2005), a carefully researched study of the perpetrators and their support network; however, the novel does not simply dramatize McDermott's dispassionate descriptions but transforms and reimagines the biography.

*ATTA* employs two methods of characterization. In the chapters numbered in reverse order 8 to 1, the protagonist's encounters and emotions are channeled through the voice of an extradiegetic narrator. These chapters are alternating with segments narrated in first person, containing Atta's confessional account of his own life, his testimony as it were. The titles of these first-person chapters with a homodiegetic narrator are spelled-out numbers, starting with chapter "eight" and ending with the appropriately named chapter "zero," which describes the final moments on American Airlines Flight 11. While the narrator constantly changes, the focalizer throughout the novel is the fictionalized Mohamed Atta.

The repeated narratorial shifts in these 17 chapters may suggest that Mohamed Atta remains a figure both inside and outside our reach. Atta is at once present and removed, legible and enigmatic. The terrorist's life and the consequences of the actual Atta's actions are dramatically visible to us from the videos and images of September 11, but his inner landscape remains outside of our grasp, the stuff of fiction as it were.

Atta's atrocious deeds have arguably made him exceptionally vulnerable, not so much in his status as an individual but as a symbol for the group and plot he represents. Who would stir to condemn any negative description of the hijacker, whether in non-fiction or fiction? In *ATTA*, this condemning portrayal comes primarily from "within" the narration and the protagonist, as the text does not include any extradiegetic commentary on Atta. Constructing Atta's interactions and even slipping into his imaginary mind, Kobek's third-person narrator does not offer any explicit judgment of

the protagonist's actions. Yet the presentation of Atta's consciousness yields the portrait of a conflicted personality, who provides a fragmented testimony.<sup>x</sup>

The novel's switching to third-person narration in every other chapter also intuits that another individual's testimony can never be fully owned. *ATTA* therefore demonstrates both the possibilities and the limitations of historical fiction. True, the author of historical fiction – whether Tolstoy, Hilary Mantel, or Kobek – can reign (and insinuate) freely, celebrating, ridiculing, or pathologizing an individual; still, the text is shaped by the available records and facts as well as by the reader's knowledge and her preconceptions associated with names and events. Significantly, in configuring the mind of another person, the author simultaneously enjoys the freedom of imagination and needs to recognize the absence of any plausible method to recover, let alone accurately represent the emotions of another person. *ATTA* verbalizes the fictionalized Atta's consciousness, but the novel acknowledges the challenge inherent in concocting the thoughts of a human being (based on an actual person) by shifting to a third-person narration at regular intervals.

Primarily utilizing the categories of free direct thought – often not adding any tags – and free indirect thought (in Alan Palmer's terms), Kobek presents the subjectivity of Atta and promotes the illusion of immediate access to his personality. The protagonist's consciousness, however, is rendered in often stilted, sometimes offensive, and certainly outlandish vocabulary, contributing to a process of defamiliarization or alienation from the character:

One student, a young Yemeni idolater, accuses me of perverting Islam. ... This Yemeni is boundless in his audacity. One night, he reaches into his bag, takes out the Qur'an, and accidentally spills out several pamphlets of perverse illustration. ... I open the book and flip through the pages. A mongoloid cripple conspires against his uncle. ... Beneath the nephew's indulgence is an illustration of the drug's effect. The cripple's face explodes into the cosmos. Multicolor infinity swirls around him, his flesh dissolves into the mystery of space, his skin indistinguishable from galaxies. ... This idolatrous perversion inadvertently depicts my life. (106-8)

The ironic gap between implied author and narrator is palpable here, as the narrator chooses vocabulary, for instance "idolatrous perversion," which evokes a strict, self-righteous interpretation of Islamic principles. Other terms – such as the insulting term Atta uses to describe the disabled figure in the book – indicate a mind apparently unwilling to entertain or accept difference. In his outrage over "blasphemy," a recurrent theme in the novel, Atta appears as somewhat naïve and insecure as well; the introspection in the last sentence of the quote implies an inner conflict triggered by the book he condemns and tears to pieces. The integration of such vocabulary into the first-person narration highlights the protagonist's alterity and arguably serves to explain or contextualize his participation in the terrorist act.

As this excerpt illustrates, the entire novel is written in present tense; everything is happening this minute, everything is imagined this minute. The novel is contained (or framed) by the poles of Atta's life. There are no additional levels of narration – or

commentary – that would point beyond the moment of the protagonist’s demise that ends the novel. There is no future for Mohamed Atta, and thus he can envision no past; paradoxically, the fictionalized Atta can only relate his life in present tense because he no longer exists. *ATTA* is a narrative about someone transplanted into the “now” by the (implied) author. Atta is forced to relive and recount his life as it were.

Atta relives his life – and testifies. In fact, the fictional autobiography borders on a confessional narrative. The first-person narration is at times interrupted by the retracting of statements and the admissions of lies: “Yet this is not the full story. I tell lies despite the profession of truth” (13). Who does Atta inform of his lying in these two sentences? Atta faces an interlocutor, as the following examples imply: “You might find me hypocritical, brother, but to my mind, there is a perverse logic in learning the language of sin from devils” (28). And: “You wish to know how Hamburg appears to my simple, innocent eyes?” (39) As the interlocutor remains unidentified, the reader serves as the brother taken into confidence by a fictionalized terrorist, who allows the reader to partake in his inner life and his ailments.

The terrorist’s physical discomfort has established itself as a salient, familiar feature in 9/11 fiction. In *ATTA*, the protagonist suffers above all from a voice in his head, which orders him around, though most days, “there are no words” (108). In these cases, the voice manifests itself as a monotonous noise. This mysterious, recurrent humming indeed fills the last three pages of the novel; it is then rendered as a simple “ZZzzzzZ,” in both capital and lower-case letters (159-63).

On the most basic level, such motifs function as connectors between seemingly distinct parts of a story. In other words, the humming that tortures Atta for years, ties several phases of his life together. From one perspective, the text implies a biological reasoning with this theme of an unnerving sound, the humming: a particular part of Atta's mind guides him towards disaster. He is destined to commit murder due to a mental disorder. This voice, this disorder cooperates with a specific set of societal circumstances to produce a man determined to inflict violence.

To be sure, the text does not insinuate insanity. Atta, as portrayed in Kobek's novel, reflects upon the consequences of his actions and appears to understand what he is doing. Yet in introducing the motif of a tormenting sound in Atta's mind, Kobek does seem to imply that a mental or emotional problem underlies the protagonist's murderous instincts. In this reading, the fictionalized Atta's unidentified disorder – combined with a lack of empathy for other human beings, revulsion towards Jewish people, contempt for liberal, sexualized Western society, and his connection to a globally operating network – creates a terrorist.

Tormented by the inner voice, Atta involuntarily listens to what replaces words, what replaces the intelligibility of his actions: "Only ceaseless buzzing" (108). His mind is not *his* mind: we do not actually possess ourselves, and we also cannot understand ourselves – we are strangers to ourselves, as Kristeva puts it. While the implied author cannot be completely "inside" a terrorist, he also shows Mohamed Atta's own inability to find himself, his desires, his thought processes. As Stephen Frosh notes, Freud

insisted (a century ago) that we need to create distance to come to a better understanding of ourselves:

[I]f we look hard and long at ourselves, the recognition is forced upon us that we are aliens, that our actions are only explicable when we refer them to 'another site' than consciousness, when we abjure the claim that we have some special private knowledge available to use about our secret process, when we treat our 'acts and manifestations' as if they belonged to someone else. (Frosh 24)

Another meaning of the humming or voice could then also be the representation of a void that neither reader nor implied author can fill. The indefinable, unspecified phenomenon possibly symbolizes what must remain obscure: the other person. We inevitably remain ignorant about another person's mind, in this case Atta's mind, his life and death. By resorting to third-person narration in half of the chapters, Kobek emphasizes this inevitable distance from another human being, even if these chapters inform us in detail about Atta's emotions. The text never disentangles itself from the treacherous web of the terrorist's mind, but it also does not pretend to convey the truth about Atta (in contrast, for example, to Amis's assertive short story, including self-righteous narratorial interventions); in a subtle manner, the humming could indicate this inability to know the terrorist.

The language of *ATTA* is infused with this sense of powerlessness and uncertainty. The novel dons many peaks of graceful eloquence but occasionally resembles Atta's movements during the Hajj, as he is lumbering along one step at a time in the stifling heat of Mecca. A perhaps more accurate image could describe Atta's

testimony as coming out in spurts: sentences tend to be brief and are regularly cut short, resulting in fragments – as if Atta’s life had shattered into shards, impossible to be pieced together. The text is replete with anaphoras, especially sentences beginning with the “I” of the terrorist, lending the novel a sometimes poetic, sometimes repetitive quality: “I exit by mutual agreement. I establish myself in graduate school. I apply for the architecture program at Hochschule für Angewandte Wissenschaften, Hamburg” (36). One effect of these short, parallel phrases is the appearance of Atta as a stiff, detached individual: “We travel by bus, 1 of 1000s. We move towards Mecca. The pious poor travel on foot” (88). The reiteration of words also engenders a dullness blending into bleakness, accentuating the fictionalized Atta’s struggles and confusion.

Brevity and repetitiveness certainly do not equal simplicity. Consider this passage on Atta’s experience on his Hajj, the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca: “Here we are, 1000000s. Stand, pray, contemplate. (...) I see devotion, love, submission. I see the beauty of our religion. I see Islam. Sea of faces. 1000000s around me. *Little thing, little thing.* (...) All is true. Their faith rewards. Faith, belief. These are true things” (93). Again and again, the reader is thrown into a maze of associations and sentiments, an eruption of ideas that often lasts only a moment before we are transported to a new place and a new eruption occurs.

As the quote suggests, Atta is eager to justify his faith to himself, demonstrating his detachment from his father, who admonishes him for his beliefs: “You are not a fool who throws it all away on holiness, on the hope of prayer, on throwing stones at pillars. You are educated!” (93). These two Mohamed Attas – the son often goes by their family



name Amir – repeatedly clash in the novel, with Atta striving to defy his dominant father; strikingly, the son calls his father too permissive, even as he suffers from his progenitor’s severity. I will return to this point later in my chapter.

The jarring passage describing Atta’s Hajj exemplifies the ambiguity and disorientation produced by Kobek’s writing. The text withholds explications of Atta’s (cryptic) associative chain. In an attempt to decipher these thoughts, the critic therefore faces the task of tracking and assembling puzzle pieces – interconnected ideas scattered throughout the novel. Along with the humming, the phrase “*little thing*” is one of these puzzle pieces, a motif conveniently italicized. We cannot miss the phrase, and we cannot fully unravel the mystery behind it. The phrase itself affirms this impossibility: we lack one salient piece of information on Atta, one little thing that would explain his actions.

Or does the *little thing* suggest a “little” problem, a mental dysfunction leading Atta onto the wrong path? Alternatively, are we, as readers, perhaps to regard the motif as reminding us again and again of the inevitable gulf of (in)comprehension that separates us from a clear understanding of Atta? The true Atta is not accessible, neither through the testament the “real” Mohamed Atta left behind, nor through the fictional thought processes Kobek offers in his novel. Presenting Atta’s thoughts without comments, implying directness and the absence of a filter, *ATTA* allows the reader to speculate about causes for Atta’s actions, but it also facilitates engagement with an otherwise absent figure.

Finally, the motif of the sound, the wordlessness, evokes the inability to articulate the events of September 11. It has become common parlance to suggest that

the utter shock-value and magnitude of the murder-suicide have left us speechless. Writers have incorporated this sense of bewilderment and horror by fragmenting their stories, even inserting moments of emptiness or a congestion of words – for example in Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and of course in *ATTA*. Kobek's novel consciously indicates the simultaneous endeavor and difficulty to create a narrative about 9/11 in general and the terrorists in particular. The disruption and gaps evoke Felman's definition of testimony: "As a relation to events, testimony seems composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference" (5). In *ATTA*, the protagonist's testimony peters out at the end, as words are failing, but even before, the narrative is interrupted regularly by puzzling, cryptic phrases. The events of September 11 have not settled, neither for us, the readers, witnesses, and survivors, nor indeed for the protagonist, who continues to be haunted posthumously by what happened; moreover, September 11 cannot be molded into one clear, unified narrative offering straightforward reasons and explanations for the occurrences on that day.

As I have suggested, the reader examines this testimony-psychograph of a criminal in both a retrospective and anticipatory manner: Which event in Atta's life may have prompted him to carry out the deadly attack? And which experience in his life indicates or foreshadows his proclivity for violence? The novel actively plays with and explores potential avenues towards comprehending Atta's terrorist act. One such

avenue opens up through *ATTA's* extensive descriptions of the protagonist's childhood conflicts. The novel insinuates that the psychological wounds of Atta's youth contribute to the development of an individual bursting with hatred for fellow human beings, an individual who concocts a plan to eradicate the lives of thousands.

The young Atta quivers under his father's iron fist; at times, he is barred from leaving the house: "My father does the honorable thing and keeps tight control. (...) Our father allows us no friends" (20-1). The obvious consequence of this veritable domestication: Atta chooses as a young man to escape not only the oppressive four walls of the family home, but also his native Egypt. The novel thus suggests that Atta breaks free to gain a self-confidence that he is unable to find in the presence of his dominating (yet supposedly permissive) father or in the smothering environment of an apparently conservative society. In a later scene, detailing one of his visits home, the narrator Atta reiterates his discomfort in his father's presence: "Life inside my father's building is like a trap, like being within an amplifier of discord" (85). The visit at his father's place, compartmentalized in the text by an account of Atta's pilgrimage to Mecca, also features the text's complex motif of the little thing, here not italicized: "'I will not believe,' says my father, 'Hajj taught you to behave in this manner. (...) You are not a fool who throws it all away on holiness (...). You are upper class! You are one of us, you little thing!'" (93). Here the reader encounters, on the one hand, a father who deems religion as less significant than his son apparently does. On the other hand, Atta's father drops the phrase that haunts the protagonist – one the father has presumably used before: Atta is the little thing, the belittled, confined son. If the constant

reiteration of the phrase must indeed be traced back to his father, Atta evidently struggles throughout his life with and against this belittlement. From this vantage point, he resorts to terrorism in an endeavor to achieve greatness, to become more than the “little thing.”

Such a reading of the novel conforms to Michael Kimmel’s claim that the confrontation with a demanding father, whose expectations Atta fails to meet, furnishes one explanation for his actions. In “Gender, Class, and Terrorism”, Kimmel creates curious linkages – and I repeat here the crucial passage I already quoted in Chapter 1:

What unites Atta, McVeigh, and Hitler is not their repressed sexual orientation but gender -- their masculinity, their sense of masculine entitlement, and their thwarted ambitions. They accepted cultural definitions of masculinity, and needed someone to blame when they felt that they failed to measure up. (After all, being called a mama's boy, a sissy, and told to toughen up are demands for gender conformity, not matters of sexual desire.). (B11)

Kobek’s novel does not reveal, neither in dialogues nor in verbalized thoughts, whether feelings of emasculation and failure prompt the fictionalized Atta’s retreat into increasingly militant Islamic theology, but such an interpretation is certainly possible on the basis of a number of scenes that indicate confrontations between Atta and his father.

While this interpretive framework – a son attempts to disprove and escape his stern father – seems prudent and appealing, the text complicates and enriches it. Atta insists that his father is actually too permissive: “It pains me, but my father is a bad

Muslim. He obsesses over status and success. He believes in prayer without politics. What wealth he wins, he does not spend. He forbids excessive contact with the outside world. This is his holiness, but it is not enough. He thinks not of Paradise. Only of work, of money" (11). Curiously, even if he appears to be seeking independence from his father's control, Atta implies here that he appreciates this control. He submits his own life to a tight regime – and incidentally expects the same from other people. Not more but less personal freedom would benefit Atta, and his father would become a virtuous man if he were more severe, more faithful. In view of Kimmel's theory, Atta's desire for strictness indicates his effort to shore up his masculinity and preserve for himself a Muslim realm that focuses on the rewards of the beyond, not the insufficiency of the here and now. Kobek's novel portrays a representative of conservative Islam who reacts to crisis not by opening up but by advocating further limitations and restraint.

Importantly, the quoted passage about Atta's father thus symbolizes the attempts of a religious community to protect its values and power by instituting further measures of control over itself: Atta yearns for restrictions and subscribes to a distorted interpretation of Islam's tenets and demands. Adherence to traditional values, an aversion towards anyone he perceives as libertine, and a resentment of Western worldviews and Judaism represent the hallmarks of Atta's belief system. Preferring devout Christians over inconsistent Muslims, Atta counts among his few friends Volker Hauth, a fellow student in Germany: "A bond forms, 2 openly religious students opposing the secularity of TUHH and Hamburg" (50).

Teaching a class at his Hamburg mosque, Atta promotes a severe Islam, condemning individualism (“earrings, ponytails, shirts advertis[ing] American basketball teams”) and banning women from participating (106). Class attendance in fact decreases dramatically after Atta’s installment as the teacher. One of his students explains this development to Atta: “‘Your Islam,’ he says, ‘has nothing to do with the Qur’an. Yours is the Islam of an ayatollah! You are a scold, brother. Your Islam will never amount to anything because it is the Islam of isn’t. No wonder only five now come to this class. The rest flee your tyranny” (106). This Yemeni student possibly functions as a mouthpiece of the implied author. In the absence of a narrator’s commentary, a character passes verdict on Atta’s approach to religion (as the implied author’s surrogate, as it were). Owing to Atta’s own admission of dwindling numbers and his lamentation about his students’ lax manners – their clothing for example – as well as due to the Yemeni’s complaint, the passage thus prompts the conclusion that Atta’s religious beliefs do not reflect the majority’s conceptualization of Islam. *ATTA* presents divergent perspectives on Islam, interrogating Atta’s strictness and “tyranny.”

In Atta’s perception of his faith, he is required to abhor indecent women such as the licentious “Jewess” Monica Lewinsky (110) and women that apply make-up to their faces (108). Several incidents and Atta’s reflections on these events allow the reader to construct a character who is intent on frankly expressing his stance even if this risks alienating others. Few can measure up to his demands: his living arrangement with a flight school employee and his wife in Florida ends after a week because he refuses to interact with “the bookkeeper’s wife, a middle age absurdity of American inanity and

feminist thought” (34). Similarly, while living in Germany, Atta offends his hosts, whose “promiscuous sodomitic paganism” he loathes. He particularly detests the supposed looseness of the female members of the family and eventually exits “by mutual agreement” (36). This resentment seems rooted both in a convoluted Islamic theology and in Atta’s endeavor to distance himself from individuals that may remind him of his own failures and repressed desires.

The fictionalized Atta’s self-righteousness reaches a climax in the final chapter. Sitting on the plane he and his co-conspirators transform into a murderous weapon, Atta considers the meaning of his decision, concluding that “I am he who punishes the guilty” (157). After the hijackers overpower flight attendants and pilots, their leader kills the co-pilot. Atta justifies this murder by insisting – to himself, to the narratee – that “he is nothing to me, another shaz dog of the Jews endorsing sodomy, whoring out women, contributing money to enslavement of the poor. Another sex addict worshipping the Hubal of this modern age” (157).<sup>xi</sup>

I resist the temptation of investigating whether these verbalized emotions convey a realistic impression of Atta – whether the actual Atta possibly entertained similar thoughts. Instead, the challenge for critics is determining how to read these lines. What do they signify? How are they constructed? More generally, I also ask how particular motifs and techniques align or contrast with other contemporary narratives, a task accomplished by this chapter as a whole.

On a topical level, what I encounter in *ATTA* is an individual challenged by modernity, capitalism, Judaism, and of course women. The sole available antidotes, I

may infer, are an adherence to (one particular interpretation of) Islam and a violent strike against these forces of infidelity, indecency, and injustice – a signal as it were.

On a narratological level, Atta's thoughts are merely that, imagined thoughts transformed into relatively coherent sentences. While every dialogue in fiction is an imaginary dialogue, the reproduction of thoughts is doubly fictional: by necessity, such a reproduction constitutes a translation of imagined pre-verbal fragments – flickering in the mind of fictional characters – into more or less comprehensible language on the page. Dialogues and actions in a storyworld represent events imagined as possible in this constructed world, but it seems challenging to assess the credibility or verisimilitude of verbalized thoughts and emotions (even) in the context of a storyworld. Considered from another angle, it is precisely because we as readers have already been transferred into this other space that the reproduction of mental activities in written form appears to us as acceptable and possible.

The implied author presents to us the ideas of a narrator who in half of the novel's chapters happens to be identical with the character named Mohamed Atta. The implied author depicts Atta's inner life in a stereotypical fashion: Atta is an identifiable type, demonstrating attitudes commonly associated with radical Islamists (virulent misogyny, anti-Semitism, anti-modernity). This fixation on an odd set of beliefs and political convictions sometimes borders caricature.

Disruptions of Atta's path can also be analyzed as part of this cliché image; specifically, as I mentioned earlier, the text implies that Atta represses emotions, including empathy, sexual attraction, and vulnerability, which are not compatible with



his self-image or his moral-religious outlook. Atta's ideological firmness is thus occasionally tested by disconcerting doubts, but he pushes away obstacles and distractions, manifesting the picture of a strict and narrow-minded Islamist. One example: there are indications in the text that he does feel attracted to women, even if the alluring member of the female sex – for instance a secular Palestinian woman he meets in Syria – does not conform to the supposedly ideal image of a Muslim woman. These passages reveal Atta's humanity and perhaps undermine any one-sided portrayal of Atta as an insensitive demon. Ultimately, however, his faith and his commitment to the terror campaign trump both his doubts and unwelcome, improper sentiments. He fends off people and ideas that are potentially shameful and remind him of his own imperfection. To quote the concluding sentence of Kimmel's "Gender, Class, and Terrorism": "It is from such gendered shame that mass murderers are made" (B11).

Shame seems to be ascribed in the novel to Mohamed Atta – on account of his conflicts with himself and with his father. The reader becomes privy to the terrorist's vulnerability: articulating his emotions and experiences on the pages, the narrator Atta offers to a narratee a testimony or confession of sorts. He divulges his actions and emotions to an interlocutor, whom he addresses as "brother" on multiple occasions, including several times in the final chapter: "zZzZzZand [*sic*] then, brother, there is open air and bright sun and its silence. (...) I stab him brother, twice in the stomach" (151, 157). I am inclined to interpret Atta's narration as a kind of performance of testimony: in a complicated gesture, the text has Atta present a narrative that serves to construct a particular image of himself, Atta, vis-à-vis the (unnamed) narratee. Shoshana Felman

argues that testimony is a “performative speech act” and Atta indeed performs his life (5); the figure Atta, the idea of the hijacker is revived in literature to present his testimony and life.

Two alternative readings are viable: Atta’s narration is designed to be read as either reliable or unreliable. Most readers presumably harbor skepticism towards a terrorist’s narration. An interpretation of a novel on a terrorist after September 11 is certainly predetermined by a reader’s assumptions on such a person’s character and mindset – assumptions the implied author arguably understands and utilizes (there is an understanding, in other words, that Atta should not be trusted). I attempt to approach such fiction with a balanced attitude, interrogating the attribution of absolute evil-ness to the terrorist(s) and wondering how possible motives and the global context are constructed in fictional depictions of these perpetrators. Still, I appreciate the insights of reader-response theory, according to which reading is “a process deeply influenced by historical, philosophical, and ideological perspectives” (Graff 5). In other words, even if I do not subscribe to hegemonic ideas on terrorism or the dichotomy of good West vs. evil Islamism, my very engagement with these ideas in my analysis of post-9/11 literature reflects my temporal and spatial location.

In the case of *ATTA* then, I am certainly predisposed to question the fictionalized Atta as a narrator. Is the verbalization of Atta’s thoughts cluttered with lies and semi-truths? After all, the text (the implied author) surrenders its authority to some degree to the fictionalized Atta by allowing this character to recount his story. By hinting at the

narrator's unreliability, the text may balance out this narrative power possessed by the protagonist. The implied author can regain control lost to the terrorist-narrator.

What are the hints that suggest unreliability? One is the very existence of an interlocutor – as mentioned earlier, Atta is eager to create a picture of himself in the face of a particular audience. Another hint is his own admission of insincerity: “Yet this is not the full story. I tell lies despite my profession of truth” (13). A third indicator is the fact that Atta wavers in his statements between emphasizing his aversion towards Western, non-Muslim women as well as towards the “moral decay of crass Western life” culture in general and, on the other hand, acknowledging his fascination for Disney movies and, among others, for an unveiled Palestinian woman (116).

This line of interpretation has its challenges, though. First of all, inconsistencies in his views do not automatically reduce the trustworthiness of his narration. On the contrary, his narration appears more reliable because he comes across as a conflicted, unpredictable character. Furthermore, his confession that his story contains lies may paradoxically demonstrate honesty. Finally, half of the chapters focalize Atta but are recounted from a third-person perspective. Are these chapters somehow contributing to the supposedly false testimony? Are they perhaps narrated by the “brother”? Essentially, these chapters do not present material clashing with the first-person narration. The notion that Atta's narration is unreliable thus lacks solid textual evidence.

Embarking on a safer route of interpretation, I suggest that the novel's narrative simply reflects the dreadful ideas and actions of a terrorist from his own perspective; Atta's testimony is as “truthful” as any autobiographical statement within the

boundaries of fiction can be (non-fictional autobiographies are of course replete with fictional elements as well). The fictionalized Atta unmask himself, revealing a torn personality as well as a revulsion for modern women and for (allegedly) Western attitudes. Emerging from both Atta's narration and from the extradiegetic narrator's account – including dialogues – is the portrait of an educated and intelligent, yet self-righteous, rigid, and intolerant individual. Scenes showing a kind and gentle Atta are far and few between; far more common are tableaux illuminating the protagonist's reprehensible character.

Atta's first-person narration of his emotions fits neatly into this overall picture. Yes, we may legitimately consider it a testimony fraught with the problems of most testimonies, fictional or not – inevitable gaps, self-righteous justifications, partiality. Yet the novel does not provide sufficient grounds on which to dismiss Atta's narration as unreliable: the protagonist makes no attempt to conceal his crimes or white-wash his past; no contrasting viewpoint is provided that might interrogate Atta's narration; finally, Atta's statements and his actions rarely diverge far from each other. More precisely, even if his beliefs and convictions are occasionally tested, he seldom contradicts himself.

The most glaring of such contradictions or divergences occurs in a scene crucial for the remainder of this section.<sup>xii</sup> The scene transpires at an office in the Syrian city of Aleppo, where Atta meets a Palestinian woman named Amal. He becomes enamored with her: "Amal, Amal, Amal. Tell me brother, how do you describe the whirlwind? By name alone. Amal" (64). Again and again, he returns to Amal: "Despite myself, despite

pledges otherwise, I return to Amal's office. It is for the thesis. All for the thesis." Then he elaborates: "I have no attraction to her, but her forwardness holds fascination" (65). Obviously, this latter statement and the first quote stand in conflict with the assertion that he only visits Amal for his thesis. Even in "hindsight" (as I mentioned earlier, it is difficult to conceptualize a backward-looking testimony in the case of a protagonist who commits suicide), the protagonist cannot fully embrace his romantic desire for a woman.

Indeed, this one and only promising interaction with a woman ends prematurely, when Atta deems Amal unsuitable for a companion. During his first visit to her family's home, he delivers a rant against Israel's treatment of Palestinians. He is taken aback by her detachment: "'I know I should be angry,' says Amal. 'But I've never met a Jew. How can I be angry with someone I haven't met?'" Their budding relationship withers before it can blossom when Amal confesses: "'Amir, (...) I am not even sure I am a Muslim'" (69). Atta rises immediately and turns to leave. Amal begs him to stay and before this final encounter of their relationship ends, she narrates a story that enthralls Atta – even though it does not sway his determination to depart Aleppo for good.

The story, reminiscent of Arabian Nights tales, revolves around the Caliph Harun al-Rashid's guard, Wazir, who endeavors to alter the past to save his wife from death. Strikingly, Atta inquires (somewhat naively): "To travel like Wazir. Do you think it is possible for a man to go back and change his fate? Or does time happen all at once, is it written from birth to death with no hope of alteration?" – "Allah willing," says Amal. "Neither of us will ever know" (76). Atta does not return to Amal to listen to the end of

the story, thus never learning whether Wazir can return to the future after he has changed the past. The fictionalized Atta provides his own response to his question: he does not, nor can he, alter what has occurred. He merely re-lives his life, with the ending remaining the same.<sup>xiii</sup> His murder-suicide bars him from returning to the future. Atta is imprisoned in the past – in fact, he is imprisoned in a storyworld, for he exists solely as the *fictionalized* Atta.

The scenes with Amal and his emotions towards her reveal a conflicted man, lured to a woman but all too eager to distance himself from her. Two interrelated questions arise: Does the text suggest that Atta is physically attracted to Amal? Does faith seem to interfere with sexuality? As he himself states, Atta is fascinated by Amal, fascinated by her existence-as-woman. To put it differently, women are a mystery for Atta, and the conversations with Amal confront him – apparently for the first time – with the concreteness of womanhood: “The subtle light shows the contours of Amal’s form. She basks in warmth. This creature, I think, is a woman” (72). Atta is engrossed but also frightened: “Amal, I wonder, from what nightmare are you born?” Presumably, this nightmare is the unwelcome realization of the beauty of women. Atta flees from Amal, never to return to her or any other woman until the day of terror.

The abrupt end of this episode may imply that Atta can only engage in a relationship with a Muslim woman secure in her faith. He not only rejects Amal after she has confessed her religious skepticism, but he also exhibits an antagonistic attitude towards other women (and men) who are not sufficiently modest or orthodox in his opinion. Who then passes his faith and personality test? No other women appear to find

access to Atta, nor does he actively seek any relationship. Whether religious or not, women exist outside Atta's shadow world, their corporeality threatening, intimidating, and infuriating. Men are hardly less remote, even if their very *being* seems less bewildering to Atta; aside from Amal, his sole friend is fellow student Volker Hauth.

The text describes this aspiring architect from Hamburg as simply a friend, not hinting at a homosexual relationship. Still, in the absence of a discussion of any intimate relationships, how is Atta's sexuality configured? His perplexity at the sight of Amal, at sitting in close proximity to a woman, appears to reveal Atta's sexual innocence, at least with regard to the opposite gender. In fact, while there is no conclusive textual evidence for viewing Atta as homosexual, he does not appear throughout as – stereotypically – masculine. More precisely, while the text often frames him as cold and abrupt, it occasionally reveals a softer, “feminine” side of the protagonist.

In one memorable sequence, set in Hamburg, Atta's enigmatic internal voice urges him to purchase makeup at a store, countering in an inner conflict his other self's apparent resentment against this “blasphemous paint”: “The voice guides me towards a display. It tells me to select the rouge that is reddest, most garish in hue. What one finds in scandalous whores, the crimson mating sign flashing like a beacon across the darkest street” (109). Back in the apartment he shares with several of his fellow conspirators, Atta receives another command from the voice: “*Go to the bathroom. Bring the rouge.*” Atta retreats to the bathroom, makeup in his hands: “I look at the mirror. There is the face, one that I know. The near is new, long, but the rest is familiar. An indistinct visage of the Arab world, an Egyptian amongst the pink. I open the plastic container that reads

*L'oreal*" (110-11). The appearance of the voice may indeed suggest the presence of a feminine – or perhaps also, in contemporary parlance, metrosexual – self that compels Atta to act in a manner rather inconsistent with his strict, traditional, religious self. In *The Looming Tower* (2006), Lawrence Wright compiles testimonies on Atta and writes: "Physically, there was a feminine quality to his bearing. He was 'elegant' and 'delicate,' so that his sexual orientation was difficult to read" (307). Yet, Wright adds: "His black eyes were alert and intelligent but betrayed little emotion."

Set alongside the fictionalized Atta's encounter with Amal, in particular his bewilderment when he beholds her (a woman!) up close, Atta's experimentation with makeup consolidates the notion that he is both fascinated and mystified by women and femininity. The Egyptian is, however, not invested in romantic pursuit. Calling his parents from Florida in 2001, the now 32-year-old Atta has to evade questions regarding his love life. Both his father and his mother, even his sister, entreat him to marry, but Atta demands patience: "'When I finish my studies, Baba,' says Amir. 'Then I will be ready for marriage'" (79). He likewise informs his sister that he is preoccupied "studying for the greatest glory" (81). By this point, the protagonist devotes himself almost exclusively to the preparation of the terrorist attacks. He conceives his murder-suicide as the completion of his studies he mentions to his father, but this idea of course postpones a possible relationship and marriage until eternity (or Paradise).

His evasive response arguably reflects not only Atta's commitment to his criminal pursuits, but also his discomfort about any association with the opposite sex. In view of his son's reticence to appreciate the other sex, Atta's stern father time and



again interrogates Atta's *maleness*. He labels his son a "crybaby" and wonders: "Why do I have three daughters? Two were born as girls, one as a boy. What happened on Hajj? Why did you come home with this beard?" (88, 93). True, the father's condescending remarks seem motivated by the younger Mohamed Atta's passionate commitment to radical Islam, which the elder Mohamed Atta rejects; the initial chapters suggest that the father places far greater weight on business success than on religious ideals. Still, the elder Atta's comments likewise connote discomfort with his son's apparent lack of interest in women – and with the protagonist's supposed femininity.

The father's stinging statements have precursors. A 17-year old Atta has to endure similar complaints about his supposed lack of fortitude: "Your mother has made you weak,' he [the father] says. 'Remember the successes of my other daughters. Even if you are a soft girl, Bolbol, you are still the man of our family. I expect you to be an engineer. If it becomes necessary, I will beat the success into you. No quarter given'" (25). The novel's protagonist is hit by a tidal wave of denigration each time he sets foot in his father's domicile, a wave that apparently sweeps him into the arms of radicalism.

In contrast to his father, however, Atta's mother exhibits gentleness and affection: "My mother appears as a vision of Paradise. She indulges me, sneaking sweets. My favorite is her special baseema" (22). Positioning the mother as a figure of safety, the text does not develop a horror scenario of a traumatic childhood that can only produce a demon.

Still, the protagonist does face an overbearing progenitor, whose evident yearning for truly masculine offspring potentially contributes to Atta's peculiar anxiety.

As most sons do, Atta – silently, indirectly – rebels against his father, not slavishly satiating his each and every desire. Most conspicuously, Atta delays marriage or even relationships with women. And again similar to most sons, Atta fails to completely circumvent these paternal-parental demands. Haunting him until his end, the epithet of the “little thing” persistently swirls around Atta’s mind – he cannot quite overcome this memory or anxiety.<sup>xiv</sup>

The endeavor to react to his father’s discontent and accusations of femininity constitutes only one element in the novel’s complex collage of Atta’s motivations. There is also an intense faith; there is also a hatred of Jews; there is also a deep animosity towards what Atta regards as obscene hallmarks of Western culture (children born out-of-wedlock, secularism, revealing clothing). These elements comprise a collage, a term I choose to suggest that the presumed roots of violence are distinct yet interconnected; significantly, beholders of a collage – readers in our case – are not necessarily familiar with the various elements’ origins. In the same vein, Atta’s political and moral convictions can perhaps not all be accurately traced to particular experiences in the protagonist’s life; they merely “exist” in the collage, as reflected in Atta’s actions, statements, and thoughts.

In this section, I have been preoccupied with the hermeneutic import of these very thoughts: How can/does the reader gain access to the protagonist’s rationale? How can/does the reader evaluate a terrorist’s narration, rendered mostly in free direct thought? I suggested that the novel grants the protagonist a great deal of control over the story by not providing explicit commentary, even in the sections narrated in third

person. In turn, the text also engenders skepticism and puzzlement vis-à-vis the terrorist's account; this distancing or doubt is the result of several inconsistencies, Atta's confessional statements, the motifs of the inner voice(s) and sounds emphasizing the protagonist's emotional challenges, and finally the curious construct of a fictional character (and a narrator) retelling his life after an atrocious murder-suicide. Atta's first-person narration and the third-person narration focalizing Atta thus do invite an interrogation of their trustworthiness.

As I also emphasized, I recognize that my analysis is skewed by the historical events refracted in *ATTA*. In other words, the appalling acts committed by terrorists in the real world – and reenacted at least partially in the storyworld – tempt the contemporary reader to mistrust a (fictional) terrorist's narration. Such doubt does not necessarily originate in a naïve (con)fusion of, on the one hand, historical events and, on the other hand, the fictional construction of events and characters with real counterparts. Instead, it is the very framework of a character recounting a life narrative which culminates in death and violence that inevitably incites questions and suspicion: how else but with some reservation do we read a text that focalizes a deceased terrorist, in both first-person and third-person voice? I cannot read the novel outside the discourse on terrorism following September 11, nor can I gloss over the novel's narrative configuration of a perpetrator's perspective.

The consciousness of Mohamed Atta is verbalized throughout the novel, set alongside dialogues and descriptions of actions, but even if I regard the narration as largely reliable, many gaps remain. Motivations are not all spelled out, other characters'

opinions are not provided, and ultimately the fact remains that a causal chain leading towards the violent ending cannot be determined definitively. Then again, can any person's actions be fully explained? Observers who seek to comprehend another person's decisions confront an intricate web of external demands, critical events, traumatic experiences, societal presumptions, genetic predispositions, and the thorny concept of personal choice.

The next text I analyze in this chapter offers a more explicit evaluation of the terrorist's mind – and body. Martin Amis's "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" will allow me to further develop the conceptualization of the (implied) author-narrator-character-reader relationship. More precisely, Amis's short story highlights the complication arising from a focus on – and a focalization of – a character who enacts horrifying violence and is, in addition, modeled on an actual criminal.

### **The Threat of Boredom**

Penned by the best-known of the triad of writers featured in this chapter, "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" has prompted largely dismissive reviews. Summing up the reactions, Birgit Däwes emphasizes their overwhelmingly negative tone: they run the gamut from accusations of "shallowness" to assertions that Amis's writing is "pretentious" and "self-absorbed" (all qtd. in Däwes, "Close Neighbors" 502-503). Literary criticism on the short story mirrors this picture, with appreciative assessments

far and few between. A lone voice, Sascha Pöhlmann insists that the story successfully manages to humanize the terrorist – instead of branding him as a “mere monster” (62). Brandon Kempner presents a similar observation, but concludes that Amis essentially “controls Atta” and “colonizes him” by attributing a “humanist, liberal” subjecthood to the terrorist (70-1). Robert Eaglestone likewise criticizes Amis for interpreting terrorism within a Western framework; according to Eaglestone, the British author “shies away from a complex explanation involving Islamism” and ultimately fails to properly contextualize the attacks of September 11 (21).

“The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” begins and ends on September 11, retracing the title figure’s steps and sentiments from a motel room in Portland, Maine, to his final seconds on American Airlines flight 11. Flashbacks inform the reader about Atta’s activities in Portland – the actual Atta’s motivations for staying in Maine’s largest city have never been ascertained. “No one outside the plot knows why,” Terry McDermott concedes (230).

Similar to Kobek’s *ATTA*, Amis’s short story does not transcend Muhammad Atta’s realm – other characters’ actions are channeled through Atta’s perspective; however, while Atta serves as the focalizer, he never assumes the role of narrator. Distancing himself from the protagonist, the extradiegetic narrator intersperses disdainful commentary on Atta’s personality. According to Martin Randall, “Amis employs a privileged third-person perspective and it is this ‘distance’ that Amis creates between himself and Atta, despite the story being ‘seen’ through his eyes, that also reflects Amis’ satirical approach” (51). Distance here does not connote aloofness or

indifference; on the contrary, through the commentary interjected at key points of the story, Amis's narrator demonstrates that he is invested in the perception of "his" character.

Atta's thoughts, his emotions and attitudes, are frequently reproduced on the page in the form of psycho-narration, as in the following example: "Muhammad Atta did not expect to relish that part of it: the exemplary use of the box cutters. He pictured the women, in their uniforms, in their open-necked shirts. He did not expect to like it; he did not expect to like death in that form" (100). Repeatedly, Amis's eager narrator explicates and supplements these ruminations. While Kobek's third-person narrator delivers rather detached accounts of Atta's mindset and actions, disinterestedly tracing the protagonist's steps, Amis's narrator interpolates and extrapolates, reveling in judgments: "Muhammad Atta tried not to writhe around in his seat; on his way to the car park, ten minutes earlier, he had tried not to run; in the elevator, ten minutes earlier still, he had tried not to groan or scream. He was always trying not to do something" (107). Atta is submitted to a malevolent evaluation in this short story; put differently, the character called Atta bears numerous flaws and idiosyncrasies, meticulously recorded in the text. Minute descriptions outline Atta's mental and especially his physical state: "The breathy refrain joined the simmer of the engines; yet neither could drown the popping, the groaning, the creaking, as of a dungeon door to an inner sanctum – the ungainsayable anger of his bowels" (118). These revolting, effusive diagnostic reports occupy hefty sections of the short story – they soil the pages, as it were. While Amis lingers on the lowly subject of abdominal pain, he incoherently

pursues this topic with a highly literary, exalted language. The eloquent narrator towers over the suffering, writhing protagonist.

The narrator in “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” intermittently underscores his omniscience, for instance noting in passing that the plane from Portland to Boston “leapt eagerly into the air, with none of the technological toil that would characterize the ascent of American 11” (109). Whereas *ATTA* provides only the fictionalized terrorist’s perspective, Amis’s eccentric narrative views the terrorist – and indeed terrorism – from above. Additionally, the short story juxtaposes Atta’s actions with observations of events outside the purview of the protagonist: “At that moment the President was readying himself for an early-morning run in Sarasota, Florida, where Muhammad Atta had been taught how to fly, at Jones Aviation, in September 2000” (106). The narrator regularly imparts his (semi-)wisdom, quipping for example that terrorism “had certainly brought about a net increase in boredom” and that if “the Planes Operation went ahead as planned, Muhammad Atta would bequeath more, perhaps much more, dead time, planet-wide” (108). The short story thus complements an imaginary reconstruction of Atta’s last hours with philosophical reflections and a non-fictional account of the events surrounding the 9/11 attacks, coalescing into a searing mockery of terrorism’s disciples.

Importantly, both sides in the conflict draw the boundary between us and them. Däwes points out in her erudite discussion of stories appropriating the terrorists’ perspective(s) that “our desire to externalize the Other (tempting us into seeing it as a caricature, making it grotesque, laughing at it)” mirrors the desire in the Other to

externalize us (*Ground Zero Fiction* 257). Analyzing the movie *Paradise Now* and Updike's novel *Terrorist*, Samuel Thomas similarly proposes that it is the terrorists themselves as well as their opponents (e.g. the Israeli or U.S. government) that subscribe to the simple dichotomy of human-inhuman (442). Such efforts of mutual exclusion are central to the works of terrorist literature I study in this dissertation. The construction of a distinction between subject and object unfolds on both sides of the aisle, even as the boundaries between these sides are interrogated and destabilized. Appropriative literary approaches to terrorists (Däwes's term) investigate how fictional terrorists identify the West as the faithless, forsaken collective Other; in turn, these narratives themselves conjure evil and violent protagonists, othering the terrorists.

Underlining the interwoven relationship between us and them, between writers and terrorists, between perpetrators and their targets, Kristiaan Versluys writes: "In lending the figure of Atta his own antireligious bias, Amis indicates the inextricable implication of the self with the Other. Even a strenuous exercise in absolute 'othering' bears the marks of ineluctable reciprocity and human interdependence" (163). Othering in terrorist fiction is therefore a two-way process; or rather, two processes of externalization overlap and collide in these narratives. As each side dehumanizes the other/Other, the validity of such demarcations becomes questionable; in fact, in the confrontation with the Other's externalization of "us", we wonder about our own difference, inhumanity, and alterity.

The selection of 9/11 literature analyzed in this chapter constantly negotiates the simultaneity of sameness and difference. A literary rapprochement towards the



figure of the Other alternates with a form of narrative withdrawal, a retreat from the enigmatic and violent protagonist. In a “gesture of inclusivity,” to borrow from Samuel Thomas, the fictional terrorist’s thoughts and actions are described in detail, or are even communicated by himself in first-person narration, conveying the notion of the terrorist as human (440). While the construction of the fictional terrorist’s personality thus possibly diminishes the distance between the protagonist and “us”, the nature of the characterization can mark him again as alien. His actions and behavior at once expel him from the community of humans and invite him into this community. Accordingly, Versluys identifies “an odd mixture of narrative nearness and distance” in the short story, as “identification with the main character – an almost automatic reflex in reading – clashes with condemnation” (162).

While this vacillation or conflict is noticeable in Amis’s short story, Amis does not hide his hostile sentiments towards Islamism. In fact, “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” distills the theories he lays out in his numerous essays on Islamism and terrorism, including the lengthy “Terror and Boredom: The Dependent Mind”. Amis roundly condemns religions and ideologies in general, and Islam(ism) in particular in this text, which incidentally precedes “The Last of Muhammad Atta” in the collection *The Second Plane*. As Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate note, Amis’s championing of “freedom, individuality” and his denigration of ideologies amount to an ideology in itself, one that pits religion/unreason/slavery against secularity/reason/freedom (40). Amis warns against a society transformed by Muslims into a retrograde, dreary community of religious slaves or slaves of religion. With its alarmist and aggressive tone, *The Second*

*Plane* is itself, to use Bradley and Tate's words, "a deeply retrogressive prophecy of the end of days" (49).

"Terror and Boredom" explicitly contrasts the enlightened, secular West with the backward Islamic world, which is suffocating in the stranglehold of the "pathological mass movement[s]" or "cult" of Islamism (80, 70). "Today, in the West," Amis writes, "there are no good excuses for religious belief – unless we think that ignorance, reaction, and sentimentality are good excuses. This is of course not so in the East, where, we acknowledge, almost every living citizen in many huge and populous countries is intimately defined by religious belief" (49). Amis certainly does not conceal his notion that on the scale of human development, the religious East lags far behind the largely secular West, which has abandoned the evils of the past (especially religiosity and patriarchy).

Amis curiously tries to balance his attack on all religions with rather half-hearted declarations of respect for Islam's history of tolerance and for Muhammad's accomplishments: "More, we regard the Great Leap Backwards as a tragic development in Islam's story, and now in ours. Naturally, we respect Islam. But we do not respect Islamism, just as we respect Muhammad and do not respect Muhammad Atta" (50). His utilization of the embracing and simultaneously divisive "we" suggests Amis's alignment with the (supposedly) enlightened and progressive West – the non-Muslim segment of the Western world's population to be precise.

Whereas Amis claims at times to feel respect for Islam's heritage, he does not consistently distinguish Islamism and Islam as a whole, neither in this nor in the other

essays assembled in *The Second Plane*.<sup>xv</sup> True, at one point he defines Islamism as a violent aberration of Islam, as “an ideology superimposed upon a religion” (91). However, “the problem is that, even if we accept his own exceptionally fine distinction between Islam and Islamism, Amis himself continually blurs it” (Bradley and Tate 43). Bradley and Tate intuit that for Amis, “all Muslims, it seems, are natural born Islamists” (116n).

Amis explicitly associates all of Islam with extremist versions of other belief systems: “Like fundamentalist Judaism and medieval Christianity, Islam is totalist” (78). After thus asserting the religion’s totalist nature, Amis contends that Islamism is a totalitarian concept – not a far stretch in the mind of the British writer: “And one hardly needs to labour the similarities between Islamism and the totalitarian cults of the last century. Anti-Semitic, anti-liberal, anti-individualist, anti-democratic, and, most crucially, anti-rational, they too were cults of death, death-driven and death-fuelled” (80). As moderate Islam has lost out, in Amis’s view, Islam and Islamism have merged into one intolerant, suffocating ideology. Concurring with Sam Harris, Amis suggests that Islamists could be regarded as complete nihilists, if it were not for their unwavering confidence in paradise, the idea that infuses life and death. The dependent mind of the essay’s subtitle is the Muslim mind: “Islam means ‘submission’ – the surrender of independence of mind. (...) The stout self-sufficiency or, if you prefer, the extreme incuriosity of Islamic culture has been much remarked” (79). Amis thus equates the strict adherence to a belief system with the general absence of intellectual autonomy and curiosity.

