

## Nationalism and Alterity in Laila Halaby and Jess Walter

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### Synopsis

This essay explores the metaphoric construction of the terrorist Other in 9/11 scholarship and literature. While academics demand an ethical engagement with Arab and Muslim Americans, they unwittingly reify a binary distinction of Other-Same that triangulates terrorist identity through ordinary Arabs and Muslims. Looking at Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* and Walter's *The Zero*, I suggest an alternative metaphor for terrorism not as a regional or religious population, but as an internal impulse that dwells within us all. Doing so more ethically and productively aligns terrorism with the threat to global security in the post-9/11 era.

### Biography

Aaron DeRosa earned his PhD from Purdue University. His work has appeared in *Studies in the Novel*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, the *Journal of Literary Theory*, and the edited collection *Portraying 9/11*. His current project, *Evolving Wounds: Cultural Trauma, the Atomic Bomb, and 9/11*, traces Cold War resonances in post-9/11 fiction.

### Essay

I begin where this conference asks us to begin, by revisioning terrorism: defining terrorism, talking about terrorism, and talking about talking about terrorism. What we say about terrorism matters. How we say it matters as well, but I'll return to that at the end of my presentation. After this panel concludes, I will go across the quad where I will finish up a two-week section on Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* in which my students and I will attempt to define terrorism through the characters of Hammad and Ernst Hechinger. Those students, if I do my job right, will come out with a better understanding of the complicated, polymorphous nature of the term and hopefully will not be as quick to associate it with Islam as the technician at the Indiana Blood Center who, on seeing me reading Halaby's novel, commented that Islam was a violent religion and Mohammad an evil dictator. The stakes of this are high, at least in my own little slice of the world.

My students are young. They were anywhere from 10 to 15 when the planes hit. There is not a lot of hate in their hearts, but there is a lot of confusion. I feel it is my duty as an educator to dispel them of their myths about terrorism as best I can. This is an ethical imperative on my part to dissociate Islam from terrorism, to clarify that Arabs are not the enemy. I share the same impulse as a host of post-9/11 scholars who cry for an ethical responsibility toward the Other, the Other defined as Arabs and Muslims both in America and abroad. Kristiaan Versluys described this as a "poethic" imperative and Richard Gray challenged writers to consider America as an "interstitial space, a locus of interaction between contending national and cultural constituencies" (18). Yet such an

impulse to consider the position of the Other should strike us as odd when we consider historical precedent. As John Duvall rightly states:

If one retrospectively applied [the] perspective [of these critics] to fiction after World War I, one might be forced to say that Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* are failures for their oblique treatment of the root cause of a historical trauma.... Hemingway and Woolf, from this critical perspective, should have attempted to face the Serbian other.

What makes the contemporary situation so different that it requires a seemingly unprecedented shift in sympathies? We will address that question in a moment.

First let us say that such a shift is neither wrong nor undesirable, as America's response to 9/11 has instigated a "deadly spiral of violence" both in terms of its military actions abroad and its anti-Arab and Muslim sentiment within the US. A chilling Gallup poll conducted in 2006 indicated that one third of Americans felt Muslims were sympathetic to al Qaeda and "fewer than half believe U.S. Muslims are loyal to the United States" (Saad). In 2010 things don't look much different as 43% of Americans *admitted* to being prejudiced against Muslims, which says nothing of how many Americans are *actually* prejudiced. This painting of all Muslims as untrustworthy terrorists has been promoted from the beginning. Anna Bernard compared newscasts on September 11, 2001 that implicitly (and in the case of FOX News, explicitly) asked their audience to conflate terrorists with Palestinians and in turn, all Arab-looking peoples. And in a recent article in *Harper's*, Petra Bartosiewicz describes how the FBI has institutionalized these generalizations by seeking out not only terrorist cells, but by targeting Muslims and Arabs they fear *might become* terrorists. Reminiscent of Philip K. Dick's SF story "Minority Report" in which future crimes can be predicted and thwarted by cognitively advanced mutant telepaths, the FBI stages sting operations on Muslim Americans in an effort to draw out *potential* terrorist activity; often these targets don't even know they're involved in a terrorist plot, let alone an FBI sting of that plot. Yet this has not stopped them from being investigated and convicted.

