

## DeLillo's *Falling Man* and the Trouble with Sympathy in Narratives of Terrorism

Jessica McDonald

*University of Saskatchewan*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), and the [Comparative Literature Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

### Recommended Citation

McDonald, Jessica. "DeLillo's *Falling Man* and the Trouble with Sympathy in Narratives of Terrorism." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 18.3 (2016): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2823>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 521 times as of 11/07/19.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 18 Issue 3 (September 2016) Article 6**  
**Jessica McDonald,**  
**"DeLillo's *Falling Man* and the Trouble with Sympathy in Narratives of Terrorism"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss3/6>>

---

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 18.3 (2016)**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss3/>>

---

**Abstract:** In her article "DeLillo's *Falling Man* and the Trouble with Sympathy in Narratives of Terrorism" Jessica McDonald discusses the ways Don DeLillo's characterization of a 9/11 terrorist elicits reader sympathy in his 2007 novel *Falling Man*. McDonald argues that introducing sympathy into narratives of terrorism undermines attempts to understand the contextual issues out of which terrorism arises even if the rhetoric of sympathy may seem to foster a sense of "fellow-feeling" that makes acts of political protest and resistance more accessible to broader publics.

Jessica McDONALD

### DeLillo'S *Falling Man* and the Trouble with Sympathy in Narratives of Terrorism

In January 2015, the majority-holding Conservative party of the Canadian government proposed Bill C-51, also titled colloquially as the *Anti-Terrorism Act*. Passed by the House of Commons and the Senate, the bill effects significant changes to existing antiterrorism legislation in Canada by "establish[ing] criminal offences that infringe upon the right to free expression" through its "amend[ment to] the Criminal Code to create an ambiguous and sweeping new offence of advocating or promoting terrorism offences in general" (*What does C-51 Mean* 3). While the Canadian public continues to voice concerns about the bill's effects on expressions of protest and dissent, the Canadian Association of University Teachers reminds us that "there are also specific concerns about the impact of the legislation on academic freedom and free speech on university and college campuses" (*What does C-51 Mean* 3). Most concerning, the bill may have permanent, detrimental effects on the scope and tenor of scholarly dialogues about terrorism, discouraging scholars from contributing to more nuanced considerations of terrorist attacks, considerations which may not accord with the government's and media's refusals to see terrorism as anything but unprovoked, senseless violence against innocent nations. The bill threatens to restrict a conversation about terrorism that has been expanding in recent years with the help of public, scholarly, and artistic endeavors. Given the representational flexibility inherent in artistic expression, artists, and writers in particular, have been able to advance controversial understandings of terrorism: art, of course, has long been vital to movements of resistance and protest precisely because it can be politically safer to express unpopular, unlawful, or seemingly unethical ideas within the cover of fiction. Using Don DeLillo's 2007 novel *Falling Man* as a model of this kind of artistic expression, I explore how sympathy is used in narratives of radical Islamic terrorism. I argue that while introducing sympathy into accounts of terrorism may seem to help us comprehend terrorist actions and motives in a way that is more tolerant, politically informed, and contextualized, it can infantilize the terrorist subject and contribute to stereotypical understandings of radical Islamic terrorists as brainwashed servants of their faith, as intellectually and socially inferior, and as misled by more reductively evil leaders or religious tenets. Through DeLillo's text, I posit that the discourse of sympathy can overwrite the historical, political, and contextual issues out of which these acts of protest and resistance arise.

Nearly sixteen years have passed since the radical Islamic group al-Qaeda's attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on 2001 September 11. Unsurprisingly, then, the problems, anxieties, and tensions undergirding 9/11 discourse have already been examined in scholarly and public circles. Indeed, representations of 9/11 in literature, media, and popular culture have been vital objects of study for scholars from Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn to Kristiaan Versluys to Slavoj Žižek. The vast breadth of scholarship related to 9/11's representation testifies to the import of the event not just as a physical or political reshaping of New York and U.S. geographies and populations, but also as a powerful discursive force that reshapes—and is used in the service of—ideologies. As Versluys writes, "September 11—for all the physicality of planes impacting on giant skyscrapers and for all the suffering caused to victims and their near and dear—is ultimately a semiotic event" (2). While Versluys's "ultimate" assertion risks understating the physical reality and material traumas of 9/11, it is true that reconstructions of the event are for many of us—especially those of younger generations and non-New Yorkers—the only means by which we will ever come to know 9/11, and thus our experiences of the attack are entirely mediated. This reality underscores the crucial need for ongoing interrogations of such mediations, as they are what continue to form public opinion of 9/11, radical Islam, and terrorism, and they consequently have real-world effects on political decisions regarding international relations, security, and (the restriction of) civil liberties.