Amis both notes and creates a rift between the presumably “true” West – Christians, Jews, and of course atheists – and Muslims. The latter do not form an integral part of Western societies, Amis implied in a 2006 message to *The Times* journalist Ginny Dougary: “There’s a definite urge – don’t you have it? – to say, ‘The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.’ What sort of suffering? Not letting them travel. Deportation – further down the road” (Dougary). Amis later retracted his comments, insisting that they were “rash remarks made at a terrible time” (Yaqoob). Still, in light of “Terror and Boredom”, Amis’s condescending remarks should not be dismissed as an exceptional lapse. *The Second Plane* indeed contains several other essays and stories that seethe with sweeping statements on the failings of Islam; one essay even warns of the grave dangers posed by the high birthrate among Muslims inside and outside of Europe (“Demographics” 155-59).

“The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” illustrates and translates Amis’s political-philosophical reflections to a remarkable degree. The fictionalized Atta personifies what his “creator” perceives as the characteristics of Islam. Amis’s protagonist both supports and represents Islam’s austerity: “Adultery punished by whipping, sodomy by burial alive; this seemed about right to Muhammad Atta. He also joined in the hatred of music. And the hatred of laughter” (102). Turning to Islam purportedly signifies the absence of pleasure – or boredom. And it is boredom that terrorism has contributed to contemporary society, according to the narrator (108). Again, Amis draws direct connections between Islam and terror, eager to place them in the same region of his moral-philosophical landscape.

This censure of both Islam(ism) and terrorism in the short story closely resembles the argument laid out in "Terror and Boredom." The parallels between fiction and non-fiction are striking. Quite evidently, the short story serves to exemplify Amis's political theses on the dangers radical Islam poses, including his notion that a conservative Islamic society equals tedium: "One way of ending the war on terror would be to capitulate and convert. The transitional period would be a humourless one, no doubt (...). It would be a world of perfect terror and perfect boredom, and of nothing else – a world with no games, no arts, and no women, a world where the sole entertainment is the public execution" (78). According to Amis, the restoration of what he calls the "Caliphate," the installment of an Islamic regime in Iraq, would transform the country into a colorless, patriarchal, and anti-intellectual realm (78). These statements place Amis in the company with other European right-wing activists such as Jean-Marie Le Pen, Geert Wilders, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Necla Kelek, or Thilo Sarrazin, who similarly warn against Islam's spread and its supposedly dire consequences. More importantly for our purposes, Amis injects the same venom that flows through the veins of his political essays into his fiction.

Via the extradiegetic narrator, Amis dissects and evaluates Atta in an unrelenting, body-centered, even vulgar manner. Aside from incorporating political statements on terrorism into his short story, Amis thus develops his agenda through a hostile depiction of his protagonist. Hence Bradley and Tate's argument that for Amis, literature's "moral purpose does not so much lie in its ability to inhabit the lives of

others – as Ian McEwan would have it – but rather in enabling us to write and think like no one but ourselves” (38).

The short story’s idiosyncratic portrayal of Atta exemplifies Amis’s perception of literature; maintaining a third-person narration, the narrator offers a report on Atta’s philosophy and actions, rather than viewing the character from the “inside” (*ATTA*’s approach). While the reader follows Atta throughout the text, it is not so much the fictional character’s perspective but the narrator’s or implied author’s perspective the reader is offered. “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” therefore appears to intuit, first, that the freedom of the writer is the ability to express his convictions in an imaginary, unconstrained space; secondly, literature allows the writer to test and work through these beliefs, rather than serving as a means to explore other people’s perspectives. The fictionalized Atta thus functions as Amis’s tool to deride Islamism and prove his theoretical assertions on the damaging effects of certain ideologies.

Indeed, while the fictionalized Muhammad Atta succeeds in his atrocious plan to destroy lives and buildings, Amis’s narrator condemns the protagonist to a reiteration of both life and death; he imprisons him in the story and denies him the emptiness this character apparently desires. In perhaps the most striking intervention of the story, the narrator prefigures the fictionalized Atta’s fate: “He [Atta] was an apostate: that’s what he was. He didn’t expect paradise. What he expected was oblivion. And, strange to say, he would find neither” (102). Atta is deprived of the void, of oblivion – he has to endure the hell of repetition and the repetition of hell.

Upon being obliterated in the collision between plane and tower, Atta reawakes, is resurrected. The short story begins and ends with the same pronouncement: "On September 11, 2001, he opened his eyes at 4 a.m., in Portland, Maine; and Muhammad Atta's last day began" (124). Whereas the actual terrorist destroyed the lives of hundreds, thousands of human beings, the narrator of "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" destroys the fictionalized Atta by not allowing him to permanently disappear.

As if to carry out a revenge attack on the deceased real-life terrorist, the narrator has Atta suffer intense physical pain and in the moment of the protagonist's death even inserts an infinite, desperate longing for life into Atta's mind: "Yes, how gravely he had underestimated it. How very gravely he had underestimated life. His own he had hated, and had wished away; but see how long it was taking to absent itself – and with what helpless grief was he watching it go, imperturbable in its beauty and its power" (124). Then, in a final narratorial assault, the story's first sentence is repeated, suggesting the endless recurrence of Atta's physical and mental misery. This fictional version of Muhammad Atta will forever remain in a liminal sphere between life and death, a sphere of eternal pain and illusions. Fittingly, the character Atta anticipates his entrapment in a wicked cycle: "The themes of recurrence and prolongation, he sensed, were already beginning to associate themselves with his last day" (99).

This repetition of Atta's final day may also signify that the traumatic experience of September 11 is inescapable. The question arises as to the effect of such a narrative staging of the recurrence, the *acting out* of a trauma, a process that can be understood as "an endless repetition compulsion that keeps the past very much alive, both in

images, memories, and the forms they take” (Rohr 140). Replicated, the past disaster becomes insistent – asserts its significance – in Amis’s short story, an observation that holds true also for DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, which begins and ends with the disaster of September 11. These works do not instigate a *working through* of trauma, which would imply, as Susanne Rohr writes, a “transcendence of trauma and turning away from the past” (140). Both the fictionalized Atta and the readers are forced to confront what happened in the past. The understanding of September 11 encompasses multiple time frames: it is an anticipated future event for the terrorist and the reader, then becomes a present event described in its effect on Atta’s mind and body; but is also a past event as it is related in past tense for readers who engage with this fictional version of an actual historical event. Amis’s replication of the first sentence emphasizes the process of folding several temporal planes together into the narrative plot and reading experience.

As the reiteration of Atta’s pain and suffering indicates, Atta ends in hell on earth. Amis’s imagery in fact endows Atta with satanic attributes: as a consequence of the protagonist’s constant gastric challenges, “[h]is breath smelled like a blighted river” (91). When Atta has to confront his odious and odorous self, he becomes despicable to himself, in a scene I already quoted in Chapter 1: “The worst was yet to come: shaving. Shaving was the worst because it necessarily involved him in the contemplation of his own face (...): the face of Muhammad Atta. (...) The detestation, the detestation of everything, was being sculpted on it, from within” (97). In Amis’s short story, the perpetrator Atta becomes both the agent and the object of hatred; the terrorist’s ire against humanity consumes the terrorist himself.



The emphasis of 9/11 literature on the terrorist's abject corporeality materializes in this scene in a particularly compelling form. As in other examples of 9/11 literature, the body here functions as a major site in the attempt to condemn and externalize the Other. Däwes suggests that "in almost all fictional depictions of Atta" – and I would add, in characterizations of other 9/11 terrorists as well – "the focus is on the terrorist's physical ailments" (*Ground Zero Fiction* 254). Amis's short story, for instance, meticulously describes the protagonist's digestive dilemmas. Apparently, Atta's body declines to cooperate with Atta's mind and attempts to release or eliminate the terrorist residing within it.

Our limited knowledge about the actual terrorists as well as their complete disappearance in their suicide-murder motivates a physical recreation of the perpetrators in terrorist fiction. The hijackers presumably lose their anonymity as their bodily presence takes center stage on the pages of some twenty-first-century texts. Imaginary intimacy and closeness substitute for the inability to interrogate them, to punish them, to know them. We inhabit their bodies and their minds, as we grapple with the challenge of not understanding their motivations and emotional processes.

Amis chooses to magnify the Other's face, to show it up close, deforming it in the process. The Other has to face himself here. This forced self-reflection illustrates the text's effort to confront us with the excesses and horrors of humanity. As mentioned earlier, Sascha Pöhlmann contends that Amis succeeds in humanizing the terrorist and revealing that terrorism is human. Still, terrorism does not become an act each one of

“us” is capable of performing – it is the Other, the “inhuman human” who attacks both us and himself.

One could indeed interpret the shaving scene as pointing to the Self’s inherent alterity. After all, the passage dramatizes the confrontation with the Other in the Self, with the Self as Other. But the short story arguably falls short of guiding the (Western) reader to self-interrogation; we do not see ourselves in Atta’s mirror. It is Atta who has to come to terms with himself, with a void in himself, though he is not necessarily able to fathom the parameters of his own identity and personality.

Through his narrator, Amis thus acts as an avenger, disparaging and virtually assaulting the fictionalized Atta (and his co-conspirators), with the actual Atta beyond reach. Through the repetition of the final day, the destruction inflicted in fiction and reality by the two “versions” of Atta is contained in a loop; the terrorist is obliged to relieve his physical and emotional pain. Atta finds himself imprisoned in this loop. His evilness is equally harnessed: rather than emphasizing Atta’s appalling qualities, the text ridicules and grounds the protagonist. This portrait of Atta as inept and indeed failing may underscore Pöhlmann’s assertion that the terrorist is depicted as human in Amis’s short story; Atta’s very mishaps humanize him, since he no longer appears as a mysterious figure but rather as a clown. In one scene, he consecutively falls “on his coccyx” in the shower, rasps his head on the “shower’s serrated metal sill,” and catches a hangnail in the process of drying himself (96-7). The protagonist stumbles towards his final, atrocious act.

This portrait of an unhealthy, awkward individual obviously precludes a notion of Atta as heroic martyr; the reader looks down on a wretched human being, not up to a fearless superhuman. Atta may become a devil in Amis's hands, but he is a miserable devil suffering in hell. While refusing to endow Atta with redeeming characteristics, "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" does invite pity for a misguided, clumsy terrorist.

Aside from focusing on the terrorist's body, it is the protagonist's perception of other fictional characters' bodies that dominates Amis's short story and terrorist literature in general. Visions of presumably perilous and mysterious female bodies flicker across the mindscapes of the terrorists. The alterity of the terrorists becomes symbolized in their inability to move from their own segregated sphere towards the body of other individuals, especially women. Women's bodies remain alien and even repelling for the terrorists. These concerns about both the own body and the other body arguably reflect the supposed cultural and political insecurity or instability in Islamic societies as well as, conversely, the rejection of difference, of other political systems and cultural models. This negotiation of internal problems and a reaction against ideas from the outside creates the conflict delineated in Amis's short story in scenes with "abhorrent" bodies.

Manifestations of corporeality deeply disturb Atta. In one scene, the narrator reports Atta's utter dismay when he is crammed on the flight from Portland to Boston next to "a fat blonde with a scalp disease and, moreover, a baby" (109). The physicality of the woman and her baby as well as the mother's disease infuriate Atta, whose all-consuming object is the very annihilation of bodies. As the narrator tells us in this

striking instance of thought report: “Between heartbeats, when he was briefly capable of consecutive thought, he imagined that the blonde was the doomed stewardess [of his final flight]” (109). The stewardess as a representative of physical ability and appeal – a professional who is incidentally crossing time zones *alongside* the terrorist(s) in an age of globalized travel and globalized violence – arises as a curious motif in Amis’s text. Sitting on board the ill-fated Boeing 767 operating as American Airlines 11, the fictionalized Atta prepares himself for assaulting the stewardess, whose death, “the opening of female flesh,” he craves (120).

In order to summon the strength to attack the reviled woman, Atta forces himself to recall another confrontation with “female flesh.” Images of beauty, sexuality, anguish, and hostility float together and clash in Atta’s recollection of this previous incident with a flight attendant. On an Iberia flight in 1999, Atta witnesses crew members’ efforts to restore order on a plane after several Muslim passengers have gathered to pray in the aisle: “Then she appeared. Even Muhammad Atta at once conceded that here was the dark female in her most swinishly luxurious form” (120). Confronted with this attractive stewardess, Atta feels the urge to hurt her – to hurt “the face of cloudless entitlement” (121).

In one reading of Atta’s reaction, the flight attendant symbolizes Western privilege and Western sensuality for Atta; by hurting her, he would attack the reviled West. As the passage is embedded in scenes revealing Atta’s exceedingly problematic relationship with women, the text encourages a more straightforward analysis, however: the protagonist’s disgust at the sight of the female body suggests an aversion

of the Islamic terrorist to a woman as woman, not simply as a symbol of Western hedonism. The flight attendant's forceful presence propels the protagonist's disgust for the feminine. In Atta's ideal world (of Islamist domination), the narrator implies, women would not only need to conceal their bodies and faces; rather, in this barren dystopia, women and the concepts associated with relationships between men and women – sensuality, love, procreation – would vanish completely. Atta's world does not point into the future, it points towards the abyss, towards the end of reproduction.

The fictionalized Atta might pass as the devil or as the devil's fanatical and somewhat awkward cousin. Yet in the passages pairing the terrorist with women, Atta is also constructed as a detached, prude, and insecure individual. He is not only averse to the passions of faith and love that compel many of us, but also *reacts* against these flavorful ingredients of life with his own peculiar obsession with blood, violence, and death.

The fictionalized Atta loses sleep over the romantic endeavors of others; the narrator discloses the supreme discomfort of the protagonist with the union of man and woman: "Ziad and Aysel were his control experiment for the life lived by sexual love; and for many months the two of them had peopled his insomnia" (114). The names Ziad and Aysel allude to an actual couple: Ziad Jarrah, the sole Lebanese hijacker on the four planes on September 11, and Aysel Sengün, a Turkish-German woman who married Jarrah "at a ceremony at Al Nur Mosque in Hamburg" (McDermott 78).<sup>xvi</sup> Through his accomplice's actions, the fictionalized Atta sees himself confronted with the possibility and possible success of love or intimacy. The reference to insomnia serves to once again

underscore Atta's deviant sexuality. Love unsettles the Islamic terrorist, the story indicates; the incipient uncertainty producing sleeplessness is suppressed and replaced by enmity towards the couple. While the story thus reiterates the concept of a terrorist incapable of accepting and expressing affection, "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" also complicates and interrogates this very notion by integrating a fictionalized hijacker who enters a relationship with a woman.

Ziad Jarrah's embracing of sexuality functions as a control experiment for Amis's thesis, articulated in fiction and non-fiction, of the narrow-minded, stiff Islamic terrorist. The Lebanese hijacker's appearance in the short story – intentionally or unintentionally – undermines the central conclusion about Islamism's (in Amis's understanding of the term as a radical, violent strand of Islam) opposition to pleasure. In his reviling of women, the fictionalized Atta might not represent extremists in general.

Portraying Atta as challenged by femininity, Amis certainly appears to associate failed sexual gratification or sexual nonconformity with the passion for murder. Until he crashes the plane into the tower, the fictionalized Atta never satisfies his compulsive desire for violence – or is it repressed sexual desire? In a sense, Atta behaves like a voyeur, obsessed with an image but incapable of acting on his longings. Obsessed and nauseated: "For him, the combination, up close, was wholly unmanageable: the combination of women and blood" (121). Again, physical intimacy and corporeality repel Atta. The image merges the idea of violence and purposely inflicted wounds with the natural phenomenon of menstruation. More precisely, the specter of womanhood is inextricably tied to pain and violence. Indeed, through a privileged third-person

perspective, we learn from the narrator that “Muhammad Atta had decided that romantic and religious ardour came from contiguous parts of the human being: the parts he didn’t have” (115). In lieu of these passions, meaningless violence provides a route to satisfaction.

In a stinging review that sets out to rival Amis’s own derisiveness and sarcasm, Leon Wieseltier disparages the identification of sexuality as a root cause of terror:

Art is not the only impediment to understanding that Amis places in the way of his reader. There is also the impediment of sex. Among the many theories about Islamism and Islamist terror that appear in these pages, the writer’s favorite is the carnal one: he believes that 2,992 more people would be alive today if 19 Middle Eastern men had only found some satisfaction of the flesh. Like Updike, he chooses to impute the malignity in the terrorist’s heart to lust. More precisely, to frustrated lust; still more precisely, to frustrated male lust. Osama bin Libido! (Wieseltier)

Flying the plane into the tower, Amis’s Atta manages to satiate his yearnings for death without having to confront death, violence, and blood himself (or so he believes, until the narrator forces the character to “experience” pain and loss). Atta endeavors to overcome his limitations and to liberate his previously stunted masculinity by this atrocious act. The misogyny as well as the failed or misconceived masculinity of Islamists, combined with the ideology’s very thirst for death, creates a fatal mixture.

These twin streams – the character Atta succeeds in his terrorist act but is portrayed as an absurd, clownish devil – evoke Stephen Greenblatt’s theory of

*containment*, the notion that many a narrative first seems to undermine the dominant ideology only to then reinforce this ideology. Atta appears as a human, as similar to us; this depiction questions the notion that terrorists are evil monsters, completely alien from law-abiding Americans. Moreover, “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” centers on an individual who wreaks havoc in our community – the secular West, with which the author and presumably many readers identify. In other words, the fictional terrorist upsets us; the narration of the plane crashing into the tower produces an unsettling moment at the end of the short story.<sup>xvii</sup> Following his historical counterpart, the 9/11 ringleader, this fictional terrorist succeeds in his goal to (symbolically) defeat the American foe. The story’s focus and content thus harbor the seeds of *subversion* – Greenblatt’s term, which in my analysis refers mainly to narrative features that present the perpetrator as human (“like us”) and those that revive the trauma of September 11.

Yet these seeds are not allowed to sprout in most of the texts I am studying; they are contained by a variety of strategies. In Amis’s short story, the narrator diverts or dilutes the devastation of September 11 (by a humanized perpetrator) through a veritable retaliation against the terrorist, who is eventually cast as an absolute Other. The character Atta may accomplish his plan to fly a passenger plane into one of the WTC towers, but he fails in almost every other respect. The series of small accidents in his motel room is only a precursor to the final strikes, dealt to the fictionalized Atta (representing the actual terrorist) by the narrator: in his last moment on earth – which, in this case, lasts “much longer than an instant” – Atta has to acknowledge “how very gravely he had underestimated life” (123). The realization of life’s preciousness is



followed immediately by the ending of this life – leaving the terrorist incapable of changing the course of events. To make matters worse, he has to relive this physically and mentally excruciating second; September 11, 2001 is a morning of pain for Muhammad Atta, pain that becomes eternal as it were.

The story's subversive ingredients – the retelling of a narrative of national trauma from a humanized perpetrator's stance – are thus contained at the hands of Amis (or his narrator); the "victory" of the terrorist is transformed into a story of his failure. The fictionalized Atta does not offer a sensible alternative to the liberal West cherished by Amis (as his non-fiction demonstrates) as well as by the short story's narrator. Atta's and the Islamists' world is depicted as a retrograde realm of boredom, hatred, and violence, a world the narrator clearly regards as inferior to the secular, progressive societies of the West. The reader will hardly find Atta's world appealing, nor is she likely to approve of or comprehend the terrorist's stated rationale for the attack (namely the desire to kill, as discussed below). While the text may thus contain any subversion inherent in the premise of a narrative with a terrorist as its protagonist, Amis's effort to combat Islamic terrorism in literature seems narrow-minded. A story preoccupied with Atta's nihilism and his repelling obsession with death, "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" neither constitutes nor stimulates a complex reflection on the global context of terrorism.

Instead of considering a host of motivations, Amis's short story grants the fictionalized Atta one "core reason" for the attacks, but the outlandishness of this core reason prevents rather than enables an explanation or rationalization of Atta's acts. In a

nutshell, Atta craves death and oblivion (only to end up “alive” again and again, as I have stressed). Amis’s short story provides a direct and perhaps simplistic answer to the question of what impelled the fictional terrorist to cause horrendous bloodshed: Atta is driven by this core reason as well as by his thwarted masculinity, which understands the attacks as liberation.<sup>xviii</sup>

At first, however, the reader is only told that Atta “was doing what he was doing for the core reason and for the core reason only. (...) Muhammad Atta was not religious; he was not even especially political. He had allied himself with the militants because jihad was, by many magnitudes, the most charismatic idea of his generation. (...) And it suited his character” (101). Jihad appeals to Atta due to its “ferocity” – which entails penalties doled out to transgressors such as adulterers – and because it satisfies Atta’s desire to join a male community (101-2). The text’s reductive definition of jihad lumps this concept together with Islamic fundamentalism and hallmarks of such fundamentalism (misogyny, cruel punishments, austerity).<sup>xix</sup> “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” equates jihad with violence as well as with the stern Islamic practices common under the Taliban in Afghanistan and under the Saud regime in Saudi-Arabia, the center of Wahhabism.

Near the end of Amis’s shorts story, the other key puzzle piece is added, defining the “core reason” and thus precluding ambiguity: “The core reason was of course all the killing – all the putting to death. (...) Killing was divine delight. And your suicide was just a part of the contribution you made – the massive contribution to death” (122). It is

violence and death Atta seeks; Islamic fundamentalism provides a means for Atta to gratify his innermost craving for destruction.

In conjunction with the scenes highlighting Atta's clownish-ungainly behavior and the narrator's antagonistic interventions, the crude sketch of the terrorist's psychology, and the rudimentary contextualization of the attacks diminish the story's imaginative and persuasive power.<sup>xx</sup> While a fictional story cannot be expected to supply clear-cut answers to the complex question regarding the factors contributing to terrorism, Amis seems to attempt exactly that in a rather unsatisfactory manner. Yet his Atta is of course merely one Atta, a projection that cannot be transposed onto the actual Atta.

Other "Attas" exist beyond Amis's text. Albeit this may not have been the intended effect, the short story's final sentence – the gesture towards repetition – indicates that Atta's last day can be retold with a different emphasis or structure (see Däwes, *Ground Zero Fiction* 264). The sentence inspires a re-imagination of Atta's story. Our ignorance of Atta, our inability to "know" him, inevitably generates competing versions and interpretations of the terrorist's mindscape. The absence of the actual Atta motivates – even necessitates – his reconfiguration and resurrection in fiction.

Versluys argues that the "recapitulation of the first sentence as the last sentence" points to the "impossibility of coming to a closure." Elaborating on the meaning of the curious doubling, Versluys writes: "The author has presented a 'slice of life' – the attendant suggestion being that Atta's life can be sliced in any number of different ways and alternative renderings of the events are not only possible but

required” (161). The ending’s rejection of closure partially counteracts the story’s narrow vision of Islamism and of the roots of terror.

If the last sentence constitutes a compelling facet of a problematic text, another salient moment is certainly the protagonist’s (first) death. In *Ground Zero Fiction*, Däwes insists that the narrative reconstruction of Atta’s suicide-murder neutralizes the preceding othering of the terrorist: “Just when the grotesque revenge of Atta’s own body has turned him into an easily dismissed Other, the intimacy of his death does precisely what Kristeva describes: it draws readers toward the place of the homologous, where its meaning collapses” (256). The depiction of death may in fact emphasize Atta’s sameness, leveling previously established distinctions between the terrorist and “us.” Yet unlike Däwes, I interpret the veritable denial of death – with Atta submitted to a narrative circuit – as a reinforcement of the Other’s externalization. Däwes suggests that this implied reiteration “precludes any secure placement of the Other,” but it appears more accurate to conclude that his fate, his continuous reliving of his final moment, marks Atta as separate from ordinary mortals (257). Atta remains in his own dimension, a world of violence and pain.

### **This Awful Monster from Cairo**

The author of a play has to externalize (in the sense of presenting openly) the thoughts of a character; the character has to be staged. Whereas in a novel the world

can be viewed from the inside of a character, through her or his eyes as it were,<sup>xxi</sup> in a play this inside perspective needs to be provided in a dialogue between characters or, in the case of a soliloquy, between a character and the audience. In Maud Ellmann's words, "the theatre gives external form to the internal dramaturgy of the mind, where anything may be invoked and brought to life" (6). The spectator-reader enters the character by way of translating external emotions and statements into expressions of the mind.

Present on stage, the character's corporeality engenders his real-ness and facilitates his humanization. Encountering a terrorist face-to-face on stage – or imagining the performance as the reader of a play – confronts us with his very humanity, his being-like-us. The connection or association between spectator and character can certainly be disrupted, for example by disfiguring the actor with an eerie mask, costume, or make-up. Again, the key struggle for author, director, and spectator is the reconciliation – in writing, in the imagination, in the performance – of the evilness of the atrocious acts with the humanness of the perpetrator. Overshadowing (and perhaps inspiring) each text analyzed in this dissertation, the questions of "why" and "who" nag and enthrall the audience – as they presumably did with the author. How to construct a causal chain and assign blame? How to properly weave a web of the familial and communal relationships, a web that embraces a human who proceeds to become inhuman by committing an atrocity?

Amis largely eschews an answer to these questions by concentrating on the general ideology that Atta submits to, an ideology of hatred, boredom, and death.

Kobek constructs a web of Atta's relations, revealing Atta's background and nature, but the rationale for terrorism is not explicitly identified in the text. Havis stops short of explicitly naming the terrorist's motivation but the characterization of Atta in the play is certainly designed to have the spectator-reader speculate about the basis of the plot and its participants. Atta, resembling his counterparts in Amis's and Kobek's stories, is a devout Muslim (204) and a serious, severe man (195); Atta matches Amis's version of the Muslim hijacker who hates laughter, representing a belief system or culture that appears to discourage humor. The character Dolni insists that Atta is an insane monster eager to inflict harm on others (226). He resents Americans (190), Jews (198, 203), women (213 and also 227-9), and in fact people in general (196).

Similar to the other works I am analyzing herein, Havis interweaves the presentation of Atta's violent disposition with the protagonist's conflicted sexuality. Notably, *Three Nights in Prague* centers on Atta's meeting with a prostitute, a boy dressed as a girl, as well as on several poignant conversations with the prostitute's Czech father and with an accomplice, employed at the Iraqi embassy. Underscoring the protagonist's challenged relationship to the female sex, Havis also provides excerpts from Atta's actual will.

Havis's play has garnered little attention – in fact, I am not aware of any critical studies of the play. *Three Nights in Prague* is based on the allegation that Atta met with an Iraqi intelligence officer in April 2001 at the country's embassy in Prague. But this sojourn in the Czech capital has been unmasked as a mere rumor. Assessing the available information, the 9/11 Commission Report on Atta's concludes drily: "No

evidence has been found that Atta was in the Czech Republic in April 2001” (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks 228). Havis’s decision to invoke the rumor about Atta’s trip to discuss the plot with Baghdad implies a willingness to associate the Iraqi government with Al-Qaida, a complicity never confirmed by intelligence.

Connecting Atta to Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, other “monsters” of history, Havis proposes commonalities among incarnations of evil.<sup>xiii</sup> According to the bland character Pavel, Saddam Hussein is known for his homosexual leanings and a proclivity for boys. These parallels between Atta and the Iraqi dictator seem to reassert the link between Iraq and Al-Qaeda that the play establishes in the encounter between the Iraqi government employee Al-Ani and Atta. The play further confirms this link between vilified fixtures of the post-9/11 world when Al-Ani claims to have met Osama bin Laden. Relating his experience to Atta, Al-Ani reports Osama bin Laden’s handshake to have been “effeminate” (206).

The (fictionalized) Saddam Hussein likewise interacted with the Saudi terrorist, Al-Ani claims; however, the Iraqi dictator, who is supposedly “not irrational like Kaddafi,” will never enter into an alliance with Al-Qaeda – in Al-Ani’s opinion. Havis’s version of Saddam Hussein seems to discern no value in close cooperation with the terrorist network, even if he is apparently prepared to assist Atta’s project; again according to Al-Ani, Saddam Hussein regards the Al-Qaeda leader as a “hypocrite who speaks to the weak.” Supplementing this verdict with a graphic addendum, Al-Ani calls Osama bin Laden “a hypocrite who likes to fuck sheep” (206). Besides constructing conspiratorial scenes and speculative, even counter-factual political associations, Havis

persistently sexualizes and degrades the various malicious historical figures mentioned in the play. Osama bin Laden, this other (near-)universal symbol of violence and viciousness, matches Atta and Saddam Hussein not only in notoriety but also in terms of his eccentric sexual desires, sharing with his two “peers” a penchant for non-normative intercourse. A web of associations begins to materialize, by now familiar from the previously analyzed texts: violent Arab/Muslim individuals confront the specter of femininity, their homosexuality or aberrant sexuality, and their vulnerability and pain.

By implying that all members of the triad of wickedness lean toward homosexuality, Havis treads on hazardous ground, as he links homosexuality and violence. The play allows for problematic inferences, fashioning the image of violent, lewd, and weak homosexuals as well as promoting a view of terrorists (which here includes Saddam Hussein) as lewd, weak, and possibly homosexual. By tethering violence to sexuality, Havis also attributes terrorism to inherent traits of Arab or Muslim societies and to the conflicts arising from these traits.

*Three Nights in Prague* indeed confirms Jasbir Puar’s assertion that Osama bin Laden “was portrayed as monstrous by association with sexual and bodily perversity (versions of both homosexuality and hypertrophied heterosexuality, or failed monogamy, that is, an Orientalist version of polygamy, as well as disability) through images in popular culture (also the case with Saddam/Sodom Hussein)” (38). The significance of Havis’s play resides thus not in an imaginative exploration of an actual event, but in its sexualization of Mohamed Atta and other (Arab) foes of the West. Sexuality, pain, and aggression are woven into a pattern of Arab-Muslim deviancy.



The process of creating this fabric entails statements by Atta himself and by the other characters (Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein are invoked but of course not present in the play). The protagonist assumes shape in a set of curiously brisk dialogues, marked by parrying between the characters, alternately entertaining and irritating:

Al-Ani: "When Arafat dies, power will go to a man in a three piece suit."

Atta: "Maybe. Who cares?"

Al-Ani: "I do."

Atta: "The Jews will all one day die from the plague."

Al-Ani: "Does your Imam teach you that?"

Atta: "Yes." (202)

Cramming such verbal duels, which feature a curious *mélange* of confession and suspicion, and relatively little action into ten scenes, a prologue, and an appendix, *Three Nights in Prague* establishes a context for Atta's and the other characters' presence in Prague. The four protagonists, Atta, Dolni, and Pavel, and Al-Ani, meet, interrogate, and assist each other in only roughly sketched spaces of the Czech capital. Their life trajectories, albeit intersecting in Prague, otherwise originate from and lead into different directions.

Mohamed Atta apparently stays in Prague to solicit assistance for his sinister plans from the Iraqi government, represented by the enigmatic Al-Ani. The central conversation with Al-Ani exposes Atta's intention of attacking an American city (not further specified, but this dialogue evidently points to the terrorist attacks of 9/11). The other dialogues – some involve the character Atta, while others revolve around him in

his absence – serve chiefly to shape an image of the terrorist’s mindset and to trace the other characters’ response to this mindset; importantly, Havis’s play confronts the responsibility of the communities that “surround” and host terrorists, a critical stance expressed particularly in the last scene of *Three Nights in Prague*, as I will explicate shortly.

The three characters besides Atta function as backboards for the main protagonist’s sentiments, allowing Havis to configure the protagonist’s mindset through his conversations with Dolni, Pavel, and Al-Ani; they also interpret Atta, expounding on the Egyptian’s disposition in their discussions amongst each other. Their statements help to modify Atta’s portrait, but their actions and reactions as they encounter Atta are crucial components of *Three Nights in Prague* beyond contributing to an understanding of the terrorist: indeed, the other individuals populating the play appear to exemplify the simultaneous closeness and distance of terrorists to the rest of society. They construct the terrorist’s alterity and his alleged non-normativity. Moreover, by delineating the premonitions of these characters, the play explores the issue of society’s knowledge of terrorism, of the predictability of terrorist attacks. Ultimately, then, the presence on stage of Dolni, Pavel, and Al-Ani provokes questions about the responsibility for terrorism, even as the play seeks answers – motives and responsibilities – in (the fictionalized) Atta’s life itself.

A succinct overview of the characters: Dolni is a sickly teenage boy, introduced at first as a girl. He works as a prostitute under his father’s aegis to fund a much-needed operation for his, the boy’s unidentified condition. Dolni’s father, Pavel, wanders

through Prague with Dolni in search of money as well as in search of relief from his rather miserable existence. A luckless, desperate individual, Pavel aids Al-Ani in his quests to acquire more information on Atta and otherwise accompanies his son on his distressing “errands”. Al-Ani himself occupies a minor position at the Iraqi embassy, toiling as a custodian; yet this lowly job could be a masquerade, as he may have links to the Czech authorities, at least according to the list of characters preceding the play. Al-Ani’s precise role remains unclear; his mask is never lifted.

The uncertainty about Al-Ani’s affiliation mirrors the ambiguity and secrecy enveloping the other characters, in particular Dolni and Atta. In the play’s first scene, Dolni lingers in the Egyptian’s hotel room, prepared to offer sexual favors. Atta regards the seemingly androgynous Dolni (no stage directions elaborate on his physical appearance) as a woman, thus maintaining the pretense of engaging in a heterosexual act. Strikingly, it is not until much later, in Scene 5, that Dolni’s gender is actually identified.

Throughout his encounter with Atta, Dolni plays with this indistinctness – this existence in between his biological sex and his masquerade of femininity. He claims he cannot have children because his “tubes are scarred” and advises Atta to “think of me as your son and as your daughter” when “I touch you” (190, 191). Dolni also questions Atta’s masculinity. He has the audacity to tell Atta that “[y]ou are a boy as much as you are a man” (188). In this charade, Dolni can risk frankness; Atta does not censure Dolni’s insolence, conveying an air of vulnerability and naiveté in this scene. Reacting to the

Czech boy's demand to share a secret, Atta admits sheepishly that he hasn't experienced pleasure "in a long time" (189).

Havis constantly reconfigures power relations over the course of this scene (and the play), variously assigning Dolni and Atta to a position of ostensible weakness. Curiously then, the weakness and pain of the Arab or Muslim terrorist is echoed by the fragility of the Western individuals in the play. They offer Atta – fundamentalism – entry into Western society. *Three Nights in Prague* is a story not only of injured, volatile Arab and Muslim societies but also of Western vulnerability; the representative of the former resorts to violence, the characters that are part of the latter are largely passive.

This weakness, this openness – the term "openness" here signifies vulnerability, sincerity (the character admit their issues and concerns), and Western hospitality – is counteracted by Atta's aggression and by the concealment of identities indicated earlier. Atta, of course, tries to disguise his identity as a participant in a terrorist plot; the audience of course has already determined this identity before the first lines are uttered. Dolni in turn pretends to be a woman, a daughter – but then again also a son; Atta accepts this masquerade to preserve his principle (rooted in faith? rooted in his sexual orientation?) not to come into contact with the other sex. Atta's attempt at concealment and the hiding of his true Self fails, however, as his behavior triggers suspicion and does not deceive the other characters.

The gender confusion replicates and is indeed prompted by Atta's own challenges with his sexual identity. Atta requests a woman to indulge his desires, but as Pavel reveals in a conversation with Al-Ani occurring while Dolni and Atta stay in the

hotel room, Atta “cannot have sex with a woman” in bed, for “it is his pure love of Islam” (213). Consequently, “Atta is with a ‘young woman’ who is not ‘a woman’ so he can still feel clean. To his God – Allah – there is no woman in that hotel room. And Allah is happy” (213). Atta’s faith is here exposed as yet another form of masquerade; his beliefs seem insincere and hypocritical, or at least they seem to force Atta into hypocrisy. Over the course of the play, Atta’s adherence to the Islamic faith seems forced and consists primarily in superficial proclamations: “We are all in the Koran,” or “A bribe insults Allah” (191, 192). He secretly skirts the restrictions his faith imposes.

Atta’s paradoxical desire-refusal to interact with women falls in line with numerous references to the terrorist’s troubled, Janus-faced sexuality. Most scenes include sometimes cryptic, sometimes unambiguous comments on Atta’s curious relationship to the body, to his Self, to his inner torments. According to Al-Ani, for example, Atta “hates his sexuality” (224). Near the end of Scene 2, Pavel explains to Atta that Al-Ani’s predecessor at the Iraqi consulate was ousted on account of his homosexuality. Pavel then offers a hypothesis about the process of self-realization in homosexuals, evidently referring to Atta: “There are some homosexuals who look into the mirror and see Mother Nature posing as something quite different. (*Pause.*) And that’s high culture” (200). Pavel sardonically adds: “I’ve been told that even Saddam likes boys - to supplement all his beautiful wives and mistresses. I’ve learned this at the consul [*sic*]. Yes, Iraqis can be decadent, Mr. Atta. Not like dignified Egyptians. Not like you” (200).

Pavel's comments recall Martin Amis's short story, which dramatizes the confrontation with the Other in the Self, with the Self as Other: as he is shaving in the Portland motel room, Atta has to face his (hideous) Self. The scene seems to demonstrate Kristeva's concept of the Self's inherent alterity, but it also has Atta discover his apparent monstrosity. Havis's play likewise incorporates the motif of the mirror and the confounding encounter with the Self/Other, albeit with a distinct emphasis. The face conceals non-normative desire, covering the actual character; what Pavel discerns in some individuals, then, is a reticence to embrace homosexuality as part of their character. It is not much of a stretch to relate this suggestion to Atta, who is presumably reluctant to openly accept his homosexual Self; at least this is the impression the play conveys regarding the protagonist.

Again, a familiar theme surfaces, the blending of knowledge and ignorance, the simultaneity of seeing and masking, of desiring and refusing. This version of Atta seemingly longs for women but also rejects women in an outright, absolute fashion, which in turn produces his fondness for the boy Dolni, even if he maintains the illusion of Dolni's femininity. Constrained by a peculiar, idiosyncratic interpretation of the Qur'an, the Egyptian cannot recognize his true Self in the mirror; he blinds himself, as he "poses as something quite different."

Atta commits a violent act in part to avoid looking into the mirror. He seeks to suppress his individual desires, his experiences and memories. Havis's play thus suggests that the Arab or Muslim mindset involves both a degree of self-loathing and a refusal of introspection. In other words, frustration about the Self and indeed the inability to

understand or accept the Self (as reflected in the mirror) are funneled into hatred against the Other, the outside.

*Three Nights in Prague* constructs in Atta a figure that employs terrorism to combat his own pain and scars. The perceptive Dolni, whose clear-sightedness ties him to the knowing audience, predicts that “he’s going to fall apart” (219). Dolni claims: “He’s the most injured person I ever met.” Dolni follows Pavel’s rejoinder that Atta is “angry” with an assertion that “[h]e can’t make his life better. So he will make strangers feel his pain.” The Czech’s depiction of Atta as a fragile, desperate individual is accompanied by a familiar, generalizing assumption: “Maybe that’s the scar inside the Arab mind. I told him that, Pavel. I really did” (219). Since Dolni functions as the play’s clairvoyant, his conceptualization of Arabs carries some weight – and is thus all the more striking. Striking not only because his thesis purports the existence of a unified Arab (or does he mean Muslim?) mind, a common Arab ailment even. Striking and unfortunate also because Dolni encourages an image of Atta as a frustrated, powerless individual seeking release for his pent-up sorrow – the inhabitants of an entire heterogeneous region are *reduced* to and symbolized by an allegedly failed, irate rogue. While the idiosyncrasies of Amis’s Atta, including his nihilism, at least question, though not entirely dismiss generalizations about the personality of Muslim terrorists, as this version of Atta is “unlike the other hijackers” (Randall 49), Havis’s Atta explicitly represents the Islamic cultures of the Middle East and their supposed internal anguish.

By insisting that Atta has struggled in vain to improve his living conditions and thus resorts to violence, Dolni regurgitates the idea of Muslim or Arab terrorists as

despondent individuals, who – by extension – hail from failing (if not failed) states and defective cultures. In his careful and detailed study, *What Makes a Terrorist* (2007), Alan Krueger calls the underlying notion that “poverty and inadequate education cause terrorism” a “myth” and “popular stereotype” (50).<sup>xxiii</sup> Rather than confronting the uncomfortable possibility that terrorists might be “motivated by geopolitical grievances” (51), Krueger writes, the “public” and “world leaders” prefer to believe that “terrorists act because they are desperate and uneducated” (50). Terrorists, according to Krueger, are actually driven by “political goals that they believe are furthered by their actions” (4). Instead of interrogating Western policies and their consequences, Havis revives misperceptions about terrorists via Dolni’s argument, asserting a causal relation between personal “despair” and a murder-suicide. Neither Havis nor Amis grants his respective version of the hijacker Atta a rational, political objective.

Dolni seems to insist that Atta’s predilection for violence derives from his depression and discontentment, or more broadly speaking, from the lack of opportunities in the Arab world to live a fulfilled existence. Aside from pointing out challenging socio-economic conditions, the play presumably alludes here to the absence of freedoms and human rights in the region. Havis thus arguably presents the idea that terrorism in the name of Islam stems from an inability of Arabs to set their house in order. Regardless of this theory’s validity, what disturbs is Havis’s failure to engage with divergent viewpoints. Dolni’s claim is never challenged in the play – on the contrary, it finds support, as Atta emerges as a dissatisfied individual.



Atta never explicitly formulates his accusations against the West and merely describes his terrorist group as consisting of “[d]evout men of Islam,” who are not “simple zealots” (204). Indications of possible motives do not become full-fledged explications. The play therefore dismisses the notion that responsibility for the attacks is to be found outside the Arab/Muslim world. Arab societies are hurt and helpless, hence eager to resort to violence – possibly to regain a sense of power (and masculinity?). In sum, Atta reflects an Orientalist perception of Muslims more generally and Islamists more specifically; Havis’s protagonist embodies what Christopher Hitchens has identified as, in Bradley and Tate’s disapproving and concise description, Islamism’s “lethal cocktail of self-righteousness, self-pity and self-hatred” (42). Atta’s challenged, deracinated masculinity and his disappointments translate into lethal acts. The terrorist’s frustration will be unleashed against “an entire city of infidels,” as he prophesies, but first against an unremarkable Czech man, Pavel (203).

In a disturbing passage (at the end of Scene 8) that fuses greed, longing, and despair, Atta threatens to kill Pavel unless the Czech surrenders his child to him. The protagonist acknowledges, “I like your child” (220), who is a “sweet child” in his words (221), and offers to “look after” Dolni (220). Pavel rejects this disconcerting proposal, his last act on stage. In the following scene, a worried Dolni interrogates Al-Ani about his father’s whereabouts, but the Iraqi dodges his inquiries. Consequently, Dolni seeks (in vain) assistance from the police, reporting his father missing in the crucial last scene.

While not explicitly revealing the circumstances of Pavel’s disappearance or naming a perpetrator, the play frames Atta as the Czech’s murderer; the conclusion of

their last dialogue leaves not much room for alternative interpretations. Atta's craving for the boy-child Dolni culminates in what might be called a trafficking scheme; when his demands are unfulfilled, he turns into a predator. Once again, he appears as a dissatisfied soul, funneling his pain into aggression towards a child and its protector.

Significantly, Pavel does not relent, does not succumb to the threat the terrorist poses; his "flesh and blood is everything" (221). The bond between father and son crucially holds throughout the play, in spite of all odds and strains. In contrast, Atta sketches unhinged familial connections at his own home. He confesses earlier in Scene 8: "My father always lied to me" (219). Atta blames these lies on his father's conflicted relationship with religion: "He lied because he was ashamed of God. And God was ashamed of him." His father also used to beat Atta "with his shoes" (220).

Introducing the notion of a violent, dishonest, and presumably irreligious father, the play continues to engage with Atta's personal suffering. Whether or not the father's treatment produced a disturbed, distressed boy/man remains mere speculation, as the play offers no further explication of their relationship. Yet what emerges is the image of an insecure individual, who experienced violence and now sets out to inflict violence.

The implied conflict in the Atta family underlines Dolni's – and arguably the play's – suggestion that violent acts committed by Muslims have their roots in the Arab/Muslim world's constraining traditions, including patriarchy. It might be far-fetched to connect Atta's struggle to overcome his father's regime with the region's confrontation of suffocating dictatorships; however, the play at least nods towards such an analysis, depicting a man marked by (past) frustration and powerlessness.

Yet the play also draws the seemingly innocent Czech bystanders into the sphere of knowledge, the sphere of terrorism. As Pavel and Dolni cross Atta's path, they anticipate the trajectory of this path. Dolni declares in the last scene, during the last of the three nights in Prague, that Atta is set to kill someone, that he is "dangerous" (226). His warnings trigger no action, however: the police officers with whom he shares his suspicions remain silent and invisible on stage, even though they do seem to respond in a dismissive fashion to his frantically narrated tale. Their presence and reaction can only be inferred from Dolni's statements: "Yes, I had sex with him. (...) Al-Ani knows the murderer. I swear to you these two men are working together. (...) My name is Dolni Frisch. Yes. Yes" (226). He confronts a wall of silence, encountering a reticence to face or imagine the acts.<sup>xxiv</sup>

When Dolni summarizes a dream/nightmare in the final scene, the specter of 9/11 looms large: "I had a disturbing dream last night. My dreams always come before dawn. A plane hits a building. The great hand of God turns green. I know the pilot" (225). In a blunt, somewhat awkward fashion, the play thus prefigures the event of September 11. Evidently then, Al-Ani, Pavel, and Dolni understand that the Egyptian harbors malicious intentions, as his plans unfold in front of them. The play thus recalls Derrida's assertion – expressed by other observers as well – that it was "not impossible to foresee an attack on American soil by those called 'terrorists'" (Borradori 91).

Atta himself announces the enormity of the attack. Conferring with Al-Ani on the possible extent of their collaboration and on his terrorist cell's strategy, Atta boasts: "We will surpass Pearl Harbor. This I do swear" (205). In a clumsily written dialogue

reminiscent of a second-rate crime or science-fiction novel, Atta requests from Al-Ani “the equipment to neutralize transponders for commercial jets” – if Baghdad is unable to “give us biological agents.” He elaborates: “We need to cloak everything in the sky for one hour” (206). In the same conversation, Atta demands that Al-Ani tell his government “that we plan to kill an entire city of infidels” (203). Comparing the planned attacks with Pearl Harbor and maintaining that the event will be an extraordinary and unprecedented spectacle, the character Atta not only seems deluded or grandiose, he also anticipates the historicity or historical significance of the terrorist plot.<sup>xxv</sup> As the play closes with Dolni’s portentous statements, it embeds the event of 9/11 into its narrative – September 11 is both a threat looming on the horizon and a component of the play.

The actual terrorist comes into focus as Dolni’s desperate pleadings fade away: the English translation of Mohamed Atta’s will supplements the play, serving as an addendum but also pointing back to the beginning of *Three Nights in Prague*, which indeed starts with an excerpt from the will. The will, a guide arguably both to Atta’s psychology and to Al-Qaeda’s ideology, follows a few background notes concerning the alleged factual basis of *Three Nights in Prague*. Incorporating historical evidence, Havis arguably seeks to both enrich and authenticate the play’s characterization of Atta. A chilling document, the will produces a portrait of Atta as a misogynist, resentful and afraid of women. The 9/11 ringleader asks, for example, that only Muslim men approach his body and grave, banning woman from physical closeness even posthumously. The

complete incineration of all the bodies on American Airlines Flight 11 nullified the following ludicrous requests, of course:

1. The people who will prepare my body should be good Muslims because this will remind me of God and his forgiveness. ...
5. I don't want a pregnant woman or a person who is not clean to come and say good-bye to me because I don't approve it. ...
9. The person who will wash my body near my genitals must wear gloves on his hands so he won't touch my genitals. ...
11. I don't want any women to go to my grave at all during my funeral or on any occasion thereafter. (228)

The terrorist's own words serve to condemn and ridicule Atta; as such, they are in line with the play's depiction of Atta as a rather bizarre figure, which may come at the cost of a more serious engagement with the terrorist plot's background and objectives.