The logic that underlies these practices relies on the conflation of Arab and Muslim Americans with global jihadists—that is, the establishment of a binary us-them, inside-outside logic (what I will later describe as a "container" metaphor). What is important is that post-9/11 scholarship, even that which seeks to counteract the racial profiling of the general media, engages in its own conflation of "ordinary" Arabs and Muslims with terrorists. In doing so, they unwittingly establish an association between these innocent populations and the jihadists just as FOX News conflated Palestinians with the 9/11 hijackers.

And in privileging these texts above others, they overwrite the lived reality of American history where the principle response to Arabs and Muslims after 9/11 was far more violent than it was curious. In doing so they generate an "imagined community" of America as a tolerant, peaceful nation, which is no less problematic than the patriotic, city-on-the-hill rhetoric against which these same scholars situate themselves. Both approaches impute a vision of a victimized America and unwittingly align Arabs and Muslims with a terrorist Other. Indeed, this is precisely what Lebanese-born Jordanian American writer Laila Halaby takes aim at in her compelling novel, *Once in a Promised Land*.

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Briefly summarizing, the novel depicts the dissolution of the marriage of Salwa and Jassim, an Arab American couple living in Phoenix, AZ. Their marriage deteriorates for a host of reasons, among which 9/11 barely registers. Salwa, a highly successful banker and realtor, falls prey to the “evolutionary mandate” (11) to have a child. She secretly stops taking birth control, gets pregnant, and has a miscarriage. The thought of raising a family in America and the trauma of the miscarriage drives a wedge between her and Jassim. At the same time, Jassim is involved in a car accident that takes the life of a white teenager. Neither able to deal with the death nor confide in his distracted wife, Jassim’s clockwork routine dissolves. Salwa and Jassim barely speak to one another throughout the novel, and both begin extra-marital relationships. Their growing distance from one another, however, is not caused by 9/11, but rather an ennui generated by the alluring yet elusive siren song of the American dream.

To be sure, 9/11 plays a role in the novel. It prompts a teenager at the mall to call security on Jassim for staring too long at a motorcycle. Later, Salwa deals with a client at the bank who inquires about her heritage before asking to be helped by “someone [she] can understand better” (114). Salwa saucily replies, “Of course. Would you like to work with a Mexican man or an American lesbian?” And ultimately it is the post-9/11 surveillance culture that prompts an FBI investigation of Jassim’s vehicular homicide—the teenager was anti-Arab—and subsequent altered routine, eventually leading to his firing.

Yet while 9/11 generates these explicit behaviors, the more pernicious problem Halaby identifies is the false inclusiveness promised by the American dream. Despite Salwa’s personal and financial success, there is something alienating and isolating about American culture. This is not realized as a result of the post-9/11 anti-Arab sentiment, but rather through the initiation of her adulterous relationship with her coworker Jake.

Jake seems genuinely interested in Salwa’s cultural heritage, learning conversational Arabic for her and inquiring about her family traditions surrounding Ramadan. But readers learn he is not drawn to her, but rather to her exoticism. She is a land to colonize, a body to conquer. Halaby even hints at the notion that his interest in Salwa may be 9/11-induced: “What baffled [Jake] was that he had never really noticed her until late in the fall, when she had glided onto his *radar screen* one morning” (171; emphasis added), invoking the imagery of air-traffic control. When they finally kiss, she reprimands herself in English because adultery is “an American problem, an American situation.” Afterward, “Salwa felt lost, which is how it came to be that she began thinking again about going home. Back to Jordan, with her family and her language and her predictable world” (176). She does not leave immediately, though. Instead, she consummates her relationship with Jake, twice, before resolving to leave America for good. When she tries to tell Jake, the promise of tolerance and respect that he demonstrates in his early romantic overtures are replaced by a blind, drug-induced rage. He brutally beats her and she is hospitalized, unable to make her flight home.