In *Falling Man* DeLillo addresses 9/11 as a semiotic event, staging the lead-up, event, and aftermath of the attacks from various perspectives. Among the novel's main characters are New York-based estranged couple Lianne and Keith Neudecker; their son, Justin; Lianne's mother, Nina; Nina's lover, Martin; and Hammad and Amir, the most prominent of the novel's terrorists, who plot to take down the towers. Beginning and ending around the time of the attacks, the novel moves forward and backward in time and weaves between different focalizing characters. The novel follows Keith, Lianne, and family as they attempt to negotiate the post-9/11 social and cultural landscape of New York. Lianne begins to question her faith and sinks into a spiritual crisis lasting the length of the novel. Keith finds temporary solace in the heart (and bed) of a fellow survivor, and later immerses himself in the more regulated world of poker. Justin and his friends spend their time peering out the window with binoculars, waiting for another plane to hit, and listening for any news of "Bill Lawton," though the reader knows they mean Osama bin Laden.

Structurally, the novel has three parts. Each part includes a shorter section, separately titled, detailing the life of Hammad in the months and years during which he and the other terrorists prepare for the attacks. As others have noted (see, e.g., Mauro; Pöhlmann; Rowe), these sections are given far less space in the book than Neudecker's sections, although their brevity is to be expected in a novel that sets out to depict the U.S. side of 9/11 trauma. The first of these shorter sections introduces the reader to the pre-attack world of the terrorists in Hamburg, Germany, where they study architecture, engineering, and urban planning (79), look "at videos of jihad in other countries" (80), learn English (82), and read the Koran (83). In the second section, the same group partakes in flight training in Nokomis, Florida (171). The last section takes us inside the hijacked plane. Having just sprayed the inner cabin with tear gas, Hammad waits for the crash, telling himself to "recite the sacred words" (238) and, oddly, buckling his seatbelt (239). These are the last moments we witness in Hammad's eyes before the narrative returns to Keith for the last pages of the novel. Much of the existing criticism

of *Falling Man* concerning Hammad is structured by the question of whether he is mostly Westernized or mostly Orientalized. Here, I invoke Edward W. Said's famed articulation of Orientalism to refer to the trend of misrepresenting the East in Western discourse, especially discourse that reduces the East to "the same clichés, the same demeaning stereotypes," as a "justification for ... violence" (xxi). According to Deepa Kumar in *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, there are five widely used Orientalist assumptions (or myths, in her terminology): "Islam is a monolithic religion" (42), "Islam is a uniquely sexist religion" (44), "the 'Muslim mind' is incapable of reason and rationality" (48), "Islam is an inherently violent religion" (52), and "Muslims are incapable of democracy and self-rule" (55). When scholars speak of Orientalist tropes, they often mean one or more of these myths.