Commenting on Atta's will in his study on Al-Qaeda's preparations for the attacks of 9/11, Lawrence Wright argues: "The anger that this statement directs at women and its horror of sexual contact invites the thought that Atta's turn to terror had as much to do with his own conflicted sexuality as it did with the clash of civilizations" (307). It is perhaps in part because of this odd document – and the resulting portrait of Mohamed Atta as a disturbed man brimming with hatred for women – that Havis and other writers have homed in on the figure of Atta in their narratives. Mohamed Atta seems to have matched the image of the repressed, humorless Muslim fundamentalist, embodying the internal conflicts of Arab and Islamic cultures.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Curiously, according to Yosri Fouda and Nick Fielding, the will “was a printed-out form devised by the [Al-Quds] mosque,” a standardized statement Atta signed as early as 1996 in Hamburg (83). The will therefore appears to be removed from the person Atta and from the events of September 11; it is instead a document representing contemporary fundamentalist ideology. In signing the will, Atta certainly performed an individual gesture, but he also submitted himself to a set of religious beliefs and socio-cultural concepts. The ideas expressed in the will are reflected in Havis’s construction of Atta; the Atta on stage thus also incarnates the ideology that informed the document.

As he takes center stage to read the first part of the will in the prologue, the protagonist envisages and foresees his death. The play ends and begins with a reference to Atta’s death, as his testament constitutes the last words and the first words of the play: “This is what I want to happen after my death,” the character Mohamed Atta declares at the outset, introducing his will (186).

On the one hand, Atta’s death indeed defines his life – or, rather, he is defined by his death – and his suicide-murder constitutes his objective in life. On the other hand, the play invites us to read and interpret Atta’s life from the point of his death. The play is wedged in between or folded into these moments that anticipate the terrorist’s passing, thus intertwining the plot of the drama with the outcome of the terrorist plot. As in most exemplars of terrorist literature, action and dialogues described in the text (occurring on stage) are bound to the eventual attack, gaining significance due to the foreshadowing of Atta’s passing in the prologue – and retrospectively, through the iteration of key motifs in the addendum.

Though Atta's testament sheds a negative light onto the Egyptian's character, it also offers his beliefs a platform in the play. Atta – the historical figure and the stage character – is lent a voice in Havis's play. His ideas frame *Three Nights in Prague*. By having the fictionalized Atta read the beginning lines of his will in the prologue, Havis allows Atta "himself" to draw the first strokes of his portrait: "I am Mohamed ... I want my family and everyone who reads this will to fear Almighty God and don't fall to deception and to follow God and his prophets. I don't want any women to go to my grave at all during my funeral" (186).

Mohamed Atta's uncommented, uninterrupted soliloquy and the printed will at the very end of the play's written version arguably constitute subversive moments, to recall Greenblatt's term. Atta is the first character to appear and he indeed speaks for himself, thus claiming a certain degree of power. Whereas Amis's Atta is analyzed and condemned by a contemptuous narrator, Havis's play presents the Other's perspective, letting the fictionalized Atta read the actual Atta's testament. Giving Atta a voice, *Three Nights in Prague* partially undermines the othering of the terrorists. This subversion is countered by the eccentric, alien nature of the terrorist's demands expressed in his will.

At first, no distanced and distancing entity – neither stage directions nor any form of intervening chorus – provides a separate viewpoint on the terrorist and his statements. As the play progresses, though, the other characters function as critical observers of Atta's plans and actions. Following their encounters with the Egyptian, they register bewilderment, scorn, and alarm, reinserting the narrative of Atta as an absolute Other, exterior to "our" sphere (recall Dolni's statement about the "Arab mind"). In

other words, as his violent and zealous nature emerges from the dialogues but also from the will itself, Atta's otherness is confirmed.

This dehumanization of Atta finds an arresting manifestation near the end of the play, when Dolni refers to him as a "monster," a "sick" murderer with "a devil inside his eyes" (226). Dolni's unqualified language emphasizes the boy's wrath and distress in the wake of his father's disappearance. It evokes scenes in Kobek's novel and Amis's short story that frame the terrorist as monstrously other, even diabolic. In the discourse following September 11, the Muslim hijackers became embodiments of evil, representing an alien, inhuman ideology.<sup>xxvii</sup> Labels such as "devil" and "monster" denote a boundary between ordinary human beings and malicious, inhuman individuals – even though violent, demonic behavior is certainly an inherent part of humanity.

Atta's disposition appears rooted in past suffering and humiliations as well as in constraints associated with his religious and cultural background. Havis endows the characters Dolni, Pavel, and Al-Ani with flaws and personal challenges as well, but he does not have them share Atta's blend of misogyny, religious ardor, familial conflict, sexual frustration, and a proclivity for violence. In Havis's play, it is a confrontation with the complexity of the Self that triggers violence. This Self in turn is interpreted by Others: *Three Nights in Prague* conveys the readability of the terrorist, who is exposed to an analysis – especially so with the text of the actual will added to the play. As other characters impose their perspectives onto the protagonist, so do writers and readers form an understanding Atta, apprehending his actions based on a few fragments.



## Conclusion

Havis's Atta is an injured soul supposedly emblematic of the Arab mind. *Three Nights in Prague* in fact compares Atta with notorious, "evil" individuals, including Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein; his traits also call to mind the other two versions of the hijacker discussed in this chapter. Havis, Kobek, and Amis all describe a character devoted to his cause, distressed by corporeality and the specter of intimacy. He is an eccentric, enigmatic character – and perhaps even inhuman?

Confronted with the challenge of defining the construction of monstrosity in terrorist literature and determining the demarcation of human and inhuman groups, I argue that the depictions of Atta by Havis, Kobek, and Amis locate the evilness and alterity of the terrorist not only in his disturbing beliefs and comportment, but precisely in his endeavor to create a sharply defined boundary between Self and Other. Relating Atta's penchant for strict divisions to Islamic fundamentalism and socio-cultural processes in the Arab world, the narratives suggest a contrast between the apparent openness of Western societies – allowing the terrorist to become the enemy within – and the separation sought by Muslim extremists. Atta's rejection, even exploitation of hospitality in the three texts signals a desire to remain entrenched in the position of otherness vis-à-vis the West. In configuring the Islamic terrorist in this fashion, Kobek, Atta, and Havis also contribute to exteriorizing Atta, distinguishing "us" from "them".

In spite of such similarities between the texts, Atta does assume different shapes. Some variance among the depictions of Atta is inevitable: unlike a novel, a short

story and a one-act play cannot trace the path or progression of a character's "life" and emotions in considerable detail. *ATTA* offers a more complex portrayal and invites a consideration of alternative routes for the terrorist. Another difference pertains to Atta's religious fervor, which is emphasized in differing degrees. His piety is most pronounced in Kobek's novel, although Kobek lends Atta an occultist streak; in contrast, his religiosity is inconsistent if forceful in Havis's play, and absent in Amis's short story, in which the fictionalized Atta regards Islamism as simply an appealing ideology.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Placing historical information about the actual Atta into their narratives, the three authors present incidents that explain or illustrate this information, inviting the reader in turn to create a meaningful sequence leading to the terrorist act. Martin Amis fills an epistemological gap about the hijacker's steps shortly before the attacks with his own peculiar narrative; the epigraph to his story is a quote from the 9/11 Commission Report stating that no "physical, documentary or analytical evidence provides a convincing explanation of why [Muhammad] Atta and [Abdulaziz al-] Omari drove to Portland, Main, from Boston on September 10, only to return to Logan on Flight 5930 on the morning of September 11" (95). In construing a story about Atta's mysterious journey on September 10 and 11, Amis also fills a more significant hermeneutic gap, offering a reading of Atta's personality – more explicitly connecting the terrorist plot with Atta's beliefs than other texts of terrorist literature do. *Three Nights in Prague* incorporates Atta's will, but otherwise draws on a rumor to spin a tale of Atta's sojourn to Prague; built on a premise similar to that of Atta's short story, Havis exploits our lack of knowledge about Atta to develop scenes that alter and reflect historical information.

Kobek integrates a significant amount of research into his novel, for instance from Atta's own master's thesis and from Terry McDermott's *Perfect Soldiers*, though he does not allow these facts to control the narrative. The known facts about Atta's movements between Egypt, Germany, Syria, and the U.S. are turned into often delirious passages of free direct thought (quoted monologue) and free indirect thought (narrated monologue). The following passage demonstrates Dorrit Cohn's assertion that "many quotations of fictional minds ... contain both logical *and* associative patterns" (13):

The European high-rise, the Brutalist assault, comes to Aleppo. These sick evils are the grim face of new Syria. ... Bab al-Nasr teeters on the brink. I hear the difference between its simple streets and the roaring axes, the shrill ululations of the high rise and the gentle purr of traditional Islamic life. I hear the slow erosion of this purr. Surely this is my fate, surely this is why I study urban planning. (56)

Kobek's version of Atta develops a string of theories about urban life, capitalism, and American popular culture. Available historical sources about the actual Atta's interests and work are transformed into the protagonist's dreams and thought processes. Based on non-fictional documentation on Al-Qaeda and Mohamed Atta, the novel creates a narrative about Atta, in which the fictionalized Atta creates for himself a narrative about history. Our reading of the evolution of the terrorist plot in most of the works of terrorist literature primarily depends on the terrorist's vision and story; as readers, we are enveloped by the conspiracy, but via the literary representation of the terrorist plot, we are also the only ones to penetrate it. Only in Havis's play and Updike's novel are characters outside of the conspiracy conscious of the protagonist's plans. As I have

indicated, the representations of Atta, his various narratives as it were, primarily focus on the fictionalized Atta's own particular construction of alterity, or more precisely: his perception of difference between his belief system and that of his host society (including secularism, immoderation, and consumerism).

The works by Havis, Kobek, and Amis are certainly inquiries not only into the psychology of terror, but also into the location of Islam and Islamism in the West. The West's apparently progressive, secular democracies become counterpoints to religious extremism. Still, as the following chapters further illustrate, the Islamic world is also depicted as participating in global streams of information, people, and capital.

Atta is identified and marked as the evil, absolute Other in the three works by Havis, Kobek, and Amis, in particular by his violent reaction against the alterity in other human beings, an alterity he also perceives in himself. This may indicate a standard story of psychological repression; still, I believe it is also a narrative of the complete eradication of another entity in order to protect through this violent attack or spectacle the notion of the own entity's (Al-Qaeda, Islamism, fundamentalism) difference from the Other ("the West"). Similarities – even sameness – between Self and Other are thus obliterated or hidden in the simultaneous, spectacular destruction of the Self and the Other. Terrorist literature indicates that the suicide-attack was designed as a suicide of the Self directed against the Other – to guard the Self.

The writers of terrorist literature likewise seem eager to maintain the idea of a profound difference between these violent Islamists and the Western society under attack. The perpetrators' desire to construct the West as Other is replicated by Western

fictional and non-fictional discourse indicating the perpetrators' alterity. In the following chapter, dedicated to the representation of entirely fictitious terrorists, I will show that Dubus and DeLillo likewise focus on the characters' contemplation of difference, though in their novels the terrorists reevaluate, even question their involvement in the plot.

Terrorist literature's curious obsession with corporeality, a narrative investment in the fragility of the bodies of terrorists, victims, and individuals physically unaffected by the terrorist attack, is accentuated in *The Garden of Last Days* and *Falling Man*. The persistence of a familiar physical theme is joined in the novels by an emphasis on the transitory nature and the unsavory elements of an American society where cohesiveness or solidarity is a rarity, either before (Dubus) or after (DeLillo) the events of 9/11. Yet it is not America's or the West's imperfection that Dubus and DeLillo underline in their portrait of the terrorist plot and its context; instead, the two writers interrogate the terrorist's construction of this imperfection. For the reader or critic, this process of othering assumes implications for the terrorist plot as prefigured in the text. It is indeed this concept of a continuous consideration of a particular incident's meaning in relation to the plot that is located at the hermeneutic center of all the narratives of terrorism examined in this dissertation.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Other texts feature Atta as a minor or less developed character, including Updike's short story "Varieties of Religious Experience", Vladimir Chernozemsky's awful piece of pulp fiction, *Phase One After Zero* (2005), and DeLillo's and Dubus's novel discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>ii</sup> The idea or myth of the premodern nature of Al-Qaida has been criticized and debunked by a number of scholars. Richard Gray for example emphasizes the modern, globalized structure of the terrorist network.

<sup>iii</sup> Havis's play is an exception by not, however briefly, introducing other hijackers (for example a fictionalized Ziad Jarrah or a fictitious person) and their personalities and motivations. Osama bin Laden and even Saddam Hussein both find their way into the dialogues of *Three Nights in Prague*, but Havis reduces them largely to their sexual identities and does not characterize them in great detail.

<sup>iv</sup> The movie *Jungle Book* becomes for Atta a tale of the return of a human to a depraved lifestyle. In his innocent, supposedly animal-like state, Mowgli is in Atta's eyes a human, whereas he is later transformed into an animal when he moves to the human village, where he is subject to the distractions of society: "Throughout the duration of *Das Dschungelbuch*, the child expressed desire to be an animal but acts entirely like a human. ... The child realizes his beastly nature will emerge only in a pagan village tolerant of fornication" (43).

<sup>v</sup> Amis's text emphasizes via Atta the intellectual emptiness of Islamic societies, where violence seems to be the only creative act – Amis speaks of "cults of death" ("Terror and Boredom" 80).

<sup>vi</sup> Fiction on Atta might consist of many invented events and dialogues, but non-fiction is often as creative and speculative as fiction, even if less self-consciously so. Indeed, even if biographers generally draw on historical documents and cite evidence for their claims, much imagination is needed "to make a life story out of the 'facts' of a life" (Bode 8). In turn, novelists, poets, and playwrights occasionally name their sources and may even add historical documents to demonstrate the authenticity, factuality, and also relevance of their work. Yet their choice of genre frees writers from expectations of absolute adherence to verified facts. Social scientists' reliance on substantiated evidence constrains them, but the reference to supposedly trustworthy documentation or their refutation of allegedly undependable sources of course also endows their works with an aura of trustworthiness (justified or not).

<sup>vii</sup> Napoleon happens to be a favorite character for theorists of historical fiction and narratology.

<sup>viii</sup> Similarly exploring fictional treatments of Napoleon, Jean-Marie Schaeffer seems uncertain of the ideal approach to this dilemma of narratives with historical foundations: "For example, the sentence 'Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo' seems to express a plain simple truth. Does its status change when it is read in a historical novel as compared to when it is read in a biography of, say, Chateaubriand or Stendhal? Does it lose its truth value when it is integrated into a novel? Most advocates of semantic definitions of the fact/fiction dichotomy give a positive answer to this question: the proper name Napoleon, when used in the novel, does not refer to the real Napoleon but to some fictional counterpart (...). However, this seems counterintuitive, for in a historical novel it is important for the reader that the proper names referring to historical persons really do refer to the historical persons as he knows them outside of fiction, and not to some fictional homonym of those real persons" (par. 24).

<sup>ix</sup> In a curious twist, the "real" Mohamed Atta ended his life with a horrific act that has itself been labeled as a spectacle, as an unreal event; the historical persona is thus already encased in a fictional frame. In other words, Atta fictionalized himself through his own "real" actions.

<sup>x</sup> The collage of thoughts attributed to Atta, the peculiar formatting of Atta's thoughts illustrates the non-linearity of the cognitive process by bouncing to and fro between themes and time frames. To be sure, there is a continuous chronological progression throughout the novel. Yet the narration advances with many digressions – the last chapter, for example, contains both the minute description of the hijacking and an outline of the failure of a large urban development in St. Louis, apparently from the perspective of Atta himself.

<sup>xi</sup> I use Shlomith Rimmon-Kennan's definition of narratee: "For me, the narratee is the agent who is at the very least implicitly addressed by the narrator" (92).

<sup>xii</sup> This one passage's obvious discrepancies are not sufficient to undermine the entire narration, however.

<sup>xiii</sup> I venture to jump the boundary between reality and fiction by suggesting that the "original" end is the actual Atta's violent death, which is also his end in his fictional life.

<sup>xiv</sup> Yet the fictionalized Atta presumably believes that he proves his masculinity, his greatness in his final, murderous act.

<sup>xv</sup> Richard Martin and Abbas Barzegar offer a useful summation of the diverse definitions of the term Islamism: "It usually refers to those Muslim social movements and attitudes that advocate the search for more purely Islamic solutions (however ambiguous this may be) to the political, economic, and cultural stresses of contemporary life" (2).

<sup>xvi</sup> McDermott adds: "The couple never registered the marriage with the state, and Aysel said she didn't consider it genuine" (78). Along with McDermott's *Perfect Soldiers*, Oliver Schröm's newspaper article "Die Liebe des Terroristen" ["The Terrorist's Love"] offers the richest resource for the story of Ziad Jarrah's love. Carsten Brandau's unpublished 2005 play *Wir sind nicht das Ende* dramatizes this ordinary-extraordinary relationship.

<sup>xvii</sup> Focalizing a fictional terrorist, Amis's short story also shuns the perspectives of Atta's victims.

<sup>xviii</sup> Kobek's *ATTA*, in contrast, explores Atta's mindscape in a more ambiguous fashion, pointing to different routes of interpretation regarding the terrorist's rationale. This interpretive openness differentiates the novel from "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta".

<sup>xix</sup> Jihad or جهاد means struggle or effort in Arabic, signifying in a religious context either the spiritual endeavor to strengthen the bond with god, or the physical fight to defend just causes. David Dakake writes that greater jihad involves an inward struggle against our passion, whereas lesser jihad refers to an outward struggle in defense of Muslims (3); according to scholar al-Tabari, strict limits are set upon this military jihad, as women, children, the infirm, and the old are not to be attacked (Dakake 10). Analyses of religious texts and concepts vary of course, and Diane Morgan writes: "The issue remains complex. War against unbelievers is a notable theme in the Qur'an; however, the word *jihad* is not generally used when referring to it. The term occurs 41 times in the Quran, and when it does, it is usually defined as waging war on behalf of Allah (*fi sabil illah*), although the specific terminology 'holy war' does not occur in the Quran at all. To make things more complicated, the term *jihad* has undergone periodic shifts in meaning. Throughout Islamic history, it has been employed to account for everything from a war of liberation to acts of terror" (88). I still invoke Dakake's explanations to register the existence of interpretations of jihad that highlight its non-violent facets. In any case, Amis inserts the term jihad in the attempt to mark al-Qaeda's terror as the only contemporary articulation of this Qur'anic idea.

<sup>xx</sup> The political context of the attacks, for example the Middle East Conflict and the American presence in the region, seems inconsequential in this short story, at least for Atta; the text does not reveal whether the Al-Qaeda network (in the storyworld) is concerned with the political consequences of the 9/11 attacks, with its symbolic significance, rather than simply with the deaths caused by the terrorist act. The conflicts in Chechnya and Palestine are mentioned briefly, but "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" fails to illuminate the possible significance of these battlefields vis-à-vis September 11 (several of the actual hijackers attempted to fight in Chechnya, for instance).

<sup>xxi</sup> This process of rendering consciousness in a fictional work likewise involves verbalization and is of course simply an artificial perspective constructed by the author and her narrator.

<sup>xxii</sup> Havis expands the scope of responsibility for 9/11 beyond the immediate perpetrators. The conniving figure of Al-Ani as well as the looming specters of Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein point to the hijackers' international support system – the aides, financiers, accomplices – and indicate the Muslim world's collective guilt.

<sup>xxiii</sup> In contrast to Krueger, Terry McDermott asserts that the lack of economic opportunities and the inability to succeed in life has facilitated the recruitment of young Middle Eastern men for suicide mission – even scions of wealthy families, for example in Saudi-Arabia or Egypt, are affected. According to McDermott, the so-called muscle hijackers of September 11, all but one hailing from Saudi-Arabia, cut their ties to their families and their home country because they saw no perspective in a country that "had

simply not produced worthwhile jobs for the growing ranks of Saudi young adults" (219). While Havis's and Amis's texts focus on sexual and physical problems, Kobek's *ATTA* – though also raising questions of sexuality and masculinity – shows Mohamed Atta to be a dissatisfied individual who opts to abandon his home because of his lack of freedom but also because his professional prospects are dim. Among works of terrorist literature, only *ATTA* associates violence with economic misery, at least tentatively so.

<sup>xxiv</sup> This scene illustrates and confirms Frank Furedi's argument in *Culture of Fear* (1997) that in "a world of risky strangers, it is difficult to trust." Furedi writes that "the fear of strangers and of risks is proportional to the decline of trust" (127). The boy-girl Dolni's testimony does not count, lacks trustworthiness because he is an outcast and stranger to the police officers. The "heightened sense of being at risk," which Furedi notices in Western societies, may not actually prevent dangerous situations but make them more likely, as we no longer trust anyone's warnings (129). Strikingly, Havis's play intimates that (the fictionalized) Atta benefits from the authorities' paralysis in the face of a predictable, a known risk. In a more recent work, *Invitation to Terror* (2007), Furedi expands his earlier analysis in light of the events of 9/11 and dismisses the notion that Western societies lacked the imaginative capability to envisage the attacks; he insists that "during the decades leading up to 9/11 the perception of the terrorist threat possessed by an all-too-imaginative official mind continually ran ahead of events" (xxvii). Atta's project succeeds (succeeded, from the perspective of the play's audience) not necessarily due to secrecy but due to authorities' and intelligence communities' failure to act on an imaginable, foreseeable threat.

<sup>xxv</sup> The construction of 9/11 and Pearl Harbor as atrocities with similar national and historical import, another proposition circulating after the attacks and strikingly reconfigured as Atta's fixation, ties two traumatic experiences in twentieth-century American history together. Peer Trilcke highlights the omnipresence of what he calls the trope "9/11 like Pearl Harbor" (96). As Trilcke points out, a myriad of statements in the media, in addition to a number of poems, invoked this trope (or analogy) in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. September 11 was thus placed on a historical continuum; it functioned as another national narrative, another landmark event associated with the commencement of a war (rather, an American proclamation of war).

<sup>xxvi</sup> On account of his notoriety, his apparent ardor, and his eccentric, reprehensible beliefs, Atta is thus a convenient, appropriate protagonist – as well as target – for terrorist literature.

<sup>xxvii</sup> In the months and years after the attacks, President George W. Bush frequently used the term "evil" to describe the terrorists and their acts; in his televised speech delivered on the evening of September 11, 2001, he mentions the word "evil" four times. Bush of course also spoke of the Axis of Evil in his 2002 State of the Union Address.

<sup>xxviii</sup> In reference to *Terrorist*, *Falling Man*, and "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta", Martin Randall argues that "the familiar preoccupations of the respective authors [overshadow] any insights into the terrorist mindset" (143). The allusions to occultism in Kobek's novel are probably a function of the writer's particular interests, but considering the dearth of scholarship or information on either Havis or Kobek, it would be difficult to extend Randall's claim to my selection of texts.



## **Chapter 3**

### ***Narrative Plots and Terrorist Plots: Don DeLillo, Andre Dubus III, and the Anticipation of Violence***

*“Amir said simply there are no others. The others exist only to the degree that they fill the role we have designed for them. This is their function as others. Those who will die have no claim to their lives outside the useful fact of their dying. Hammad was impressed by this. It sounded like philosophy.”*

--- Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* (176)

#### **Interwoven Paths and Coherent Explanations**

When the middle-aged woman Lianne, one of the protagonists of Don DeLillo’s novel *Falling Man* (2008), reads the newspaper shortly after the September 11 attacks, she is confronted with the face of “the man from Flight 11.” Only one of the nineteen hijackers “seemed to have a face at this point, staring out of the photo, taut, with hard eyes that seemed too knowing to belong to a face on a driver’s license” (19). This man, of course, is Mohamed Atta, one of the leading figures in the actual terrorist plot and arguably the most recognizable and visible of the hijackers. Unlike in the texts examined in the previous chapter, Atta or Amir is not at the center of *Falling Man* or Andre Dubus III’s *The Garden of Last Days* (2008), but he remains a crucial figure in the background, a

figure of contrast whose severity and stiff demeanor accentuate the vulnerability and faltering of the other portrayed hijackers.

In this chapter, I discuss two of these hijackers, the fictitious terrorists Hammad (in *Falling Man*) and Bassam (*The Garden of Last Days*), both loosely based on some of the “real” conspirators involved in the 9/11 plot such as Marwan Al-Shehhi or Ziad Jarrah; no one named Hammad or Bassam boarded the doomed planes on September 11, 2001.<sup>i</sup> These two characters do not conform to the image of the constrained and misanthropic, terrorizing and terrifying Islamist; instead, emotions of curiosity and lust in their interactions with the Western (American or German) “Other” partially or temporally undermine their criminal fervor. Their mental and corporeal vulnerability paradoxically at once jeopardizes and confirms their “terrorist masculinity”; the discovery of heterosexual desires underlines their heteronormative, masculine desires but also weakens their commitment to their cause. Bassam is even depicted in some moments as a boyish figure barely able to control these desires.

The terrorists are confounded or at least conflicted as a result of personal encounters in the alluring temporary host societies of Germany and the U.S. They are torn between attending to their sexual drives and repressing these drives, between the novel pleasures of the West and the discipline demanded by their religion and by the endeavor to ensure the plot’s success: “The idea is to go unseen” (*Falling Man* 172).

In short, Hammad and Bassam are human. Drawing on John Carlos Rowe (see below), I suggest that they can be human precisely *because* they are fictitious characters, as opposed to the fictionalized Atta who appears in DeLillo’s and Dubus’s

novel as well as in the already examined texts by Amis, Kobek, and Havis – and in Updike’s short story “Varieties of Religious Experience”. The representation of the actual terrorist Atta, a symbol of evil, is arguably placed under some constraints by the ongoing contemporary discourse on the Muslim hijackers of 9/11, regarded as absolute Others, as beyond redemption. It seems that the authors are thus less prepared to depict the historical individual Atta as a persona with which the reader can identify.

The distinction between the fictionalized terrorist and the fictional or fictitious terrorists is not clear-cut. There are moments of humanization or humanity in the portraits of Atta examined in my prior chapter, even in their very illumination of Atta’s flaws; Kobek’s story for example includes the character’s engagement with popular Western culture (Disney movies in particular) as well as Atta’s brief consideration of a romantic relationship with a Palestinian woman. Nevertheless, in marked contrast to Hammad and Bassam, the immersion in European and American cultures leads none of the versions of Atta to interrogate his role in the terrorist plot. Creating fictitious hijackers seems to “allow” DeLillo and Dubus to imbue the non-historical terrorists with a range of emotions; these accessible figures vacillate between doubt and self-assurance regarding the conspiracy and between viciousness and compassion towards other human beings.

I am not implying here that the representations of Atta in 9/11 literature encompass no imaginary elements – Amis, Havis, and Kobek incorporate a limited amount of historical research as they rewrite Atta’s story. This act of rewriting, though, is arguably subject to an image of the actual Muslim terrorists formed by political and

media discourse. This prefiguration determines both the depiction of Atta and that of fictitious hijackers, but against the foil of an unwavering, determined, hate-filled Atta – who reflects the notion of the intolerant, narrow-minded Islamic extremist (or fundamentalist) – it becomes arguably possible to invest the fictitious characters with doubt and even kindness. In other words, the *fictionalized* Atta can likewise exhibit human emotions, though his portrait is influenced and inflected to a significant extent by the historical person he represents. At the same time, in *The Garden of Last Days* and *Falling Man*, Atta serves precisely to accentuate the *fictitious* conspirators, who symbolize the very change that can occur if the process of othering (in this case, the terrorists' effort to distance themselves from the West) is disrupted.

Their stories, the stories of Hammad and Bassam, are propelled by the hijackers' desperate endeavor to suppress the emotions provoked by the prospect of life-giving relationships, which are juxtaposed with the death-driven terrorist plot.<sup>ii</sup> However, the apparent splendor of the West with its presentation of beauty, love, and kindness receives visible stains throughout both novels. Not only do couples grow apart and betray each other, adults neglect their children, men and women commit violent and abusive acts, and people in general fail to properly communicate, but the American characters are also unable to control or even fathom their own trajectory. They are incapable of grasping the meaning of their own actions or those of others, in part because the characters are at a loss when facing novel situations and individuals, and in part because most of their interpersonal connections are too transient to allow a

process of understanding. Shared spaces and shared vices entwine the Saudi hijackers with the American protagonists, reducing the otherness of the fictional terrorists.

Efforts to affirm this otherness, for instance by presenting the characters' unusual demeanor and language, seem at times awkward, forcing otherness onto normalcy as it were. Addressing the representation of Bassam, Richard Gray writes: "Sometimes, too, the attempt to give Bassam an Arab-inflected language is as unsuccessful as a similar attempt made by John Updike in *Terrorist* to find an appropriate speech for an Arab-American protagonist: what is meant to sound different but authentic too often comes across as artificial, even stereotypical" (79-80). In fact, the novel has Bassam demonstrate an advanced proficiency in English. His English in his "translated" thoughts or mind-narration is only occasionally interrupted by Arabic terms, for example *kufar* (infidels) or *mushrikoon* (polytheists), but his thoughts are otherwise rendered in standard English with very few markers to emphasize "foreignness". Bassam's oral skills likewise bear little indication of his status as a non-native speaker. Oddly enough, the text assigns one grammatical flaw to Bassam's spoken English, namely the recurrent use of the verb "to have" to reveal his or anyone else's age: "I have twenty-six years" (104). This approach to conveying the notion of a person not quite comfortable in the world of English – by modifying only a couple of components of language – appears as neither rigorous nor logical; it could possibly have been circumvented entirely.<sup>iii</sup> Renderings of dialects or accents in fiction can certainly be awkward and even offensive, and Dubus's point in imposing specific, minor mistakes onto his Arab character is not evident.<sup>iv</sup>

The very difference of the terrorists, their separation from their host societies America and Germany, is keenly experienced by the characters themselves. Though often appearing vicious and relentless, the terrorists seem to crave normalcy. They realize that they could live a different existence and that their involvement in the 9/11 plot is perhaps not inevitable – the boundary between “us” (terrorists) and “them” (Western societies) appears permeable.

Still, they eventually submit to the fact that they cannot escape the terrorist plot. As characters in a narrative with a conclusion predetermined by an actual event, Bassam and Hammad are defined by the endpoint of the conspiracy. The texts and the fictional terrorists are thus entrapped by the terrorist plot, tied to the terrorist act. To understand this emplotment, I will trace in this chapter the steps of the destined hijackers Bassam and Hammad, analyzing their narrated encounters and verbalized consciousness.<sup>v</sup>

Both terrorist and narrative plot contain a beginning-middle-end structure of course, but it is curious to see that the narrative plots in the texts examined in this study largely elide elaborate discussions of the terrorist plots’ beginnings. As *Falling Man* addresses the plot’s development shortly before the attacks and its culmination on 9/11, we learn little about the hijackers’ path to militancy; the first component of Hammad’s trajectory discussed by the narrator are his days in Afghanistan, where he “had begun to understand that death is stronger than life” – a statement stressing the conspiracy’s focus on obliteration, its celebration of death (172). *The Garden of Last Days* even disengages with the fictional terrorists prior to the execution of their dreadful

plan, thus focusing primarily on the middle section of the plot. On the other hand, especially in Dubus's novel, the hijacker's memories are certainly crucial for an understanding of the terrorist plot's development (Bassam is, for example, haunted by the humiliations he suffered as the supposedly inadequate, lesser son).

As I have indicated, the terrorist plots in the two novels are injected with a narrative about the terrorists' vacillation between subscribing to a fundamentalist ideology articulated by their political and religious leaders and a questioning of this ideology based on their own reasoning and – fictional – life experiences. This narrative complicates the connection between character and action (the attack) and reiterates the query of how Hammad and Bassam have arrived in their position as participants in a terrorist plot. The events described in the terrorists' stories (only a few in Hammad's case, as he receives comparatively little space in *Falling Man*) are combined through the act of emplotment, which in Paul Ricoeur's terms "extracts a configuration from a succession," transforming events into a story through grasping together "the detailed actions or what I have called the story's incidents" (*Time and Narrative*, Vol. I, 66).

The endpoint of September 11 retroactively casts a shadow on every incident in the novels, and although Hammad and Bassam are fictitious characters, their particular fates are, to draw on Alan Robinson's discussion of historical fiction, "mapped out within the constraints of familiar documented events" (35).<sup>vi</sup> In contrast to much historical fiction, the particular fates of these personas are already known to the reader (unless we imagine a reader that believes in Hammad's and Bassam's defection, admittedly not an outlandish thought). The writer of historical fiction, Robinson

remarks, occupies a “retrospective vantage point” granting her “insights unavailable in the past, when the working out of actions had not been finalised and their full significance could not be appreciated” (36). Reading terrorist literature such as *Falling Man* and *The Garden of Last Days* involves similar sensations, as we anticipate the path of the character towards the attack; we detect meaning in incidents not immediately related to the route the character chooses in the narrative and terrorist plot.

Retrospection and simultaneous foreshadowing become key elements of the reflection about and interpretation of a text since the event of September 11 imposes a reading backward and forward of the terrorist’s narrative. Imbuing the story of the perpetrator with a form of telos, the reader links sentiments and events to the terrorist act, as if (or indeed because) this act is predetermined by history. The concept of retrospection is emphasized through the very use of past tense and further accentuated by embedded narratives illuminating different aspects of the characters’ past.

Dubus’s and DeLillo’s novels follow the terrorists to the attacks of September 11; these movements are arguably transformed by the reader into a “coherent pattern” (Robinson 35). From another perspective, while this pattern imposed on events might be implied or hinted at by Dubus’s and DeLillo’s novels, its validity, in other words the necessity to form a causal connection, is not explicitly expressed. Roland Barthes notes in *Image-Music-Text* that the “confusion of consecution and consequence,” the process of “what comes after being read in narratives as what is *caused by*,” is the “mainspring of narrative” (98).<sup>vii</sup> It is perhaps inevitable that we invest each of the interactions and feelings (rendered in thought report or direct thought) of the terrorists with



significance; yet the texts discussed in this and my other chapters may as well be interpreted as reflections on how to make sense – or how we make sense – of the hijackers' stories. One might also recognize the disconnect between particular events in the stories and thus concede the impossibility of fathoming a terrorist plot merely by means of considering specific moments in the life of a character. However, though some of these details may “appear,” to borrow from Barthes, “irretrievably insignificant,” they are not without meaning, but instead carry the “meaning of absurdity” (89): “no unit ever goes wasted, however loose, however tenuous may be the thread connecting it to one of the levels of the story” (90).

The complex maze of plots in *Falling Man* and *The Garden of Last Days* is difficult to navigate, and the enigma of the terrorist's rationale and intricate path to the terrorist act cannot be disentangled neatly. Certainly, though, even if we cannot identify a correlation between the attacks and, for example, Hammad's experiences in Afghanistan or Bassam's childhood in Saudi Arabia, the passages about these experiences represent statements about existing structures: they reveal a (Western) vision of Islamic societies and the conspiratorial network.

Such passages constitute what Barthes calls functional units, referring to concepts “necessary to the story” (91). In Barthes's terminology, these examples can either be interpreted as “indicial” – finding their meaning “only on the level of a general typology of the actants” – or as “functional,” indicating a more immediate bearing of a scene on the sequence of action (93). Most scenes with the hijackers in DeLillo's and

Dubus's works – for instance Bassam's and Hammad's various encounters with women – are arguably both indicial *and* functional elements of the narratives.

One of many possible examples illustrating this simultaneity of the indicial and functional aspect is a scene from *The Garden of Last Days*, set in a strip club. Bassam has to leave the club's VIP room because police has arrived to investigate the disappearance of a little girl, the daughter of the protagonist April. He sits down at the bar "so that he might watch more dancing for the mushrikoon" (229). Bassam's decision, which seems to be only of immediate import (explaining other developments later in the same chapter), thus belongs in the functional category. Yet the focalized Bassam in the same passage acknowledges that he cannot leave because "he was too weak." His "hatred for these kufar" is "rising with the knowledge of his own weakness" (229). The scene therefore also carries significance on an indicial level, as it is part of the general description of Bassam as an unsettled individual, torn between his commitment to the terrorist plot and the fascination with the "attractions" of life he would forfeit. It is paradoxically precisely this fascination that appears to increase his dedication to his cause – as he cannot bear his own weakness. While seldom in such an explicit fashion, scenes with the perpetrators in terrorist literature often propel not only the narrative plot forward (in a direct, functional fashion) but assume broader importance in relation to the terrorist plot, as incidents (indeed, as indicial units) apparently explaining the beliefs and convictions of the terrorist.

Bassam's night in the strip club, described over the course of many chapters, exemplifies the setting of many scenes in *Falling Man* and *The Garden of Last Days*. The

narratives are primarily confined to small, circumscribed areas, including a flat in Hamburg, a campus in Boston (Harvard University), a few blocks in Manhattan, a strip club in Florida, and the planes. While thus revealing the domestic, private, individual interactions that affect perpetrators and victims, the texts register at the same time the transnational crossings that occasion and succeed the attacks of September 11.

Other episodes of terrorism are drawn into this conceptualization of terrorism's global framework. I am considering here for example DeLillo's character Ernst Hechinger. Ernst Hechinger is suspected by other characters (including Lianne) to have been involved with the 1960s and 1970s wave of leftist, anti-government radicalism in Germany. He has since taken up a life as an internationally active art dealer, under the assumed identity of Martin Ridnour. In a trajectory illustrating the ephemeral bonds among people as well as between people and places in *Falling Man* and *The Garden of Last Days*, Ernst never remains in one location sufficiently long enough to stabilize relationships, primarily delivering short, programmatic statements in his truncated conversations with Lianne, Keith, and his partner Nina, Lianne's mother: "He spoke with an accent and had an apartment here and an office in Basel. He spent time in Berlin. He did or did not have a wife in Paris" (42). Lianne succinctly describes Ernst's life of constant movement, or rather the lack of constancy in his life: "But even when you're here, I think of you going from a distant city on your way to another distant city and neither place has shape or form" (42). A standard type in DeLillo's work, Ernst Hechinger has a vaguely defined past and present, with no firm roots, reminiscent of characters

such as Murray in *White Noise* (1985) or Karen in *Mao II* (1991). His is an existence of recurring abandonment and fluctuating, unstable relationships.

Both novels, in keeping with this theme of inconstancy, integrate a number of abandoned, destroyed homes: the World Trade Center, the adopted American and German homes of the terrorists, their Saudi birthplaces, the dissolving families of the American protagonists. New “homes” – temporary residences or eternal abodes – open up to the characters, yet these locales are not in all cases welcoming and bucolic, but rather confining and empty. The bleak array of dysfunctional relationships, of disconnected lives even before September 11, is not replaced by a triumphant narrative of redemption and reestablished bonds.

The ties that cannot be renewed are of course those between the dead and the living, and among the irretrievable ties are the connections between the terrorists and the people they meet on the brink of the attacks. These connections are not meant to last, they are destined to be impermanent. The end points of hospitality are set by both sides: from a legal, American perspective, these visitors from the Middle East are *allowed* to stay for only a limited time. As Judith Still notes, hospitality “is a particular form of the gift that involves a temporal sharing of space” (14). The terrorists themselves envisage an abrupt, violent conclusion to their stay; they exploit the fact that the hospitality extended to them establishes the “conditions of possibility for ... murder,” to borrow from Still’s discussion of the misuse of hospitality (14).

In his essay “Foreigner Question”, included in the volume *Of Hospitality*, Derrida presents the concept of “absolute hospitality”. He underscores the paradoxical nature

of hospitality, as absolute hospitality breaks with the “law of hospitality as right or duty” and does not require reciprocity or even the name of the “absolute, unknown, anonymous other” who enters the home (*Of Hospitality*, 25). Absolute hospitality can thus collide with the host’s power and sovereignty, potentially submitting the host to the status of hostage as the guest encroaches on the host’s sovereignty (54-5). “No hospitality, in the classic sense,” Derrida writes, “without sovereignty of oneself over one’s home, but since there is also no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence” (55). The ability to demonstrate hospitality presupposes the capacity of granting it and distinguishing between guest and parasite. Derrida suggests that the host possibly needs to curtail or abandon the notion of absolute hospitality.

The concept of hospitality assumes significance in my analysis of *Falling Man* and *The Garden of Last Days* because the narrations of the terrorists’ mindsets catalogue the strained relationship between Saudi and Egyptian hijackers and their American and German host societies. Placing the foreign purveyor of violence into direct, sensory contact with the hosts precipitates a cascade of conflicting emotional responses by DeLillo’s and Dubus’s characters Hammad and Bassam (and later by the other characters ruminating about the attacks). The hijackers recognize their positioning in a place within yet beyond society, as they face the possibility but also impossibility of belonging. The anticipation of their violent death devalues moments of direct contact, negating their potentially positive effect on the terrorists even as they occur. Though these moments affect the terrorists, as readers we know that the characters choose to continue on their

path to destruction and “un-belonging” (even, as it turns out, as a result of recognizing their weakness in their encounters with the Other).

The cultures of the West are indeed actively rejected by the terrorists, both physically in the eventual violence and emotionally in the preceding articulations of contempt – albeit “perforated by doubts and insecurities” – towards the host’s values and culture (Däwes, *Ground Zero Fiction* 267-68). The terrorists seek to conceal their intentions by trying to blend in, thus helping them to superficially belong to America. This association is supposed to be a façade; they intend to distance themselves from their host society, a process only partially successful, as the allure of Western openness draws the terrorists into this alien realm.

The ultimate rejection of the host society through the terrorist act violates hospitality, albeit this act is also a consequence of hospitality. Judith Still explains that there is a “historical tendency for the language and practice of hospitality to ‘turn’ against the guest – the focus on the generosity of the host becomes a focus on the duties of the guest, and notably the construction of the figure of the guest who not only fails to fulfill his duties (the parasite) but even betrays the host (the terrorist)” (13). While Still refers here to a polemical rhetoric of regarding illegal immigrants as potential terrorists, terrorist literature precisely describes guests who commit a terrorist act. The guests thus turn against the host, which is a risk of “absolute hospitality,” to use Derrida’s formulation. Still speaks of “violence stemming from a failure of hospitality or falling upon it from the outside,” but this violence also derives from the very offer of

hospitality, granted by the host from a position of apparent power (14). The welcoming of the Other gives this Other power over the host, reversing the process.

In sum, the two novels pivot on the configuration of Islam's and the Islamic terrorists' (non-)belonging and also on the hospitality offered by America – and Germany. The terrorists' conceptualize this hospitality as a non-reciprocal relationship, in which the guest betrays the host. The mutual assessment is marked by temporal dissonance: prior to the attacks, in narrative time, the West is scrutinized by the terrorists (albeit with a few exceptions, including the verbalization of April's judgment of Bassam), whereas afterwards the terrorists become the object of the other characters' interest. To modify Atta's (Amir's) statement presented in the epigraph, the others becomes useful and interesting only in anticipation and as a result of death.

### **The Reduction of Life**

Don DeLillo's novel *Falling Man*, including one of the most widely reviewed and analyzed works of 9/11 literature, assembles a set of conflicted, even hapless characters in a compelling, complex, and sometimes confusing narrative, fragmented and non-linear – with a cataclysmic ending that unites its storylines, in scenes of death and life. Written in DeLillo's signature epigrammatic style, with characters talking at cross-purposes and recycling well-worn clichés from media and popular culture, the novel is situated in the contemporary moment, suggesting a communicative collapse in the

wake of September 11; however, its often absurd scenes of literal and figurative muteness also evoke earlier postmodern texts such as *White Noise*. In its exploration of the reductive logic of terrorism, the novel is of course also tied to several of DeLillo's other texts, including *Mao II* and "In the Ruins of the Future".

The terrorists' reduction of meaning is highlighted by the focalized terrorist-in-the-making Hammad himself. In narrated monologue, he indicates the order that has arrived in the lives of the terrorists: "But there were rules now and he was determined to follow them. His life had structure. Things were clearly defined" (83). These rules are destined to ensure the achievement of the conspiracy's one goal: "They sat around a table on day one and pledged to accept their duty, which was for each of them, in blood trust, to kill Americans" (171). The life of the terrorists becomes reduced to a violent act, "to make blood flow, their blood and that of others" (173); the terrorist plot places the conspirators into a tunnel, as they need to eclipse all distractions of life, all other possible paths (and plots). A Western way of life, in contrast, is construed as meaningless: "This entire life, this world of lawns to water and hardware stacked on endless shelves, was total, forever, illusion" (173).

This separation from society, however, cannot be complete. Or, to put it differently, the construct of alterity is in a sense an artificial one, sustained by the masterminds of the attack to control the conspirators. The gap could be easily traversed, as Hammad recognizes in observing ordinary Americans: "How easy would it be for him to walk out of his car and into theirs? Open the door with the car in motion and walk across the roadway to the other car, walk on air, and open the door of the



other car and get in" (172). Moreover, Hammad interrogates the point of the attack, in terms of his own life but also in a general sense: "But does a man have to kill himself in order to count for something, be someone, find the way? Hammad thought about this. ... Amir spokes in his face. The end of our life is predetermined. We are finding the way already chosen for us" (175). It is Amir/Atta who constrains and convinces the group. In depicting a more uncertain Hammad, the novel signifies that the terrorists, as guests in a Western host society (indeed in two, the U.S. and Germany), are not immune to the appeals of an alternative life; they have to ignore and reject the apparent hospitality offered to them. Or, rather, they exploit this hospitality. After all, in spite of their belief that they are constantly monitored and that "Islam was under attack," neither police nor intelligence agencies actually seem to pursue them (83).

On the one hand, then, the perceived hostility against Islam has to be construed by and within the plot, as a prerequisite for the mental commitment to the terrorist act. The terrorists, the focalized Hammad suggests, have to suppress their normality, their humanness – the violent jihad is preceded by a spiritual, inner jihad: "He had to fight against the need to be normal. He had to struggle against himself, first, and then against the injustice that haunted their lives" (83). Curiously, this injustice is never quite explained, it remains a vague concept, which indicates that the implied author denies the terrorists any acceptable – political, economic, moral – justification for their crime. Only one is there a hint at the context of the attack: "Wrong-eyed men and women laughing on TV, their military forces defiling the Land of the Two Holy Places" (175).

On the other hand, as we thus see, the narration itself harbors hostility or at least deep skepticism towards Islam and the Islamic militants. The ideology of the conspiracy is configured as crude and absurd. Jews and Americans are generally, generically abhorred, and even the sentence suggesting the cooperation between Saudis and Americans to be at the root of the terrorist act demonstrates not understandable but blind aversion, driven by prejudice (“wrong-eyed men and women”). Focused solely on the terrorist plot, the group seeks the fulfillment of a duty or “predetermined” path (175). The religious element of the conspiracy is quite evident, for example in references to jihad. The Qur’an itself is presented as inflexible and therefore distinct from a postmodern, Western culture of constant doubt: Lianne learns that the Qur’an “is not to be doubted,” while she herself is “stuck with her doubts” (231). Apparently, Islam does not, cannot belong in the West.