We see a similar impulse in Jassim’s relationship to his boss and friend, Marcus. Marcus is reluctant to give in to the office’s suspicions surrounding Jassim, despite the

loss of clients and an increasingly intrusive FBI investigation. But when he learns of Jassim's accident secondhand, Marcus feels betrayed and fires Jassim. Marcus's actions are not inspired by 9/11—Halaby has given no inclination Marcus views himself as a watchdog of the homeland. Instead, Marcus's actions are inspired by a sense of misplaced trust. Marcus justifies his firing of Jassim by spinning a narrative of himself as ethically superior, trusting, and inclusive—he pats himself on the back for having a Muslim friend. Yet in spite of this, his response to Jassim after this switch is no different from the teenager at the mall who called security: Jassim is escorted out of the office as a potential security risk, unable to collect his papers.

In both situations, the promise of an inclusive America that accepts Arabs and Muslims is proven false regardless of the events of 9/11. Of course, the construction of this Other-Same binary is problematic in that the Other we WANT to identify is the terrorist Other, but the Other we seek to address in scholarly discourse is the Arab and Muslim Other. That is, we seem to feel we can learn about the one population by triangulating through the other. Doing so reifies this binary logic and misidentifies what terrorism actually is.

These misidentifications are precisely what Arjun Appadurai warns us about in *Fear of Small Numbers* when he describes the complex generation of global terrorism. Not only can the West inspire terrorists through their military ventures abroad, but at home as well where anti-Islamic rhetoric directed at the internal minority aligns otherwise non-militant Muslims with the terrifying external majority (111). The result of this is that some “among these minorities—often educated, disaffected youth—begin to identify themselves with the cellular world of global terror rather than the isolating world of national minorities. Thus they morph from one kind of minority—weak, disempowered, disenfranchised, and angry—to another kind of minority—cellular, globalized, transnational, armed, and dangerous” (112-13). The attackers involved in the 2005 bombing of the London Underground, Appadurai argues, were “Born out of the shreds and patches of British multiculturalism. . . . it is the rogue voice of an injured global majority” (111).

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It is this isolation we see depicted in Jess Walter's *The Zero*. Told from the perspective of a NYPD officer-turned-secret-federal agent, *The Zero* mocks US efforts to draw out and identify terrorists. The novel follows Brian Remy's investigation of a recipe for pecan-encrusted sole that should have been destroyed on 9/11, but was somehow recovered days after, leading the paranoid Office of Liberty and Recovery to suspect a woman was tipped off to the attack. Remy ultimately finds out the lead is a dead end, but not before murdering and torturing a number of innocent Arab Americans. Meanwhile, the Office of Liberty and Recovery vies with the FBI and CIA in an internal turf war that culminates in a sting operation in which every suspect is a government-backed informant.

Although the novel is fiction, it seems to draw on a number of real-life FBI cases. One such case is the prosecution and conviction of Yassin Aref and Mohammed Hossain, two Muslim immigrants involved in a “missile plot” in Albany. The two were accused of money laundering for a terrorist group seeking to buy a missile. “Yet in

announcing the arrest of Aref and Hossain, the FBI allowed that their crimes were ‘not real’ and that the public had never actually been in jeopardy. The plot had been a sting operation wherein the FBI concocted the assassination plan and furnished the weapon . . . it was unclear that either man even knew he was involved in a terrorist plot” (Bartosiewicz 37). The sting was designed not to investigate individual terrorists, but susceptibility to corruption in the Muslim community; a corruption that was not easily linked to any terrorist activity.

Such is the case for the Middle Eastern characters in Walter’s *The Zero*. Each element of the final sting operation is staged, but uncoordinated. The informants are unsure what their roles are supposed to be and when one refuses to participate another eggs him on: “Look, just say some crazy shit on the tape. . . . You don’t have to do anything after that. Just cover your face, hold the machine gun, and say infidels and wolves and shit like that” (312). But the operation goes awry and all the informants are killed but one.