Abbasali Borhan and Hossein Pirnajmuddin's coauthored paper and Sascha Pöhlmann's article both fall into this camp of scholarship that emphasizes the ways DeLillo uses Orientalist tropes to depict Hammad and his compatriots. Borhan and Pirnajmuddin argue that DeLillo "greatly relies on the Orientalist discourse" (128), contending that DeLillo reinforces the mistaken "Orientalist thesis of the incompatibility of Islam with Western modernity" (120) by portraying Muslims in the novel as a mass with a singular, static identity (124), by neglecting to offer a fully-developed, multidimensional Muslim character (123), by establishing a narrative in which Muslims "find themselves imprisoned in the Western societies, suppress their xenophobia, and finally, turning into global 'parasites,' decide to destroy their host community" (121), and by drawing on Orientalist stereotypes of Iranians as fundamentally revengeful, fanatical, and superstitious (126). Pöhlmann assesses similarly that "*Falling Man* ultimately fails to leave dominant ideological frameworks precisely in its attempts at representation, and ... it does not succeed in imagining the terrorist as anything other than an Orientalist construction of an Islamist terrorist" (51). Giving marginally more credit to DeLillo, Pöhlmann argues that the novel includes "narratives that emphasize a plurality of viewpoints rather than a singular explanation" (51) and avoids typical victim/oppressor, good/evil binaries (56), thus declaring DeLillo's representational ethics a "partial success" (53). Yet, Pöhlmann's ultimate conclusion remains that the terrorists are "two-dimensional vectors with only one speed and one direction, going straight into the towers without any significant detours or ambivalences of representation" (59). On the other side of *Falling Man* scholarship are those critics—namely John Carlos Rowe and Linda S. Kauffman—who argue that Hammad and company are Westernized. Rowe asserts that "DeLillo gives some human definition to Hammad only to Westernize him" (129) and posits that "Hammad's Westernized desires and confused soul do not adequately represent the rage or the violence directed against the United States by groups and individuals who are willing to die for the barest chance to 'speak out' against first-world arrogance" (132). While in some ways Rowe narrates a realistic depiction of the often violent efforts of fundamental Islam, his positioning of terrorism as primarily against the U.S., and not also emerging from within and because of the U.S., echoes the Orientalist master narrative of radical Islamic terror. This narrative positions the non-white, non-U.S. citizen as the terrorist and U.S.-Americans as victims who neither provoke nor deserve such resistance despite their unwelcome and frequently violent impositions into the political situations of foreign countries. Rowe also reads Hammad's characterization in a subtly Orientalist way when he rejects any potentially "Western" parts of Hammad's personality as somehow inauthentic. And Kauffman, too, claims Hammad is Westernized, though she problematically uses the word "normal" to suggest this. While Hammad, she writes, "secretly harbors doubts about jihad...wants marriage and children...[and] has an overwhelming desire simply to be 'normal,'" Amir is conversely "the true believer who eliminates all contradictions. With his superior powers of abstraction and rhetoric, [Amir] breaks down Hammad's resistance," taking advantage of Hammad, who "reluctantly surrenders his individuality" (355-56). Kauffman therefore pits the "normal," conflicted Western subjectivity of Hammad against what she sees as the more absolute, singular Eastern subjectivity of Amir.

If Borhan and Pirnajmuddin and Pöhlmann constitute one end of the critical spectrum and if Rowe and Kauffman form the other end, Ahmed Gamal's study comparing *Falling Man* to John Updike's 2006 *Terrorist* and Aaron DeRosa's article on otherness in post-9/11 fiction form a kind of middle ground. Gamal admits that DeLillo's and Updike's novels "draw heavily on popular Orientalism and stereotypes," but he adds that both novelists still offer "a passionate analytical portrait of a terrorist prone to emergent individual and social frailties rather than to inherent debilitating cultural and intellectual models or value systems" (96). In this way, the novels express a kind of "cultural ambivalence toward the other," forming a "step toward beginning a new kind of writing that ... challenges these conventions and traditions that are informed by the familiar oppositions between 'them' and 'us,' East and West, and the premodern and modern" (96). For Gamal, DeLillo presents a "balanced view" of 9/11 "that acknowledges the twin evils of Islamophobia and anti-Westernism" (114). Similarly DeRosa argues that while Hammad may sometimes be grouped together with his compatriots in a kind of Orientalist blanketing, he is also "individualized" (165) through his doubts about the plot, his dodging of "extremist positions," and his "attention ... to female sexuality" (166). However, for DeRosa, Hammad is not sexualized in an Orientalist way—his "hypersexuali[ty] ... is not depicted as a marker of difference"—nor is he "filled with jihadist rage," making him an ambivalent figure whose representation strays away from extremes (166).

Given these two poles of argumentation, there are some limitations in the very structure of the dialogue happening about DeLillo's representation of the terrorists. The dialogue thus far tends to uphold the problematic Orientalized/Westernized binary, which in turn upholds a spectrum of authenticity through which the cultural and religious authenticity of Hammad's experience is assessed. Both sides of the argument claim a problematic inauthenticity in DeLillo's portrait of Hammad whether that inauthenticity is said to stem from Orientalist or Westernized coloring of character. And while evaluating the accuracy of representations, particularly representations of alterity, is a vital part of literary analysis, in the case of *Falling Man* this approach limits the critical discussion from developing into anything

more than simply comprehending Hammad through the established patterns of discourse on terrorism (i.e., patterns that pit the East against the West). This is the critical oversight I seek to address by focusing on the use of sympathy in the novel's narrative of terror and thereby rounding out the already contentious debate on this character and on representations and discourses of radical Islamic terrorism more generally.