The incompatibility or difference between the two sides, between Islam/Islamic militants and “the West” is therefore constantly confirmed, but it is also questioned, for example via Hammad’s uncertainty about the plot’s rationale and via a depiction of his sexual desires that suggest his reluctance to accept the constrictions imposed upon the militants. He envisions participating in a culture that seems accessible, available to him. Indeed, the story of Hammad and his fellow conspirators is eventually interlaced with all the other stories: at the end of the novel, in death, the stories merge and Hammad becomes part of the Other’s story, belongs to it in other words.

The novel’s ending as well as the novel’s opening cast the reader into the utter turmoil in and around the World Trade Center, as lives are lost, buildings collapse, and

perceptual clarity disappears. For protagonist Keith Neudecker, stumbling through the rubble, the parameters in the interaction between self and world are dissolving, quite literally so, as the readers learn in the first scene of *Falling Man*: “There was something critically missing from the things around him. They were unfinished, whatever that means. They were unseen, whatever that means, shop windows, loading platforms, paint-sprayed walls. Maybe this is what things look like when there is no one here to see them” (5). In the last chapter, the narrative circles back to the beginning, describing the moments immediately preceding and following the attacks; in the most remarkable and often remarked-upon sequence, the narration switches from the perspective of hijacker Hammad to the perspective of Keith.

Over the course of the 200-odd pages between these haunting moments, a number of storylines evolve, all connected to the events of September 11: a brief affair between Keith and Florence, another survivor; the gradual rekindling of marital passion between Keith and Lianne, though both are scarred; the idiosyncrasies of their teenage son, in whose mind Bin Laden morphs into the imaginary Bill Lawton and who for a while reverts to monosyllabic speech; Keith’s obsession with poker, which is radically transformed when two of his poker buddies die at Ground Zero; the performer Falling Man, who shocks and enrages New Yorkers with his vivid, creative demonstrations of a form of empathy with the WTC jumpers; the liaison between the former German radical Ernst Hechinger and Lianne’s frail mother Nina, who passes away near the end of the novel; and of course Hammad, the Saudi terrorist-in-the-making and focus of my study.

At first sight, these diverse sites of interest contribute, along with DeLillo's often sparse, cliché-ridden language, to what Versluys calls an "unspairingly fragmented style" (39). In the opinion of the Belgian scholar, this approach to structure and composition suggests "corrosive despair and its attendant disarray" (39). Versluys maintains that the lack of connection among characters and the non-linearity of the work are "proof of the indelibility of trauma and its shattering impact" (40). DeLillo, to draw on James Berger's discussion of the novelist's pre-9/11 oeuvre, "commits himself to portraying the traumatic burden of a damaged symbolic order and the desperate desire to escape from it – which can take political, artistic, sexual, and simply violent forms" (351). In "Falling Towers and Postmodern Wild Children", Berger "explores some of the consequences of damage to a linguistic-social order, for which the destruction of Babel serves as a prototype" (342); Silvia Caporale Bizzini uses Berger to emphasize that *Falling Man* investigates "how we seek reasons in order to come to terms with a reality that is falling to pieces not only metaphorically but also physically" (41). However, do novels need to be broken into pieces to reflect a trauma's "shattering impact"?

The converging of the various stories of the novel, their culmination and confluence, leads Peter Schneck to diagnose not so much a fragmentation of experiences but a union in the text: "As the reader soon realizes, the remaining parts of the novel connect almost seamlessly with the beginning of *Falling Man* so that the whole narrative again conjoins the end with a beginning" (218). Linda Kauffman remarks that the terrorist in DeLillo's "reduces the world to one plot, in both senses of the word:

one story and one conspiracy” (20). In contrast to the fundamentalist’s rejection of cultural and experiential diversity, the novelist embraces an expansive vision.

According to Schneck, *Falling Man* illustrates that it is “the office of the novelist ... to describe the fullness of our predicament and our experience instead of reducing them to one meaning” (218). The “predicament” in Schneck’s argument is presumably “the tension between fundamental anxiety and ironic deflection” (218), but this point does not entirely clarify the implications of the argument, nor does Schneck explain how his claim about the unification of stories can be reconciled with his ideas about the novel’s expansive visions and multiple meanings. I suggest, though, that we use Schneck’s interpretation of the novel and especially of its ending – he actually concedes that the text’s circular movement can certainly be understood “in terms of traumatic experience and its repetition” (218) – to emphasize the possibility of reading fragmented, non-linear narratives not simply as illustrating the impact of traumatic scenes of chaos and violence. Instead, such disjointed narratives epitomize the scope and unpredictability of human experience, which cannot be neatly structured, but the novel’s revisiting of the initial scenes also suggests our very inclination to contain experiences, to mold them into a structure that allows us to approach and possibly apprehend personalities and incidents (in this case, to gain emotional access to 9/11).<sup>viii</sup>

Regardless of how we read the connection between the novel’s first and last chapters, they dominate the narrative in their immediacy, their “physicality”, and in their very placement. The forceful beginning is matched by an equally intense, bleak conclusion. In comparison, much of the remainder of the novel seems inconsequential,

almost on a different level than the “enclosing” chapters, both in terms of the force of the prose and in terms of the apparent import of the content: none of the other storylines seem particularly significant for the development of the narrative plot – or the terrorist plot for that matter – as each relationship or interaction is transient (note the fleeting moments of intimacy or friendship between Keith and Florence and between Keith and his former poker buddy Terry Cheng).

Relationships fail, and so does communication. As I mentioned, characters in *Falling Man* – and other DeLillo novels as well – frequently “talk at cross purposes,” their conversations spread quickly to a range of diverse topics, and they tend to regurgitate clichés, speaking words they are “doomed to say by the ambient culture” (Versluys 25, 27). A dialogue between Nina and Lianne, for instances, unfolds as follows:

‘Where’s my grandson? He’s doing my portrait in crayon.’

‘You had a cigarette twenty minutes ago.’

‘I’m sitting for my portrait. I need to unwind.’

‘He gets out of school in two hours. Keith is going to pick him up.’

‘Justin and I. We need to talk about skin color, flesh tones.’ (113)

The characters in the novel encounter communicative limits – they are unable to gain access to their interlocutor(s) and largely fail to establish lasting bonds. This aspect of the novel might be typical for DeLillo’s work, but it is also a sign of the perceived impossibility to properly articulate a perspective on September 11. In spite of apparently counteracting moments of solidarity and community in the novel, the dominant motifs are muteness and separation. The affair between Keith and Florence is a case in point,

as this relationship between survivors does not progress past a few sexual encounters and brief exchange of traumatic memories.

Importantly, as the excerpt from the dialogue between Lianne and Nina exemplifies, the characters in DeLillo's novel have a penchant for brevity in conversation. Silvia Caporale Bizzini considers the "short and broken sentences" as indicative of a "sensation of chaos and loss of understanding" (41). In fact, this minimalism or (in more than one sense) "breaking down" of structures pervades the entire novel and is one of the leitmotifs of *Falling Man*. Addressing the disintegration of Keith's marriage and affair, Mikko Keskinen writes: "Rather than ordinary married life, the novel depicts particles of the alleged basic unity of society" (71).

Further examples of attempts to contain or control the complexity of life abound in the novel: prior to 9/11, Keith's poker group gradually imposes (and later abolishes) rules governing, for example, the demeanor of the players and restricting the consumption of food and drink items. In the wake of the attacks, Keith and Lianne's son Justin speaks only in monosyllables, reducing language to its basic fragments; Justin's idiosyncratic speech may be a form of working-through the trauma of 9/11, but it is also an odd performance (a presentation of a skill) that becomes a ritual: "At first it was an instructive form of play but the practice carried something else now, a solemn obstinacy, nearly ritualistic" (160). Rituals to shore off adversity are also at the center of the therapy group convened by Lianne: she hosts a regular meeting of Alzheimer patients, who attempt in each session to share their experiences in conversation and writing. Lianne eventually has to abandon her project because, as their memories and

mental capacities are gradually failing, the struggling members of the group begin to miss the gatherings. Memory vanishes and language is reduced to the absolute minimum, even to the very speechlessness I mentioned earlier as one of the most widely diagnosed effects of September 11 (albeit this inability to make sense of and formulate an articulate response to the events was curiously juxtaposed with the proliferation of news, commentaries, video footage, images – and poems). The Alzheimer patients embody a frantic, hopeless search for meaning; they stand, “in Versluys’s words, “for the entropic drift of society, where things tend to come apart” (35). We can therefore diagnose in the post-9/11 (but also pre-9/11) society depicted in *Falling Man* the dissolution of meaning and relationships as well as the reduction of life to its essential parts – at the same time that we also detect in this debris many essential components of human existence, including love, pain, strife, division, and compassion.

In the portrayal of the hijacker Hammad, the notion of limitation is perpetuated, most significantly in the depiction of the conspirators as intending to simplify the world’s complexity. In addition, the very scope of representation is limited, reduced to about 20 pages divided up into three chapters set in Hamburg, Florida, and New York – with Hammad’s reminiscences about his prior efforts as part of Al-Qaeda taking the narrative to other far-flung corners of the globe. Indeed, Hammad is not only a stranger or guest in America, but his entire existence is one of constant shifts and movements, as John Carlos Rowe emphasizes: “Hammad remembers nothing but crowding, narrow rooms filled with other lodgers and ceaseless displacement. Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Florida, New York, the Hudson Corridor – Hammad is always in some



foreign place, experiencing to be sure the fundamental estrangement of DeLillo's and modernity's existentialist thesis" (130). Hammad is also emotionally estranged from his fellow conspirators in the terrorist plot, as his (imaginary) reflections reveal.

Conveyed in different modes of rendering consciousness, the reproduction of Hammad's desires, principles, and concerns engender what Versluys calls "affective or empathic identification" (150). In one passage that represents a blend of modes, the focalized Hammad contemplates the meaning of the plot: "There was the claim of being chosen, out there, in the wind and sky of Islam. There was the statement that death made, the strongest claim of all, the highest jihad. But does a man have to kill himself in order to accomplish something in the world?" (174). If indeed this last sentence is meant to reflect Hammad's feelings, it is a curious instant of doubt, indicating the character's (repressed) humanity and facilitating the reader's approach to this Other.

Similar to Bassam, Hammad watches and evaluates other. Reflecting on the members of the conspiracy, the focalized Hammad notes in a slightly detached tone that they "studied urban planning and one of them blamed the Jews for defects in construction. The Jews built walls too thin, aisles too narrow. ... Hammad wasn't sure whether this was funny, true or stupid" (79). Evidently, Hammad is less committed to a fundamentalist, anti-Semitic ideology than one might expect from a core member of a militant group linked to the Al-Qaeda network. The image of the unbending Islamist is questioned, chipped in the novel.

Yet the description of the group in this first section, set in Hamburg, indicates a narrow-minded worldview, injected with paranoia and a reductive certainty:<sup>ix</sup> "The men

went to Internet cafés and learned about flight schools in the United States. Nobody knocked down their door in the middle of the night and nobody stopped them in the street to turn their pockets inside out and grope their bodies for weapons. But they knew that Islam was under attack” (83). Aside from projecting a palpable sarcasm in the final sentence, *Falling Man* underscores here the hospitality extended to the terrorists-in-the-making, an unwarranted hospitality as it later turns out. Importantly, this hospitality – it is a negative hospitality in a sense, marked by the absence of open suspicion – does not attenuate the group’s confidence in the truth of their convictions. Though Hammad does waver in a few moments as a result of the encounter with (appealing) difference, the conspiracy does not disintegrate.

The terrorists’ utter self-confidence is linked in one moment of the novel to Islam’s dissuasion of questioning the faith’s tenets. Lianne wants to “disbelieve” in the face of belief, in the face of the Qur’an’s dismissal of doubts: “People were reading the Koran. ... One, a doctor, recited the first line off the Koran in his office. *This Book is not to be doubted*. She doubted things, she had her doubts” (231). Not only does this scene articulate a banal argument, since religious doctrines and sacred texts rarely encourage critical analyses of their precepts, but the passage also registers a reductive reading of the second verse of the second sura: “There is no doubt in this Book. In it is guidance for those with Taqwa (ذالك الكتب ريب فيه هدى للمتقين).” An English translation could also merge the two parts of the verse into one phrase: “This is the book whereof there is no doubt, a guidance unto the pious” (*The Qur’an*, Al Baqarah 2:2; the translator discusses both translations). The verse may thus suggest that the Qur’an serves without a doubt as

guidance for believers. Other interpretations are likewise possible – Lianne’s (or her doctor’s) statement captures just one part, one possible meaning of the verse.

Both the conspirators and their religion therefore appear, in the perspective presented in the novel, to reduce diversity or complexity. The “Other” might seem to be a vague entity (the enemy, the infidels, the West), but the Other is also a set of individuals belonging to clearly identified religious and national groups: Islam for the group is, according to Hammad, “the struggle against the enemy, near enemy and far, Jews first, for all things unjust and hateful, and then the Americans” (80).

Hammad offers the reader an insider perspective, irony-ridden, on the beliefs articulated in this brotherhood. The fictitious terrorist is not actually addressing the (implied) reader as an interlocutor, but his assessments constitute overviews of the ideological patterns in the conspiratorial cell. Expressed in the form of thought report or free indirect thought, many of his statements in this Hamburg chapter (entitled “On Marienstrasse”) can hardly pass as momentary emotions of a fictional character; rather, they can be considered summaries of Hammad’s complex experiences with the group.

The moments in *Falling Man* that reveal cracks in the foundation of Hammad’s belief in the violent conspiracy allow us to see Hammad as human. By human, I mean that his belief system and opinions are *not* consistent or coherent. Similar to Bassam, Hammad represents a (postmodern) human, who is precisely the opposite of the standard humanist view of a rationalist, stable, unified self.

Rowe argues that DeLillo “gives some human definition to Hammad only to Westernize him, a strategy reinforced by the fact that Hammad is fictional, whereas the

historical Amir Atta is dogmatic and totalitarian” (129). To put it differently, Hammad can be described as human because he is not a fictionalized terrorist (a version of the real terrorist Atta) but an amalgam of Western images of and research about hijackers; he is an entirely fictitious terrorist in other words. He can be apprehended by the West, is shaped by the West, displaying the hidden uncertainty behind the severe façade of the dedicated hijacker. His very fictitious-ness also separates him from the post-9/11 discourse on the evil, unwavering terrorists, the absolute Others for whom the lives of innocent individuals are expendable.

Amir/Atta in turn matches the image of, to adopt Puar’s formulation, “the purported barbarity and unhumanness of the backward, fundamentalist Muslim[-Palestinian] suicide-bomber-terrorist” (18). Where does this barbarity originate? How to adequately respond to this question – and how to narratively construct and then in turn interrogate the response – represents of course one of the key challenges for terrorist literature in general. All of the texts explicitly or implicitly raise the question of “why”, providing only a few straightforward answers, for instance through the narrator in Amis’s short story or individual characters such as Ernst Hechinger in *Falling Man*.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the quest for explanations proceeds in *Falling Man* not by engaging with broader political structures – which are only gestured at in some scenes in the novel – but by integrating personal incidents that may foreshadow the character’s violent act. These personal stories do not yield many conclusions about the former, even though the diversity of locales referenced in the discussion of Hammad does signify the very modern, international scope of terrorism. Curiously, *Falling Man*

also barely engages with the past of the character Hammad. It does not provide hints as to the character's trajectory until his association with a terrorist network. Rather, it provides access to the personality of Hammad through his emotions and experiences in a few select moments set shortly before the terrorist attacks. In a passage such as the following, focusing on his time in Florida, Hammad appears inauthentic, indifferent even: "Hammad ordered takeout at times, undeniably. Every day, five times, he prayed, sometimes less, sometimes not at all. ... These people jogging in the park, world domination. These old men who sit in beach chairs, veined white bodies and baseball caps, they control our world. He wonders if they think this, ever" (173). In the first part of this excerpt, Hammad reveals inconsistency, while the latter part shows his mental attachment to a peculiar ideology. This ideology is self-condemning in its excessiveness and absurdity, as the oddly detached Hammad himself seems to recognize.

Explanations for the terrorist attacks in *The Garden of Last Days* and *Falling Man* are indeed complicated by Bassam's and Hammad's hesitation and uncertainty (as in the passage quoted above) regarding the conspiracy. Unlike Atta, Bassam and Hammad demonstrate curiosity in cross-cultural encounters. Departing from the path prescribed by his commanders, Hammad has a relationship with a German woman of Turkish-Syrian heritage and also "did a little lusting after the roommate." Leyla encourages Hammad to ask questions and express "curiosity about things, including his friends at the mosque" (82). DeLillo's language implies, first of all, a dichotomy between what Martin Amis calls Islam's incuriosity and the Western tradition of critical thinking.<sup>x</sup> Secondly, what emerges here is another exemplar of a Muslim struggling with his

sexuality<sup>xi</sup> – the scenes describing Leyla indicate a certain guilt in Hammad, the guilt of the Islamic terrorist who must reject women. He is clearly enamored by Leyla’s “[p]retty eyes and knowing touch” but he has to discontinue their relationship for the sake of the terrorist plot and his ideology (83).

In a reproduction of his inner voice that qualifies as free indirect thought in Palmer’s categorization, we witness Hammad’s inner torment in his pondering about his and the other conspirators’ position vis-à-vis their host society: “Being with a shameless woman, dragging your body over hers. What is the difference between you and all the others, outside our space?” (83). On account of Hammad’s doubts and vacillation during the Hamburg period, the persuasiveness and even the very meaning of the terrorist plot are lessened. Rowe writes accordingly: “Behind the dogma of Amir Atta lies the skepticism of Hammad, so that even the jihadists will be tricked into nothingness in the end. But DeLillo no longer believes that this universal truth of human contingency can motivate anything beyond the ceaseless history of a will-to-power that thrives on warfare and the production of subalterns” (129). More specifically, Hammad must be driven by more than existentialist concepts (which Amis’s short story and also partially DeLillo’s novel reflect) of the “fundamental absurdity of [his] existence” or an “insurmountable alienation from the external world” (Rowe 129).

Elements outside of what Rowe calls the “framework of Euroamerican ideologies” supply the force behind the terrorist conspiracy, but occasional Qur’anic quotes may not be entirely sufficient to address those elements. This inadequate exploration of the political (and imaginative – not imaginary) world of terrorist networks

may mark the hermeneutic, epistemological limits of contemporary terrorist literature from the U.S. and Great Britain (132).<sup>xii</sup> On the other hand, Georgiana Banita, taking up Richard Gray's call for more 9/11 literature that transgresses boundaries instead of assimilating the "unfamiliar into familiar structures" (Gray 30), maintains that some Anglophone fiction has actually succeeded in peering beyond a national, domestic horizon:

Yet to project a narcissistic worldview onto post-9/11 fiction as a whole would be to overlook what may be called 'the second wave' of post-9/11 novels, which clearly attempts to deal with the liminal condition of post-9/11 America, its position between historical borders and cultures. Specifically, these novels are more intently focused on the racial fear and anxiety sparked by the attacks and by the official response to them in the lives and minds of people previously inured to the effects of distant international affairs. (Banita, "Race, Risk, and Fiction" 242)

Banita's assertion does not invalidate Rowe's and my own argument: neither the representatives of what Banita identifies as a second wave of 9/11 fiction nor the works by DeLillo and his peers in the first wave (including Ken Kalfus and Jay McInerney) manage to tell stories that reflect the diversity of factors and ideologies informing the structure of Islamic extremism. They hint at but do not unearth the roots of the attacks, instead claiming the absurdity and in fact non-existence of motivations. These texts do not approach the realm of those apparently foreign cultural, religious, political belief systems without resorting to a set of well-known clichés, without a pattern of othering

as it were. As my study endeavors to show, however, there rests a great deal of value in these texts, in part because they illustrate these very clichés, but also because they do reveal the discourse of othering that evolves in the philosophical framework of the Muslim and Arab “terrorists”. *Falling Man* and the other works of terrorist literature delineate the complex perspectives of the 9/11 perpetrators on their supposed enemy.

Immediately prior to the attacks, the fictional terrorists in *Falling Man*, for strategic reasons, endeavor to blend in as they stay in the United States. In contrast, during their time in Hamburg, a period of planning as well as bonding, they “seek to distance themselves from Western culture in all kinds of ways, thus trying to cement their perception of standing outside mass society. They grow untrimmed beards to look different from the people around them; they distance themselves spatially by converting their apartments into prayer rooms and ... they think and live Islam” (Grössinger 80). Again, the network’s deliberate isolation and the resolute emphasis on Islam evoke the novel’s pervasive concept of a reduction of life’s complexity (tellingly, this constriction occurs on both sides). The participants in the plot apparently also vilify the West in order to foster their own group identity. While rejecting their host, the terrorists/visitor embrace the idea of a brotherhood, a male-only group that provides them with a sense of belonging: “He [Hammad] was becoming one of them now, learning to look like them and think like them. This was inseparable from jihad. He prayed with them to be with them. They were becoming total brothers” (83).

The conspiracy’s absoluteness is interwoven with the key concept of simplification or reduction. Indeed, the idea of “total brothers” implies sameness and



what Peter Knight calls the “diminution of sacrosanct individuality” (38). Knight refers here to DeLillo’s *Mao II*, which features crowds as paradigmatic moments of modern deindividuation. As Knight shows, the 1991 novel also equates terrorism with the loss of individual identity. Abu Rashid, leader of a Lebanese terrorist group in *Mao II*, advertises the effectively dehumanizing endeavor as a source of education: “We teach them identity, sense of purpose. They are all children of Abu Rashid. All men one man. ... The boys who work near Abu Rashid have no face or speech. Their features are identical. ... They are surrendering these things to something powerful and great” (234). Abu Rashid’s words betray the sinister, dehumanizing role of the group’s attempt at unification in the supposed service of a greater good or goal. The novel finds, though, that the power of deindividuation rests not only in the hands of terrorists but also in those of religious and political leaders (Ayatollah Khomeini, Sun Myung Moon, Mao Zedong). These personalities manage to summon masses in life and death, thus diminishing the individual’s “control”.

Strikingly, as Knight points out, *Mao II* likewise demonstrates “the homogenizing forces of globalization” (38). In other words, the individual loses not only as a result of obviously totalitarian forces, but also on account of cultural and political pressures and “the inescapable network of global capitalism” (Knight 44). Aside from the fact that Al-Qaeda itself bears a modern, globalized structure, as scholars of literature and political science such as Samuel Thomas (“Outtakes and Outrage: The Means and Ends of Suicide Terrorism”) and John Gray (*Al Qaeda and What It Means to Be Modern*) have

emphasized, the attack on the symbolic center of capitalism is itself a sign of this inescapability of global capitalism, to adopt Knight's terminology.

*Falling Man* discloses the global scaffolding of the terrorist network, for example through verbalizing Hammad's reminiscences of Afghan camp (e.g. 178), but the novel also insists on the totalitarian, dehumanizing nature of the plot. The epigraph to my chapter stems from the second section that focalizes Hammad. When Hammad openly wonders about the fate of those who will perish in the Twin Towers, Amir or Atta responds with a chilling formulation of misanthropic indifference. It is curious to have Hammad fulfill the role not just of an insider observing the conspirators but also of the extradiegetic narrator's mouthpiece, forcing the fictional Atta to account for his deeds: "Amir said simply there are no others. The others exist only to the degree that they fill the role we have designed for them. This is their function as others. Those who will die have no claim to their lives outside the useful fact of their dying. Hammad was impressed by this. It sounded like philosophy" (176).

While these last sentences function as an apparently sarcastic intervention by the narrator, the first part of Atta's malicious statement underscores both the novel's endeavor to suggest the ringleader's inhumanity and Atta's reduction of what he perceives as "Others" to a uniform entity. Distinctions between these other individuals disappear, or to put it differently, their individual existence is limited to its bare minimum, as they are held to be expendable and worthless. Moreover, their life is predetermined, as is the life of the terrorists, though the paths of these groups point in opposite directions. Atta stresses this predetermination, quoting a supposedly

explanatory phrase, with no specific source given: “*Never have We destroyed a nation whose term of life was not ordained beforehand*” (173). The grounds for attacking Americans are, in a tautological turn, that they are destined to be attacked. The Others are meant to be destroyed.

According to John Carlos Rowe, “Atta’s contention that the ‘others’ exist only for al-Qaeda’s purposes recalls Nazi rationalization of their genocide” (124). Rowe does not offer more of an explication, but *Falling Man* certainly paints Atta in the darkest of colors, as someone for whom the future victims of his terrorist act have neither face nor feature beyond their victimhood. The encounter with the Other simply does not take place for Atta, or at least he refuses to consider the Other as a human being that could be encountered at all. According to Lévinas, the recognition of the Other marks “the priority of the good in relation to the evil.” Hence his claim that “[t]hinking the other person is a part of the irreducible concern for the other” (98). Thinking the other person does not occur to Atta, but in the case of the more Westernized Hammad, this process of deindividualization is a gradual, complex process.

Before their departure from Hamburg, Hammad decides to leave his beloved Leyla, who he believes will soon exist only “as an unreliable memory” (83). Leyla’s impending “non-existence” is mirrored by the mutual invisibility of Hammad and his designated enemies; during the group’s sojourn in the small Florida town of Nokomis that lends the chapter its title, both Atta and Hammad articulate this non-recognition of the other person, this absence of concern: “Hammad pushed a cart through the supermarket. He was invisible to these people and they were becoming invisible to him”

(171). The idea, of course, “is to go unseen” (172). Set in Florida, these scenes are interwoven with Hammad’s occasional reminiscences of moments in Afghanistan, Hamburg, and Saudi Arabia. These voyages have left a mark on Hammad, though their precise role in his development is difficult to determine – which might be the point of course, as the novel does not grant the terrorists a compelling rationale for their acts. There is no clear context or framework for the terrorist attacks. The terrorists’ past is barely mentioned in the novel, just as their future is empty, as following September 11, there will be “nothing left to think about” (178). This emptiness of both past and future is paralleled by the many seemingly inconsequential scenes in the novel; it is as if the event of September 11 and the terrorist plot suppress the development of meaningful scenes, erasing any meaning outside of the event/plot.

Importantly, however, Hammad continues to waver in his resolve during this Florida chapter. Hammad is on the verge of deserting. His eyes occasionally fall on women (171) and through a thought report, the reader learns that Hammad rather jealously watches a group of young people, who are “laughing and smoking”: “How easy would it be for him to walk out of his car and into theirs?” (172) These might be but fleeting sentiments, yet they illustrate the alleged binary between the free, alluring West and the oppressive world of Islamic, Middle Eastern extremism. The crudest, ugliest line about the Muslim conspirators, effectively denigrating and dehumanizing their ringleader Atta, appears near the end of the Florida section, when Hammad underscores Atta’s status as external to ordinary society: “You look at Amir and see a life too intense to last another minute, maybe because he never fucked a woman” (176).

Again, DeLillo opposes the fictionalized Atta to the fictitious Hammad; the latter is arguably humanized on account of his fictitiousness. Hammad harbors sexual desires and a capacity for critical thinking while Atta remains the evil terrorist, the absolute Other. The ringleader's sexual abstinence, coupled with his intensity or severity, points to a repressed sexuality, conditioned by his cultural and religious background. DeLillo's Atta thus resembles the other versions of Atta I described in the previous chapter.

The Muslim terrorist is placed in the realm of sexual deviance, defined in relation to a particular normativity, reached through heterosexual relationships. According to Jasbir Puar, "terrorists are quarantined through equating them with the bodies and practices of failed heterosexuality, emasculation, and queered others" (47). In contrast to other texts of terrorist literature, neither a feminine nor a seemingly queer Muslim/Arab perpetrator is part of the cast of *Falling Man*, but the idea of the pathological, non-heterosexual, non-normative terrorist is evoked in DeLillo's novel, too (through Atta).

Andre Dubus likewise constructs a figure without sexual experiences in his *The Garden of Last Days*. The hijacker-to-be Bassam comes close to abandoning the terrorist group when he encounters kind and beautiful women as well as, days before 9/11, a stripper and a prostitute. They appear to open the door for Bassam to an earthly paradise, an alternative, feminine dimension that the versions of the stern Mohamed Atta deliberately forego in *The Garden of Last Days* and *Falling Man*.

In a reverse motion from Bassam's decision to indulge in otherwise shunned pleasures shortly before his suicide-murder, Hammad turns his back on worldly sources

of gratification associated with both the female sex and with the West more generally. Hammad cherishes the brotherhood of like-minded men: “They are together. There is no word they can speak, he and the others, that does not come back to this” (176). Aside from this facet, this male bonding, implied but not thoroughly explored in any of the examples of terrorist literature (with the possible exception of *The Garden of Last Days*), Hammad is ultimately drawn to the vicious plot because of its simplicity: “His life had structure. Things were clearly defined” (83). The expectation of and dedication to death is part of this pure structure. The terrorists are set apart from wider society by their very commitment to human sacrifice: “We are willing to die, they are not” (178).

All these lines from the novel evoke passages from DeLillo’s well-known December 2001 essay, “In the Ruins of the Future”, even reiterating phrases verbatim. In this early reaction to the attacks, published in *Harper’s Magazine*, DeLillo claims for example that “[w]e are rich, privileged, and strong, but they are willing to die” (34). The writer asserts here that the terrorist does not consider the victim’s (curiously, DeLillo uses a young mother as an example) “humanity and vulnerability”: “This is his edge, that he does not see her. ... He knows who we are and what we mean in the world – an idea, a righteous fever in the brain. But there is no defenseless human at the end of his gaze. The sense of disarticulation we hear in the term ‘Us and Them’ has never been so striking, at either end” (34). Again, in this perspective, the encounter with the Other inspires no compassion in what DeLillo terms “men bent on suicidal terror” (34). But the face of the Other does not incite hatred either. Instead, the enemy is, according to DeLillo, completely absent in the calculations of the terrorists, who are focused on a

goal (the murderous act and shocking spectacle itself) without having an objective (no end or reason). In short, “there is no logic in apocalypse” (34).

*Falling Man* reflects these theories, with Atta’s arresting response to Hammad perhaps the most frequently cited and certainly the most succinct statement of the terrorists’ (or specifically Atta’s) lack of empathy and their absence of any sensible motivation. While DeLillo’s and Dubus’s novels may entice the reader to construct a clarifying story and causal chain out of the terrorists’ narratives, the texts also include such moments that dismiss any rationale for the attacks. In the same vein, we learn about the focalized Hammad that he “didn’t think about the purpose of their mission. All he saw was shock and death. There is no purpose, this is the purpose” (177). The purpose in other words is the plot: “They felt the magnetic effect of plot. Plot drew them together more tightly than ever. Plot closes the world to the slenderest line of sight, where everything converges to a point” (174). The concept of convergence calls to mind the afore-mentioned unification of fragments in DeLillo’s last chapter: at the end of the narrative plot, everything converges in the terrorist plot. Indeed, the quoted passage refers both to terrorist plots, which force the world into an inflexible structure and culminate in one moment of disaster, and to narrative plots, which tie their individual components together. The term “plot”, in Banita’s words, “seems to overflow with meaning both in the study of political action and in the field of narrative” (“Middle Hours” 213).

Submitting to the power of the plot (narrative and terrorist), most of the storylines in *Falling Man* converge on the novel’s final pages, which present a

cataclysmic conclusion indeed. This conclusion epitomizes in the novel's central moment the intertwined histories of perpetrators and victims:

A bottle fell off the counter in the galley, on the other side of the aisle, and he watched it roll this way and that, a water bottle, empty, making an arc one way and rolling back the other, and he watched it spin more quickly and then skitter across the floor an instant before the aircraft struck the tower, heat, then fuel, then fire, and a blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall. (239)

As Paula Martín Salván emphasizes, this astonishing sentence illustrates “the ideas of connectivity, parallel storylines, and the convergence of a series of seemingly unrelated events to give shape to the narrative itself” (152). Salván speaks of a “parallelism between Keith and Hammad,” both of whom stumble along on the search for their appropriate future path (150). Drawing a connection to the thematic precursor of *Falling Man*, Rowe writes that both Richard Gray of *Mao II* and Keith Neudecker “degenerate into specters of their terrorist antagonists; aimless, stateless, socially determined beings following others’ orders” (122).

In another striking parallel, *Falling Man* pairs the Middle Eastern hijacker with the German terrorist Ernst Hechinger, who functions in the novel as the character who most explicitly judges and interprets the terrorist act of September 11. He offers a leftist, European perspective that seems to reflect the rhetoric of 1970s radicals and terrorists in Germany (most notoriously members of the militant Red Army Faction or RAF). Ernst’s argumentation, Linda Kauffman emphasizes, likewise “repeats the ideas



from 'In the Ruins of the Future' almost verbatim" (26). They therefore mirror the viewpoints of DeLillo himself, who is critical of America's inability to fathom the world's perspective on U.S. foreign politics but who is certainly far from sympathizing with the 9/11 terrorists.

In a dialogue with Lianne, Ernst Hechinger alias Martin Ridnour claims: "They strike a blow to this country's dominance. They achieve this, to show how a great power can be vulnerable. A power that interferes, that occupies" (46). "One side," he notes, "has the capital, the labor, the technology, the armies, the agencies, the cities, the laws, the police and the prisons. The other side has a few men willing to die. ... This is politics and economics. All the things that shape lives, millions of people, dispossessed, their lives, their consciousness" (46-7). Offended by these efforts to explain, even justify September 11, Lianne rather bitterly remarks: "Blame us. Blame us for their failures" (47). In all of terrorist literature, Ernst is one of the few non-Arab, non-Muslim characters identifying the West as at least partially responsible for the attacks by criticizing global inequality and Western neo-imperialist ventures.

During a later conversation with Lianne and her mother Nina, Ernst repeats a point Baudrillard and others made – the idea of the Twin Towers inviting attacks, being designed for destruction (see Baudrillard, *Power Inferno* 14-17): "But that's why you built the towers, isn't it? Weren't the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction? You build a thing like that so you can see it come down. The provocation is obvious" (*Falling Man* 116). In themselves, these comments are unusual in terrorist literature (though not unique in 9/11 literature more

generally), but they become especially poignant in light of Ernst Hechinger's own past as someone who – the novel insinuates – employed similar lines of argumentation when protesting and sabotaging the German government.

DeLillo weaves a curious intertextual and pan-historical thread between *Mao II*, “In the Ruins of the Future”, his 2002 short story “Baader-Meinhof” (named after Gerhard Richter's portraits of RAF),<sup>xiii</sup> and *Falling Man*, arguably discouraging the notion that Hammad or the actual hijackers constitute a new species of terrorist. Critics of *Falling Man* relish in the novel's juxtaposition of the 19 RAF militants (on a poster) with the 19 hijackers of September 11. This connection is primarily created in a dialogue between Keith and Lianne at the center of the novel. According to Lianne, Ernst Hechinger believes that “these people, these jihadists, he thinks they have something in common with the radicals of the sixties and seventies. He thinks they're all part of the same classical pattern. They have their theorists. They have their visions of world brotherhood” (147). The ideology of the 9/11 hijackers is in Ernst's mind only another iteration of a familiar pattern, recalling the German character's own story.

As arresting as this comparison between militants might be, the narrative link between Hammad and Keith, to return to my previous thread, is equally striking. DeLillo resorts to his well-known stark, laconic style, his minimalism in several of the key passages focalizing Hammad or Keith, in particular at the end of their development – their “ascetic process” as Salván calls it – towards death in the case of Hammad and renewed mental and physical well-being for Keith (153). Shortly before the impact of the plane, Hammad urges himself to see only the dimension he will soon enter. These

passages create intimacy and suspense by incorporating both psycho-narration and quoted monologue; Hammad's thoughts are reproduced either in the voice of the narrator, with tags – "He believed he could see straight into the towers even though his back was to them" – or in what seems to be his own voice (though rendered in stilted vocabulary): "Forget the world. Be unmindful of the thing called the world" (238).

Using a similarly ascetic language, DeLillo describes Keith's realization, long after September 11 of course, that for poker players, the world is reduced to this game: "This was never over. That was the point. There was nothing outside the game but faded space" (154). Both Keith and Hammad verbalize here the motif of reduction I have indicated throughout this section; they lose their sense of temporality, the one after, the other immediately before the suicide attack. Hence Däwes's claim that "Hammad is repeated and reflected in Keith" (*Ground Zero Fiction* 279).

In spite of these parallels and connections, the stories of the two characters of course also diverge. Where the narrative of Hammad ends, there Keith's storyline begins. In the moment of the crash, they become unbearably close, with Hammad's suicide nearly leading to Keith's death – in this same moment then, the two characters' stories are also separated eternally. Keith, injured but alive, is able to recall and review the events, while Hammad exists solely in retrospection.

In his final seconds, Hammad turns inward, focusing on himself, with no regard for the doomed people on the plane or in the Twin Towers – Lévinas's other person no longer exists. Indeed, the hijacker is committed to the abandonment of this world and reassured by religious, political, and personal principles.<sup>xiv</sup> "All of life's lost time is over

now. This is your long wish, to die with your brothers. ... Recite the sacred words. ... Carry your soul in your hand. ... Every sin of your life is forgiven in the seconds to come. There is nothing between you and eternal life in the seconds to come" (239). It is, then, this dedication to the termination of life, this reduction of life to its end that exemplifies both the idea of emplotment and the alterity of the terrorists. Even though Hammad recognizes that he can become part of his temporal host society/societies and bridge apparent differences, he ultimately chooses to submit his life to the logic of the plot. The terrorists seek to be separated, from the West as well as from human existence: "They felt the claim of danger and isolation" (174). Just as the three chapters focusing on Hammad are isolated from the other chapters, so do the terrorists-guests decide to isolate themselves from their hosts, precluding the possibility of meaningful encounters.

### **Decision-Making in the Netherworld**

In a process similar to *Falling Man*, Andre Dubus's *The Garden of Last Days* forges complex links between the terrorists and characters outside the conspiracy. Dubus's novel, an impressive tome of nearly 550 pages cut into a myriad of easily digestible portions, deliberates the failures and transgressions of the Saudi terrorist Bassam as extensively as it addresses the shortcomings of the construction worker AJ and the stripper April. All of their lives intersect in Sarasota, Florida, during a summer night in 2001. *The Garden of Last Days* does not actually depict the events of September

11, which are mediated in the novel, reduced to news stories followed by the characters on radio and TV. The fictional characters remain as distanced from the attacks as most Americans were from them on that fateful day.

While neither narrating the culmination of the terrorist plot nor its genesis – beyond a few of Bassam’s reminiscences verbalized primarily in thought reports (psycho-narration) – Dubus’s novel tells stories about the perpetrators preparing for the attacks, the middle part of the plot in other words. On the verge of committing a carefully orchestrated suicide-murder, Bassam is focalized by the author, granting the reader the inside perspective of a (fictional) hijacker. Contemplating his status as part of several communities, Bassam’s imaginary realm covers an enormous range, from the very private to the global.<sup>xv</sup> *The Garden of Last Days* leaves Bassam as he passes the security checkpoint in the Boston airport, before he “joins his brothers” and all board the doomed plane (511).

Invoking the plans of Bassam and his co-conspirators – scenes with the hijackers comprise about one-fifth of Dubus’s work, as opposed to only about ten percent in the case of *Falling Man* – the novel features, in Georgiana Banita’s formulation, “seamless imbrications of narrative and terrorist plotting” (“Middle Hours” 222). Any of Bassam’s interactions and memories are invested by us, the readers, with our excessive knowledge: we inevitably read the narrative from the position of prophets who anticipate the outcome. We organize the events into a trajectory that, with some interruptions (i.e. Bassam’s doubts, which are themselves part of a narrative of the appeal of Western freedom and enlightened human interactions), culminates in the

terrorist attacks. The verbalizations of his thoughts and the descriptions of his movements turn into a constant foreshadowing of what cannot be prevented. His every action and emotion carries – from the reader’s vantage point – the anticipation and knowledge of what is to come: the narrative plot is inextricably tied to the already known terrorist plot and its goal. In contrast to Dubus’s earlier, less predictable novel *House of Sand and Fog* (1999), Judie Newman points out, this time “we know only too well how the terrorist plot will end” (74).

However, these assertions come with a caveat. Drawing on Barthes’s admonition not to confuse consecution with consequence, I suggest that Dubus’s novel leaves it up to the reader to either construct a causal chain, for instance between Bassam’s conflicts with his father and his involvement with Islamic extremism, or appreciate the impermeability of the structure of human decision-making. Contrasting historical fiction with historiography, Alan Robinson indicating this possibility of rejecting causality and of withholding narrative or logical connections:

A significant difference between history and historical fiction is that historical argument seeks to fill in the epistemological gaps in sources by treating the evidence as metonymic fragments from which a connected narrative whole may be conjectured, whereas the narrative discourse (*sjuzhet*) of historical fiction (save in intrusive heterodiegetic commentary) frequently leaves gaps and silences, although its metaphorical organization and conceptual presuppositions may interpret implicitly. (33)<sup>xvi</sup>

*The Garden of Last Days* does not fill in the epistemological gaps, for example by speculating about or clarifying the connection between the death of his brother Khalid and Bassam's radicalization, but unless the narrator or another character intervenes, such plain explanations cannot be expected from fiction in general (of any genre). Instead, the gaps in Dubus's novel allow for various explanations and readings, which need to be based on what Robinson calls "metaphorical organization"; in referencing Khalid again and again in *The Garden of Last Days*, the implied author turns Bassam's brother into a motif, suggests his significance for Bassam's development. The motif of Khalid signals the obsession of the protagonist to attain the same affection his brother received from his father, turning paternal love or at least recognition into an impetus for his commitment to violence. On the other hand, Khalid's wild, carefree, "Westernized" self both fascinates and repels Bassam, further sharpening the (familiar) image of a torn, repressed Islamic militant, filled with resentment for the Western Other, but secretly eager to break free of the chains of a fundamentalist ideology. As this brief discussion demonstrates, the gaps (of course a key term in reader response theory since Wolfgang Iser) in Dubus's narrative prove fruitful in constructing the image of a terrorist. In understanding and interpreting formal and substantive components of a novel, the reader of fiction thus assumes a similar role as the historian who conjectures a narrative from "metonymic fragments."

Terrorist literature therefore invites the interrogation of narratological concepts of causality and emplotment, asking the reader or critic to navigate the meaning-making process in stories that end with a prefigured, predetermined violent act. Bassam, for

example, is absorbed by the plot, chained as a fictional character to the narrative reiteration of the events of September 11. It is not that, to adopt Robinson's language regarding historical fiction more generally, the fictional hijackers' "intentions are subordinated to the plans which the author has for them and controlled by the author's puppet-master-like manipulation of their lives" (34). Rather, they are subject to particular constraints inherent in the discourse pertaining to September 11 and in the inevitable "event-ness" or historicity of the attacks (Puar xviii). At the same time, Bassam represents the possibility of escaping this entrapment. He reassesses his worldview on account of a personal relationship with the unfamiliar Other.

In spite of the narrative's predictability, with September 11 as its obligatory or predetermined outcome, *The Garden of Last Days* does hold a few surprises then. These include the novel's apparent digressions such as the portrayals of people largely unaffected by 9/11. It is also striking that a novel which focalizes a terrorist in many chapters abstains from an imaginary reconstruction of the incidents on the plane (as in *ATTA* or "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta") or at Ground Zero (as in *Falling Man* or in other novels such as Beigbéder's *Windows on the World* or Kalfus's *A Disorder Peculiar to this Country*). The fact that episodes ostensibly separated from the history of September 11 receive an extraordinary amount of space in the novel allows the text, as Banita remarks, to escape "the purposeful plot it was meant to unfold" (229). September 11 is the inevitable outcome or end point of the narration; yet the relegation of the attacks to a mediated, unrepresented event as well as the focus on the stories of AJ, April, Franny, April's friend Jean, and AJ's mother Virginia, Americans inhabiting a



world only tangentially connected to the spheres of 9/11 perpetrators and victims, enables Dubus to decenter the attacks, the terrorist plot. In fact, after a detailed description of the hijackers' steps from their hotel to airport security, the novel inserts a narrative break, which is followed in the novel by a few pages detailing some of the characters' lives years later. Dubus thus avoids the sense of the novel as merely driving towards death, towards a predetermined conclusion.

The three main characters, whose stories converge but then move apart again in a motion similar to the overlapping and then diverging storylines of *Falling Man*, all find themselves at a crossroads in the summer of 2001: April, stripper at the sleazy Puma Club and mother of a three-year-old daughter, decides in light of her usual babysitter's unexpected hospital stay (the elderly Jean suffers from what appears to be a blend of heart disease and general anxiety, perhaps a portent of the attacks) to take her child Franny to the stripclub, leaving her in the care of a woman in a backroom of the establishment. A patron of the Puma Club, Bassam, requests a private session with April in the VIP or Champagne Room, which eventually lasts for two hours; during this entire period, April feels unable to inquire about Franny's well-being. She may recognize that it "was so wrong to have her here at all," but this realization does not result in a modification of her actions (45).

The tiny Franny sneaks out of the club and is picked up by AJ, only to be discovered the following morning in a private garage, miles away from the crime scene. After a harrowing night and equally painful days of interrogation and continued separation from her daughter, April can finally welcome her daughter back home, but

her joy is marred by the attacks of September 11. Television provides April access to the position of witness of the events, but the images also impart a sense of guilt, as others have fallen victim to a gruesome crime, whereas she celebrates the reunification with her daughter: “The days and nights of television. ... There was the feeling she’d been given a great gift while others were robbed of everything” (521).

Alan James Carey or AJ is another figure that exemplifies Dubus’s engagement with the netherworld of the unsavory and the underprivileged; *The Garden of Last Days* “begins and ends in the world of the underclass,” Richard Gray notes (73). Dubus’s incorporation of “regular folk” represents a fairly unusual focus in 9/11 literature, which is populated primarily with middle- and upper-class individuals (see Beigbéder, DeLillo, Kalfus, Foer, Hamid, O’Neill) and rarely illuminates the world of blue-collar or “entertainment” workers (McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin* is another exception). Employed by a construction company and separated from his wife Deena and son Cole, AJ is dissatisfied with his life – as are most of the other characters: the sense of an unfulfilled existence appears as a significant factor in the chain of fateful events described in the book. AJ is a generally kind, considerate man, but his short temper and propensity for rash, unreasonable acts have led to a restraining order that keeps him from seeing his little son Cole (77). For much of the novel, AJ drives through Florida, drinking beer and reminiscing about the gradual dissolution of his marriage; most importantly, he contemplates what to do with a child he considers in need of a rescuer.

After inappropriately touching one of the dancers, one of many acts that a character in the novel commits with only a faint recognition of its consequences, AJ is

expelled from the Puma Club and injured in the process by one of the security men. He later returns to the scene and upon seeing Franny standing by herself at the club's exit to the parking lot, he feels compelled to abduct her, or – from his perspective – rescue her from a deplorable existence, from “this fallen shithole of a place this scared, wailing child was lucky to get out of, lucky A.J. Carey had come along and found her just when he did” (198).<sup>xvii</sup> After a sleepless night of driving through South Florida and pondering a range of options for initiating a more pleasant life for Franny, AJ ultimately abandons her in a private garage; shortly afterwards, he is arrested and then imprisoned for several years. AJ's inability to acknowledge his crime, in addition to his belief that he is saving an innocent individual from her harmful environment, certainly echoes Bassam's interpretation of his role as that of a “shahid,” a martyr, who acts in a just and righteous fashion (92). This comparison has its limits, however, in particular because Bassam does not envision himself a savior of the innocent (only of his own innocence).<sup>xviii</sup>

Honing in on its characters' flawed decision-making, *The Garden of Last Days* compels the reader to engage with the perennial philosophical conundrum of whether we are entirely responsible for our actions, propelled by our free will, or hapless prey to fate, God, or socio-cultural circumstances. The characters in Dubus's novel, protagonists as well as minor figures, do not quite fathom what happens to them, or if and how they can (could have) act(ed) to alter their fate. “Driven into corners,” in Richard Gray's words, they seem like witnesses to their own lives (74). AJ, April, and Bassam are, in Gray's assessment, responsible for their actions, even though they are incapable of understanding them on a deeper level: “They can behave more or less well or badly, but

that behaviour does not lead to moral assessments that venture beyond the momentary and conditional” (80). Gray adds: “Meaning remains mostly latent for the characters in *The Garden of Last Days*; they watch, they witness but they do not work out” (81).