The only Middle Eastern survivor is Jaguar—a Western-educated doctor disappointed with the racist intonations of his codename—who senses the trap and follows Remy to Penn Station where he detonates the US-government-supplied explosives. Jaguar’s motivation, however, is unclear. When Remy asks him whether or not he “work[s] for us,” Jaguar responds: “I’m sorry, but your idea of *us* tends to be a little bit fluid. You switch sides indiscriminately . . . arm your enemies and wonder why you get shot with your own guns. . . . *Are you with us?* . . . May as well ask if I am aligned with the wind” (291). It is uncertain whether he detonates the bomb to take vengeance on Remy and the various government agencies for abusing Arab Americans or to fulfill the mission Remy initiated, supposedly in America’s best interests. The bombing is viewed as a victory in the War on Terror because, the media reports at least only one bomb was detonated.

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Walter’s novel speaks to the fear of small numbers Appadurai described and highlights an important distinction between what terrorism is and how we approach it. For Walter, terrorism is a tactic one employs, not a group one belongs to. At its heart this is a problem of the metaphor we use to describe terrorism. As Lakoff and Johnson, and more recently Fauconnier and Turner, have argued, human thought is largely metaphorical in nature and metaphors play a huge part in how we generate solutions to perceived problems. People offer different solutions to a problem if it is described as a beast or a virus, for instance. “In the former case they are most likely to call for strong law enforcement, whereas in the latter they are more open to solutions such as rehabilitation and the understanding of root causes” (Ball).

After 9/11, terrorism was largely perceived through a container metaphor: terrorism is a group that one belongs to, with an identifiable region, religion, skin color, and uniform. Thus, George Bush could easily sell to the American public “We are fighting these terrorists with our military in Afghanistan and Iraq and beyond so we do not have to face them in the streets of our own cities” (2701). This distinctly nationalist approach is evident throughout Bush’s 2006 “National Strategy for Combating

Terrorism,” that solves the problem through democratizing the Middle East. Terrorism, for Bush and many others, is a beast.

In contrast, others saw “Islamic fanaticism . . . as a repressive ideology, born of complex societal conditions, that won’t be defeated by any predominately military solution” (Bai). As Richard Holbrooke put it, “The war on terror is like saying ‘the war on poverty.’ It’s just a metaphor. What we’re really talking about is winning the ideological struggle so that people stop turning themselves into suicide bombers” (Bai). President Obama’s revised “National Strategy for Counterterrorism” takes a different angle, identifying that we “are not at war with the tactic of terrorism or the religion of Islam. We are at war with a specific organization—al-Qa’ida.” This deterritorialized strategy against an ideological position poses vastly different possibilities in the fight against extremism. Terrorism is a virus.

Of course, both the beast and virus metaphors imply an externalization of the threat: a foreign invasion. But as Walter and Halaby both argue in their novels, terrorism is just a strategy and a terrorist is one who performs that operation. That is, terrorism is a decision we make, not a group we belong to. A war against terrorism is, as Robert Adolph put it, a war “on our worst impulses.”

Drawing binary categories of Other-Same, even as part of an ethical imperative, do nothing to help us understand or combat the internal impulse that leads one to terrorist activities. Surprisingly, and perhaps upsettingly, it is precisely this impulse the racially-targeted FBI investigations seek to determine: not who is a terrorist, but who will become one. In this, Philip K. Dick’s mind-bending “Minority Report” may be quite instructive. The detective surmises that as soon as someone determines what the future will be, “*it cancels itself out*. The assertion that [a particular individual] will commit a future crime is paradoxical. The very act of possessing that data renders it spurious” (213-14). Put differently, recognizing terrorism as an action one chooses rather than an external Other places us in a position to cancel out the future violence our ignorance might otherwise have promoted. Perhaps it is through an investigation of these impulses that our greatest hope for security lies.

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