Here, a note on terminology is necessary, as the term "sympathy" is used widely and differently across contexts. Sophie Ratcliffe rightly admits in *On Sympathy* that "one of the main challenges when writing about the idea of sympathy is the vagueness that surrounds the term itself" (8). Like Ratcliffe, I do not seek to "resolve the question of what sympathy is" within the scope of this paper (20): my argument rests instead on a rather conventional definition of the word, which the online version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* explains as "the fact or capacity of entering into or sharing the feelings of another," or, more to the point, the creation of "fellow-feeling" (see *oed.com* [subscription necessary]). While I would not assume a unified readership, one that experiences fellow-feeling in the exact same way, I do assert that there are behaviors that characters demonstrate which would reasonably inspire fellow-feeling or sympathy in most readers. These include showing affection or caring for other human beings (and living creatures more generally); expressing feelings of concern, sadness, regret, and love; taking part in harmless, everyday activities, such as walking one's dog, buying groceries, or watching television, and so on. Sympathetic figures develop within the interpretive space that results from a general, morally conventional reader being able to easily put herself in the shoes of the character. This discussion of sympathy leads us to a similar term that is useful here, even if it is oft-decried in literary studies: relatability. According to the online version of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, something relatable is something "with which one can identify" (see *oed.com* [subscription necessary]). This is an admittedly broad definition, but the gist behind it—the act of identifying with someone—leads us to the central questions of this paper: what aspects of Hammad bring him into relation with readers who might not easily identify with the terrorist subject, or with followers of radical Islam, and what are the implications of this constructed reader-character identification on understandings of radical Islamic terrorism more generally? By shifting the focus to sympathy, fellow-feeling, and relatability, I hope to avoid simply concluding that Hammad aligns too much or not enough with the East or West—an assessment that bolsters rather than deconstructs a dialogue of extremes—while also addressing the problems that come with introducing sympathy into narratives of terror.

Through the novel, Hammad is revealed as a character who can at once garner the reader's sympathy and prompt her condemnation. We are first introduced to Hammad in front of a mosque in Hamburg after evening prayer. The mosque is a "shabby building with graffiti smeared on the outer walls and a setting of local strolling whores" (77-78), a description that signals the relegation of the Islamic community to the neighborhood ghettos and marks their status as ostensible outsiders in the city (although, according to Tom Heneghan, Hamburg's Islamic community made up a full five percent of the city-state's population in 2010 with around four million Muslims residing in Germany more broadly) (<<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/hamburg-set-to-be-first-german-state-to-officially-recognize-islam/article4329474/>>). The graffiti on the walls of the mosque suggests it is not looked after by the government and public, despite its being held in high spiritual regard by those who use it. The shabbiness of the place is made all the more important because it is the first setting in which we see Hammad. We are thus immediately encouraged to think of him as a figure of destitution and exclusion, eliciting our sympathy for the man and his apparently ostracized community. We also begin to see, early on, how Hammad is an outsider even within his own peer group, occupying the bottom of the social totem pole. DeLillo describes Hammad's encounters with the men in his group: "They studied urban planning and one of them blamed the Jews for defects in construction. The Jews build walls too thick, aisles too narrow. The Jews built the toilet in this flat too close to the floor so a man's stream of liquid leaves his body and travels so far it makes a noise and a splash, which people in the next room can sit and listen to ... Hammad wasn't sure whether this was funny, true or stupid. He listened to everything they said, intently" (79). For Rowe, in these moments, "DeLillo seems to stress Hammad's ordinariness, his lack of intellectual sophistication, both as part of his common humanity and his willingness to be recruited" (123), but I read something more into this characterization. Hammad's inability to determine the socially correct response to his comrade's spiel demonstrates Hammad's separation from the strain of radical Islamic thought that has historically vilified the Jewish community. Either Hammad does not know about this history (he wonders if the man's remarks are "true"), or he does not accept this exaggerated and radical criticism of Judaism (he considers the remarks might be "stupid"). In either case, whether he is unlearned in the history of this conflict or skeptical of the prejudices that have amounted from it, Hammad's genuine admission of confusion and social uncertainty encourages reader sympathy. This uncertainty stands in stark opposition to the absolutism frequently thought, by lingering Orientalist thinking, to define Islam (and, certainly, to define radical Islam). Moreover, Hammad's uncertainty about the very same things that his companions seem so certain of marks him as different from his apparently more radical peers, another move that elicits our sympathy.