To be sure, Bassam does attempt to work things out, to investigate mentally the alternative paths he can follow, and he endeavors to understand the structure and possibilities of America. In the final weeks prior to the 9/11 attacks, Bassam is literally faced with those he is supposed to regard as his enemy – the American *kufar* or unbeliever. In contrast to the fictionalized Atta in both Dubus’s and DeLillo’s novels (and to some extent Hammad in *Falling Man*), Bassam endeavors to comprehend and even respect the Other.

The individuals he meets and watches on the streets and in the bars of Florida and Boston present him with the diversity of the American experience, from wealthy Harvard students to elderly cops, from forlorn bouncers to the bright young dancer April herself. Encountering these individuals compels Bassam to interrogate his position vis-à-vis the alleged Other – Hammad’s question comes to mind: “What is the difference between you and all the others, outside our space?” (83). Surprised by the pleasant conversations and interactions in an America that is neither paradise nor hell, Bassam reconsiders his status as participant of a plot targeting the very society that hosts him and indeed grants unexpected hospitality.

While Bassam is comforted and strengthened by the brotherhood of martyrs evolving between himself and his closest co-conspirators Tariq and Imad (“a shahid with three heads and one heart,” 252), his disgust for their enemies, for Jews and Americans

and Westerners, has dwindled on account of his personal exposure to Western culture: “The hatred that was so pure and clear in the disciplined months in camp, the hatred that began to weaken in Dubai and has weakened further in this Florida with its heat and all the women who each day show so much of themselves” (252). He acknowledges to himself that he “never would have known ... that he would *like* these kufar, that he would like Kelly and Gloria and Cliff, and yes, this April who calls herself Spring” (259). The young and beautiful trainer Kelly, for example, is described by Bassam as a pleasant person: “She was kind. He could see it and feel it” (253).

Americans become human for Bassam in the very encounter with them: from distant, obscure enemies, they morph into actual people, into friendly individuals. Dedicated to an act of violence based on this othering and on an absolute rejection of the alleged opponents of Islam and Islamic extremism, Bassam now has to come to terms with the destabilization of this foundation, a shift triggered by the comportment of the perceived enemies themselves. Dubus has Bassam question the validity of the tenets he has learned to believe in: he is surprised to meet “so many women who are kind” in America (253). It is in part the kindness of the women and the very interaction with them – these strange creatures whose apparently libertine selves he is supposed to loathe – that entice Bassam to experience them more closely.

The nude dancers, cab drivers, receptionists, prostitutes, waitresses, and fitness coaches the hijackers meet during their months on the U.S. therefore function in the novel as embodiments of the West or as entryways into the West for Bassam. To some extent, the portrayal of constantly smiling Americans constitutes a positive (always

friendly) and negative (insincere, superficial) stereotype, and it is certainly curious that some scenes of the novel form such a stark contrast between the mostly earnest and ultimately brutal Islamic terrorists and the shining representatives of America. However, several incidents of rape, the abduction of Franny, physical altercations, frequent lies and arguments, and the collapse of love relationships combine to disallow any simplistic assessment of Dubus's novel as a celebration of American society.

Bassam notices – and exploits – America's obsession with money as much as he is appalled by the ostensible depravity of the host culture. It seems, in fact, as though the nudity (in the club) or semi-nudity (on the streets) of many of the women he observes compels Bassam to engage with the ideas of American openness and freedom as well as with the notion of seemingly unrestricted – but in the club actually highly regulated – male-female interaction. The physical proximity of the stripper April in the Puma Club's Champagne Room tempts Bassam, inviting him to experience the human body: "He wishes to hold her face and kiss her lips. He wishes to look into her proud eyes. For this is as close as he will ever be to a woman from this earth, and was it close enough?" (283).

Such encounters with women evidently force Bassam to reckon with his own lack of "knowledge", his sexual ignorance: "But to kill bodies he has never lain with – this is what weakens him" (230). Experiencing the body of a woman – this alien being – in the form of April and other women he encounters during his months in the U.S. underlines for Bassam the gravity of the intended erasure of the body in the terrorist act (of his own body and the bodies of others).

Bassam actively seeks out women, these unknown Others, seemingly off limits to a committed Islamic extremist. Similar to some of his counterparts in 9/11 literature, but in contrast to the more worldly Hammad, Bassam is “inexperienced in sexual matters” and “both repelled and fascinated by the female American body” (Däwes, *Ground Zero Fiction* 268). Däwes claims that “it is particularly his unease with his virginity that turns his voyeurism into violent fantasy” (268). His excitement at the sight of the female body demonstrates to Bassam “his own weakness,” a knowledge that intensifies his “hatred for the kufar” (*The Garden of Last Days* 228).

A central feature of American/Western culture in the novel is thus its femininity – not only from the perspective of the terrorists: with the exception of AJ, all of the focalized (American) characters are female. Each of these girls and women is exposed to masculine violence – to rape, voyeurism, mistreatment, and abduction – but most of the perpetrators are absent from the story. The terrorist act seems to fit into this pattern of masculine violence.

What American and Middle Eastern men indeed have in common is the resolve to use violence to overcome their own weaknesses. Yet while American men abuse women that are to them desirable but seemingly inaccessible, exploiting them in moments of vulnerability, the violent acts of the Muslim militants are targeting not individual women but the idea of strong femininity arguably represented by the United States. The Islamic terrorists’ violence – I assume here that Bassam’s emotions reflect more widely shared sentiments – is at least in part a reaction to their own emotional vulnerability in the wake of discovering the unknown female body. Women are to them

not an immediate objective of violence but a source of violence. The Islamic terrorists do not come from an openly sexualized culture; hence their bewilderment at the visibility and ubiquity of the female body. Facing the novelty of the female Other, Bassam perceives the restrictiveness of fundamentalist ideology as well as his own weakness, responding with excessive violence.

Bassam is in fact afraid of the ramifications of his “sinful” acts, identifying the workings of the devil in them: “Do you see the work of Shaytan? Can you feel his power? ... Shaytan has not been able to influence Imad or the Egyptian or, please Allah, any of the others. But he is working hard now to corrupt two of the four who will travel first” (433). Unlike their more disciplined peers Imad and Atta, Bassam and Tariq commit numerous transgressions. Bassam maintains neither sexual nor dietary abstinence, frequents the Puma Club, drinks alcohol, and then, spurred on by the pleasure-seeking Tariq, has sexual intercourse with a prostitute in their hotel room. Recognizing that he ought to adhere to the demands imposed on a devout Muslim fighting for his faith in a jihad, Bassam channels his fear and desires into fury and excessive violence.

In *Terrorist Assemblages*, Jasbir Puar describes the shifting figure of this weak and fearful yet also fearsome Muslim terrorist. She maintains that Muslim masculinity in post-9/11 discourse is configured as “simultaneously pathologically excessive yet repressive, perverse yet homophobic, virile yet emasculated, monstrous yet flaccid” (xxv). Bassam to some extent reflects what Puar considers a grotesque, stereotypical reading of the Muslim terrorist, a reading infused with Orientalist tropes and contributing to what she terms the “collective vilification of Muslims” (21). Alternately



portrayed as a weak, vulnerable young man, a boy even, and as a determined, vile terrorist-in-the-making, Bassam is certainly one of the most complex characters among the “terrorists” described in 9/11 literature, but he also embodies familiar characteristics associated with Muslim men.

On the one hand, he is described as boyish and “boy” several times, but in a passage that focalizes April, Bassam appears as both old and young. This portrayal signifies that he is both consumed by his hatred (appearing prematurely aged) and unaware of the gravity or consequences of his actions (emotionally immature in other words, alongside sexual immaturity). Or perhaps it is precisely, to follow April’s interpretation, his newly gained recognition of the import of his deeds that affects Bassam: “She could see how his hair was thinning prematurely at the top, his scalp smooth and brown in the recessed light. Again, he seemed like a boy, one who’d been curious about things and was now filled with a sadness that had turned hard” (172). In a later scene, after an abbreviated sexual intercourse with a prostitute (he does not perform well and is “flaccid,” to recall Puar’s term), he fears that she mocks him: “Is she *laughing* at him? Does she think he is a *boy*?” (456). A self-conscious character, Bassam believes that he has achieved nothing special in his life – the terrorist act presumably constitutes his first deed of any significance (477). An excessive deed, the novel insinuates, compensates for an unimpressive life. His counterpart Hammad likewise yearns to finally succeed in of his pursuits: “He wanted to do this one thing right, of all the things he’d ever done” (174).

Bassam's violent impulse is linked to his failure to accomplish anything of note, principally from his father's perspective: the novel mentions his anxiety of not meeting his father's expectations. Dubus conveys, through several vignettes from Bassam's past and in the hijacker's musings on this past, the sense of a character who deems himself inadequate. Bassam recalls his childhood, growing up in the city of Khamis Mushayt in the Saudi province of Asir, living with a father who looked at him "as if all the sons before Bassam had been the best" (255), who mocked him because "you have never been a bright boy" (256), and who favored Bassam's brother Khalid, "the one who had done nothing but dream of the West and smoke and drive too fast listening to an American Jew" (256). Khalid's fatal car accident – did he drive too fast or was he "lost" to Allah, as young Bassam believes? – repeatedly finds its way into narrations of Bassam's consciousness as well as dialogues, assuming significance by associating Bassam's childhood with violence and death. A similar effect is created by the depiction of an execution in the Saudi capital of Riyadh, presenting a gruesome spectacle to the seven-year old boy (394-95). A debate evolves among Bassam's relatives over redemption and the meaning of death in Islam. They discuss the question of whether Allah grants mercy to all human beings or only to the faithful and good, reiterating the motifs of individual responsibility and guilt.

The protagonist's father is actually dissuading Bassam from pursuing a violent fight against the presumed enemies and informs him that the concept of jihad primarily refers not to an aggressive act but to "a struggle within yourself, that is all" (256, see also 489).<sup>xix</sup> Bassam's own jihad becomes also a personal battle against his father. His

emotions of curiosity, empathy, fury, and desire towards Americans, the Other, rekindle this fear of failure and at once reinvigorate and weaken his determination. His personal encounter or clash with an immodest, extroverted America perplexes and enrages Bassam; in the end, however, he does not abandon the terrorist plot. The plot presents him with an illusion of success countering his lack of achievements in life. Bassam almost reaches a kind of liberation, a maturing as he questions the plot, only to eventually submit again to his pledge to the brotherhood. *The Garden of Last Days* carries the vestiges of a bildungsroman, its ruins as it were.

In fact, we could consider several of the narratives discussed in this study as *bildungsromane*, a genre that has emphasized romantic desires and sexual encounters. In the case of terrorist literature, distressing sexual experiences mar protagonists' attempts to become self-confident adults, and they also generate violence. Put differently, the peculiar lack of independence and freedom of the perpetrator-in-the-making, his struggle to overcome restraints – a struggle that is a core facet of the *bildungsroman* genre – leads to violence. The genre's archetypal movement towards breaking free, towards individual autonomy is not necessarily in line with cultural expectations in the Muslim world; close family ties are, after all, still a very common feature in Middle Eastern societies. In many of the texts discussed here, however, the Muslim protagonists' interactions with family members are either strained or non-existent. The moment of abandoning the home becomes in many of the texts a signal or symbol for the beginning of a journey to violence, removed from the folds of humanity.

While Bassam thus steers away from human existence, which he briefly, temporarily embraces in the novel, the version of Mohamed Atta in *The Garden of Last Days* never betrays any indication of being moved by the encounter with the Other or of questioning the inhuman plot. He is the embodiment of the self-righteousness, misogyny, and intolerance associated in media and in fiction with Muslim extremists (see Amis's short story and Havis's play, but also Salman Rushdie's 2005 novel *Shalimar the Clown* and Ian McEwan's *Saturday*). The fictionalized terrorist "hates all women, not only the kufar" (23). Atta exudes a malicious aura, which in itself serves as a reminder and admonishment that Bassam match the "ideal" of the vicious Islamic terrorist:

There were the women who served them food in restaurants, the young ones or older ones, the pretty or the ugly, they were polite and smiled while looking them in their eyes. Except Amir's. Their smiles changed then. They could see and feel his hatred for them, and Bassam had felt soft and weak and not worthy of the titled shahid; these people should fear him, too. He was prepared to do what he was chosen for. They must not doubt this. No one should question this. (254)

Bassam senses at times that his aversion to women, Jews, and Americans is untenable and erroneous (though he then backpedals again). In stark contrast, Atta's viciousness seems unassailable and almost inborn, such that he has no qualms about refusing any interaction with the friendly realtor Gloria: "How easy it was for Amir to ignore her, to hate her." In the same passage, the author, through the focalized Bassam, provides a description of Atta as "brash and arrogant and short-tempered" (380). This abrasive Atta is the mirror image of DeLillo's version of the 9/11 ringleader. Atta is thus also the real

hijacker, while Bassam is the fictional (completely fictitious) hijacker who becomes the vessel for the implied author's conceptions about the terrorist's path to violence, redemption, and humanity.

In his desire for women and in his partaking of alcohol and prostitution, the character Bassam might be, in Judie Newman's formulation, designed to question the piety and authenticity of the historical hijackers (80-1).<sup>xx</sup> Yet Bassam is distinguished from the actual hijackers and from the fictionalized Atta. As a fictitious man, he can be endowed with sentiments of doubt, compassion, and kindness, which we otherwise do not associate with the terrorists. Hence my argument that the Atta in Dubus's novel represents the real hijacker, while Bassam is the possible hijacker, the one who reacts to otherness (i.e. to "us") in a way that readers of this novel would expect a stranger to react when encountering the attractive aspects of – a surely imperfect – America. We learn through dialogues and the techniques of psycho-narration and narrated monologue that Bassam experiences feelings of doubt, and he in turn encounters gestures of compassion and kindness.

Terrorist literature is largely "inhospitable" to the fictional perpetrators, not engaging extensively or explicitly with justifications of the attacks. However, *The Garden of Last Days*, eager to invite the Other's (referring in this case to the Muslim terrorists) unfamiliar, unknown view into the narrative in order to question the Self ("us", the West), does imagine on many pages Bassam's stories, his trajectory. The novel does present the United States as a society which seems open and carries a friendly façade, but which also has corruption and violence prevail inside its private homes and publicly

accessible rooms, its bars and hotels – the very places where one would expect and demand hospitality.

Derrida's concept of hospitality, as outlined at the outset of this chapter, plays out on different levels in Dubus's novel. On a small scale, for instance in the case of the strip club, strict regulations protect the host (including staff and dancers) against any breaches of conduct, allowing the host to invite or expel anyone; to put it differently, any adult has access to the club, but this right can only be exercised through the acceptance of the club's right to control and rescind this right. There are no real names, no openness – everyone is to each other not just a stranger but what Derrida names the "absolute other."

In Derrida's view, "the difference, one of the subtle and sometimes ungraspable differences between the foreigner and the absolute other is that the latter cannot have a name or a family name" (25). Allowing this absolute Other into the home involves the abandonment of the idea of a close relationship between host and guest (a knowledge of each other), and this is the point where the Puma Club scenes constitute a separate form of hospitality from the one described by Derrida. After all, at the strip club, the interaction between dancers and customers in particular remains within a boundary that prohibits familiarity and an actual meeting that would encompass the disclosure of real names (25). The absolute Other remains in his position of otherness, and the conditions restricting (and ensuring) hospitality are upheld; this stands in contrast to Derrida's contention, of course put forth in a more general context of immigration and personal hospitality, according to which the "unknown, anonymous other" arrives in my

place “without asking of them [*sic*] either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names” (25). In another sense, Derrida’s concept applies directly to Dubus’s novel, as the regulations of the club include the maintenance of anonymity between host and “absolute other,” thus keeping the host (I mean here the dancer and other staff) in the position of “unknown other” from the perspective of the customer.

Bassam tests the rules and boundaries by offering the dancers money in exchange for transgressive acts: Spring reveals her actual name, April (106), and allows Bassam to touch her (177), while her fellow dancer Retro exposes herself completely in front of the young Saudi (153). However disconcerting such violations of the dancers’ private spheres may seem, the novel does not primarily frame the terrorist as a reprehensible pervert in these scenes (in spite of references to his unpleasant demeanor and appearance), but as a conflicted man eager to experience the unfamiliar. When Bassam asks for the stripper’s name, he endeavors to understand her as an individual, not as an absolute Other, the narrative implies.

On a larger scale, to move to the next level of hospitality, American society harbors corruption and violence in the novel, and is yet also represented as a place of absolute hospitality. Indeed, it seems in *The Garden of Last Days* as if reciprocity between host and guest, a mutual welcoming and openness, does not exist: the conspirators receive and enjoy freedom of movement; rather than suspicion, they experience benevolence, whether from a talkative cab driver or from the security personnel at the airport. In sharp contrast, the group secretly prepares a violent attack – the host is deemed hostile – and does not respond in a reciprocal fashion to the

individuals they meet. Bassam constitutes an exception, perhaps oddly so: he endeavors to return the kindness extended to him.

Leaving the hotel to head to the airport on September 11, Tariq, Imad, and Bassam encounter a friendly receptionist who bids them farewell. While Tariq and Imad ignore the woman and her questions regarding their stay and their means of transportation, Bassam responds with a smile and thanks her (500). Even though Bassam understands the formalized nature of this interaction, the conflict inside him is rekindled, as he experiences here another bright smile and lovely face. He attempts to fit in, to become part of the society, on the very day on which he articulates and enacts with the terrorist attack a rejection of this society.

### **The End of the Terrorist**

Similar to Hammad, Bassam wavers between insecurity, even anxiety, and the brazen confidence in his power to annihilate and destroy. His impending death frightens him but also renders him careless and over-confident. Dismissing April's warning about the physical strength of the club's security personnel, including Andy who regularly inquires about the stripper's safety in the Champagne Room, Bassam insists that "[H]e only has power if I care what happens to me; he is not here to stop me from hurting you. ... He is here only to punish me *after* for hurting you" (175). Bassam's statement is more meaningful to the reader than to April: anticipating his suicide-murder, Bassam



has (nearly) overcome his attachment to life; moreover, after the attacks, punishment would not affect the hijackers.

Punishment usually follows the deed, but in the case of 9/11 and similar terrorist acts, any such retribution has to target those responsible for the planning of the attacks. Fiction, however, can exact an imaginary punishment through a demeaning representation of the perpetrators, critically engaging with their ideas, ideologies, and idiosyncrasies. Such a gesture of imaginary “revenge” can take the form of a deprecating description of a terrorist’s appearance, an emphasis on his emotional or physical weakness, or a focus on what the terrorist is missing – in every sense of the word: what are the societal, cultural, and political processes he misreads and what are the pleasures of life he does not seem to recognize or enjoy? Every single of the texts I have discussed so far arguably contain moments of revenge, detailing a terrorist’s defect, for example Bassam’s immaturity and hideous appearance, or describing a flaw in the ideology behind the attacks, for instance the Qur’an’s discouragement of doubt (in *Falling Man*).

By using the term revenge, I do not imply that an author or implied author deliberately sets out to attack the terrorist. It is evident, though, that much of terrorist literature effectively questions the rationale and the socio-cultural outlook of their terrorists-protagonists. Challenging the ideology of the Muslim extremists is a gesture symptomatic of the discourse out of which the novels arise – a discourse that encourages an opinion of the West as perhaps flawed but still inherently superior in its political and cultural framework compared to the constricted world envisioned by the Islamic terrorists.

I have repeatedly stressed the epistemological, hermeneutic, and ethical predicament associated with a writer's endeavor to *read* a terrorist, to represent the story of the culturally other who enacts violence. In a likewise significant process, terrorist literature is invested in the view that the terrorist *misreads* the world, or, as *Falling Man* and *The Garden of Last Days* demonstrate, that he fails to convert an altered, "enlightened" interpretation of people and structures into an adjustment of his own personal path. The terrorist in these novels, similar to the texts examined in the previous chapter, is a prisoner to history, as is the narrative plot, which is intertwined with the terrorist plot.

I have argued that the focus on *fictitious* terrorists tied to the 9/11 plot grants both writer and reader a certain freedom to project an array of concepts about the actual terrorists onto the fictitious terrorist. Portraying fictitious terrorists, composite figures as it were, instead of reconstructing the historical figure Mohammed Atta, a known entity and a symbol of evil, also facilitates empathic identification with Bassam and Hammad. They interrogate in Dubus's and DeLillo's novel the validity of the plot and their participation in it.

Nonetheless, the outcome of their trajectory is still predetermined because the narratives do not evolve into counterfactual stories. This facet distinguishes the two novels from John Updike's *Terrorist*, in which a moment of perceived maturity and enlightenment effects a change in the course of action. The title of Updike's novel may indicate a predetermined conclusion as well, but in the end, the terrorist betrays this sense of a definitive, known plot.

The idea of emplotment, in William Dowling's words, "permits an intuitive grasping together of otherwise heterogeneous elements," involving a "strong implication of causality" (6). I have addressed this notion of sequentiality and consequence in wondering how Bassam's and Hammad's commitment to a suicide-murder in *The Garden of Last Days* and *Falling Man* is possibly but not necessarily prefigured in scenes depicting relationships and experiences prior and outside of the conspiracy. The ending of *Terrorist* in turn may invite two separate causal chains (paradoxically created both retrospectively and in anticipation of the ending), one of them leading to the character's devotion to a murderous deed, the other one leading to the character's eventual absconding of violence. Once again, however, the imposition of causality on a narrative is not actually an inevitable, inescapable act.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Marwan Al-Shehhi spent a great deal of time in Florida, as did Atta. Ziad Jarrah was a member of the Hamburg cell with Atta and Marwan Al-Shehhi; Jarrah also had a Turkish-German girlfriend in Germany, an obvious parallel to Hammad's relationship with a Syrian-German.

<sup>ii</sup> I mean to imply here that the terrorist plot focuses on inflicting death – death is the plot's objective but also its actual end, in that the perpetrators die in achieving their objective. The narrative plot of works of terrorist literature is transformed (even determined) by the terrorist plot. In other words, both the narrative plot and the terrorist plot are death-driven. This notion evokes twentieth-century theories of narratology that connect death and plot. Walter Benjamin for example writes: "Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell" (94). In DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), the protagonist Jack proclaims: "All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots" (26). However, as Leonard Orr suggests, *White Noise* itself counters this concept with an ultimately "life-affirming plot" (37). Similarly, *Falling Man* and *The Garden of Last Days* end with scenes of life, not death – with the survivors and witnesses, not with victims and perpetrators.

<sup>iii</sup> In one scene, Bassam tells April: "'Then why do you worship your prophet? He was not the son. There is only one Allah and He had no son. These are your gods.' He picked up his cash, handed all of it to her. 'Here, take your gods. As much as you wish. I do not care'" (175). In a later chapter, the narrator verbalizes Bassam's reflections on young Harvard students: "It is the morning of their day of worship. ... They have as many years as he does, and they smoke cigarettes and drink coffee and laugh or lean close to one another and speak quietly" (419). Rather than merely having Bassam repeat the mistake of using an incorrect verb to express age, Dubus could have added more errors to Bassam's speech or he could have simply rendered the character's statements – and his narrated emotions – in standard American English. In any case, there are more convincing ways to indicate a character's foreignness. Interestingly, in Dubus's novel *House of Sand and Fog* (1999), the Iranian protagonist Massoud Behrani similarly fails to use the correct verb to say a person's age.

<sup>iv</sup> In many American novels of the nineteenth century, for example in Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* (1827) or in James Fenimore Cooper's novels, Native American speech was loaded with lofty figurative language.

<sup>v</sup> . In her essay "Middle Hours: Terrorism and Narrative Emplotment in Andre Dubus III's *The Garden of Last Days*", Georgiana Banita maintains that "the issue of how terrorist plots are folded within narrative structures has remained largely unexamined" (216). Banita likewise argues that "the emplotting of terrorism in post-9/11 cultural discourse may be better understood by studying its mutation into narrative forms that retain the original event's aura of violence and spectacle" (214). She does not, however, sufficiently elaborate on this promising argument.

<sup>vi</sup> To reiterate my differentiation between fictional/fictionalized and fictitious: the fictionalized Atta/Amir is a fictional version of an actual, historical person, whereas Hammad and Bassam are fictitious hijackers, imaginary individuals based to some extent on the actual hijackers but not meant to evoke particular historical figures.

<sup>vii</sup> Barthes notes: "It has already been pointed out that structurally narrative institutes a confusion between consecution and consequence, temporality and logic. This ambiguity forms the central problem of narrative syntax" (98). He further remarks that the "functional covering of the narrative necessitates an organization of relays the basic unit of which can only be a small group of functions, hereafter referred to (following Bremond) as a *sequence*. A sequence is a logical succession of nuclei bound together by a relation of solidarity: the sequence opens when one of its terms has no solitary antecedent and closes when another of its terms has no consequent" (101).

<sup>viii</sup> . Again, other interpretations of the ending seem likewise sensible: the revisiting of the impact (in more than one sense) of the planes in the closing pages can also be seen as highlighting the impossibility to erase these scenes from public memory.

<sup>ix</sup> Implying that this paranoia is unfounded, DeLillo indicates that U.S. administration and American intelligence services failed miserably in their duties by not preventing the attacks – or at least by not adequately monitoring the (future) perpetrators. In the chapter “In Nokomis”, the narrator suggests repeatedly that the terrorists overestimate the state’s capacities: “They thought the state would read their coded e-mails. The state would check out airline databases and all transactions involving certain sums of money” (171-2). And: “But don’t forget, we are being stopped any minute by the CIA, the other man says” (177). Or: “Not that they would ever get that far. The state had watch lists and undercover agents” (173). Amir/Atta is an exception among the group’s members regarding their (his) expectations vis-à-vis police and intelligence: “Amir did not concede this. He received certain sums of money wired to a Florida bank in his name, first and last, Mohamed Atta, because he was basically nobody from nowhere” (172).

<sup>x</sup> In the essay, “Terror and Boredom”, discussed in my previous chapter, Amis asserts: “Islam means ‘submission’ – the surrender of independence of mind. (...) The stout self-sufficiency or, if you prefer, the extreme incuriosity of Islamic culture has been much remarked” (79).

<sup>xi</sup> Hammad is indeed sexualized, or rather, he is shown as embracing his sexuality, even though he also has to repress it. In one scene, the worlds of seeming freedom, of free sexuality at least, and of apparently oppressive religion are juxtaposed in a telling fashion: “Late one night he had to step over the prone form of a brother in prayer as he made his way to the toilet to jerk off” (80).

<sup>xii</sup> Middle Eastern and North African fictional and non-fictional works can intervene in the post-9/11 discourse with meaningful, distinctive conceptions about the intricate relations between terrorism and economic, political, and cultural developments; however, the idea of the “native” writer as the more accurate informant would be naïve, implying that a common geographical origin equates the novelist’s familiarity with terrorists, transcending boundaries of class, politics, and religion. Besides, expatriate authors such as Mahi Binebine and Slimane Benaïssa are presumably as steeped in Western culture (France) as Amis or DeLillo are.

<sup>xiii</sup> Each of DeLillo’s texts contains intertextual references to his other texts, intertwining them. The MOMA scenes in his recent work *Point Omega* (2010), which also qualifies as a 9/11 novel, recalls the opening sequence of “Baader-Meinhof”, which is likewise set at the MOMA and likewise interrogates the act of watching a work of art on different levels: What do I see? What do others see? How do I react to it, what is my perspective, and how do other people respond? In the case of *Point Omega*, the character views a modified, slower version of Hitchcock’s movie *Psycho*, whereas in “Baader-Meinhof”, the object of interest is a series of Gerhard Richter paintings based on photographs.

<sup>xiv</sup> Hammad’s commitment is also strengthened by reflections about Shia boys killed during the Iraq-Iran War on a battlefield along the Shatt al Arab, a strategically significant river dividing the two countries. This association suggests that the terrorists, represented by Hammad, regard themselves as warriors for a sacred cause.

<sup>xv</sup> In what is arguably the most striking sentence of the novel, Bassam crosses in his mind a multitude of geographical and temporal boundaries, moving from his Boston accommodation in the summer of 2001 to the home of his childhood. This incredible tour de force reiterates the motifs of overlapping histories and surprising cross-cultural linkages, but it also configures the act of terror as a journey home, to Bassam’s father: “They have pushed the second bed aside and there is room for two rooms of two, Tariq and the Egyptian Amir, then Imad and Bassam. Imad has lighted the incense, and how fitting that the direction in which they pray has the television at their backs, Makkah so far away but not far away, simply through the walls of this hotel and over the square of the best school and its high walls that cannot protect them, over the loud and dirty streets of the kufar, through their homes of false idols and over the sea on which tankers of Saudi oil, over the shores of England and France and Germany, over the heads of their women who laugh and smoke and drink and tempt believers away from where he travels now, through Spain and Italy and Greece, its wine-drinking kufar, its women naked on beaches he runs away from, through the Balkans where thousands of Muslims were massacred and the West watched, then over the Mediterranean he has never seen and blood-soaked Palestine the Zionists occupy, his brothers

and sisters living in camps since they were born, the holy city occupied by Christians and Jews, their polytheistic temples and churches, their worship of Ezra and the Messiah as if there is not One Lord, then south through Egypt and Sudan and across the Red Sea to the beaches of the kingdom where as a boy he played and swam with his older brothers, his mother and aunts and sisters in full abayas on blankets beneath umbrellas, and years later he and Khalid and Karim would drive there in their auto built by the far enemy and laugh and make silly jokes about nothing, even later sitting so closely together on a mirkaz in one of the restaurants on the water, eating fried fish and yogurt, again talking about nothing because they were nothing, because they adrift on the sea of unbelief and none of them had even begun to prepare for the hajj, nor would they now, though the shahid is exempt, the shahid is exempt, and Bassam is nearly there, passing the two hills of Safa and Marwa and the eternal springs found by the faith of Abraham's wife to the Al-Haram Mosque and its stone Ka'bah built by the hands of Abraham and his son and how can Ahmed al-Jizani not be proud? How will he not be so very proud?" (443) These last few lines indicate that for Bassam, the terrorist act or his own jihad will lead to the approval from his dad that he has so far sought in vain. The passage also demonstrates, to borrow from Sirène Harb, "that the dimension of the personal constitutes an essential prerequisite for a genuine performance of the collective" (19).

<sup>xvi</sup> As I discussed in my previous chapter, extradiegetic commentary is an essential part of Amis's short story, "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta".

<sup>xvii</sup> In an essay that inspires by drawing intriguing cultural and intertextual connections but also frustrates, on account of its many loose ends and insufficiently explored arguments, Judie Newman maintains that Franny's story is suggestive of Puritan captivity narratives about the ordeal of "frail white [women]" (74); unfortunately, Newman does not further pursue this compelling line of thought.

<sup>xviii</sup> From the perspective not only of Americans, the attacks were and are usually regarded as an unwarranted crime against innocent victims.

<sup>xix</sup> In Dubus's novel, Bassam's father plays the role of the ordinary Muslim, who insists on the genuine, fundamental peacefulness of Islam and explicates frequently misinterpreted Islamic concepts. For another discussion of jihad, see Chapter 2, Footnote xix.

<sup>xx</sup> Linking public opinion about the terrorists' supposed indecency to the content of *The Garden of Last Days*, Newman writes: "Muslim commentators emphasised that true believers would not go to strip clubs, drink alcohol or kill, and that Islam is not synonymous with terrorism. But the reports (including, as in the novel, the purchase of prostitutes) met a psychic need in America to discredit the piety and authenticity of the hijackers. From the ordinary American point of view their participation in 'terrorist stag parties' demonstrated that they were not genuinely motivated by religion, but fakes, wallowing in the culture they had come to destroy, not authentic political activists but demonic killers" (81-2).

## **Chapter 4**

### ***American Terrorists:***

#### ***The Ethics of Hospitality and the Endgame of Tribalism***

*"We have created you, so why do you not accept? Tell me about the seed that you issue forth. Do you create the child or are We the Creators? We have decreed death among you and We are not helpless. "*

--- The Qur'an, 56: 57-60.

*"So why do you not [intervene] when the soul reaches the throat [of a dying person]. And you are all there watching? We are even nearer to him but you fail to see."*

--- The Qur'an, 56: 83-85.

### **Liberal Orientalism**

After investigating fictional versions of the 9/11 terrorists in the previous sections, this chapter focuses on two novels and one short story in which September 11 serves as a backdrop. In John Updike's 2006 novel *Terrorist*, Sherman Alexie's short story "Can I Get a Witness?" from the 2003 collection *Ten Little Indians*, and the Spokane writer's novel *Flight* (2007), an American "terrorist" with Arab or Muslim heritage commits or plans to commit a suicide attack.<sup>i</sup> The perpetrators are accessed directly through dialogues and several techniques of rendering consciousness; however, they are to varying degrees unknowable, even invisible, to other characters in the

storyworld and thus to us as readers. These binary tensions point to the hermeneutic – and narratological – challenges inherent in depicting domestic American terrorists, who resist being placed in one particular ontological category.

I argue that in the two novels and the one short story, Muslim perpetrators are described as suffering from inner – familial, sexual – predicaments and moral or political indignation towards the United States in order for the implied authors to cast Islam as a repressive antipode to a tolerant American/Western culture. Paradoxically, post-9/11 America in turn is shown to be vulnerable to the terrorists precisely because of its moral, cultural, and political freedom, its hospitality or openness, and its attendant diverse, multiethnic composition. In other words, while these facets are championed as hallmarks of American democracy in the three narratives, they are also identified as fostering the country's weakness or vulnerability. America brings terrorism, domestic terrorism with a foreign note, unto itself: this terrorism appears to result, paradoxically, from the experience of shared (as well as separate) living spaces of the diverse races and religions present in the United States. Conflicts ensue as a consequence of gaps of misunderstanding, stereotyping, and mistrust between groups. While Alexie and Updike thus describe these groups (for example African Americans, Muslim Americans, Euro-Americans, Native Americans) as divided by historical, cultural, and political differences, there are also constant interactions, formal and intimate, and it is at this confluence of segregation and proximity that terror emerges.

One example for this emergence of conflict is the multi-racial man described in "Can I Get a Witness?", who blows himself up in the restaurant Good Food, an eatery



offering a wide assortment of national specialties. The suicide-murder generates a debate between two characters about the inherent, hidden cruelty of humans, regardless of race. In fact, all three texts locate a propensity for violence not solely in Muslims, but instead delineate instances of public as well as domestic violence by Euro-Americans, American Indians, and African Americans alike. Terrorist acts in contemporary literature are depicted as consequences of the personal pathology of Muslim militants and, by extension, of supposedly oppressive Muslim communities, yet they are apparently also manifestations of conflicts within Western societies.

Both visible (or public) and domestic terror are linked in the primary texts discussed in this chapter to the events of September 11 and their aftermath. The societal and political structure in the storyworlds, including details such as the role of the Department of Homeland Security in *Terrorist*, as well as the content and trajectory of many conversations, marked by a tenor of suspicion, desperation, and (self-)interrogation, are products of the 2001 terrorist attacks, revisited in a fictional, creative space. Moreover, similar to the spectacular horror of 9/11, the (planned) terrorist attacks in Alexie's and Updike's narratives, bear a creative and performative mark: they are demonstrative acts of self-assertion on the part of the terrorists and also seem to be invested with the objective of disrupting regular life in a particular space. Each of the perpetrators chooses a symbolically charged public space to attack not specific individuals but a set of people associated with the space: the center of a major American city, a restaurant testifying to America's peculiar assemblage of ethnicities,

and a traffic artery connecting a bustling American mega-city with depressed, post-industrial suburbia.<sup>ii</sup>

Thus woven into the fabric of all three texts, the disaster of September 11 is in one case even “reenacted”: in *Flight*, the character Abbad crashes a plane into downtown Chicago, causing numerous deaths. To be sure, this deed is not the result of a massive, transnational scheme rivaling the scope of 9/11, but instead an individual, small-scale attack, a murderous performance by Abbad to compel others to listen to him and his grievances. Yet the pattern or form of the attack certainly suggests that Abbad’s act symbolizes the events of 9/11 and their context.<sup>iii</sup>

In the case of Abbad and his counterpart in “Can I Get a Witness?”, the precise content of the grievances leading to the attack is barely addressed – the terrorist and his mind remain a mystery. I am still including the two texts in my study because of their obvious association with September 11. Moreover, “Can I Get a Witness?” and *Flight* identify the terrorist with Islam and create linkages to a familiar contemporary discourse of Islamophobia, which existed before 9/11 but has intensified after the attacks.

The portraits of the terrorists in Alexie’s stories are not as multilayered as the extensive depictions found in the other selected examples of terrorist literature, but the aesthetic and content of the portraits is nonetheless instructive in the emphasis on race and religion. Alexie challenges visions of peaceful multiculturalism and interracial cohabitation and implicitly affirms a sense of whiteness as constituting American society’s norm and foundation; the Spokane writer highlights, as Steven Salaita terms this configuration, “white majoritarian normativity” (24). “Can I Get a Witness?” and

*Flight* – as well as the short story “Flight Patterns”, which I will analyze at the end of this chapter – also offer moments of unexpected harmony in the midst of violence and desolation. Alexie thus combines despair, belligerence, and solidarity in a representative pattern of post-9/11 sentiments.<sup>iv</sup>

As Sherman Alexie, in Salaita’s words, “reveals the limits of the American celebration of literary multiethnicity” (23), he also interrogates ideas of *hospitality* that relate to the identification and comportment of foreigners/guests and citizens/hosts. Salaita, coins the term “Liberal Orientalism” for Alexie’s approach to Muslim and Arab characters. According to Salaita, these characters do not quite belong to American culture in Alexie’s writings, even though Alexie indicates the existence of a niche for them in society. Salaita senses a tension in this approach’s “inclusivist self-image and the exclusivist structures innate to its fundamental logic” (Salaita 27). Often identifying the ethnic membership of characters, Alexie depicts a society where most everyone has ties to multiple ethnic and national groups – along with the identity crises such an assortment of associations (and a lack of a clear identity) can generate.

The “terrorists” in Alexie’s texts and in Updike’s novel (as well as the protagonist Zits in *Flight*) emerge as characters who belong and do not belong to American society – and who, as I will explain, are invisible yet expressly identified. In the terrorist act, demanded by inner voices and beliefs, the perpetrators seek to assert their place in American society. In the case of Updike’s protagonist Ahmad, the inner voice becomes a text, as the Qur’an is embedded and embodied in the character; the novel becomes the host of a “foreign” text, a text that tests, via Ahmad, America’s hospitality.

The texts examined in this chapter may insinuate that it is in particular the Muslim or Arab Other who possesses the potential of wreaking havoc in American communities, themselves made less safe by multicultural identity politics; however, as I have suggested, the texts likewise point to the latent violence underlying and undermining American society in general. Persistent violence encroaches on the very viability of community. In this state of insecurity, it remains uncertain who ought to protect the home(land) and how the Other, against whom the Self presumably needs protection, is defined: by citizenship, ethnicity, religion, or even sexuality? In addition, how should hospitality vis-à-vis the Other be conceptualized after 9/11?

The fictional characters who commit or envision acts of terror in the three key texts are foreign in their heritage, strangers thus. Yet they are also very much at home, and they are indeed products and symbols of different facets of contemporary American life, including ethnic diversity, cultural openness, and the decline of Euro-American power. Similar to the previously examined narratives about Mohamed Atta and fictitious 9/11 hijackers, the three texts address the incongruous or precarious position of Muslim or Arab hijackers attempting to function in Western society. However, in contrast to the other works, Alexie's and Updike's writings integrate the American-ness of the perpetrators, or at least their American acculturation. These are stories of American terrorism and American violence as well as of the inability to either preclude or accurately predict the outbreak of violence considering the ubiquity of pain and malice.

### **Aiding the Beetle: John Updike's *Terrorist***

I will preface my investigation of *Terrorist* by engaging with another compelling text, which braids this chapter and my second chapter on fictional representations of Mohamed Atta. In his 2002 short story, "Varieties of Religious Experience", John Updike articulates distinct perspectives on the events of September 11, 2001, concisely portraying four very different individuals all affected by the attacks: a bond trader working on an above-impact floor of one of the Twin Towers; a passenger on one of the hijacked planes; an eyewitness watching the disaster unfold from an apartment in Brooklyn Heights; and Mohamed Atta, the ringleader of the 9/11 hijackers. Similar to other fanatic terrorists in post-9/11 literature – for example Dubus's Bassam and Amis's Ziad Jarrah – Updike's version of Atta spends one of his last days in a space that represents excess and hypersexualization, aligning the storyline with much of terrorist literature: in a Florida stripclub, Atta splurges on expensive alcohol and food, stares in dismay and derision at the dancers, and marvels at his ability to impress Americans with his money and profession: in a twisted joke, he claims to be a pilot for American Airlines.

Atta muses about his attempt to remain undetected: "Their training regimen had inculcated the importance of blending in, and getting drunk was a sure method of merging with America, this unclean society disfigured by an appalling laxity of laws and an electronic delirium of supposed opportunities and pleasures. The very air, icily air-conditioned, tasted of falsity" (90). For Atta, American society is the rejected, detestable Other. Everything in this "devilish country" is "excessive and wasteful" (92). The social

and legal structure of America as well as the country's purported falsity and impurity represent the excess that Atta and his fellow believers seek to banish from their own version of the ideal society. According to the short story's reading of the terrorist(s), the operation of 9/11 serves as a spectacular attack on Western corruption and temptations, which imperil Muslim and Arab communities (93).

America and the West appear to symbolize an expelled part of the terrorist: presumably universal human desires and pleasures that are celebrated in Western societies are rejected by Atta and his co-conspirators. The "West" – of course an abstract idea rather than a homogeneous entity – therefore constitutes the realm of what Julia Kristeva calls abjection, referring to that which disrupts our identity because it threatens to break down the distinction between Self and Other, as it is not quite either. The terrorists in Updike's story reject the very material and corporeal pleasures that likely constitute ingredients of their own humanity (the Self), and while blending into American society is evidently meant to be interpreted as a strategy for the terrorists to conceal their intentions, it also serves as a way for them to confront repressed and jettisoned "opportunities and pleasures." Whereas the terrorist – the monster – is usually associated with the Other, "Varieties of Religious Experience" and terrorist literature in general reverse the dominant perspective, focalizing individuals such as Mohamed Atta, who consider American society to embody the Other – which is at the same time an integral and discarded element of the Self.

Atta has "dedicated himself to the holy jihad" in order to fend off this menacing, despicable Other and prevent his sisters "from ending as sluts" (93). The Qur'an

conveniently supplies Atta with proper justification for turning planes into weapons: “*For the unbelievers We have prepared fetters and chains, and a blazing Fire. Flames of fire shall be lashed at you, and melted brass*” (92, italics in original). Albeit an exegesis is absent from the short story, such verses underscore the sense that the fictitious terrorist has cultivated a violent, idiosyncratic conception of the Qur’an; conversely, these Qur’anic quotations are destined to indicate the sacred text’s (supposed) malleability to fundamentalist ideas.<sup>v</sup>

In a perhaps inevitable progression, Updike repeats the “exploitation” of potentially problematic suras in his 9/11 novel *Terrorist*, which features a protagonist who absorbs, internalizes every Qur’anic verse. Curiously, the novel is set in the small town of New Prospect, transferring the idea of a Muslim Self/Other, fascinated yet appalled by the attractions of America and prepared to die for his faith or cause, to the familiar geography of Updike’s New Jersey. *Terrorist* describes the – aborted – terrorist act as in part a result of domestic conflicts rooted in cultural and demographic transformations (the developments in New Jersey epitomize changes across the U.S.), rather than solely as a function of internal challenges afflicting Muslim communities.

The latter element, the motif of personal, familial problems, of course plays a key role in Updike’s penultimate novel, as it does in other works of terrorist literature. Updike’s teenage protagonist Ahmad is rather isolated from his peers, immersed in religious study and awkward in personal interactions. Though he is raised by his Irish-American mother Teresa Mulloy, it is his Egyptian-American father who defines Ahmad. He has been absent since the protagonist’s childhood but he remains one of the people,

along with several other father figures, who indirectly or directly shape Ahmad's thoughts and plans, influencing and manipulating him as it were. His father's absence reinforces Ahmad's Muslim identity, as he seeks to bond with his father through religion: "I would like, some day, to find him. Not to press any claim, or to impose any guilt, but simply to talk with him, as two Muslim men would talk" (36).

Driven by his religious zeal and influenced by several father figures, the protagonist becomes involved with a terrorist cell, apparently with ties to Lebanon and Yemen. He is chosen to detonate a truck full of explosives in a fragile part of the Lincoln Tunnel between New Jersey and New York City. As he reaches the target zone in the tunnel, he decides to abort the mission, persuaded in part by his Jewish high school counselor Jack Levy but primarily by his own recognition that the Islamic faith demands the protection not the destruction of life.

Similar to the other works of terrorist literature, Updike's novel does not explain Ahmad's path to violence. As readers, we create linkages among religious verses, the various characters, socio-political structures, and Ahmad's beliefs, in order to construct the image of a perpetrator. This emplotment is complicated, of course, by Ahmad's eventual refusal to carry out his gruesome task; the refusal requires a different meaning-making framework that conceptualizes not the mind of a terrorist but that of an ultimately rather ordinary individual who opts for a path beyond violence. The title of the novel appears to compel the reader to engage with the text as another example of terrorist fiction, which we read both in an anticipatory and in a retrospective fashion; however, the implied author's decision not to conclude the text with the seemingly



predetermined ending adds another layer to the reading process. The novel's title is in fact questioned by the conclusion of the story itself, as the terrorist seems to exist only as a haunting possibility, an unfulfilled threat.<sup>vi</sup>

Since the narrative plot does not culminate in the realization of the terrorist plot, is the reader's assembly of incidents to understand the configuration of a terrorist not pointless? For two reasons I believe that the opposite is true: first of all, I suggest that Ahmad's failure (or, from an ethical standpoint, success) actually serves to highlight the text's configuration of a terrorist mindset. The conclusion asks us as readers to consider how we construct a mindset based on narrative units and how the outcome of a story affects this prior construction of consciousness. Secondly, the existence of an Islamic conspiracy and this conspiracy's will to destroy and kill certainly suggest violent inclinations along the ethnic or religious faultlines of American society. The aforementioned motifs, the dialogues, Qur'anic quotations, and narrated monologues, are crucial in that they help explain these inclinations, contributing to the fictional construction of a possible, potential perpetrator. In other words, the fact that the terrorist attack does not actually occur at the end of the novel neither indicates the permanent eradication of violence nor the success of American multiculturalism – it does not, in other words devalue my argument that particular familial, personal, and societal structures engender terrorism and a terrorist.

Whether these structures and the novel's motifs actually amount to a sensible, convincing portrait of a perpetrator has been questioned by literary critics. As Samuel Thomas points out, *Terrorist* "has been criticized for failing to provide a character ... who

shows little or no signs of the fact he was born and raised in New Jersey ... rather than some kind of imaginary Jihadi training camp” (439). Kristiaan Versluys remarks that the novel “has been decried and derided as pure projection and as a self-serving exercise in the idiopathic imagination” (170). True, the novel suffers from Updike’s well-known critical view of contemporary America, a vision suffused with nostalgia, from his equally standard fixation on the Mid-Atlantic region, and from barely veiled racial prejudice. Yet these same idiosyncrasies and flaws contain significant socio-cultural arguments that indicate the significance of *Terrorist* beyond “Updike Studies”. The novel, for example, addresses surely common concerns about an open, multi-ethnic, and seemingly all-too-hospitable America (concerns that are problematic in themselves). Moreover, the choice of setting is astute, as the predicaments of the fictitious town of New Prospect can be interpreted as representing the crisis of the American enterprise more generally.

I am also wary of the criticism Thomas references. True, the fanaticism, narrow-mindedness, and cultural inaptitude of the protagonist may justify the claim that he is depicted not so much as an American-born-and-bred teenager but as a fundamentalist recently returning from a “jihadi training camp”. However, the implied author also offers the portrait of an intelligent, educated, and even compassionate young man.<sup>vii</sup>

Whereas the Atta of “Varieties of Religious Experience” has no redeeming qualities visible to the audience, the eighteen-year old Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy emanates humaneness and is likely to engender empathy in the reader. In part, the construction of this “empathetic identification,” as Thomas calls it, is a function of the genre (438). A novel can more comprehensively trace the development of a main

character, creating a potentially richer, more balanced portrayal. The empathetic identification with Ahmad – or “empathic understanding” in Versluys’s terminology – may also derive from the sense that he is manipulated, turned into the agent of a wicked, destructive project (150).

The story is set several years after September 11 but again, the event is present throughout the novel in dialogues and extradiegetic narration. 9/11 in fact looms in the background: attempting to gauge Ahmad’s perception of “capitalist-imperialist” America and his dedication to Islam, Ahmad’s employer Charlie Chehab takes him to a viewing platform that overlooks Lower Manhattan’s altered skyline (187). A Lebanese member of a terrorist cell – though he is later identified as a CIA agent, a revelation that could imply the inauthentic nature of his statements – Charlie expresses his pleasure about the murder of thousands of “imperialists” and the obliteration of the Twin Towers. Ahmad, in contrast, laments the death of innocent individuals, among them Muslims, whom Charlie dismisses as “collateral damage” in war (187). Ahmad’s protest hints at the attacks’ self-destructive aspect, with Muslim extremists inflicting harm on other Muslims. And while this scene explicitly evokes both the consequences and the imagery (the absent towers) of September 11, it also foreshadows Ahmad’s own path towards self-destruction. He himself nearly ends up as collateral damage in the struggle between American intelligence agencies and terrorists.

The scene also exemplifies the virtues of Ahmad Ashmawy, as he prefers to be called in honor of his Egyptian father: he sporadically demonstrates compassion, eloquence, and politeness – qualities counteracted by awkward mishaps and fantasies

of “ruthless” violence against infidels (294).<sup>viii</sup> He seems capable of reading others, understanding their hidden motives and emotions, but these interpretive skills do not necessarily translate into the capacity to reach out to others and forge bonds. In one striking passage that illustrates the protagonist’s emotional conflict between contempt and consideration, an African American classmate named Joryleen encourages the sexually innocent Ahmad to embrace sexuality and consumerism, which she is certain will enrich his life. Ahmad counters harshly: “You have a good heart, Joryleen, but you’re heading straight for Hell, the lazy way you’re thinking.” He soon regrets this insult, feeling “guilty about her disappointment” (73).

While Ahmad seems to be struggling to connect emotionally with his fellow human beings, demonstrating insensitivity towards the fate of others, the opposite conclusion can therefore be supported by the novel as well. In a scene heavily laden with symbols of creation and destruction, Ahmad helps a struggling beetle back onto its legs. The beetle, it turns out, “had been on its back in its death throes” and expires minutes after Ahmad’s “merciful intervention in the natural order” (254). This mundane event, described in effusive prose, occurs on the anniversary of September 11. Confirming the reference point, the narrator (or is it the focalized Ahmad in an instance of quoted monologue – the boundaries are not always firm) informs us that the “sky above is cloudless, but for some dry shreds of cirrus and a disintegrating jet trail” (252). The portentous atmosphere and the symbolic profundity of a rather ordinary incident accentuate a development within Ahmad. In Versluys’s words, Ahmad gradually discovers “a transcendence that is in the meanest of objects – a transcendence that

vouchsafes creation rather than destruction and elicits sympathy rather than condemnation” (174). The terrorist Other, eager to sacrifice himself for his faith, grows up to acknowledge both the vulnerability and the integrity of what is for him the Other.

In some respects then, Updike’s protagonist does not resemble the incarnations of Mohamed Atta in post-9/11 literature, which I described in the second chapter: he is neither a clownish nihilist like Martin Amis’s short story protagonist, nor the enigmatic misanthrope that Jarett Kobek creates in his novel *ATTA*, nor the malicious, troubled homosexual of Allan Havis’s play, *Three Nights in Prague*. However, in his single-minded focus on Islamic principles, in his conflicted relationship to both his absent father and to women, and in his rejection of the manifestations of American popular culture, Ahmad does bear some affinity to the other fictional representations of the 9/11 ringleader, including Updike’s own version of Atta.

I have suggested that the loss of his father, itself a recurring trope in terrorist literature and other 9/11 fiction such as Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, fortifies Ahmad’s eagerness to assume a Muslim identity. The decision of his father to abandon the family also appears to deprive Ahmad of an uncomplicated engagement with his masculinity. Samuel Thomas identifies a Freudian theme: “Ahmad’s Egyptian father, we are told, abandoned him at an early age, an index to the novel’s underlying and ever-present libidinal economy” (437). The missing father is translated by the novel into a deficient masculinity.

A blend of reluctance and emotional ineptitude thwarts Ahmad’s tentative heterosexual ventures, a failure symbolized by the awkward interactions with Joryleen.

Ahmad might be homosexual, of course, and Jack Levy for example articulates that possibility (165-6), but *Terrorist* does not invite any definitive conclusion about the protagonist's sexual preference. Evidently, however, Jasbir Puar's impression of contemporary depictions of Muslim terrorists is accurate, as much with regard to Updike's novel as to the texts previously discussed. Puar maintains: "Working in tandem, the proper modern gay or lesbian Muslim subject is foreclosed, while the terrorist is forever queer, improperly sexual, embedded in an 'always already homosexualized population'" (14). Ahmad is subjected to a discourse that places Muslims, in particular those labeled Islamists or terrorists, in a position of sexual uncertainty; insecure, constrained, and inexperienced, they lean towards male bonds and at the same time exude an air of femininity. According to Puar, "the evilness of bin Laden is more fully and efficaciously rendered through associations with sexual excess, failed masculinity (i.e. femininity) and faggotry" (46). The "terrorists are quarantined," Puar notes, "through equating them with the bodies and practices of failed heterosexuality, emasculation, and queered others" (47).

In contemporary terrorist literature, many Muslim characters are self-conscious of their corporeality, inept even (recall Amis's clumsy Atta). Fictional terrorists are seldom located in the realm of heteronormativity because this is the space reserved for white Western men, threatened by the potentially though never openly queer terrorist.<sup>ix</sup> Whether I consider the versions of Atta in Havis's play and Kobek's novel, or Bassam in *The Garden of Last Days*, or Ahmad in Updike's *Terrorist*, the main character is cast in at least one scene as homosexual or as uncomfortable in his male body.

Ahmad may not be gay, but the question of his queerness is raised repeatedly, including by his fellow high school students.<sup>x</sup> Until the end of the novel, his intimate encounters are limited to one brief, more comical than erotic “contact” (falling far short of intercourse) with Joryleen. Throughout the story, Ahmad struggles to “preserve purity in a world that is contaminated,” Versluys maintains (179). While I agree with Versluys’s observation, he does not call attention to the fact that not only Ahmad demonizes contemporary American culture, deploring its contamination. The (implied) author likewise bemoans the effects of ethnic tolerance and hospitality to foreigners: American society’s loss of values and high culture as well as the compromised societal contract based on Euro-American, Christian traditions. In a way, then, Ahmad represents one consequence of the impure social fabric and also one, obviously unacceptable way of engaging with the U.S.’s – the West’s – perceived moral ambiguity. Updike can obviously not subscribe to Ahmad’s violent ideology, but his novel certainly exudes the same blend of disgust and admiration for the dedicated followers of a firm system of morals that also underlies DeLillo’s comment, when he writes in his essay “In the Ruins of the Future”: “We are rich, privileged, and strong, but they are willing to die” (34). Perhaps it is not only Ahmad who seeks male leadership and a masculine identity, but rather, it is also the U.S. that needs, according to Updike’s narrative, a renewal of morality and masculinity.

The absence of Ahmad’s father therefore symbolizes the absence of a male, heteronormative model as well as the absence of a moral compass; this affects Ahmad in particular and, by extension, Muslims more generally, but strikingly America seems

likewise deprived of such guidance. Ahmad's mother can apparently not fulfill the role of helper – while she is fairly independent, she hardly serves as a source of advice for Ahmad. Only vaguely conscious of Ahmad's true interests and projects, Teresa Mulloy spends her time working, painting, and seeking love affairs – the mother is thus barely present either for the boy.<sup>xi</sup> Hence Ahmad's search for a father figure; he locates individuals who accompany him and guide him, even though they also manipulate him: "There had been a father who vanished before his memory could take a picture of him, and then Charlie had been friendly and shown him the roads, and now this tired Jew in clothes as if he dressed in the dark has taken their place, the empty space beside him" (290). Missing a stable male guide, Ahmad apparently endeavors to fill his emptiness with a strong ideology – or in fact a goal that he can achieve, even if his pursuit involves violence. Charlie, Imam Shaikh Rashid, and Jack fill this void to some extent, representing radical, misanthropic Islamist thought and Western despair (and rationality), respectively.

Ahmad's decision to not detonate the bomb is an expression of individuality, however.<sup>xii</sup> Until then, his faith is not "sharpened by his own conscience" – instead, it is "conditioned by that of his teacher" (Hartnell 487), and in general, Ahmad's decisions are not truly his own. This dependency of the mind is presumably a result of an inflexible belief system, which may serve as a moral compass but which also restrains and constricts him. In Anna Hartnell's words, it is hard "not to draw the conclusion that what emerges as sinister in Updike's novel are the consequences of a communal faith" (488). The various figures Ahmad follows and emulates, beginning with his father, draw



him partially away from his own interiority, and it is only at the end that he recovers this interiority or individuality.

Mohamed Atta in Kobek's novel, Dubus's Bassam, and Ahmad thus all suffer from scars caused by their fathers in personal interactions or through their very distance. None of the texts explicitly confirms that violent acts originate in such scars or in a challenging familial environment. The texts suggest, however, a correlation between, on the one hand, familial or paternal conflicts, and, on the other hand, the perpetrators' perceived fragility, their conflicted masculinity/sexuality, and their commitment to a fatal, absolute act of violence.

Ahmad's behavior and his background therefore correspond with a pattern identifiable in other fictional descriptions of terrorists: Ahmad lacks a reliable father figure, wrestles with his simultaneous attraction to and rejection of women, is absolutely dedicated to his cause, ready to "slay and inconvenience many unbelievers" (292), and appalled by the liberal, godless American society. These points, of course, also rank among the implicit or explicit motivations for violence presented in fictional narratives from DeLillo's *Falling Man* to Amis's "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" and Dubus's *The Garden of Last Days*. In her comparison of Updike's *Terrorist* and German author Christoph Peters' *Ein Zimmer im Haus des Krieges* (2006, *A Room in the House of War*), Petra Fachinger writes accordingly: "These explanations [for violence] range from the two protagonists' narcissistic personality traits and their having been raised by single mothers, to their asceticism and utter rejection of the materialism and secularism of western society. Yet, so I argue, both novels ultimately fail to make actions of their

protagonists plausible" (411).<sup>xiii</sup> While the actions may not be entirely plausible, what the depictions of the terrorists signify is the focus of Updike and other Western writers on the personal conflicts of Islamic militants as well as on the perpetrators' resentment towards Western consumerism and socio-cultural "decadence". Islamic terrorism is configured as originating in pathological, repressive individuals or communities, which are contrasted with tolerant Western societies. *Terrorist* of course also laments Western openness and liberalism, and in its depiction of the Muslim perpetrator, it displays the same vacillation familiar from other works of terrorist literature.

Updike's novel opts for a curious mixture between stereotyping of and empathizing with the would-be terrorist, a representation not entirely compatible with the image of the monstrous terrorist-Islamist that emerged in the Western imagination following the September 11, 2001, attacks. In his conversation with Giovanna Borradori, Jacques Derrida articulates the concern that "certain parties have an interest in presenting their adversaries not only as terrorists – which they in fact are to a certain extent – but *only* as terrorists" (110, italics in original). Ahmad is not *only* a terrorist, but also a medium-distance runner, an excellent student, a son living in a tiny apartment with his single mother, and a conscientious employee – he agrees to drive a truck for a furniture company, owned by the very Chehab family whose members persuade him to actively participate in a heinous plot. Updike thus constructs a – however flawed and simplistically constructed – *person* in his novel, precluding a "reduction to the monstrous" (Däwes, *Ground Zero Fiction* 264).

Ahmad's eccentricity and his peculiar retreat from many facets of contemporary America counter this humanization, or more precisely, they suggest his otherness, his difference vis-à-vis the ambient culture. In Geoffrey Nash's words, "Updike's character has been almost universally dismissed as monomaniacal, and his stilted, totally unidiomatic speech condemned as robotic and highly implausible" (105). In a conversation with Jack Levy, Ahmad discusses his parents' relationship in oddly formal language: "My father well knew that marrying an American citizen, however trashy and immoral she was, would gain him American citizenship, and so it did, but not American know-how, nor the network of acquaintance that leads to American prosperity. Having despaired of ever earning more than a menial living by the time I was three, he decamped" (35). Curiously, Levy and Ahmad proceed to talk about Ahmad's vocabulary, a gesture that underscores the importance of this linguistic aspect: Ahmad's excessive eloquence indicates his separation from normal teenagers; he might be educated and intelligent, but he is also overly controlled, formal, and rigid.

In a structural parallel to other works of terrorist literature, Updike's novel thus processes a vacillation between humanization and dehumanization and implicitly inquires how we set up the "boundaries of the human" – itself a question that relates to the notion of hospitality and its attendant considerations of "admittance or refusal" (Still 4). The novel wonders who belongs to American society and how this society's norms, values, and traditions can be conceived or envisioned in a context of immense cultural diversity. *Terrorist* suggests that cherished values – courtesy, modesty, eloquence – have almost vanished, with their advocates (the Secretary of the DHS, Jack,

his wife Elizabeth, Ahmad) not actually models of virtue themselves. They are separated from the seemingly depraved culture that surrounds them, but they also embody it.

Lamenting the country's vices, these characters construct the picture of a corrupted country.<sup>xiv</sup> Jack Levy, for instance, muses that 80 years ago, "guidance was everywhere, loving parents innermost and a moralistic popular culture outermost, with lots of guidance between" (34). Jack's wife Elizabeth echoes these sentiments of a socio-cultural demise: "The young people in the library talk out like they're in their own living rooms, it's the same at the movies, there are no manners any more, television has ruined everybody's life" (123). While these lamentations may constitute a satire on the familiar syndrome of harping about the next generation's failings, no alternative, positive voice is present in the novel.

Guided and influenced by his teacher Shaikh Rashid, Ahmad himself, of course, loathes American culture, calling it "Godless" and "obsessed with sex and luxury goods" (38). The "American way," in Ahmad's assessment, "is the way of infidels. It is headed for a terrible doom" (39). This religious zeal, in addition to his eccentric, formal behavior, his emotional numbness in some passages, and his voluntary retreat from social interactions turns Ahmad into an almost isolated figure, largely invisible to his fellow citizens as a result of his disengagement from society. *Terrorist* stands in contrast then to fiction focusing on ringleader Mohamed Atta, texts assigning agency and independence to the protagonist, whose control over his actions is limited not by other individuals but by the struggle with his own corporeality.

Ahmad Molloy or Ashmawy is indeed configured as an instrument in *Terrorist*; he is shaped by the demands of his faith and manipulated by the members of a terrorist cell operating from New Jersey. Instrumentalization and manipulation of Ahmad commence with the religious and political indoctrination through Imam Shaikh Rashid, who reads and interprets the Qur'an with him, and they end with the assignment to steer a truck into the Lincoln Tunnel and detonate a massive stash of explosives, "four thousand kilos of ammonium nitrate" (248). Shaikh Rashid himself turns out to be less than pious, but he instills in Ahmad an unbending faith, which sharply separates believers from infidels and formulates firm rules. The imam recommends his follower Ahmad to the Lebanese Chehab family, owners of Excellency Home Furnishings and intermediaries for the masterminds of the terrorist plot. Earning his pay as a truck driver and delivery man, Ahmad remains uninitiated for a while, ignorant of the planned attack.

Charlie Chehab, Ahmad's supervisor and confidante, recruits the boy for the suicide mission. The two most present faces of terror in the novel, the conspirators the narratives most closely follows, are false leads. Charlie Chehab functions as an instrument of American intelligence, while Ahmad Ashmawy, the presumed terrorist of the title, decides in the last minute against setting off the explosion, choosing compassion over destruction.

With this ending, *Terrorist* reads like a coming-of-age narrative: a fatherless boy pushes away his mother, follows a teacher's and an employer's guidance, but ultimately chooses to trust his own voice, in this case his personal interpretation of Islam's sacred

text as a basis for withdrawing from the suicide mission. Versluys likewise understands the novel “not so much as a thriller” but as a “bildungsroman, describing the growth of a young man’s mind. His coming of age takes the form of the realization of what his Americanness and his Islamic identity truly add up to” (172).

“God does not want to destroy: it was He who made the world,” Ahmad recognizes (306). In arriving at the decision to not explode a truck filled with explosives, Ahmad saves lives – but he also leaves, figuratively, America intact, an America that has thus succeeded in taking “away my God” (310). What prevents the terrorist attack, and thus disqualifies the protagonist from attaining the status of a monster, is a combination of Ahmad’s recognition of the Qur’an’s encouragement of compassion, his sudden empathy for his fellow human beings, and the intervention of Jack Levy; Ahmad discovers his individuality even as he is again influenced by a substitute “father”.

A nagging question left at the end of the novel, however, is whether anything has been saved. David Simpson asserts that what is saved “at the end is not declared unambiguously as worth saving,” in particular because of the novel’s critical tone vis-à-vis contemporary culture (219). The novel’s ending indicates a failure of Ahmad’s ideology, not so much a victory for America and its values. “There are no grounds for active patriotism,” Simpson notes, “and little, if any, described sympathy for the victims of the disaster that occurred just across the river a mere twelve months before the time of the novel” (220). But while Simpson states that American culture is “not defended or justified with any strong conviction” (220), *Terrorist* is steeped in nostalgic reminiscences of a lost era, the America of yesteryear, “of its nineteenth and earlier

twentieth-century ideals" (Nash 106); similar to Updike's *Rabbit* novels, this work hints at a more pleasant past, supposedly populated by well-mannered, optimistic – and white – Americans.

The nostalgic air of the novel is amplified by its setting, a bleak, largely abandoned, post-industrial town in New Jersey. The domestic focus of many of Updike's previous stories indeed clashes here in a jarring fashion with a terrorist plot that has (or would have) global implications. Critics and writers have intimated that Updike overstrains his thematic capacities in the novel. Salman Rushdie, for instance, derides *Terrorist* in *The Guardian*: "He should stay in his parochial neighbourhood and write about wife swapping, because it's what he can do" (Rushdie). While polemical and rude, Rushdie's critique importantly highlights the tension in Updike's novel between an investigation of contemporary discourses of socio-economics, popular culture, and race in small-town America and an engagement with the broader context of extremism and violence that forms part of the post-September 11 world. But is there a tension? Though limited in geographical scope to New Jersey and often fixated on the characters' psychological turmoil and sexual desires, the novel also prompts the interrogation of wider political, moral, and demographic phenomena, juxtaposing the developments in a small town – which itself symbolizes ordinary America – with the protagonist's involvement in a terrorist group. Rushdie's statement, spoken out of revenge for Updike's negative review of one of his novels, suggests a frustration with the choice to incorporate a terrorist plot into a familiar geography. Rushdie certainly raises the key issue of whether 9/11 literature requires a different framework, needs to expand its

boundaries as it were. *Terrorist*, after all, does interrogate terrorism and important contemporary political processes primarily through a domestic vision. The novel situates terrorism in an Islamic and American realm, as violent acts are committed by Muslim “Others” who are actually part of the new American fabric – thus laying bare America’s vulnerability on account of its diversity. It is questionable then whether Updike’s New Jersey-centered narrative plot sufficiently investigates the geopolitical context of terrorism and violence; the novel does not address, for example, America’s pre- or post-9/11 military, political, and economic operations in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Ahmad Ashmawy embodies the tension between domestic societal patterns and fundamentalist ideologies that have entered America from the outside. The protagonist seems to be an average awkward American teenager from a lower class family, raised by a single mother, but he is also a product of “alien” beliefs flourishing in an unhinged American society. In contrast to the ordinariness of his upbringing and his surroundings (the bleak New Prospect), Ahmad’s single-mindedness and his intense Islamic faith also mark him an anomaly in Updike’s storyworld; he seeks fulfillment and meaning in the margins of a society in which other marginal cultures have indeed moved to the center.

Even though Ahmad’s fanaticism leads him to a terrorist plot that seems to originate in a cell in Yemen, the novel barely details these origins. This unsatisfactory exploration of the international dimensions of terrorism and Ahmad’s lack of a political vision beyond a religiously motivated fight against infidels demonstrates the novel’s focus on internal, domestic concerns. The outside world is only significant in the novel in



so far as it affects the United States, i.e. via foreign, fundamentalist religious principles as well as continued migration leading to ethnic diversity and conflict.

As I have suggested, Ahmad belongs himself to a separate world within the United States due to his strict interpretation of Islam and his reticence to indulge in the excesses and idiosyncrasies of youth culture. These characteristics reinforce the outsider status already established by his mixed heritage.<sup>xv</sup> Rather than choosing to assimilate, Ahmad deliberately separates himself from his peers and from the perceived vices of contemporary American culture.

Paradoxically, it is Ahmad's outsider status which underscores the positive attributes of the young terrorist-in-the-making – his eloquence and moderation, for instance. More precisely, his detachment from society pushes Ahmad into a discourse of otherness, but it also distances him from the collapse of America's values and traditions. A racial and social oddity, a rare specimen in the town of New Prospect on account of his heritage, intelligence, and polished manner, Ahmad is not implicated in the demise of America diagnosed by both the narrator and the narrator's apparent mouthpiece, the nostalgic, morose Jack Levy. In spite of Ahmad's righteousness and his contemptible approval of religiously and culturally motivated violence, the protagonist represents an alternative to American culture's supposed moral indifference.<sup>xvi</sup> Accordingly, Geoffrey Nash writes: "Ahmad's faith may be sectarian but it is constructed as the polar opposite of America's godless materialism more than of its Judeo-Christian heritage" (106). This godless materialism is paired with increasing diversity, a crisis of morality, and with failed relationships, including the stale marriage of Jack and Elizabeth Levy and the

exploitative partnership between the high school students Tylenol and Joryleen. In Nash's words, "it may be that western civilization itself has created simultaneously the susceptibility for its destruction from without and its disintegration from within" (95).

Though the appeal and moral strength of American culture seems to falter in the novel, a radical interpretation of Islam is destined to fail as well. One by one, Imam Shaikh Rashid loses his disciples, and at the end of *Terrorist*, Ahmad recognizes the falseness of the imam's misanthropic, hateful teachings. The confrontation with potential victims of his attack sways him, forcing him to concede that "[t]hese devils ... have taken away my God" (310). The very realization of his god's endorsement of benevolence and compassion removes Ahmad from his previous understanding of Islam. Abandoned by most of his mentors, employers, and fellow conspirators, detached from his deadly task, the protagonist must now discover his space in the American fold, as he is developing an altered vision of Islam and an uneasy bond with an aged but rejuvenated Jewish counselor. Ahmad is re-naturalized – forcibly so, as it were.<sup>xvii</sup>

Just as the novel ends on a tense note, as the participation of Ahmad – and Islam in general – in the American enterprise is destined to be conflict-ridden, so do many other scenes in the novel present the challenges accompanying the ethnic and religious diversity in the United States. This multi-ethnic fabric contains the source of violence, as I have been arguing, and it also confuses the structures of hospitality: Who belongs to American society, who is the host in other words? And who determines the future composition of society? As white power has presumably waned, the role of gatekeeper or host has been assumed or is at least shared by other ethnic groups:

The majority of security personnel were recruited from the minorities, and many women, especially older women, recoiled from the intrusion of black or brown fingers into their purses. The dozing giant of American racism, lulled by decades of official liberal singsong, stirred anew as African-Americans and Hispanics, who (it was often complained) 'can't even speak English properly,' acquired the authority to frisk, to question, to delay, to grant or deny admission and the permission to fly. In a land of multiplying security gates, the gatekeepers multiply also. To the well-paid professionals who travelled the airways and frequented the newly fortified government buildings, it appears that a dusky underclass has been given tyrannical power. (45-46)

This passages contains the notion that a previously reliable moral and cultural compass is miscalibrated.<sup>xviii</sup> The relativism and immorality of today's culture is, the novel suggests, as lamentable as the inflexible, intolerant structure of Islam (interpreted of course in a strict, orthodox fashion by Ahmad and Imam Shaikh Rashid). In fact, as I have suggested, the former seems to contribute to the development of the latter. In contrast to most of the other works of terrorist literature, Updike's novel thus contains both an appreciation or acknowledgment of Islam's solid moral framework and a critique of (fundamentalist) Islam as an aggressive belief system and violent ideology, incompatible with Western concepts of tolerance and personal freedom.

On the one hand then, Muslims are part of American society, they belong in other words. The most austere of them, the protagonist Ahmad, is endowed with some positive qualities, in particular because he reflects with his culture critique the implied

author's own analysis. A principled person, who is willing to sacrifice his life for his faith, he is an outsider, but in this outsider status, he represents the more value-secure past mourned throughout a painfully nostalgic work. His moral certainty represents the opposition to a crass, unappealing contemporary culture.

On the other hand, however, the would-be-terrorist's belief system comes across as not only oppressive and aggressive but also as a factor in Ahmad's own stunted development. Ahmad, after all, is sexually immature and acts in an odd, stiff manner – his repressed personality, a repressive religion, and the pursuit of violence are seemingly interrelated. Similar to many of the other texts I have examined in this dissertation, *Terrorist* creates a link between martyrdom and sexual fulfillment. In one scene, Shaikh Rashid disputes and condemns the claim that the Qur'an speaks not of virgins but of raisins awaiting in Paradise. After all, dry fruits "would make Paradise significantly less attractive for many young men" (106). The text thus reiterates the idea of a Paradise as a desirable objective for male Muslim militants because it holds the promise of erotic adventures. Accordingly, in his scathing, near-universal condemnation of 9/11 literature, the Indian essayist and novelist Pankaj Mishra faults major Western writers for a seemingly reductive vision of Islamic terrorism:

Struggling to define cultural otherness, DeLillo, Updike and Amis fail to recognize that belief and ideology remain the unseen and overwhelming forces behind gaudy fantasies about virgins. Assembled from jihad-mongering journalism and propaganda videos and websites, their identikit terrorists make Conrad's

witheringly evoked revolutionaries in *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* look multidimensional. (Mishra)

Whereas his criticism of Amis seems justified – the British author depicts a clownish Mohamed Atta in his sophomoric, disconcerting short story – Mishra does not give Updike credit for tracing Ahmad’s internal conflict between piety and personal conscience, between obedience and mature judgment (a dialectical more than an oppositional formation, as the submission to the Islamic faith does not equate a suspension of intellectual, independent reasoning). In addition to a familiar focus on corporeality, Updike weaves psychological, cultural, and religious patterns into his image of a terrorist-in-making, an endeavor Mishra does not honor.<sup>xix</sup>

*Terrorist* appears to translate research about a culture that is alien to author and many readers into a fictional story, using linguistic and cultural markers (for example the Qur’an) to gain the brand of authenticity. Functioning as a gateway to Islam, The novel certainly arrogates a mediating role between reader and a presumably foreign Islamic belief system. Updike installs the figure of the native informant in his novel by assigning the analysis of specific suras to Imam Shaikh Rashid and Ahmad, characters who can ostensibly tell the inside story of Islamist hatred against the West. They convey the ideological-religious underbelly of a terrorist plot.

In fact, in its selection of verses (and suras) and interpretations of these passages, the novel prompts a reflection on how Islam’s sacred text can be employed to justify an act of terror – and how Western writers incorporate (mis)readings of the Qur’an. Ahmad’s and the imam’s approach to the Qur’an as well as the consequences of

their interpretations underline the pitfalls of extreme religiosity, but their convictions also reveal the uncertain place of a stringent Islam in a liberal, sexualized West (curiously, the implied author seems to at once celebrate this freedom and tolerance and criticize its ramifications). Trying to “fend off contamination” in an almost paranoid fashion, Ahmad and Shaikh Rashid see themselves as surrounded by Jewish and Christian unbelievers and by a corrupt culture (51). Ahmad loathes the rude, ill-mannered boys at his high school and recoils at the ubiquitous sight of female flesh, repressing his budding sexuality, as it were: “Tylenol’s enmity becomes one more reason to leave this hellish castle, where the boys bully and hurt for sheer pleasure and the infidel girls wear skintight hiphuggers ... There is no end of devilish contortions once human beings feel free to compete with God and to create themselves” (19). Rejecting this ambience of physicality and pleasure, Ahmad insists that fun “is not the point of a good Muslim’s life” (69-70).

Such descriptions of a Muslim’s principles and sentiments are certainly influenced by a contemporary discourse on Islam that itself perpetuates already entrenched stereotypes. The opposition to pleasure, for example, is reminiscent of the notion, advanced for instance by Amis in the essay “Terror and Boredom”, that Islam is a religion of boredom and severity. Islam does not belong, Amis and Updike appear to suggest, into a Western framework, and the hospitality shown to it, the entering of Muslims into the West, might prove to be a risk for an already damaged socio-cultural structure.

Indeed, Ahmad's traits and beliefs evoke the litany of insinuations against Islam, as catalogued by Geoffrey Nash: sexually repressed, opposed to modernity, intolerant of other religions. Nash continues: "Charges of fanaticism, obscurantism and violence ... are laid at the feet of Islam the religion and the Muslims who are its followers" (117).<sup>xx</sup> Recent Western writers, including Amis and Updike, perpetuate a persistent Orientalist discourse that unite past and present scholars, journalists, and artists; this discourse not only blurs the line between Islam and radical Islamism, the socio-political endeavor to strengthen and implement Islamic traditions by the use of force,<sup>xxi</sup> but also envelops non-Western writers such as Nadeem Aslam or non-Western public figures such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who serve as native informants.

Providing insights into the psyche and private conversations of a Muslim terrorist-in-the-making is of course the hallmark of terrorist literature. The narrative perspective – as well as the presentation of characters in fictional engagements with September 11 – assumes political and epistemological significance: the Muslim protagonist addresses the reader, testifying, in Updike's case, to the perilous potential of the Qur'an, a text apparently amenable to destructive, dehumanizing purposes. Instead of an observer evaluating Islam, the novel *Terrorist* invites an insider perspective.

This narrative closeness to the protagonist is used in part to qualify some of his public statements, as Ahmad reveals doubts about his faith and his frequently insensitive demeanor. His emotions are primarily conveyed in the form of a thought report, which allows the novel or its narrator to maintain a slight distance to the

protagonist – he does not become the “I” or the Self. The narrator frequently follows and focalizes Ahmad, yet he does not exactly privilege Ahmad over other characters, instead providing equally direct access to a number of individuals in the novel.

Focusing on Ahmad’s mindset and behavior, *Terrorist* does prioritize the speech acts of the main character and his mental state – his fears, desires, beliefs – as opposed to his physical actions or his appearance. We read in the novel that “the whole world is a distraction for Ahmad,” and it seems to be the protagonist’s desire to isolate himself from the world (109). In other words, the narrator isolates Ahmad to hone in on the “terrorist’s” psyche. Complicating matters further, it is obvious that Ahmad isolates himself as a reaction to what he perceives as a depraved world. In narrative theory, it is impossible, as Alan Palmer notes, to “keep the social and individual apart” and we therefore need to consider a character’s “mind *in action*” as well as, I need to add, interactions between the fictional mind and the social and cultural forces in the storyworld (137, 135; italics in original).

In Ahmad’s case, many of his emotions are evidently influenced by the Qur’an, or by conversations he leads with Shaikh Rashid. The protagonist indeed is said to fear that, “wrapped in his sensation of God standing beside him –so close as to make a single, unique holy identity, *closer to him than his neck-vein*, as the Qur’an expresses it – he notices fewer mundane details than other people, unreligious people” (144-5, italics in original). The protagonist becomes a text, becomes the Qur’an, as this text envelops him; *Terrorist* shows the Qur’an (or one interpretation of it) in action, embodied by an American boy. But in some cases, this merger of text and person fails. Ahmad, for



example, “had consulted the Qur’an for sexual advice in vain.” Guidance for his struggles with his sexuality and for the exploration of his own body is hard to come by, since the scripture “talked of uncleanness but only in regard to women, their menstruation, their suckling of infants” (156). The thought report in the passages focalizing Ahmad moves from holy text to mundane mind, from mind to text – Ahmad’s mind is “filled with the All-Encompassing” (95).

It is the pursuit of a goal, or rather the route towards this goal, which the novel develops through the psycho-narration. By following Ahmad, by constructing his feelings about the Qur’an and the imam, about American culture, about the people in his school or on the street, the narrative shows how Ahmad operates in a social context and how he perceives this context. Taking a functional approach toward fictional minds, Palmer suggests that we can see a fictional character (his example is Dickens’s Pip) as an “adaptive, goal-directed, information-processing device” (90). He writes that the “changing gaps between Pip’s current situations and various goals define the structure and design of the narrative. They comprise its teleological shape” (91). Adapting these concepts, I suggest that Updike’s novel – and I have explored this idea in previous chapters – creates a teleological narrative structure through the various facets of Ahmad and his surrounding socio-cultural environment; the representation of the protagonist’s fictional mind is designed to render the ending of the story comprehensible, both in terms of Ahmad’s endorsement of violence and in terms of his eventual decision not to carry out the murder-suicide plan.

In *Terrorist*, the Muslim protagonist embraces faith and violence.<sup>xxii</sup> Ahmad detests unbelievers, disapproves of the pleasures and trappings of modern life, and all-too-easily accepts his role in the terrorist plot. He ultimately refuses to continue on this path, however. *Terrorist* arguably indicates in its closing passage that simple human interactions are more effective in preventing terrorism than intelligence measures, but it also sketches a rather rapid radicalization of an American who is paradoxically depicted as a more sophisticated and polished individual than his peers. Lamenting behavioral and cultural patterns in a diverse, multi-ethnic population, the novel discovers a threat to America's hallowed values and traditions not solely in radical Islam but in the country's demographic and cultural developments. Alexie's stories spin this story further, finding the menace not just in individual actions of enigmatic characters but in everyday violence by seemingly ordinary members of society.

### **Sherman Alexie's Invisible Terrorists**

Unlike many of the other authors of what I call terrorist literature, Sherman Alexie leaves the reader largely at a loss as to the perpetrator's mind. In the work of this enrolled member of the Spokane tribe in Washington, "arguably the most visible Native writer today," the Muslim/Arab terrorist becomes an indistinct, even *invisible* figure, at a protective distance (Salaita 22). The multifaceted trope of invisibility – linked to the tropes of American Indians shadows and ghosts – has persisted as an important motif in

Spokane writer Sherman Alexie's work for a couple of decades, from *Reservation Blues* (1995) and *Indian Killer* (1996) to *Flight*. I define the term invisibility as encompassing the concepts of anonymity, ignorance, and de-individualization (through stereotyping for example). These envelop in different manifestations Native characters in several of Alexie's works: the mysterious John Smith in *Indian Killer* is as unsure of his actual identity as Zits/Michael in *Flight*, both of whom cannot pinpoint their tribal heritage.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The motif of invisibility is intimately tied to an uncertainty about ethnicity; the perpetrators in the two works I am analyzing in this part of the chapter might be aware of their home and origin, but the configurations of belonging appear to generate the acts of violence they commit. As Daniel Grassian remarks, Alexie frequently illustrates the seemingly submerged position of Native Americans in a culture and a "narrative dominated by the white majority" (37). The Arab and Muslim "terrorists" are likewise submerged in a narrative dominated by Euro-Americans, but they are also described by Alexie as active participants of this narrative, even questioning it.

Most texts I have discussed in my dissertation ask the reader to approach the Other, and following Lévinas's concept of alterity, to escape the limited framework of the Self; focalizing the terrorist, the analyzed narratives encourage a serious engagement with this unusual protagonist. Alexie, however, focuses on a more distanced observation of the Other. Insights into the emotional landscape of imaginary terrorists are rare in Sherman Alexie's 9/11 stories. The fictitious "terrorists" – and this categorization is especially problematic in Alexie's texts – in the novel *Flight* and in the short story "Can I Get a Witness?" are only sketched in a few strokes and thus lack

depth in comparison to their peers in contemporary Anglophone writing.<sup>xxiv</sup> Alexie's characters remain imprecise, vague, but at the same time definitive and circumscribed. Motives are rather obscure or unspoken – if there ever can be a coherent, reasonable set of motives for an act of terrorism.<sup>xxv</sup> The characters' identities are bewildering in their simultaneous emptiness and clarity. Quite simply, the inner lives of the unnamed Syrian-American suicide bomber in the short story and the Ethiopian suicide pilot Abbad in the novel are only hinted at, through a short thought report (in "Can I Get a Witness?"), equally brief dialogues (in *Flight*), and concise characterizations.

In both texts by the Native American author, he primarily focalizes a protagonist who observes the Other. In *Flight*, the white (but actually Native, as I will explain later) protagonist befriends the perpetrator prior to the crime, whereas in "Can I Get a Witness?", the American Indian protagonist witnesses the actual act, becoming a victim herself, suffering an emotional trauma though no serious physical injuries aside from a mild concussion. The two suicidal characters, while not portrayed at great length, assume significance in my study through their distinct identity markers as Arab or Muslim and through the intricately crafted lattice-work of post-9/11 grief, accusation, and suspicion in the stories around them.

This part of the chapter will thus serve as an exploration of two fictional Arab/Muslim "terrorists", the contemporary discourse of paranoia as reflected in fiction, and idiosyncrasies and clichés in Sherman Alexie's work. I posit that Alexie's texts, very similar to Updike's *Terrorist*, reflect liberal America's superficial acceptance of a multiculturalist discourse that is, however, simultaneously challenged in the wake of

concerns about national security and about the threat originating from Islamic extremism. The texts' perspective on America's post-9/11 cultural and political landscape is arguably consistent with a widely shared anxiety, apparently shared also by Updike, about the participation of Muslims and Arabs in the American enterprise. This anxiety is couched in terms of unease about the dangers of religious extremism and lenient border as well as security policies, but it appears to be motivated by the attempt to shore a liberal, Enlightenment consensus against the specter of Middle Eastern violence. Drawing another parallel to *Terrorist*, I suggest that Alexie's texts also convey the notion of an inherently violent American society, which is indeed in its hospitality and diversity a target and fertile ground for crime, injustice, and aggression.

"Can I Get a Witness?", the first of Alexie's texts I want to examine here, commences with the apparent climax, a devastating suicide attack killing more than forty people inside and outside a crowded restaurant. Reflecting Alexie's trademark style, irreverent and deliberately shocking – he consistently intends to be confrontational and offensive in his fictional works (see Grassian 14), if sometimes to the detriment of a text's sophistication – the narrator summarizes the impact of the explosion: "The bomber had spent only \$436 to make his bomb, so it had cost him a little over ten dollars a head" (71). Disrupting a passage that otherwise highlights victimhood and corporeal pain, this chilling dictum inappropriately – or appropriately, in a story referencing the World Trade Center attacks – inserts the language of capitalism. The short story is permeated by such a provocative, perhaps crude banalization, even

demystification of terrorism – balanced to a degree by the mystification of the suicide bomber.

Named Good Food, the targeted restaurant is a “postcolonial wonder house” offering specialties from across the globe. Rather than fusing these cuisines, the culinary delicacies are offered separately, reflecting the individual national origins of the dishes (68). Alongside this celebration of palatable, liberal multiculturalism, the short story serves the unsavory type of the violent Muslim and Arab. The anonymous attacker might be a mystery, but his identity as a Syrian-American with a Muslim father places him squarely into a paranoid 9/11 discourse and beckons an association with contemporary Middle Eastern terrorism.

While the following section investigates the significance of these ethnic and religious markers, the conversation between a white man and a Spokane woman in the aftermath of the suicide bombing likewise merits attention; this conversation, in addition to the accompanying interior monologues (third-person thought reports), addresses directly a general concern of terrorist literature, namely how to respond to and understand terrorism, and how to cope with its effects. Alexie may not present a detailed image of the suicide bomber in “Can I Get a Witness?”, but similar to Updike in *Terrorist* and DeLillo in *Falling Man*, he integrates into his story a discussion of the point(lessness) of terrorism, even a form of defense of the 9/11 attacks. Precipitating shock and trauma in the surviving characters, the explosion that shakes Seattle thus also activates an important conversation between the Spokane protagonist and the white man, which addresses moral questions related both to the September 11 attacks and to

painful personal conflicts: Can such a horrific event precipitate positive personal developments – and if so, how can we delicately express this idea? Were all the victims in the towers innocent or virtuous – if not, does this change our perception of the dead? How can we articulate our irritation with the omnipresence of 9/11 in the media?

Even though the female protagonist obviously witnesses the bombing, the story's title begs for a witness. The reader is asked, even forced to serve as a witness of traumatic moments, rendered in a visceral fashion: "Six pairs of paramedics performed CPR on two men and four women. A horribly burned man, his skin peeling off his hands and arms in long, bloody strips, wailed for his wife" (73). We have to observe the explosion and its aftermath in order to understand what transpires – but can we truly make meaning either out of these graphic scenes or out of a description of the terrorist?

The woman indeed refuses to fulfill the role of witness, not admitting her status as an observer – neither to the middle-aged white man she meets outside the restaurant nor to any other person. Crawling over bodies to leave the scene of the attack, she escapes unscathed; the man, a stranger, takes her to his apartment, tends to her, and eventually carries her out into the street; before they reach the hospital, she decides to break from his grasp. She thus evidently asserts her individuality, rejects her victimhood, and calls to mind the motifs of loneliness and desertion that permeate the story.

Alexie's terrorist appears out of the blue, as a "small and dark man," who "stepped inside, shouted in a foreign language and detonated the bomb he had taped to his chest" (71). In the story, he never receives a name, yet is marked by his ethnicity,

relationships, and political beliefs: “He would eventually be identified as a Syrian American born in Seattle and raised in upper-class comfort by his Muslim father and Catholic mother” (72). His background, along with his skin color, may point to Arabic as the language in which he announces his attack. Interestingly, this fictional perpetrator shares the mixed Catholic-Muslim heritage of Updike’s Ahmad.

As I have suggested earlier, the man’s lack of a name or relation to any terrorist cell in combination with a confirmed foreign background, his otherness enveloped by an American identity, contributes to a contradictory movement of mystification and illumination. The bomber is intangible and tangible at once, resembling in this aspect other terrorists in contemporary literature (for example Atta in Kobek’s novel). Terrorists are approached in narratives of terrorist literature through dialogues and narration of consciousness, and generally via their focalization, yet there remains – must perhaps remain – a vestige of incomprehension, inaccessibility.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Inaccessible but also clearly identified, the Syrian American bomber is established as a liminal figure, straddling multiple religious, ethnic, and political affiliations. The character might seem elusive, but prior to his act, he was integrated into a community and attached to a set of multifaceted relationships inside Alexie’s storyworld:

He’d graduated from Lakeside Upper School and Seattle University, and had been working toward his Ph.D. in economics at the University of Washington. He was engaged to another Ph.D. candidate, a French American woman who sang lead for a local folk band. The FBI and local police would investigate the suicide



bomber for a year but would find no evidence that he'd engaged in or espoused terrorist activity or philosophy. They'd find no one who had ever heard the man express an anti-American sentiment. He was a registered and consistent voter who preferred moderate Democrats but whose best friend was a local Republican fund-raiser. Over the last five years, the bomber had made equal monetary contributions to Israeli and Palestinian charities. Equal, right down to the penny. (72)

These snippets of information about the suicide bomber follow the announcement of his Syrian and Muslim heritage, which appear as the primary identity markers of a man in whom Alexie unites diverse components of a multicultural American society. As Steven Salaita notes, such depictions of an array of cultural boxes available to an individual are reminiscent of Epifanio San Juan, Jr.'s argument in *Racism and Cultural Studies*: in multiculturalist discourses, San Juan claims, "all the margins, the absent Others are redeemed in a sanitized, uniform space where cultural differences dissolve or are sorted out into their proper niches in the ranking of national values and priorities" (6). San Juan's acerbic mockery of multiculturalism can function as a critique of the representation of the suicide bomber, but it also applies to the description of the multi-ethnic restaurant that "served Japanese teriyaki, Polish sausage sandwiches, Italian American pizza, and Mexican and Creole rice and beans" (69): a symbol of the apparent success and integration of immigrant communities, the restaurant provides each ethnic dish with a flattering location on the American menu.<sup>xxvii</sup> According to Ishmael Reed, "the United States is unique in the world: The world is here" (56). Lambasting this

formulation, which he regards as naïve, San Juan sarcastically states: “Multicultural USA reigns over all” (6). While welcoming foreign specialties, this “bureaucratic mechanism of inclusion ... is a mode of appropriation” (7). Ethnic, foreign food becomes a commodity, incorporated into American culinary business ventures. Alexie’s suicide bomber appears to match both alternatives of San Juan’s pattern: the narrator assembles in the key paragraph such a large number of distinct identities for the perpetrator that they do seem to dissolve in one blurry mass (a puree – to preserve the culinary rhetoric). It is not clear then whether the passages on the restaurant and the suicide bomber deride the neat compartmentalization of ethnic identities, or whether they convey the significance of not melting all these identities together and of instead attaching proper labels to each character (or food item, for that matter).

Not only “Can I Get a Witness?” but many others of Alexie’s texts therefore serve as both artifacts and critiques of a multiculturalism in the service of nationalism. On the one hand, the descriptions of the perpetrator and the menu are parodies; moreover, the characters in the Spokane writer’s stories, though Alexie often assigns them to particular ethnic groups, are rarely as easily identifiable and accessible as the items on the menu. Salaita points out that “Alexie is adept at creating characters that never quite fit into tidy niches of American life, even if they are rooted in particular cultural practices or traditions” (25). The Syrian American man in “Can I Get a Witness?” apparently does not fit into any niche either; however, his Arab, Muslim identity still ties him (beyond the text) to contemporary discourses of suspicion towards immigrants and citizens with this particular ethnic and religious background. On the other hand then,

the quoted passage does reflect an ethnic diversity that is in the story both the target and the source of violence.

Alexie blends a liberal celebration of a multicultural America, in which individuals can represent and embrace a multitude of identities and ethnicities as long as they do not challenge fundamental structures of American society, with a contrasting impulse that exoticizes and pigeonholes the Arab or Muslim (American). The Native writer follows in the footsteps of classical Orientalists such as Bernard Lewis, who consign terrorism's "ostensibly senseless violence to the premodern Arab and Muslim" (Salaita 27). Salaita terms Alexie's ambiguous project Liberal Orientalism, which "contextualizes Muslim terrorism with a multiculturalist dialectic. It upholds many of the assumptions underlying discussion of Muslim terrorism while still actualizing a niche for Muslims in the American polity. It thus creates a tension between its inclusive self-image and the exclusivist structures innate to its fundamental logic" (27). Both the Ethiopian-American Muslim in *Flight* and the Syrian-American Muslim in "Can I Get a Witness?" belong to American society, but their violent acts also associate them with images of suicide attacks committed by Muslims (for example in Israel) and of course with the events of September 11. Similar to the American-born would-be terrorist Ahmad in Updike's novel, Alexie's perpetrators do not represent foreign "Others", as is the case with the terrorists described in previous chapters. Instead, they are all domestic terrorists, who react against but also benefit and exploit America's multiculturalism and hospitality, which allowed them – or their ancestors – to enter the United States. These perpetrators also share, of course, a Muslim identity, more or less pronounced.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Eerily, the restaurant bomber in “Can I Get a Witness?” actually appears to be an all-American guy, incorporating a host of American identities, even as his violent act and his peculiar, “eccentric” self removes him from mainstream America. He is also an individual assassin, apparently not involved in a terrorist conspiracy. Identifying the man without naming or comprehensively portraying him, “Can I Get a Witness?” conjures an *invisible*, anonymous perpetrator, whose ethnicity and religion are at the same time carefully demarcated. In other words, the short story does “efface ethnicity” to an extent by endowing the suicide bomber with an enigmatic aura as well as multifaceted identity, but the story also directs attention to the perpetrator’s Middle Eastern background (Grassian 179).<sup>xxix</sup>

The haunting invisibility of the perpetrator is explicitly mentioned by the text itself: “The investigators would conclude that he was either the most careful, eccentric, and invisible terrorist of all time, or an unsolvable mystery” (72). Arguably, the eccentricity or carefulness of the terrorist contribute to the enigma surrounding his person, and it is this enigmatic threat that associates of the short story with what Michelle Burnham has called an “Indigenous gothic” (4).

Burnham explores her concept of the Indigenous gothic through an examination of Alexie’s *Indian Killer*, a controversial opus that vilifies white conservatives and liberals alike, but also laments “aspects of Indian culture and attitudes” (Grassian 105). Replete with graphic violence and “fury,” Burnham writes, the novel “deliberately refuses its readers the knowledge they desire about Indians ... just as it deliberately refuses the affective pleasure that the conclusions to conventional gothic novels provide” (6, 20).

*Indian Killer* summons a ghost-like killer, constructing a “menacing darkness, a terrifying indeterminacy, a present absence” (21). The Euro-American community and the Euro-American reader are to be frightened by a narrative of terror<sup>xxx</sup> – without reprieve, since the source of terror, i.e. the perpetrator, is neither identified nor eliminated.

Transferring the latent threat and indeterminacy of *Indian Killer* to a post-9/11 realm that is suffused with a discourse of suspicion and the anticipation of terror, “Can I Get a Witness?” offers yet another twist to Burnham’s concept. The short story can be added to the category of the Indigenous gothic as a Native-authored text that does not identify the killer but summons terror from many sides – from eccentric individuals and society as a whole (this ubiquity of violence is of course also a central theme in other works of terrorist literature). Substituting a non-Native suicide bomber for indigenous “Ghost Dancers”, Alexie also invokes the contemporary menace of Middle Eastern terrorism, not of anti-colonialist indigenous revenge, as in *Indian Killer* (to be sure, the Ghost Dance was primarily a non-violent movement).<sup>xxxi</sup>

The terrorist bombing in “Can I Get a Witness?” is constructed as impossible to predict due to the perpetrator’s apparent invisibility and innocuousness prior to the event; moreover, the investigators of the bombing fail to contextualize the event, for the eccentric, multifaceted individual cannot be connected to like-minded people. Diagnosing him as “one more lone nut in the long American history of lonesome killers” – and, presumably, as yet another Middle Eastern terrorist – the FBI provides a resolution that both thwarts and begs further inquiry: if loneliness and emotional

challenges are at the root of a criminal act, then does the community bear some responsibility, or can it offer no means of preventing such a deed?

While this particular event was perhaps unpredictable in the context of Alexie's storyworld, an event of the same nature falls nowadays, in fiction and reality, in the range of expected, possible experiences. In "Can I Get a Witness?", the notion of an unpredictable and incomprehensible deed haunts the reader, as does the postulation by the two main characters that most people, whether those passing them by on the streets of Seattle or those who passed away in the Twin Towers, harbor frightening secrets. Confident that not "everybody who died in the towers was innocent," the Spokane woman submits a stirring question, or rather a proposition: "How many of them were beating their kids? ... Don't you think one of those bastards was raping his kids?" (89) The vision of a mass dance of resistance and community at the end of *Indian Killer* turns in "Can I Get a Witness?" into suspicion towards the masses. Alexie's short story conveys the sense of American society as a generally depraved, corrupt society, certainly a notion reminiscent of Updike's *Terrorist*, which likewise locates a crisis both in Islam and in Western culture.

Rather than offering the reader relief from terror and pain, the conversation between the Spokane woman and the white man following the attack hones in on the absence of positive, lasting emotional bonds, not perhaps as the root of terrorism but as its context. Maintaining a bleak note, with sparse comical relief, the story's concluding paragraph has the white man pose a pointed question: "How many loveless people walk among the barely loved?" (95). "Can I Get a Witness?" offers a disheartening trajectory

from gruesome violence and the looming threat of Middle Eastern terrorism, to the deserted selves of Americans and their proclivity for domestic violence.

Similar to the woman, the male protagonist in fact fears both the extraordinary and the ordinary. In an early passage in the story, he wonders “[h]ow many more terrorists were walking the streets of Seattle? How many more suicide bombers were building bombs? There was no way of knowing. That information would be forever unknowable” (77). He describes Seattle as a “city of dangerous strangers,” of people who hurt each other in the realm of privacy, presumably without the witnesses that the title requests.<sup>xxxii</sup> The loveless, anonymous wanderers, their daily activities concealed from view, therefore haunt reader as well as characters in the storyworld. Perhaps the most frightening aspect of the short story, then, bolstering its classification into a reconfigured genre of the Indigenous gothic, is its motif of unknowability, the pattern of uncertainty about the source of danger.

Permeating significant sections of 9/11 fiction is of course a similar sense of lingering, directionless fear and a sense of insufficient comprehension of terrorism’s roots, agents, and contexts. Part of the appeal of terrorist literature is the interpretive, literary, and hermeneutic challenge it harbors: how does one cross the gap between the perpetrator’s mind and his actions? And what if a story lacks, as is the case with “Can I Get a Witness?”, depictions of the fictional psyche? In spite of a summary of his familial and political bonds, Alexie’s Syrian-American bomber does retain an aura of alien-ness, inscrutability, and absence after a devastating public act.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Apparently torn between various affiliations, the suicide bomber leaves behind a world struggling to piece together a coherent image of this individual – or even discover indications of a rationale for his actions. In contrast to many other examples of terrorist literature, “Can I Get Witness?” provides only a brief glimpse into the imaginary mind of the perpetrator. Employing the technique of psycho-narration, the implied author suggests that the fictional bomber “hadn’t thought of himself as crazy or lonesome as he walked toward Good Food” – the multi-ethnic restaurant that is the site of the explosion (72). Instead, his act may have had a pathological basis: “He’d been listening to the voices in his head and following their orders. Content and proud of his commitment, he’d been smiling when he stepped into the restaurant” (72). This psycho-narration is curiously in conversation with the posthumous understanding of the terrorist – the FBI classifies him as a lonesome killer – and in fact questions the analysis of the perpetrator; our knowledge of a terrorist’s mindset is inevitably incomplete.

The psycho-narration exemplifies Alexie’s penchant for harsh contrasts: the smile on the terrorist’s face stands in stark opposition to the mayhem he causes. Joy and pain, love and hatred, creation and destruction are placed side by side in his oeuvre, as they are in this story. Seemingly incompatible – and inappropriate – sentiments (the offhand reference to the financial cost of the bombing seems incongruous with the list of casualties, for example) pervade the passages depicting the carnage in the restaurant as well as the scenes constructing the encounter between the Spokane woman and the equally nameless white man.



At his apartment, the two main characters embark on a frank and painful conversation about September 11 and about their respective, dysfunctional relationships. The white man, introduced as a “short, forty-something Caucasian” (73), mourns his wife, who has left him because of his inability to lead a serious conversation. Even the terrible scenes of death and destruction do not prevent this man from cracking jokes, a trait that points to Alexie’s trademark combination of humor and pain. The appearance of “Mr. Funny” (86) likewise casts a stark light on the – by now clichéd – communicative predicament engendered by terrorism: how to respond to such a bewildering and disruptive as well as apparently unpredictable experience?<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Still in a state of shock, the woman refuses to admit that she saw the bombing or the bomber, that she was in fact an eyewitness and can offer a testimony to the events – she does not accept the idea that she is and was affected herself. She is, however, brutally honest on the other hand, sharing opinions about 9/11 seldom heard in either non-fiction or fiction. The attack releases in her a pent-up energy – she is both violated and liberated, admitting to the man that she had hoped for such an attack to happen, as it would help her to escape and “start a new life, a better life” (94).

This frustrated Spokane woman offers Alexie the opportunity to express the unacceptable. Articulating her inner reaction to September 11, the woman asks: “Didn’t you get exhausted by all the stories and TV shows and sad faces and politicians and memorials and books? It was awful and obscene, all of it, it was grief porn” (91). Associating the terrorism of 9/11 with retrograde American rituals of masculinity and patriotism – hanging “antlers and flags” on the walls of houses, she wonders why

“anybody was surprised when men crashed jets into buildings” (92). Both the destruction of the Twin Towers and hallmarks of American conservatism represent for the woman an inconceivable primitiveness and inanity. She wonders: “Political posturing aside, didn’t a few thousand stupid men believe terrorism was another way to get laid?” (74) She is evidently referring to the notion, reiterated *ad nauseam* in post-9/11 discourse and fiction, that the terrorists were driven by the unfulfilled sexuality common to the Muslim male and by the promised reward of “seventy-two virgins in heaven” (74). What if, the woman ponders, “the United States offered seventy-three virgins to each terrorist if he would abstain from violence?” (74).

The unnamed woman continues to indict both the Muslim/Arab terrorists and Americans, even those who died in the Twin Towers. Infuriated by the fact that “after the Trade Center, it was all about the innocent victims, all the innocent victims,” she confesses that she “‘*knew* one of those guys in the towers was raping his daughter. Raping her. Maybe he was raping his son, too. And beating his wife’” (92, italics original). Following the attacks, would this man’s wife not have thanked “‘God or Allah or the devil for Osama’s rage?’” (93).

Provocative and disturbing, the woman’s seemingly idiosyncratic rant is not an anomaly in Alexie’s work: in his storyworlds, every identity group is implicated in violent actions – liberals and conservative, Native Americans and whites. The assortment of identities and positions assigned to the composite terrorist in “Can I Get a Witness?” likewise invokes Alexie’s signature style, leaving no group without blame. At the same time, both “Can I Get a Witness?” and the novel *Flight* create a perpetrator with at least

a partially Muslim/Arab identity, referencing the contemporary anxiety about Muslims and Arabs. "Can I Get a Witness?" does efface the characters' names and thus identities and indeed presents a near-invisible, enigmatic terrorist, but the story does obviously associate the perpetrator with the Muslim/Arab terrorists of September 11. The implied author condemns and perpetuates dominant narratives about the events of 9/11, about victims and perpetrators.

While not narrowing the protective distance between Self (reader, "us") and Other (terrorists, "them"), "Can I Get a Witness?" generates the foreboding sense of a terrorist threat lurking within America. At the same time, this threat is multiplied by each individual's own proclivity for violence; within each home, there is a potential criminal, even terrorist, the male protagonist surmises as he surveys pedestrians on the street: "He looked at those strangers and knew each of them lived with terrible secrets. He knew that man cheated on his wife with her sister and that woman pinched her Alzheimered mother's arms until they bled" (94). Ideas of victimry and guilt are likewise interrogated in Sherman Alexie's novel *Flight*, another paradigmatic text that illustrates how a multicultural America embraces and rejects its multitude of identities. "Can I Get a Witness?", *Flight*, and much of Alexie's work convey the simple message that injustice and love originate in all races. However, Arabs and Muslims are singled out in several texts as dangerous outcrops of a multi-ethnic American society that appears as at once hospitable and intolerant.

*Flight* illustrates Alexie's propensity to focus both on the historical victimization of Native Americans by Euro-Americans and on the responsibility and guilt born by other

ethnic groups, including Natives themselves – and Muslims, who are again associated with terrorism. Alexie’s third novel, after *Reservation Blues* and *Indian Killer*, *Flight* tracks the challenges of fifteen-year old Michael, unfortunately and appropriately nicknamed Zits – his ruined skin defines him but also obscures his character. Michael is yet another invisible character, along with the suicide bomber of “Can I Get a Witness?” and John Smith as well as the assassin of *Indian Killer*. His Irish heritage and his depiction as an isolated teenager are also reminiscent of Updike’s *Terrorist*, which arguably likewise portrays a young boy whose existence is largely limited to a separate dimension.

Described as part-Irish and part-American Indian, “from this or that tribe,” Michael grows up in “twenty different foster homes” by his own account (4, 7).<sup>xxxv</sup> Mistreatment and abuse, frequently followed by escape (*read: flight*), derails Michael. Just as he lacks a solid home, Alexie’s protagonist is deprived of a definitive sense of identity or group membership. Ignorant about his exact tribal origins, not “familiar with what it means to be an Indian” (Meyer 296), Michael finds himself placed in a void, not actually between cultures but outside of cultures; according to himself, only the homeless, “wandering Indians” acknowledge his existence (*Flight* 7). These bite-sized pieces of the plot I offer here may smack like the ingredients of familiar literary fare. Alexie and other writers, including Adrian Louis, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Louise Erdrich, have similarly told stories of distressed, disillusioned, lonesome, and sometimes tribeless or mixed-blood Indians, much to the chagrin of scholars such as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, who writes: “The sovereign rights and obligations of citizens of the First Nation of

America as modern concepts seem less important to today's writers than stories of loss, exile, identity, and degeneration" (89).<sup>xxxvi</sup> Jennifer Ladino points out that "[c]ritics of Alexie – including other American Indians – have condemned his work for failing to represent healthy communities and for perpetuating damaging stereotypes about Indian life" (42).

This first taste of *Flight* as a novel about a troubled American Indian's conflicted identity is indeed not entirely misleading, considering the novel's emphasis on challenges (and possibilities?) faced by an individual bound to no cultural setting in particular. In an eccentric twist, though, the novel's protagonist ferries not only between two worlds in his reality, but is carried into other worlds, into dreamscapes. In these separate spheres Michael is confronted with violence between whites and American Indians – as well as with an Ethiopian Muslim "terrorist" in a later chapter.

As I will explain, *Flight* is as much a novel about multicultural America and what Alexie has described as the post-9/11 end game of tribalism (see Ladino 38), as it is a novel about American Indian historical traumata. One may thus wonder whether the criticism mentioned by Ladino (and expressed by Cook-Lynn) is still applicable following September 11. Conversely, it might actually be more important for a fiction writer in an exceedingly diverse American society, in which cultural and linguistic markers are also harnessed to be reconciled with majoritarian norms, to articulate specific tribal identities and conflicts.

*Flight* suggests that Michael's rage and depression result from his inconstant, home-less upbringing and from the lack of tribal connection. His anger is channeled into

a violent mission, prompted by a conversation with an enigmatic white boy called Justice. During one of his many times detained in juvenile prison, a consequence of his flight from a foster home, Michael meets Justice. The boy encourages Michael to pursue a project of revenge against white America, a twenty-first-century “Ghost Dance” – again, *Flight* arguably misinterprets the structure and purpose of the historical Ghost Dance movement – that will presumably have redemptive effects (34).

A bank robbery is Michael’s first operation in his venture to recreate the Ghost Dance, but in the moment of pulling the trigger, he is instead transported into the year 1975, confined inside the body of an FBI agent on a mission to undermine the American Indian Movement. At the next station on this fantastic journey through a history of American conflicts, the inadvertent time-traveler participates and witnesses the Battle of the Little Bighorn on both sides, a hundred years earlier (1876). Finally, Michael slips into the body of his own homeless, long-lost father in the last section of the novel. In the penultimate sequence, Alexie’s protagonist experiences a conflict intricately bound up with contemporary discourse on September 11 and thus tied to the other texts examined in this dissertation: this station in his time-travel adventure describes an instance of domestic terrorism (as opposed to domestic violence delineated in the other chapters),<sup>xxxvii</sup> crystallized in the novel in a one-person suicide attack that in its form evidently represents the international terrorist act of 9/11. The novel concludes with Michael’s adoption by a friendly, white police officer.

*Flight* thus stands in contrast to *Indian Killer*, which ends on a threatening – and somewhat inane – note evoking the Ghost Dance: “The killer sings and dances for hours,

days. Other Indians arrive and quickly learn the song. ... The killer dances and will not tire. The killer knows this dance is over five hundred years old. ... The killer never falls” (420). As he embraces a non-Native home, Michael’s Ghost Dance is disrupted. Whereas *Indian Killer* hails confrontation and portends in its conclusion continued resistance and persistence, the later novel’s ending reaffirms the banal lesson Michael’s time travels teach him: ethnic lines do not reflect a person’s commitment to ethical values and demeanor.

Even prior to his immediate engagement with past and contemporary conflicts, Michael recognizes the impropriety of essentialist, racial frameworks, a point reiterated in many, if not all chapters. At the novel’s outset, Michael notes that most of his (seldom welcoming) foster families were white, yet “I’ve had two Indian foster fathers, and they were bigger jerks than any of my eighteen white foster fathers” (9). In spite of this rejection of ethnic divisions that are created and promoted by several racist characters in the novel, Alexie does paradoxically accentuate ethnic and religious markers in the part of the novel that incorporates the events of 9/11.

Two male characters are at the center of the novel’s contribution to discussions surrounding racial profiling, responsibility, and security that arose after the disaster that unfolded in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania. Chapters 13, 14, and 15 of *Flight* epitomize the book’s title motif in chilling accounts of betrayal. The shape-shifting protagonist Michael inhabits in this section the body of a white flight instructor named Jimmy, who cheats on his wife and is thrown out of their house – along with his “plastic airplanes, toy airplanes, model airplanes, remote control airplanes” (121). The crash

landings of the miniatures planes onto the quintessentially small-town front lawn foreshadows another instance of betrayal – this time, Jimmy himself experiences the abuse of his trust. He teaches the Ethiopian Muslim Abbad how to fly; meeting the post-9/11 stereotypical expectations of a Muslim flight student, Abbad proceeds to crash a passenger plane into Downtown Chicago, causing numerous fatalities.

Jimmy/Michael, the figure of identification for the reader, becomes implicated in the attack, as he himself recognizes: “He didn’t want to defend himself. He was guilty. He had not murdered anybody. He had never wanted to hurt anybody. But it was his fault. He had trusted Abbad” (127-28). Immersed in a discourse of paranoia, the protagonist had in fact initially assumed malicious intent on the part of this Muslim eager to fly a plane. He admits to Abbad that he ““was a little worried about you”” (112).

As these worries wane, the two men commence a friendship and engage in frank conversations that seem to both confirm and refute other clichés about Muslims. Jimmy, adopting the role of the informed observer of Muslim culture, suggests that in the domestic sphere, “Muslim women just have to be craftier” because they “they can’t say they’re in charge, but they’re in charge” (114). Abbad, however, rejects this claim, scornfully declaring that “you Americans, you let your wives control your destiny. That is not our way” (113). In contrast, Muslim men supposedly rule in their homes – Abbad in fact asserts that he is the “king” in his household (114). In a humorous spin to the cliché of the demure, powerless Muslim woman, Abbad’s wife calls him in this very moment to reprimand him for not bringing “home milk last night” (114).



Tempting the reader at first to file this scene under the category of a presentation of patriarchal Muslim cultures, Alexie has the Muslim woman intervene (even though she remains invisible) to dismiss such simplistic assumptions. Abbad aims to project an image of control, but he has to acknowledge his *de facto* lack of power. Alexie vacillates here between a “particular rhetorical formulation that identifies a type of invented Muslim disgruntlement” and a humorous inversion of the tendency to frame the Muslim man as imperious (Salaita 34). However, the admonishment issued by Abbad’s wife, demanding that he purchase milk, itself reiterates a familiar formula of a fundamentally weak Muslim man, who only pretends to maintain control in his house.

In Michael’s dream, Abbad and Jimmy turn their conversation to American politics and Abbad’s place in America, as a foreigner. Once again, Abbad articulates “a type of invented Muslim disgruntlement”: “‘Jimmy, Jimmy,’ he says, ‘you Americans are so arrogant. You think the whole world wants to be like you’” (121). When Jimmy dismisses and diverts the immigrant’s political lament, insisting that Abbad has enjoyed a pleasant life in the United States, Abbad’s repartee is forceful and foreboding: “I’ve lived here for fifteen years, and I have been sad and lonely for my real home for every one of my days. I live in the United States because my real home has been destroyed” (121). While not faulting America for his predicament, the Ethiopian Muslim expresses resentment towards his adopted home; neither does he recognize America as home, nor is he welcomed in America as a part of the community. Recalling obstacles on the path to learning how to fly, Abbad points out to Jimmy that he was turned away by

seven flight instructors, one of whom called him a “sand nigger” and asked him to “get the fuck out of his place of business” (111).

Abbad’s experience highlights post-9/11 Islamophobia and xenophobia, but for Abbad, it also reinforces the sense of America as a nation obsessed with capitalism: “You Americans love capitalism so much” (111). A mild complaint, this very phrase likewise seems to suggest that Abbad hails from a pre-capitalist world, as if northeastern Africa or the Islamic world were not yet enveloped by capitalism as well. Curiously, Abbad himself employs a stereotypical image of his own origins, and emerges as a narrow-minded, even anti-American individual. He remains foreign, removed in a personal and political sense from a position of power. His murder-suicide is also a reaction to his perceived lack of power.

Just as any immigrant’s presence in the U.S. alters the host country, Abbad’s death empties it and indeed reveals a failure and consequence of hospitality: a failing on the part of host and guest to apprehend each other but also an indication of the violence that can result both from openness and from restrictions vis-à-vis the foreign Other. According to Derrida, hospitality is ethics and ethics is “thoroughly coextensive with hospitality” (On Cosmopolitanism, 16-17) because the politics of hospitality addresses the “crossing of thresholds” (Still 7) as well as relationships among the people of one culture and between foreigners and ourselves. In so far as the concepts of ethics and hospitality are bound to each other, Abbad’s terrorist act points to a violation of ethical principles on both sides, since the host has not unconditionally accepted the guest and the guest has not fully embraced the host. Judith Still highlights the

underlying and resulting dilemma: “The response to the potential for violence is often to impose restrictions or conditions, to limit hospitality. But limitations can provoke transgression – if they are a gesture of mastery, reinforcing the imbalance of power that creates the need for hospitality in the first place” (13).

Jimmy does not see what may have caused Abbad’s transgression, or what limitations Abbad may face. He counters Abbad’s complaints with the following observation: “You’ve lived in our country for fifteen years. And you’ve done really well – for yourself, for your wife, and for that new baby” (121). An ignorant Jimmy asserts in a paternalistic fashion that Abbad must surely have had a pleasant life; both on the plane and in his country, the flight instructor senses himself in the position of the host, secure in his connection to home but also defensive regarding the guest.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

These images of domestic crisis are juxtaposed in the novel with scenes of Abbad’s terrorist attack – in Michael’s dream with Jimmy at its center, a video of Abbad emerges on a TV screen, then a news segment, followed by scenes of utter mayhem in downtown Chicago. Speaking to the camera, Abbad presumably justifies his terrorist act and articulates a form of visual testament – a genre familiar not only from the news but also from cinematic representations of suicide bombers, including Hany Abu-Assad’s 2005 movie *Paradise Now*. In *Flight*, the implied author inserts a news report on the attack, according to which “Abbad and his wife somehow disabled the passengers and crew. Abbad then took control of the airplane and crashed it into downtown Chicago during rush hour” (126). A stricken Jimmy thus also loses his second home, the airplane, which can no longer offer a sense of accomplishment but rather symbolizes another

betrayal: “Jimmy taught Abbad how to fly a plane. And once you know how to fly a plane, you also know how to crash it” (127). Jimmy condemns Abbad but he acknowledges his own responsibility. His guilt derives from trusting Abbad: despite Abbad’s professed rage, Jimmy trusted him to be docile and incapable of violent protest.

In his despair, Jimmy decides to commit suicide, unsurprisingly by crashing his plane – not into a city, but into Lake Michigan. During his descent, he thinks “about the people I hated” and the “people I betrayed” and “the people who have betrayed me” (130). This again is reminiscent, on the one hand, of a passage in the previous chapter of Alexie’s novel, where Jimmy considers “how many wives and husbands are cheating on each other. And thinks of how many fathers are abandoning their children, He thinks of how many people are going to war against other people. We’re all betraying one another all the time” (120).<sup>xxix</sup>

This sense of a ubiquitous violation of norms and ethical values reflects the sentiments expressed in “Can I Get a Witness?”, where the protagonist similarly suspects each of his fellow human beings of secretly harming other individuals, either physically or emotionally. In light of Alexie’s pessimistic, near-misanthropic perspective in these texts, it appears curious that the two men that inflict the most severe damage are both of Muslim origin, one of them Syrian American with a Muslim father, the other Ethiopian Muslim. The net might be cast wide by Alexie, as humans in general are depicted as potentially violent, but the characterization of the perpetrators reinserts the “causal fusion of Islam and terrorism” (Salaita 34).

As in the case with the suicide bomber in “Can I Get a Witness?”, Abbad’s decision is never fully explained – in his video, he uses a “foreign language,” and he thus remains unintelligible, incomprehensible to Jimmy and the reader (126). His rage at America’s political and cultural strategies, his frustration in light of his apparent domestic subjection, or his dejection over the loss of home may all have been contributing factors, but Abbad’s emotional landscape is not explored through focalization or psycho-narration. He exists only in a few vignettes, painting the portrait of a friendly but discontented man.

Reiterating the motif of invisibility, the novel depicts a terrorist almost as enigmatic as the anonymous Syrian American man in Alexie’s short story – explanations remain largely outside the scope of the novel, as the dearth of contextualization renders the act arbitrary. Similar to Jimmy, the reader thus occupies the position of an ignorant witness, speculating about Abbad’s fury. Unlike in “Can I Get a Witness?”, the terrorist’s membership to one group, Ethiopian Muslims, is clearly demarcated, though his ties to his home are severed. Not composed of as many identities as his counterpart, Abbad is associated through his final, horrific, and outlandish act with the eccentric representative of (failed?) multiculturalism in “Can I Get a Witness?”.

Abbad’s domestic quarrel, his act of horrendous violence, and Jimmy’s marital infidelity all invoke the tropes of conflict and betrayal that permeate the entire novel. However, the relationship between chapters 13-15 and the other sections of *Flight* is tenuous at best, in particular because neither of the two main characters in this segment is identified as Native American. In his encounters in the narrative present and

on his involuntary journeys into the past, Michael experiences primarily (re)enactments of injustice against Native Americans, witnessing interracial and inner-racial antagonism in American history. In contrast, the terrorism segment of the novel engages with the contemporary discourse on political violence and paranoia and sketches a conflict between a Muslim immigrant and an inhospitable American host society. Jan Johnson claims in reference to *Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* that “one of the most important effects of Alexie’s latest works – particularly since he admits the majority of his readers are white – is making Native American historical trauma and the occluded truth of American Indian history visible” (237). Johnson’s straightforward argument appears sensible, but what do chapters on marriage crises, the emergence and consequences of terrorism, and Islamophobia contribute to a fictional representation of an imbalanced Indian-white interaction?

While the conversation and story that unfold in this section may appear incongruous in the context of the whole novel, the motifs of betrayal, violence, and desertion – as I have indicated – link the three chapters to previous and later parts. The image of obliterated planes likewise materializes throughout the novel. In the section on Jimmy and Abbad, model airplanes are destroyed by Jimmy’s wife and by one of Michael’s Indian foster fathers, as their familial relationships disintegrate; mirroring this pattern, Jimmy and Abbad commit suicide crashing “real” planes following personal conflicts. In this recurrence of aggressive patterns, Birgit Däwes argues, “the apparent ‘historic rupture’ of 9/11 is relativized by quotidian human violence” in the novel (*Ground Zero Fiction* 224). Such repetition simultaneously de/emphasizes acts of

violence: the novel, similar to many of Alexie's works, demonstrates that the use of violence by Americans of various ethnicities is a common occurrence, an event that is by no means extraordinary; it is this very predictability of pain and horror that underscores violence as a persistent and arresting trope in American culture. Along the same lines, the frequent association of ordinary individuals with harmful acts, from lethal terror to minor harassment, demonstrates in "Can I Get a Witness?" both the normalcy and the exceptionality of each act.

Aesthetically linking terrorism and prior moments of devastation and treachery, the novel evidently suggests "that violence crosses cultures and knows no ethnic boundaries" (Meyer 297). Aside from drawing cultural or ethnic comparisons, *Flight* certainly also insists on temporal continuities. What emerges in the later chapters of *Flight* marks a new development that differs from previously outlined historical moments (Wounded Knee, AIM). The Euro-American societal and economic system is still firmly established, but in contemporary America, Native Americans do not appear as organized enemies of the state, as they did in the nineteenth-century and even briefly in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, twenty-first century America no longer uses open but systemic violence – economic inequality, incarceration, discrimination, corporate lobbying, insurmountable barriers for new parties, campaign donations, media self-censorship – to dismantle or stifle opponents of a society marked by capitalism and largely controlled by Euro-Americans.

A desperate operation, Abbad's attack signifies individualized, conspiratorial violence that turns against an overbearing system. In both *Flight* and "Can I Get a

Witness?”, the terrorist seems to object to the inability to amend the structures of an American society that appears at once hostile (nationalist) and open (multicultural).<sup>xi</sup> While the frank conversations in *Flight* and “Can I Get a Witness?” transpire in the contained spaces of plane and apartment, the terrorists break free of this restrictive framework of merely verbal disapproval. Do their actions jeopardize the system? Perhaps any such protest must remain a futile effort, just as Native resistance, from the late nineteenth century until today can hope to establish limited tribal sovereignty and modify laws but is unlikely to inspire an overhaul of the very basis and structure of the American political system. Arguably, Alexie’s work is saturated with this air of resignation – or acceptance of the status quo.<sup>xii</sup>

In some ways, then, Abbad’s trajectory invokes Native history. Considering *Flight’s* focus on Native American historical trauma, Abbad’s loss of home – in combination with his inability to accept his new home – perhaps reflects the American Indian experience of removal and an existence distant from their original homeland. Jimmy’s assumption that Abbad must surely recognize the benefits of American life can be translated into the suggestion that abandoning tribal cultures or traditional lands in exchange for participating in “mainstream” American society supposedly constitutes a positive development for American Indians. When Abbad voices and then violently enacts his discontentment with his experience of non-belonging in the United States (both to his white friend Jimmy’s astonishment), a loose analogy arises with American Indian experiences: Abbad resorts to a violent suicide attack to avenge alleged injustice and a form of homelessness; Native nations, of course, protested in word, spirit, and



action against the forced expulsion from their own territory and against the effort to impose a new language and different customs on them. The conflicts and conversations evolving between Abbad and Jimmy likewise evoke a clash of American Indian rage with Euro-American historical ignorance, deliberate forgetfulness, and naïveté.

Not all components of these chapters of *Flight*, however, neatly align with episodes of American Indian experiences during the past few centuries. After all, the Abbad-Jimmy section does point to the existence of novel conflicts in America that do not pit Indians against whites. Whether we see this section as an allegory of Indian history in the U.S. or primarily as a comment on the continuation of violence in the twenty-first century with different parameters, both angles have their merits; both reiterate the significance of the motifs of mistrust, betrayal, and homelessness that are woven through the text.

Rather than predicting the arrival of a dancing (perhaps murdering?) multitude of Indians, as *Indian Killer* does, Alexie's later novel concludes with a blissful moment of interracial, familial harmony. Curiously, most of the countervailing acts of kindness in *Flight* are disconcerting to the protagonist Michael, who is not receptive to gestures of benevolence. To be sure, these same gestures can also be interpreted as attempts at redemption by the white foster fathers, cops, soldiers, and strangers Michael meets in his various reincarnations.

Comparable to a substantial share of Alexie's work, *Flight* both rejects a naïve trust in human decency and depicts small instances of such decency; the novel deserts its initial vision of a Ghost Dance and ends with a moment of reconciliation. While *Indian*

*Killer* insists that “the killer can dance forever ... and plans on dancing forever” (420), *Flight* prompts a peaceful vision of a Native American character’s “cultural and physical rebirth,” as Sabine Meyer puts it (299). Zits reclaims his real name Michael in the presence of his new white foster family, recognizing their genuine compassion and humanity: “But I’m beginning to think I’ve been given a chance. ... I’m beginning to think I might have an almost real family” (180). Jan Johnson rightly states that “this hopeful, interracial conclusion to *Flight* reflects a shift in Alexie’s vision that has been so marked by anger throughout his career” (233). Strikingly, though, this image of apparent Indian-white harmony arrives in conjunction with the identification of Arabs and Muslims as potentially dangerous and disruptive.

Alexie’s narratives of barely contextualized terrorist attacks depart from and resemble the pattern familiar from Updike’s *Terrorist* and other selected works of terrorist literature, which follow Arab and Muslim men that struggle with a lost or hostile home/father as well as with the body that they inhabit. The body in turn is home to minds at once obsessed and insecure. Abbad and the anonymous Syrian American are not portrayed in great detail, of course, and conflicts with corporeality are not at the center of their brief narratives. Still, parallels emerge as concepts of cultural belonging, integration, and rejection (and thus questions of hospitality) constitute a significant component of *Flight* and “Can I Get a Witness?”. These themes likewise materialize as crucial elements of another one of Alexie’s short stories, “Flight Patterns”. I will briefly turn to this story to further contextualize the other two texts and accentuate my argument regarding the non-belonging of Muslims/Arabs in Alexie’s fiction.

“Flight Patterns”, included along with “Can I Get a Witness?” in the collection *Ten Little Indians*, is a story void of a climax, a story that follows the well-traveled, middle-aged Spokane salesman William on the first leg of a business trip; on the cab ride to the airport, William embarks on a conversation on paranoia and integration with the cabdriver Fekadu, incidentally an Ethiopian Muslim (like Abbad). This recurrent choice of religious and national identification provides Alexie presumably with a means to place a character into the realm of Islam without reiterating the motif of the discontented, victimized, and potentially violent Arab or Middle Easterner, as utilized in cliché-ridden texts such as Updike’s *Terrorist* or even Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land* (2007).

Alexie’s short story maps three itineraries: Fekadu’s life journey, William’s emotional evolution and rollercoaster, and America’s trajectory following September 11. These narratives are developed in thought report reproducing William’s reflections and in a conversation between Fekadu and William. The dialogue unfolds in an atmosphere of apparent honesty, but it also reveals the characters to be cagey, reticent to accept stories and experiences as truthful. William, the narrator insists, is “very doubtful of this man but fascinated as well. If he was a liar, he was a magnificent liar” (115). At the end of the conversation, William almost pleadingly tells Fekadu that “I want to believe you.” The retort is as simple as it is vague, failing to reassure William: “‘Then believe me,’ said Fekadu. Unsure, afraid, William stepped back” (123). This apprehension appears to result from and demonstrate the very atmosphere of suspicion which Martin Randall identifies as one of consequences of the terrorist attacks of New York and Washington. Randall speaks of “the massive investment in security and

surveillance, the rise of anti-Islamic sentiment and a more general mood of paranoia, fear and political instability” (1). And if, as Frank Furedi asserts, the West’s “cultural imagination is dominated by a sense of vulnerability” and by a “public anxiety about terror,” it is hardly surprising that contemporary American literature engages with this anxiety (127, 128).

In “Flight Patterns”, the anxiety of non-belonging and ethnic categorization haunts the two main characters, as they sense the ever-lingering possibility of being associated with terrorism in the aftermath of September 11. Fekadu, whose appearance is summed up by the focalized William as that of a “black man with a violent history,” shares his experience of unexpected non-profiling: “Because people think I’m black, they don’t see me as a terrorist, only as a crackhead addict on welfare. So I am victim of only one misguided idea about who I am” (117).

Typecast in a derogatory manner, Fekadu is another exemplar of an immigrant who is not quite at home in America – but also unable to move to his former home (114): “I cannot go back. There is too much history and pain, and I am too afraid” (122). Fekadu’s fear of returning stems primarily from his participation in aerial attacks as a fighter pilot for Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie’s army, when he killed his “own people” (120). Through the multifaceted trope of flying, associated in this story and in *Flight* with separation, departure, and death, “Flight Patterns” participates in the discourse on the varied effects and ramifications of September 11; it also ties the story to my earlier discussion on hospitality. Fekadu recognizes the impossibility of hospitality in his original home – which can no longer be his home – and the simultaneous

inhospitality in his adopted home. His own ethical transgressions – he flew attacks against his own people – bar him from reentering his homeland Ethiopia. In the new home, he is linked to crimes as well, though he is, fortunately so from his perspective, placed in a different category than the terrorists.

William, in turn, deplors the prevalent xenophobia and confusion about national origins, demonstrated for example by the rude individual who leans out of his “big truck with big phallic tires” and yells at William (born on the Spokane reservation): “Go back to your own country” (117). With American Indians having a legitimate and long-standing claim to this land, the irony is evident. William responds to the verbal abuse with disarming humor: “You first” (117). Yet both William and Fekadu also emphasize distinctions between themselves and the terrorists, endeavoring to not be identified as Middle Eastern.

The salesman from the Spokane nation problematically subscribes to a discourse that supports the notion of guilt-by-association, which is located at the nexus of fear of terrorism and aggression towards ethnic minorities. Himself “equally afraid of Osama bin Laden and Jerry Falwell wearing the last vestiges of a summer tan,” William “understood why people were afraid of him, a brown-skinned man with dark hair and eyes.” After all, “Norwegian terrorists had exploded the World Trade Center, then blue-eyed blondes would be viewed with more suspicion. Or so he hoped” (108). In Salaita’s words, William is “comforted by his assumption that American racial profiling is not punitive but practical” (29). William’s somewhat naïve and certainly unfounded – in light for example of countless shootings committed by Caucasians in recent years –

confidence in a fair and sensible distribution of suspicion in the United States is only slightly modified in the last, added sentence (“Or so he hoped”), which expresses a hint of doubt. The sentence also underscores Alexie’s penchant for interrogating sentiments and claims expressed by his protagonists, whether related to race, politics, or love.

William addresses an important issue when he wonders whether racial profiling would actually have happened if a different ethnic group had committed the horrific crime of September 11. In artistic engagements with September 11, these questions of collective guilt frequently arise, often with a reference to the Oklahoma City bombing. A few striking lines in Palestinian-American poet Suheir Hammad’s magisterial “first writing since” highlights the double standard noticeable in the treatment of Muslims. In Hammad’s poem, the irate yet introspective speaker recounts the suspicion towards Middle Easterners in the aftermath of 9/11 and then exclaims: “we did not vilify all white men when mcveigh bombed oklahoma. america did not give out his family’s addresses or where he went to church” (section 5; see also my Chapter 1).

The indigenous protagonist of “Flight Patterns”, however, expresses understanding for post-9/11 paranoia, since he is himself afraid of potential Middle Eastern perpetrators: “William always scanned the airports and airplanes for little brown guys who reeked of fundamentalism” (107). As I have suggested, Alexie’s texts paradoxically validate and dismiss prejudices and stereotypes. In “Flight Patterns”, “Can I Get a Witness?”, and *Flight*, Alexie’s characters and plots “sublimate,” Salaita writes, “a crude conflation of terrorism and Islam to a type of multiculturalist liberalism that questions but does not expunge its cross-racial assumptions” (32). Curiously, of course,

many of Alexie's characters, including William, critically reflect on their own ideas on race, an element that contributes in the three texts to a blend of passages expressing but also disavowing Orientalist thoughts.<sup>xliii</sup>

William intimates that guarantee of security on airplanes and, more generally, the defense of Self and home should be in the hands of those who are themselves prone to violence. He claims he feels safer when surrounded by "gun-nut, serial-killing ... right-wing ... bastards" than in the company of supposedly weak, defenseless liberals – he derides the archetypal "communist, liberal, draft-dodging, NPR-listening wimp" (119). Oddly enough, William thus seeks the protection of those who would presumably favor restrictions to the rights of immigrants and possibly American Indians. Even in insulting these "right-wing bastards," Alexie's protagonist salvages their value for the safety of the American citizenry, which not so much relies on progressives to safeguard multi-ethnic tolerance, but on their political opponents to secure individual – and national – "sovereignty" in a broad sense.

Sovereignty, more specifically associated with self-determination and territorial integrity, rests on the power to police and control the state, and thus depends on a strong response to terrorism and on the creation of a protective shield (these policies lie apparently outside the purview of NPR-listening individuals). This sovereignty, according to Derrida, is also the prerequisite for hospitality (*Of Hospitality*, 55), for only the one who is "master at home" can freely, willingly receive guests (53). Hospitality, however, requires that we distinguish between guest and parasite and that we determine to whom we grant it (Derrida 56). Identifying that (the person, the idea) which we cannot

allow, which disrupts our security and exploits our hospitality, is one central component of terrorist literature. Nonetheless, the texts I am examining also consider the response *to* and evaluation *of* this hospitality: the “terrorists” are framed as foreigners or “guests,” and they interrogate their own political and moral position vis-à-vis American or European societies. Even American-born Ahmad observes throughout Updike’s novel in a detached manner the structures and mores of America – as if he were a foreigner (not a “host”). To reiterate my earlier excursion into etymology, “host,” “hostile,” and “guest” are interrelated, or as Bill in DeLillo’s *Mao II* puts it: “It’s interesting how ‘guest’ and ‘host’ are words that intertwine” (67).

The relevance of such intertwining terms for an examination of terrorist literature lies in the shifting nature of the cultural positioning of characters such as Ahmad, the Syrian American man, and Abbad. They belong yet do not belong; in a quintessentially, perhaps stereotypically American experience, these characters claim American citizenship and identity but also have homes elsewhere, are paradoxically not quite American in their Americanness. This liminality, this blending and drifting of identities also points to my broader argument that the terrorist is both configured as an outsider, an Other, and as an integral part of a multicultural society.

Both Alexie’s and Updike’s stories do actually encourage to some extent a conservative perspective of terrorism as an outcrop of a multiculturalism that neatly separates, divides ethnicities. Salaita’s neologism “liberal Orientalism” is an apt description of Alexie’s criticism and condoning of paranoia towards Muslims/Arabs, but Alexie’s writings also betray a conservative and perhaps self-indicting critique of the



liberal hesitation to pass judgment on members of other ethnicities. As a result of Alexie's sense of liberalism as inferior or unconvincing in certain circumstances, even as he frequently derails right-wing America, contradictions and ambiguities are constituent elements of his stories.<sup>xliii</sup>

In "Flight Patterns", William finds himself at a curious crossroads, afraid that undesirable guests or "parasites" will threaten him, although coping himself with the fact that he is associated with precisely this suspicious group. Imagining a paranoid community, the dark-skinned William – he describes his appearance as "more beige than brown, more mauve than sienna" – admits that he and "everybody else" was "scared of little brown guys" (118). William maintains the dependence of the law-abiding citizen, white or non-white, on the protection granted by violent (white) Americans, which shift from posing a threat to representing much-welcomed security against "*those Taliban jerk-offs*" (112, italics in original). The security officers at U.S. airports, however, are today "most often low-paid brown folks" (112).

The new gatekeepers of America are African Americans and Hispanics – a notion also advanced in John Updike's *Terrorist*. In Updike's novel, the transfer of border control to non-white groups is conceived as a basis for renewed racism, as ethnic minorities have acquired "the authority to frisk, to question, to delay, to grant or deny admission and the permission to fly" (46; see also the second section of this chapter). In Updike's diction, a "dusky underclass" has assumed control as representatives of the American state – as hosts (46). Not only does this scene in *Terrorist* betray an anxiety about the control of non-white individuals over movement and communication as well

as over manifestations of personal freedom. The novel also suggests that the administration of hospitality and sovereignty has passed at least partially into the hands of the “little brown guys” so insistently invoked in Alexie’s short story.

### Conclusion

*Flight*, “Can I Get a Witness?”, “Flight Patterns”, and *Terrorist* explore the map of cross-racial interaction in the United States, examining the (intersecting) itineraries of African-American, Native American, Euro-American, and immigrant communities: First of all, Muslims and Arabs are positioned as the fictive Other, marginalized, “reek[ing] of fundamentalism”; secondly, whiteness, still the standard category of American politics (in terms of representation in executive, legislative, and judicative), is increasingly interrogated by demographic developments and the occupation of nodes of hospitality by non-whites; thirdly, the notion of a multiculturalism that allows each group to pursue its separate paths *explodes* in these texts, literally so in the case of the restaurant Good Food and the suicide bomber in “Can I Get a Witness?”; finally, with the exception of the slightly incongruous ending of *Flight*, the division between ethnic and religious groups finds affirmation in the narratives, as fleeting conversations in confined spaces fail to properly bridge the gaps.

The terrorist attacks in the stories by Alexie and Updike – whether “merely” evoked in conversation, actually carried out, or prevented – arguably signify a failure of

communication, or rather a substitute for communication, even as they represent a form of communicative act. Crashing a plane or detonating a bomb replaces the verbal articulation of the terrorist's emotions and beliefs. The anonymous Syrian American, Abbad, and Ahmad seek a venue to express their inner voices, voices that seem to derive from an all-consuming, fatal imagination. Abbad laments, somewhat awkwardly, his failure to feel embraced by America, while the Syrian American follows voices in his head, and Ahmad misinterprets (as he himself realizes at the end) the message of Islam.

These narratives present curious, even provocative perspectives – notably the conversation regarding the innocence of the victims in the Twin Towers – on the effect of September 11 and terrorism more generally, but they also link violence and intolerance to Muslim and Arab characters. To be sure, African American characters are likewise frequently associated with violence in Alexie's stories. The petty criminal in the recent short story "Breaking and Entering" (included in *Blasphemy*, 2012) is just one exemplar of troubled, violent black youth.<sup>xliv</sup>

Alexie has himself stated his unease with the classification of people according to their ethnicity, but he also appreciates the potential social and economic value of such distinctions. Asked by Åse Nygren to comment on the tendency to group together authors of the same ethnicity, Alexie states that his "exceptional" status as a minority writer contrasts with the "normative" status of the white writer: "I guess the problem is not that I'm labeled as a Native American writer, but that writers like John Updike and Jonathan Franzen aren't labeled as White Americans. They are simply assumed to be the norm, and everybody else is judged in reaction to them." Demonstrating his typical

shifting between distinct positions, Alexie admits that he benefits from his “exotic” ethnicity (and in fact, most of his main characters are identified as Native American, which suggests that racial categories are of some importance to the Spokane writer): “We live in a capitalistic society and it’s all about competition. In the world of writing, I have an edge because I’m an Indian. If I was a white guy writer, I’d just be another white guy writer” (144).

Alexie’s texts frequently play with and perpetuate stereotypical notions of particular groups. The idea that Indians tend to carry blankets with them at all times, as suggested in the short story “War Dances” (part of the 2009 collection *War Dances*) in an admittedly self-reflexive fashion, might constitute a trifling, harmless cliché. However, in a more egregious gesture, the identification of the Muslim male with acts of terror in *Flight* and “Can I Get a Witness?” effectively pigeonholes this group. This connection deindividualizes and exteriorizes the Islamic Other, even though these narratives admittedly interrogate simplistic assumptions: the short story creates a multi-ethnic personality while *Flight* and “Flight Patterns” explicitly address post-9/11 paranoia and Islamophobia. Nevertheless, the individual person in the end retreats behind the screen of Islam, becoming in some measure invisible.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Even though the attack's political goals are not clearly delineated in any of the three texts, I will continue to use the term "terrorist" in this chapter; while the value of terminology is tied to usage consistent with a particular definition (I largely follow Alex Schmid as well as Louise Richardson, who both argue that terrorism is politically motivated violence targeting civilians and rooted in a conspiracy), I do suggest that the term "terrorist" is useful as a label for fictional characters who plan or commit a public, spectacular act of violence against civilians and who, with their actions or their specific socio-cultural traits (religion, heritage), evoke the attacks of September 11. I discuss definitions of terrorism in Chapter 1.

<sup>ii</sup> Evidently, while the genesis of terrorism occurs in a secret, conspiratorial sphere, the perpetrator becomes deliberately visible in the moment of the actual deed – in contrast to an "ordinary" murderer who would endeavor to slide into secrecy following the crime. Laura Tanner suggests that the terrorists of September 11 – and this observation seems to be reflected in the fictional perpetrators I am discussing in this chapter – "orchestrated the attacks to create spectacular images deployed to tremendous effect" (62). The suicide-murders of 9/11 were conceived and perceived, Tanner remarks, "as spectacle, positioned in a world entailing the constant negotiation of intertwined virtual, representational, and material realities" (60). The stories I am analyzing here do not foreground the actual attacks, but the places where they occur and the narratives constructed around the (planned) deed point to an intentionally terrifying effect.

<sup>iii</sup> *Flight* thus indicates that one reason for the attacks was a sense of (political, economic) injustice and inequality, which was channeled into violence by the Muslim terrorists.

<sup>iv</sup> "Flight Patterns" allows me to expound and reflect on some of the key themes in Alexie's recent writings, in particular *Flight* and "Can I Get a Witness?"

<sup>v</sup> I surmise that most sacred texts are prone to an interpretation that promotes violence and intolerance, as much as these texts encourage believers to commit to a life of moderation, good deeds, and kindness.

<sup>vi</sup> Conspirators of Yemeni origin loom in the background, on the novel's fringes. They presumably give orders to the Chehab family and are in turn connected to a wider network. This network is under surveillance by the Department of Homeland Security and the CIA, but it is a coincidental, familial relation between an administrative assistant at the Department of Homeland Security and her brother-in-law Jack Levy that helps in the identification of Ahmad as the accomplice in a treacherous plot. The primary factors in the foiling of the plot, however, are related to Ahmad's consideration of his place in the world.

<sup>vii</sup> Curiously, Ahmad loses his religion, loses his god in the process of embracing humanity or humaneness, which may suggest the incompatibility of Islam with Western, American values.

<sup>viii</sup> Ahmad is depicted as questioning the condemnation of infidels, but the limiting framework of Islam his teacher asks him to accept discourages Ahmad from further investigating his doubts: "It seemed to Ahmad that, as with the facts of Paradise, his teacher resorted to metaphor as a shield against reality. Joryleen, though an unbeliever, did have feelings; they were there in how she sang, and how the other unbelievers responded to the singing. But it was not Ahmad's role to argue; it was his to learn, to submit to his own place in Islam's vast structure, visible and invisible" (77).

<sup>ix</sup> Alexie's characters, exceptions at any rate, cannot be lumped into the same category here.

<sup>x</sup> Tylenol, Joryleen's boyfriend, calls Ahmad a "dumb queer" and a "faggot" (16). Typical jargon of high school bullies? Perhaps, but these insults serve to reinforce the association of Ahmad with homosexuality.

<sup>xi</sup> Ahmad's predicament as he finds himself without a stabilizing bond is certainly not a surprising aspect of the novel, considering Updike's penchant for storyworlds replete with hapless men and shallow women.

<sup>xii</sup> Though triggered at least in part by the interaction with a representative of the Judeo-Christian West, Ahmad's decision cannot be said to constitute a submission to Jack Levy's will.

<sup>xiii</sup> Fachinger's argument presupposes the possibility of a "plausible terrorist". Yet the creation of a solid chain of cause-and-effect strikes me as an impossible undertaking in terms of deeds of mass murder. Not only fictional stories, but also empirical and psychological research on the roots of terrorism, for example by Louise Richardson and Alan Kruger, can only present common denominators of terrorists, not

necessarily render individual terrorists' actions plausible. Aligning the geopolitical and economic context of terrorism with a man's or woman's dedication to inflict violence constitutes one of the major challenges for terrorist literature – the difficulty of such an alignment is possibly one of the central and inevitable predicaments of this subgenre's representatives.

<sup>xiv</sup> What are the actual roots of this nostalgia? Increased immigration from non-Western countries, the gradual expansion and power of the non-Caucasian population, and a post-1968 shift in the American value system have changed U.S. society, regrettably so, the novel implies; in its current multicultural shape, the country seems unrecognizable and insufferable to Judeo-Christian heralds of a utopian America of racial assimilation or blending, intact families, and moral propriety. According to Fachinger, *Terrorist* presents an elegy to both “the lost American Dream and the melting-pot philosophy” (412); indeed, the novel mourns the bygone era of seemingly secure job prospects, and it mourns the lost confidence that each ethnic group will eventually turn American and submit to a Euro-American consensus – an imaginary consensus, I must add.

<sup>xv</sup> Fachinger insists that the key factor in Ahmad's “failed Americanisation” is the racial position the protagonist inhabits, as the son of an Egyptian father and an Irish-American mother (411).

<sup>xvi</sup> Mita Banerjee reads the novel slightly differently. She argues that Ahmad “despises” whiteness, while the narrative cherishes it. Ahmad, in Banerjee's view, takes a racist stance against whites: “The implicit charge here, of course, is that of reverse racism, of Ahmad himself being a racist; and it is this charge underlying Updike's narrative perspective which brings me back full circle to whiteness studies. For whiteness studies, at its worst, dismisses the power inequalities inherent in the concept of racism and charges the other side with victimizing, with *minoritizing*, whiteness” (22). I concede the validity of Banerjee's point, but I suggest that Ahmad is driven by his utter (and perhaps unrealistic) indignation at the moral and cultural structure of America, and less by his revulsion against whiteness. He seeks to spiritually reconnect with his father and distance himself from his mother because he disapproves of his mother's lack of faith and her independence and inconstancy. Whereas his father's physical *absence* may symbolize the instability of Ahmad's life, the father's *presence* in Ahmad's reflections as well as the protagonist's decision to go by the name of Ashmawy, not the Irish Mulloy, indicate that the father fulfills, in absentia, the role of a stabilizing force that links Ahmad to his perceived origins.

<sup>xvii</sup> The prospect of integrating into American society seems likewise riddled with obstacles. Yet he arguably needs to embark on this path of integration and assimilation. Curiously, Banerjee claims that “by correlating Ahmad's strange get-up with his convoluted speech, Updike's novel refuses to grant him naturalization, or rather, what is worse, it revokes his American citizenship” (24).

<sup>xviii</sup> I will return to this passage in my examination of Sherman Alexie's short story “Flight Patterns” at the end of this chapter, since the motif of the changing gatekeepers has important ramifications in a consideration of (non-)belonging and hospitality after September 11.

<sup>xix</sup> Mishra also ignores in his discussion the passages set in the Department of Homeland Security – symbol of an underfunded and unsophisticated intelligence apparatus (and an inept administration relying on coincidence). The Secretary of Homeland Security's “compensation is nearly nil and in terms of financial compensation distinctly modest, with children approaching the age of college education and a wife who must keep up her end in the endless social rounds of Republican Washington” (*Terrorist* 46-47). If actions and demeanor of the Islamists or terrorists in the novel are sometimes predictable and clichéd (but moments of stereotypical portrayal are also countered frequently by passages that show these characters to be unusual and sophisticated and at least Ahmad indeed self-reflexive), so are utterances of the Secretary of Homeland Security, who repeats for instance the familiar post-9/11 dictum of incomprehension: “Those people out there ... Why do they want to do these horrible things? Why do they hate us? What's to hate?” (48). His assistant, Elizabeth Levy's sister Hermione, answers him with a Bible quote, echoing Ahmad and the imam's piety and their selective utilization and interpretation of a sacred text: “They hate the light. ... The light shone in the darkness, ... and the darkness comprehended it not” (48, from John 1:5). Just as the characters involved in the terrorist plot presume an impossible distance

between themselves and the Other(s), the infidels, so does the administration in the person of the Secretary (and his assistant) form a barrier between “us” and “them” – the unfathomable Other.

<sup>xx</sup> I concede that the novel presents Muslim characters that do not share Ahmad’s characteristics. Imam Shaikh Rashid is insincere as well as full of doubts about the parameters of his faith (see e.g. *Terrorist* 7 and 279), while the Chehab family of Excellency Home Furnishings consists of the kind Habib, his curt brother Maurice, and Habib’s jovial but devious son Charlie. Recognizing their distinct personalities and ideologies discourages sweeping generalizations about Updike’s perspective on Arab and Muslim Americans. However, the focus of my discussion and of the novel as such of course is on the protagonist Ahmad, who meets several of the “criteria” outlined by Nash as typical for depictions of Muslims.

<sup>xxi</sup> Meghnad Desai, for example, separates “Islam as a religion in both theory and practice from Islamism as an ideology. It is the ideology that feeds terrorism. It puts on religious garb and takes shelter in quotations from the Qur’an. But the ideology is political, its aim being the winning of power over people” (23). Since the term “Islamism” is of dubious value, Samuel Thomas somewhat awkwardly speaks of “the elements of Islamic faith used to frame and justify terroristic actions” (436).

<sup>xxii</sup> Muslim women are almost entirely absent from this novel, with the exception of Charlie Chehab’s wife (discussed only in one paragraph), who is described by Ahmad as having a “mannish air” (170).

<sup>xxiii</sup> Reggie Polatkin is an additional example of a Native character in *Indian Killer* who is detached from the history and complexity associated with a tribal identity. He indeed deliberately discards this element of his self, ignoring his Indian mother during childhood and adolescence and instead mimicking his cruel white father, Bird Lawrence. In one moment of *Indian Killer*, before a scarring encounter with the white professor Clarence Mather opens his eyes, Reggie Polatkin believes “that he was successful because of his father’s white blood.” Reggie buries – he had buried – the narrator explains, his Indian identity “so successfully that he’d become invisible” (94). He had “white-washed” himself so thoroughly that nothing was left of himself. I adopt the metaphor of white-washing from Jean-Paul Sartre’s biting preface to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. Sartre proves to be an ardent critic of European colonialism: “The European élite undertook to manufacture a native élite. They picked out promising adolescents; they branded them, as with a red-hot iron, with the principles of western culture; [...]. After a short stay in the mother country, they were sent home, white-washed. These walking lies had nothing left to say to their brothers; they only echoed” (7).

<sup>xxiv</sup> The enigma regarding the motives for the attacks indicates that the term “terrorist” may not be applicable in this case (20). Neither the Syrian American bomber in “Can I Get a Witness?” nor the Ethiopian American flight student in *Flight* have a clear-cut rationale for their violent act; in addition, they do not seem to belong to a terrorist cell or network with broader ideological or political aims. I still use the words “terrorist” and “terrorist literature” to refer to the fictional perpetrators and Alexie’s narrative, respectively. I do so because of, not in spite of the proliferation of these words in current discourse. “Terrorist” has become, Bruce Lincoln writes, “the key signifier in our contemporary political discourse,” and by working with this charged term, I place Alexie’s texts in the appropriate post-9/11 context (21). For aesthetic reasons, I have refrained in this dissertation to consistently put “terrorist” in quotation marks, due to the problems inherent in using a word that signifies primarily political attacks, a word that has been employed for a long time by state actors to demonize designated enemies.

<sup>xxv</sup> Strictly speaking, we cannot ascribe motives to any fictional character. Characters have by definition only an imaginary psyche, an imaginary capacity for intentionality (see Pietzcker). However, in constructing a matrix of statements, narration, and events involving a character, a story can render a particular act plausible, thus creating a “motive”.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Throughout terrorist literature, simple but enervating questions arise as to the personality and identity of the perpetrator, whose appearance on the page (or even on stage) triggers the desire in the reader to apprehend the perpetrator, to dissolve the mystery of the Other. Yet impulses, motives, emotions are never completely resolved or explained, whether we consider the strange voices in the restaurant bomber’s mind or the fanatic urge of Allan Havis’s Atta to inflict violence, to harm.

<sup>xxvii</sup> In their article, “Hawaiian Pizza to Sushi: The Changing Nature of Ethnicity in American Restaurants”, Liora Gvion and Naomi Trostler study “American restaurant menus from the 1960s throughout the 1990s as revealing a symbolic expression of ethnicity and as an indicator of ethnicity as a social construct.” They claim that during this period “restaurant menus shifted from adapting the form of ethnic dishes to the taste of their potential customers to constructing traditions of the ethnic communities in America. As part of this trend, ethnic culinary boundaries were obliterated in favor of an appropriation of ethnic dishes, and the creation of what appears to be a ‘multiethnic cuisine.’ Not only was one no longer surprised to find various ethnic dishes in a traditional local restaurant, one actually expected to be able to dine from a selection rich in ethnic dishes” (950). The kind of food served in restaurants may not necessarily reflect the status of particular ethnic groups in American society, but it functions as an important marker of the espousal or rejection of ethnic diversity and multiculturalism more generally. Gvion and Trostler also point out that while multiethnic restaurants can upset culinary conventions, they adhere to the “dominant meal structure that applies to all restaurants that operate in Western cultures” (954).

<sup>xxviii</sup> Incidentally, the association of Muslims and Middle Easterners with violence and terror – or, rather, an awareness of this association – is not confined to Alexie’s recent writings. When the Spokane band Coyote Springs, in *Reservation Blues*, endeavors to board a plane from Spokane to New York City, the other passengers react with concern: “The crowd at the gate stared at Coyote Springs. They worried those loud dark-skinned people might be hijackers. Coyote Springs did their best not to look middle eastern [sic]” (218).

<sup>xxix</sup> Regarding the unique position of the collection *Ten Little Indians* in Alexie’s oeuvre, Daniel Grassian writes: “That many of the characters in *Ten Little Indians* are more generically American and less specifically Indian may in part be due to the fact that some, if not all, of the stories were written shortly after the events of September 11, 2001, which at least temporarily seemed to efface ethnicity in America” (179). While Grassian’s argument is sensible with respect to a number of stories that focus more on differences in class and morality than in race, Alexie continues to stress the importance of ethnicity. The suicide bomber in “Can I Get a Witness?” is of course a multi-ethnic enigma with Arab roots.

<sup>xxx</sup> Since there is vicious and random violence against Indians in the novel, and since the Indian killer is potentially a killer of Indians, indigenous readers may likewise feel a sense of threat and insecurity.

<sup>xxxi</sup> The Ghost Dance was not actually a movement of revenge and resistance. In the late 1880s, the Paiute Wovoka attracted members of many tribes, who sought out this “prophet” to learn about the essentially non-violent Ghost Dance; L.G. Moses explains: “Throughout the ages frightened and oppressed humans have longed for deliverance, and Wovoka’s message of renewal, rebirth, and ‘revitalization’ offered hope for many Indian people” (336). The Ghost Dance spread across the Western United States, with tribes adapting the form of the dance to their cultures and customs. Wovoka’s revitalization movement was performative and spiritual, but this made it not less effective in the eyes of the dancers. The spiritual and religious elements of the movement ensured its effectiveness in reality. Wovoka’s teachings and the acts of his followers were not simply an inevitable reaction to material deprivation and injustice by desperate victims of European colonization. The Ghost Dance was a powerful and deliberate demonstration of Native strength and survivance.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Seattle is both the *unique* location for this and many of Alexie’s texts, but it is likewise a representative for any American city.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> “Can I Get a Witness?” is marked by individuals that are not named and only partially individualized. *Indian Killer* is likewise populated, Michelle Burnham writes, “by a succession of characters who are or feel themselves to be followed by absolutely menacing but utterly invisible figures” (4).

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Richard Gray begins his important monograph on 9/11 literature, *After the Fall*, with the following observation: “If there was one thing writers agreed about in response to 9/11, it was the failure of language; the terrorist attacks made the tools of their trade seem absurd” (1). It has of course been noted before, for example by trauma theorists, that speechlessness, or the inability to “properly” articulate emotions is a familiar problem in the aftermath of a traumatic experience.



<sup>xxxv</sup> Zits's fate as an Indian orphan without knowledge of his tribal roots recalls stories of the wresting of Native children from their ancestral home. In the 1950s and 1960s, adoption of American Indian children by whites was supported by the government, in an effort to "dissolve" Indian cultures in mainstream, Euro-American culture. A large number of Native American children were adopted by white families before 1978; in that year, the Indian Child Welfare Act was passed, granting tribes exclusive jurisdiction over child custody (Grassian 105-106). As Zits/Michael explains, he cannot benefit from this act, suggesting continuous injustice endured by Natives in spite of legal improvements: "There's this law called the Indian Child Welfare Act that's supposed to protect "half-breed orphans like me. I'm only supposed to be placed with Indian foster parents and families. But I'm not an official Indian. My Indian daddy gave me his looks, but he was never legally established as my father. Since I'm not a legal Indian, the government can put me wherever they want" (8-9). Alexie's protagonist is drifting, an invisible, ghost-like individual who regains his name, Michael, only at the conciliatory, positive end of the novel, when he finds a permanent place to live – in a loving, white family.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Channette Romero takes these critiques to task, suggesting a more affirmative interpretation of *Ceremony* and other texts that center on individuals coping with the customs and constraints of two cultures: "Cook-Lynn, Krupat, and Allen seem compelled to explain Silko's focus on cross-cultural political and spiritual connections as being a negative product of her environment or racial heritage rather than as a conscious attempt to strengthen American Indian tribal sovereignty. I believe, however, that Silko's use of cross-cultural connections upholds and attempts to strengthen American Indian nationalist concerns through international alliances" (624).

<sup>xxxvii</sup> In using the phrase "domestic terror," I depart from the exact definition of terrorism; I refer here both to the violence endured by Michael in his foster families and to attacks by whites on American Indians, including the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Jimmy's home is ultimately a fleeting home as well, as he is veritably banished from his home when his wife discovers his infidelity.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Such honest but rather simplistic sentences confirm the notion that *Flight* is less polished and complex than some of Sherman Alexie's other writings. Alexie's oeuvre does include quite a few mediocre stories and incoherent poems, of course; too often does the reader encounter truisms and, at the other end of the spectrum, convoluted arguments.

<sup>xl</sup> As I suggested earlier, Alexie's tribalist endeavor to depict Spokane lives off and on the reservation contrasts with his integration of multi-ethnic characters and places in his work.

<sup>xli</sup> In Alexie's most recent texts, possibly affected by his own changed, more comfortable living situation, his Native characters embrace, if (self-)ironically so, their arrival in middle-class America. In his earlier writings, Alexie depicts a great many dejected figures, who may not have lost their humor but certainly their hope for fundamental change. *Indian Killer* might constitute an exception, albeit its association with the Ghost Dance and its foreshadowing of Native resistance appears more as a product of an enraged author than a viable political vision. Moreover, the implication of violence in *Indian Killer* may not constitute an accurate reflection of the purpose of the Ghost Dance.

<sup>xlii</sup> Similarly, characters frequently recognize other forms of prejudice and other flaws they possess, articulated in all three of Palmer's modes of verbalized emotions: free indirect thought, thought report, and direct thought. In a combination of thought report and free indirect thought, a passage of "Flight Patterns" expresses William's contradictory sentiments (of course contradictory, in Alexie's world of paradoxes and harsh juxtapositions) towards his loving wife: "He hated to leave [their home], but he loved his work. He was a man, and men needed to work. More sexism! More masculine tunnel vision!" (106) Many of Alexie's stories show characters torn between two opposing impulses such as aggression and compassion (another pertinent example is the tempestuous relationship between Victor and Thomas in *Reservation Blues*). This conflict is at least in part an illustration of the complex position of American Indians as wronged victims of injustice and as agents of their own destiny, following hallowed (yet evolving) indigenous traditions and at the same time contemporary American popular culture.

<sup>xliii</sup> A striking example is his story, "Breaking and Entering", included in the collection *Blasphemy*. Recounting the death of a young African American caught breaking into the house of the Spokane protagonist, who strikes the boy in self-defense with his baseball bat, the story sways between the first-person narrator's self-condemnation and a feeble, desperate effort at self-justification: "Why had he decided to steal from me? Why had he made all the bad decisions that had led to his death? ... It was self-defense. ... I was legally innocent, that much is true, but was I morally innocent? I wasn't sure, and neither were a significant percentage of my fellow citizens" (257). The narrator interestingly assures the reader, the fictional interlocutor that he had not thought, "There's a black teenager stealing from me" (255). While the story thus distances the protagonist from a discourse of racial profiling and racism, it is still a black teenager who intrudes into the narrator's home. Reminiscent of the scene in *Flight* that has Jimmy admit to Abbad his initial anxiety about teaching a Muslim, "Breaking and Entering" self-consciously reflects on its choice of perpetrator and on the protagonist's perception of this perpetrator. Following the tragic incident, the narrator acknowledges his fear of revenge and states: "There are people – white folk, mostly – who are extremely uncomfortable in the presence of black people. And I know plenty of Indians – my parents, for example – who are also uncomfortable around black folks. As for me? I supposed I'd be always been the kind of non-black person who celebrated himself for not being uncomfortable around blacks. But now ... I was afraid ..." (263). Just as similar passages in *Flight* and "Flight Patterns" explicitly, critically examine moments of paranoid, racist discourse but still evoke and even justify precisely this paranoia, the self-reflexivity in the more recent short story does (of course) not in itself disperse concerns about the problematic identification of a particular ethnicity with criminal activity.

<sup>xliiv</sup> Alexie employs William to highlight this tendency. When William first studies Fekadu, he identifies him as a "black man with a violent history," but immediately reprimands himself "for racially profiling the driver: *Excuse me, sir, but I pulled you over because your scar does not belong in this neighborhood*" (114, italics in original).

## ***Conclusion***

### ***Portraits of Grief***

*“A mirror held up to every moral superiority will show its precise mirror image: The terrorist loves his truth as hard as I love mine; he has a mother who looks on her child with the same fierce pride I feel when I look at my own. Someone, somewhere, must wonder how I could love the boys who dropped the bombs that killed the humanitarian-aid workers in Kabul.”*

--- Barbara Kingsolver, *Small Wonder* (6)

Deconstructing a Manichean rhetoric that insists on the absolute difference between the West and supposedly inhuman Islamic terrorists, Barbara Kingsolver’s epigraph springs from – and prompts – self-reflection. She demands the recognition that the vilification of the perceived enemy conveniently saves us from having to interrogate our own preconceptions. Kingsolver does not judge or praise particular values held by “us” and “them”, but rather emphasizes that, though we primarily criticize the inflexible, missionizing nature of Muslim militants, Western public, media, and governments likewise self-righteously pronounce (and insist on) the truthfulness of our moral and political beliefs – including the belief in a set of universally applicable human rights.<sup>i</sup> Kingsolver implicitly criticizes short-sighted, sanctimonious Western depictions of Muslim militants. Importantly, by emphasizing the terrorists’ social and familial support system, she humanizes them.

Kingsolver's plea for self-reflection and for the acknowledgment of the individuality and humanness of the 9/11 perpetrators is echoed in a lyric form in Tom Clark's "The Pilots". I will examine this post-9/11 poem on the following pages in part to illustrate that poetry, while not a subject of the previous chapters, has also been employed to imaginatively approach the hijackers.<sup>ii</sup> "The Pilots" will serve as segue into a discussion of the central arguments of this dissertation.

In his twenty-line poem, Tom Clark seeks out the homes of the hijacker-pilots of United Airlines 93, American Airlines 11, and United Airlines 175, tracing their innocuous origins in the Middle East.<sup>iii</sup> The first of the three pilots to be portrayed in the poem is Ziad Jarrah, who "danced at his female cousin's / Wedding. Slender with glasses, intelligent / Looking, a seemingly happy young man, / Smiling pleasantly his arms waving in the festive air" (1-4). The stanza overflows with vivacious vocabulary, somewhat incongruously associating the Lebanese member of the Hamburg cell with positive qualities: laughter, cheerfulness, charm, intelligence, and energy. Facing what could be an image from a family album, we, as readers, try to discern the terrorist in this startling snapshot: where is the monster in the "happy young man"?

In the subsequent stanza, Mohamed Atta's "Boyhood friend weeps to recall the 'delicate, / Innocent, virgin' youth of their childhood home" (7-8), recalling images of the fragile, immature Atta, familiar from fictional representations of the 9/11 ringleader and mastermind. The poem continues to model interactions with the acquaintances and families of the hijacker-pilots, even reproducing the voice of Atta's grieving father: "Having lost his son, Mohammed Atta's / Father rages against the Americans" (5-6).

Another fixture in terrorist literature, the Arab/Muslim father of a terrorist-in-the-making tends to represent the allegedly repressive, patriarchal atmosphere that suppresses personal freedom and stifles Arab/Muslim communities – a repression that, as many of the texts imply, generates (male) frustration and violence. In Clark’s poem, however, Atta’s father and Atta’s childhood friend contribute to a narrative of humanization, a narrative foregrounding the ordinariness and indeed banality of evil.

Concluding this imaginary journey into the familial sphere of the members of Al Qaeda’s Hamburg cell, the third stanza delineates a visit to the former abode of Marwan Al-Shehhi, the third of “The Pilots”. The festive, happy air permeating the first vignette turns into grief in the second and somber, oppressive mood in the third one: “Marwan Al-Shehhi lived behind that gate / Between the two buildings, see that obscured / Back yard, where the streets starts to get real / Ramshackle” (9-12). Underscoring the grimness inscribed into the stanza by the account of a derelict neighborhood, Clark describes the hijacker from the United Arab Emirates as “dedicated, serious, committed to the cause,” in a line that is presumably meant to echo the words of a former acquaintance of Marwan Al-Shehhi’s (12).

The poem’s remaining two stanzas reflect the struggle inherent in the depictions of terrorists analyzed in this dissertation: How to plausibly connect a person to his deed? How to make sense of a life that ends in a celebration of death? For Clark, this quest and the more general effort to apprehend September 11 is a painful process, which affects language, alters it, rendering it resistant to the aesthetic endeavor: “The standing pool of language, thickened then with / The algae and flotsam of guilt and time

/ And fear, coagulating to clog / The throat; the conscience anyway never clear ..." (13-16). Clark pours a host of emotions into these lines, evocative as well as ambiguous: does he refer, for instance, to the guilt and conscience of the perpetrators, of the survivors, or perhaps of the West more generally? The stanza certainly captures the aura of fear and speechless, helpless reckoning which dominated the immediate aftermath of September 11.

In creating portraits of the terrorists and in conjuring up the pain and trauma of the events of 2001, the poem arguably also asks us in the West how we are implicated in the disaster, both in terms of its political context (if Clark's invocation of guilt and conscience indeed addresses the West) and in terms of accurately, fairly representing victims and terrorists. "The Pilots" does not offer a detailed description of the perpetrators, but sketches a few images, outlines rather; their brevity suggests a kind of resignation, the realization that perhaps these images do not bring us much closer to the person or that any further information may not be any more clarifying. On the other hand, such poetic sketches poignantly, succinctly highlight the gradual, piecemeal search for meaning behind the horrific murder-suicides; from this last perspective, each stanza presents a starting point for research into the perpetrator's context.

Sketching the origins or trajectory of a terrorist in poetry, fiction, or drama certainly does not equate understanding this trajectory, yet what "The Pilots" and the other works of terrorist literature accomplish is a process of "empathetic identification" (Samuel Thomas's term). By approaching the individual perpetrator outside the parameters of violence, authors can eschew or interrogate a pattern of othering the

terrorists. Kristiaan Versluys calls such othering “an act of exclusion, whereby, through prejudice, ignorance, or both, one refuses to treat someone else fully as an individual” (150). Othering implies a condemnation of the terrorists, suggesting that they act(ed) on account of their depravity and their “evil” nature, an accusation that Terry Eagleton notes, “is generally a way of bringing arguments to an end” (*On Evil* 8).<sup>iv</sup> Moreover, othering the terrorists, presenting them as utterly, unfathomably different, also avoids introspection: rather than our policies, it is their difference, presumably reflecting the morally questionable values of a radical Islamic community, that engenders violence.<sup>v</sup> Martin Amis’s “The Last Days of Mohammad Atta” is a striking example of a fictional text that demonizes the terrorist by primarily associating him with a vocabulary of contempt and self-hatred; yet the story’s iteration of Atta’s physical and emotional pain, while serving to ridicule the protagonist, does likewise humanize the 9/11 ringleader.

Amis’s short story also illustrates the curious status of terrorist literature as a form of contemporary historical fiction. The story commences with the acknowledgment of ignorance about Atta’s steps immediately prior to his transfer from Portland, Maine to Logan Airport in Boston on September 11. This ignorance becomes the incentive for an exploration of Atta’s personality, filling hermeneutic gaps in the process of addressing epistemological gaps. Speculating about Atta’s final moments, Amis subscribes to a discourse of Orientalism and othering, denying any rationale for the terrorist attacks; or, rather, he makes sense of the violence precisely by insisting on the fictionalized Atta’s empty, nihilistic obsession with death.

The fifth and last stanza of Clark's poem reflects on this challenge of creating meaningful stories from the available information on the terrorist: "How to build sentences of such transparency / The strange accident of those pictures of the dead / Peels away to reveal a grammar of humanness / Life our school, knowledge of suffering our teacher" (17-20). Until this point, the poem attempts to recreate the hijacker-pilots from childhood stories about Mohamed Atta, family pictures of Ziad Jarrah, or an imaginary visit to Marwan Al-Shehhi's home. Crystallizing this confrontation with the terrorist's background and personality, the final lines of "The Pilots" indicate that what disconcerts us is the humanity or humanness of the perpetrator. The terrorists' transparent humanness, so clear to see in pictures and descriptions, does not seem match their deed. There is an apparent disconnect between a person's violent act and his various personal relationships and activities (a gap terrorist literature tries to bridge via a rendering of a character's consciousness, an endeavor creating more gaps).

In these last lines, Clark tries to construct a lesson about configurations of humanity, based on the "knowledge of suffering" and on the "pictures of the dead"; this latter phrase is reminiscent of the *Portraits of Grief* published in the aftermath of September 11, obituaries or snapshots that likewise felt stunted and incomplete.<sup>vi</sup> The final stanza of "The Pilots" serves as a lesson, asking us to consider the consequences of suffering. But such consequences can of course be wildly different: suffering can beget further violence, enable a person to empathize with others who are in pain, or compel a person to refrain from inflicting violence. The poem thus ends with a vaguely



formulated, almost desperate lesson, born of the bewilderment expressed in the first line of the stanza: "How to build sentences out of such transparency."

In utilizing linguistic terms such as "sentences," "grammar," and "accidence," "The Pilots" addresses in a metatextual fashion the very attempt to discover the source of violence through language, through literature. Clark's poem begs the question of what we expect to find in the snapshots of perpetrators. To put it differently, "The Pilots" highlights the conundrum of terrorist literature: even if a terrorist's life is reimagined, how does one actually connect beginning, middle, and end? Moreover, "The Pilots", involuntarily perhaps, indicates the pitfalls of literature that exposes the human individual behind the façade of the perpetrator. As Judith Butler writes, such apparent humanization of terrorists through the investigation of their idiosyncrasies and private spaces is itself fraught with problems:

We can narrate, for instance, what Mohammed Atta's family life was like, whether he was teased for looking like a girl, where he congregated in Hamburg, and what led, psychologically, to the moment in which he piloted the plane into the World Trade Center. Or what was bin Laden's break from his family, and why is he so mad? That kind of story is interesting to a degree, because it suggests that there is a personal pathology at work. It works as a plausible and engaging narrative in part because it resituates agency in terms of a subject, something we can understand, something that accords with our idea of personal responsibility, or with the theory of charismatic leadership that was popularized with Mussolini and Hitler in World War II.

Isolating the individuals involved absolves us of the necessity of coming up with a broader explanation for events. (“Explanation and Exoneration” 179-80)<sup>vii</sup>

According to Butler, then, capturing the image of the terrorist as son, friend, or cousin can amount to a depoliticization of the attack’s context. I have similarly argued that terrorist literature frequently fails to explore the geopolitical framework that gives meaning to the development of terrorist conspiracies in the Islamic world.<sup>viii</sup>

Ignoring the human component of the terrorist plot would not, of course, convey a complete picture of the evolution of political violence either. It is arguably fiction’s prerogative (and using distinct techniques, also that of drama and poetry) to present the imaginary psyche of an individual without the necessity of providing evidence to support such a speculative, imaginary reproduction of consciousness. The emphasis on personal pathologies in terrorist literature is therefore predictable and indeed not problematic in itself.<sup>ix</sup> Yet tying this personal aspect to a global dimension could, in an explicit or allegorical fashion, address what I consider a major issue of terrorist literature: responsibility is located principally within the Muslim world, whereas self-indictment is largely absent.

Such diminished complexity renders the individual terrorist more graspable, but it also demonstrates a gesture of dismissal: in this view, the issue at the root of terror need not be found in multifaceted geopolitical formations, but inside Islam.<sup>x</sup> To put it differently, the rationale for terror is located by the examined texts in the interstices between individual aspirations and repressive socio-cultural structures. Western policies in the Middle East seem to play no significant role in the recruitment of terrorists and

development of terrorism, according to the texts I have analyzed. Complicating matters further, however, the differentiation between the fictional hijackers, whose imaginary personalities vary dramatically (within each text and across the genre), undermines this very reduction of the Muslim terrorists to their adherence of a fundamentalist belief system; simply put, they are evidently not uniform representatives of an alien, homogenizing/homogeneous ideology.

In sum, Clark outlines in his poem an affective approach to the perpetrators of September 11, in addition to conveying the complexity of articulating moments of death and victimization. Clark interrogates the process of identifying a responsibility and rationale for the terrorist attacks of 9/11 by offering snapshots from the lives of three hijackers. Rather than subscribing to a language of othering, segregating the perpetrators and safeguarding ourselves as it were, Clark visits the homes, the intimate spheres of Ziad Jarrah, Mohamed Atta, and Marwan Al-Shehhi. Presenting mundane facets and personal images of the perpetrators, Clark also emphasizes the challenges inherent in trying to understand the paths that connect ordinary individuals to extraordinary acts. This latter impulse to identify and possibly disallow motives – and to reflect on the very method of developing such motives in poetry, fiction, or drama – is the point of origin of terrorist literature. The contemporary texts I have examined configure a terrorist (plot) by creating a sequence of incidents, motifs, and dialogues that the reader is prompted to “unveil” to make sense of the final, fatal act.

Rather than setting out to evaluate whether the configuration of such sequence of narrative units yields *plausible* responsibilities and reasons, I have focused in my

dissertation, first, on this configuration as such from a narratological viewpoint, arguing that we read most of terrorist literature in both a retrospective and an anticipatory fashion. We already know what is going to happen, and we try to make sense of it while it is happening (see Orr 36). In other words, in the case of many of the texts I have analyzed, we *know* how they *end* – in particular regarding the terrorist-protagonist and the terrorist plot – before we read them. This knowledge of the historically based and thus predetermined violent act affects our reading strategy, as we impose significance on moments in the narrative, constructing a terrorist's mindset in the act of reading.<sup>xi</sup> The stories discussed in Chapter 4 may delineate fictitious incidents which are not in the same way predictable, but I have likewise shown how these texts address the terrorist's process towards the decision to commit a murder-suicide; this decision is either explicitly discussed by other characters, or it is contemplated in moments of psychonarration and narrated monologue.

Investigating the arrangement of the terrorist plot – and the narrative plot, which is in a work like Dubus's *The Garden of Last Days* inextricably tied to the terrorist plot – I have addressed intertextual connections of individual motifs. Several of the motifs, for example the Muslim character's familial and sexual challenges, are reiterated throughout terrorist literature: the terrorists' conflicted sexuality and their tormenting experiences with parental oppression delineated in many of the texts likely signify the supposedly restrictive social environment of Muslim communities. Judging from the literary representations of Atta and other suicide attackers, terrorism thus emerges in part from the impossibility to embrace a non-normative sexual orientation and to

articulate romantic emotions without restraints – they cannot reconcile these emotions with their ideology's rigid tenets. Even as femininity and corporeality repel them, the Muslim characters move between assertions of a violent masculinity and moments depicting his sensitivity, alternately framed as childlike or feminine behavior. The texts describe the emotional and physical discomfort caused by these internal conflicts: the pain is apparently only to be cured with violence directed both outward and inward.

I have discussed the meaning of this motif of corporeality and other key features of terrorist literature in the context of an ongoing discourse that pigeonholes the male Muslim militant. Our expectations influence our reading, as we structure the motivations of the terrorists and their religious and cultural context according to our own concepts of Muslim terrorists or fundamentalists. These expectations, likely encompassing a hostile view of these figures and their attendant beliefs, are occasionally frustrated or interrogated, for instance in the description of the perpetrator in Alexie's "Can I Get a Witness?": a multi-ethnic American, arguably symbolizing the vagaries of a multicultural, open society.

At the same time, the writing of terrorist literature is in a peculiar way influenced by the expectations of the ambient culture. More precisely, it is difficult for writers not to dichotomize when portraying terrorists, or in Versluys's formulation "not to fixate understandable anger on a well-defined enemy" (151). One reason for the creation of an entirely fictitious – rather than fictionalized – terrorist is thus arguably the desire to divest the character from an actual hijacker closely associated with particular images and facts. The fictitious terrorist is at least slightly removed from a localizable, visible

enemy such as Mohamed Atta.<sup>xii</sup> Fictitious characters are arguably less loaded with the weight of contemporary conceptualizations of and historical information on the perpetrators of 9/11; they still represent the enemy, but they can in their fictitiousness also serve to question this enemy (as Bassam and Hammad, for example, do).

To be sure, in spite of my reiteration of the term “enemy”, I have also challenged the definition or identification of the enemy (the process of finding culpability only in the actual perpetrators) and the very idea of the Muslim, fundamentalist/Islamist enemy as situated outside the West. Islam is in fact constitutive of the West, both in terms of the fact that the construction of a Western identity requires the existence of an entity opposed to the West and in terms of Islam’s presence within the West. Gil Anidjar suggests that the enemy is a central entity, both external to the community, as stranger, and tied to the community. For Anidjar enemy is – usually – “not within” and “not the other” (80); the distinction between “other” and “enemy” in Anidjar’s conceptualization seems to be the notion that the enemy demands recognition, needs to be engaged, while the other/Other remains beyond contact or communication. Emile Benveniste, a main source for Anidjar, writes: “It is always because a man born elsewhere is *a priori* an enemy that a mutual bond is necessary to establish between him and the Ego relations of hospitality, which would be inconceivable within the community itself” (294).

The Islamic terrorist, whether we call him Other or enemy, is part of the West in so far as he is central to the demarcation of Western identity. In terrorist literature, the Muslim terrorist interacts with the West, the “Ego” in Beneveniste’s terminology, and engages with the West’s gestures of hospitality. This engagement, however, is always

cautious; indeed, these moments of hospitality, for instance in DeLillo's or in Dubus's novel also precipitate the rejection of hospitality. The bond, as it exists also for Updike's protagonist Ahmad, is an inherently tenuous connection, epitomizing a relationship between the enemy and the community that is always on the verge of failure.

This idea of the enemy as connected to the Ego is therefore reflected in terrorist literature. In fact, I have argued that the Muslim terrorist is constructed as both external to the West and as belonging to it. On the one hand, the Muslim terrorists in fiction exhibit behavior that seems incompatible with the West's enlightened, liberal, Judeo-Christian value system: their interpretation of Islam results in aggression and intolerance; they harbor intense resentment against women, Jews, Americans, and Western culture; and they display the willingness, even zeal to resort to violence. Though explicit explanations are largely absent, from the incidents and units that constitute the already mentioned sequence of the terrorist plot, the reader can glean that this violence – the terrorist act – is primarily presented as an internal problem. It is a means to (re)claim honor and self-worth in light of familial or sexual challenges (symbolizing broader conflicts in the Islamic world) or a way to fulfill an enigmatic demand, epitomized by an inner voice.

On the other hand, as the texts by Alexie and Updike most plainly demonstrate, Islam has become part of the West on account of decades of substantial migration and transnational movements of capital, ideas, and peoples. Moreover, violence does not necessarily arrive from the outside, but emerges within America. In the texts examined in Chapter 4, the terrorist act committed by Muslim characters is a consequence of

Islamic principles as well as of domestic conflicts; more precisely, it is a result of multiculturalism, openness, and hospitality. In Alexie and Updike, the terrorist is the exterior Other who has been transformed into the enemy within – an enemy that is an integral part in the identity-formation of American society and that is a result of specific domestic policies and cultural patterns. In Anidjar's words, the community creates and *is* the enemy, one among several possible enemies.

These policies and values of (perhaps superficial) tolerance and freedom do engender the multicultural, liberal culture so loathed by Updike's protagonist Ahmad. They also appear to allow the *emergence* of the mixed-heritage Ahmad, of the immigrant Abbad (in *Flight*), and of the suicide-bomber in "Can I Get a Witness?", the embodiment of multiculturalism. Terrorist literature therefore critiques not only a supposedly intolerant and repressive Islamic society and belief system, but also – likewise problematically – a multi-ethnic, hospitable American culture.

Hospitality thus becomes a risk to the host, in that the Other (in my broader definition of the Other as the one that is alien and opposed or exterior to the Self) turns against the host. This hostility arrives in spite of the encounter with each other, in spite of the knowledge of the Other's face that is supposed to inspire benevolence in Lévinas's theory. Characters such as Dubus's Bassam and DeLillo's Hammad are certainly affected, almost swayed by the hospitality and sensual pleasures they experience in the United States and Germany; however, these two and the other Muslim terrorists in fiction and drama also reject what for them is the Other.



Terrorist literature reflects Islam's alterity, and it incorporates, through the Muslim characters, the reverse projection of otherness onto the West. The terrorist's encounter with the West as Other highlights the vacillation of belonging and non-belonging (vis-à-vis the West) that terrorist literature delineates. The terrorist recognizes his own precarious location on the edge of Western culture, yet feels drawn to it in some moments; he eventually remains in his marginal place, though whether this decision occurs despite of or because of the lure of the West is not evident. Terrorist literature seems to suggest that the inner conflict – and, by extension, the internal conflicts in Islamic societies – arising from the confrontation with the Other and with an apparently offensive, hateful Western culture actually reaffirms the resolve of the fictional perpetrators to enact the planned deed (*Terrorist* is an exception, as here the face of the Other begets compassion, although at first, it only engenders hatred).

The exemplars of what I call terrorist literature are thus predominantly conservative texts: they largely locate the responsibility for violent acts in the Muslim Other and abstain from critiquing Western neo-colonialist and neo-imperialist policies that arguably aided the evolution of terrorism. Presenting a set of stereotypical, hostile perspectives on Muslims in general and on Islamic terrorists more specifically, the authors of the analyzed texts weave Orientalist patterns into their narratives. Characters such as Atta or Bassam are cast as innocent and boyish, for example, recalling Edward Said's observation that the Oriental is portrayed as childlike whereas the European is supposedly mature (40). In the same vein, I have drawn on Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages* to argue that the depiction of the fictional terrorists as sexually repressed

and not secure in their masculinity is firmly rooted in contemporary Orientalist or “homonationalist” rhetoric (Puar’s subtitle reads *Homonationalism in Queer Times*). Furthermore, both the rigid, unwavering nature of the Muslim characters, in particular of the fictionalized Atta, and the implication that Islam discourages doubt reiterate the Orientalist notion that “reform is a betrayal of Islam” (106).

To find in American and British literature such hostile characterizations of Islam and its – fundamentalist, violent – adherents is hardly surprising; Western writings are affected, first of all, by the horrendous casualties inflicted by the hijacker-pilots on September 11, and, secondly, by the Islamophobia prior and especially following the disaster. Do these same factors influence, perhaps in a different fashion or intensity, fictional approaches to terrorists by Muslim and Arab American writers and by writers from the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia? It would be a valuable project to compare and contrast transnational configurations of terrorism. Muslim writings on contemporary Islamic terrorism and fundamentalism can perhaps not claim greater cultural and psychological authenticity (writers of Muslim faith or Arab heritage do not necessarily have an epistemological “advantage”); however, as they tell the story of Islamic/fundamentalist violence, Muslim and Arab authors can attend to Said’s verdict that “because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action” (3). Needed are works such as Mohsen Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* that implicitly challenge terrorist literature’s reductive localization of the origins of terrorism in Muslim communities – as opposed to Western policies – and that echo terrorist literature in its effort to not just pathologize but also humanize the terrorist.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Paradoxically, another Western value that is opposed, for instance in DeLillo's *Falling Man*, to Islamic principles is the postmodern belief in the contingency of truth and in the value of doubt.

<sup>ii</sup> I am not actually aware of any poems besides Clark's "The Pilots" that not just condemn but try to access or portray the terrorists. In light of the plethora of verses published in the aftermath of September 11, I cannot declare for certain, however, that no other poet has attempted such a portrait.

<sup>iii</sup> The pilot of American Airlines 77, Hani Hanjour, is not included. He was the only pilot not to have been a member of the Hamburg cell.

<sup>iv</sup> Branding a criminal (or terrorist) as intrinsically evil prevents any search for meaningful explanations for the person's deeds. If someone is evil by nature, on what basis can this person or society be held responsible for violent actions? More to the point: is evilness actually intrinsic and inborn, or does it derive from the vices of the perpetrator's culture or community? (see Richter's argument in the following footnote)

<sup>v</sup> I am drawing here on Jörg Thomas Richter, who argues that terrorist fiction after 9/11 displays often times picaresque elements. The picaro's dubious exploits reflect society's shortcomings: "Der moralisch fragwürdige Charakter des Pikaros antwortet auf die moralische Fragwürdigkeit der ihn umgebenden Gesellschaft" (121-2). In English: "The morally dubious character of the picaro echoes the moral dubiousness of the community surrounding him."

<sup>vi</sup> MaryAnn Snyder-Körber writes that these texts are "markedly brief and, in their emphasis on the daily and ordinary, tend to understatement." The *Portraits* also seem spontaneous or improvised – the "contingencies of impromptu memorial practice ... mark the page" (453). Snyder-Körber therefore argues to consider the texts as snapshots: "The evocation of the snapshot aligns the print series with a visual form that is informal, unassuming, and, perhaps most significantly, intimate" (454). I suggest that the first three stanzas of Clark's poem can be likewise regarded as snapshots – brief, personal, and impressionistic.

<sup>vii</sup> In a sense, my emphasis on terrorists in 9/11 literature reflects Butler's very point about the isolation of individual perpetrators as opposed to a more comprehensive articulation of responsibilities – of course my discussion is not intended to promote a focus on the individuals at the expense of the wider context of September 11.

<sup>viii</sup> As I have likewise stated, there are certainly moments in the texts that hint, for example, at military and political conflicts in Central Asia and the Middle East or at the resentment against the American presence in Saudi Arabia.

<sup>ix</sup> Through the reproduction of personal narratives (or narration), the texts can offer claims about networks, belief systems as well as historical contingencies and conflicts to transcend this personal, domestic sphere, displaying a world of intersecting ideas and people; such a world can be formed in dialogues or reflections, not only by incorporating different locations.

<sup>x</sup> To some extent, the stories discussed in Chapter 4 constitute an exception, as they treat terrorism as in part a domestic, American product.

<sup>xi</sup> In the case of recent terrorist literature, we are not only aware of the conclusion of the plot but we are also invested in the depiction of the terrorist, mostly described as an evil perpetrator in contemporary discourse. Our very approach to reading these texts is therefore affected by our considerations on the origins of terrorism and our anticipation of a text's culmination in an attack.

<sup>xii</sup> To be sure, the examples of 9/11 literature that portray Mohamed Atta also reflect, subvert, and/or reinforce narratives on terrorism that emerge in U.S. media and politics following the disaster. Incorporating the public image of Atta in constructing their own Atta, the fictionalized hijacker is shaped as much by the Western writers' idiosyncrasies as by the current discourse on terrorism and Islam.

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