Even Hammad's physical appearance elicits reader sympathy: "He was a bulky man, clumsy, and thought all his life that some unnamed energy was sealed in his body, too tight to be released" (79). The descriptor "clumsy" suggests a physical carelessness while "bulky" might connote that his body makes it difficult for him to operate smoothly and with dexterity. As a counterpoint, Amir is described as "intense, a small thin wiry man" (79); his physicality suggests a litheness and a concealed power (because he is thin) that accords with stereotypical imaginations of terrorists, which frequently conjure fears of furtive movements across borders and sinister infiltrations through immigration and deceitful performances of allegiance—fears that are concretized in, for example, public outcry in the West about the wearing of burqas in official procedures of citizenship and travel. It is not only Amir who physically

embodies these fears. Hammad, too, is described as having a kind of restrained power: the "unnamed energy" (79) that perhaps mitigates the impression of incapability we get from his other descriptors. This described energy problematically suggests an innate anger or rage associated with Hammad's biological and genetic make-up. The implications here are clear, though troubling: it is this "unnamed energy" that leads Hammad down the path of radical Islam and eventually leads to his part in the attacks. In terms of fostering sympathy, this description risks suggesting that Hammad is not accountable for his actions because "all his life" he has been genetically, physically, and culturally predisposed to release this energy abruptly and, perhaps, violently. The unsettling image projected here is thus one of the Muslim body as a bomb of terror waiting to go off.

Apart from his interactions with peers and his physicality, another aspect of Hammad that elicits sympathy is his relationship with Leyla, his lover in Hamburg. DeLillo constructs a love story for Hammad and Leyla which fosters fellow-feeling and demonstrates Hammad's capacity for intimacy, care, and affection. With Leyla, Hammad gets caught up in the moment: "There was a rush, a pull that made it hard to see beyond the minute. He flew through the minutes and felt the draw of some huge future landscape opening up, all mountain and sky" (82). This passage points to both the earthly joy Hammad is beginning to feel as well as the temptation to stray from his mission in search of this brightly described "future landscape" wherein he might enjoy a long(er), pleasurable life. Hammad even entertains the idea of marriage and children, fostering fellow-feeling for readers who see these goals as signs of harmlessness, innocence, or good intent: "sometimes he wanted to marry [Leyla] and have babies but this was only in the minutes after he left her flat, feeling like a footballer running across the field after scoring a goal, all-world, his arms flung wide" (82). Even if the sympathy derived here is mitigated by his description of triumphantly leaving Leyla's apartment after "scoring," this passage still invites readers to relate to Hammad in terms of the sense of accomplishment and happiness individuals often feel as they take new steps in their relationships. As Noemi Abe notes, if Hammad must fight against the "need to be normal" (83), it is "a normality which is fundamentally perceived as distinguished by romantic love and family," as these kinds of urges seem to spur his emotional and psychological wavering the most (Abe 70).

Hammad and Leyla's relationship is also an intensely sexual one, and even apart from Leyla, Hammad's sexual profile is developed to the point that it combats the Orientalist master narrative that sees fundamental Islamic followers as wholly committed to the spiritual world and uninterested in the earthly one. In one scene, Hammad and Leyla "shuffle ... across the room toward her cot, clamped tight, with her roommate on the other side of the door" (81) and Leyla "clung to [Hammad] and they did damage to the cot" (82). We later learn that Hammad "did a little lusting after [Leyla's] roommate when he saw her ride her bike but tried not to bring this craving into the house" (82). It also becomes clear that Hammad is especially aroused by women on bikes because he tends to note their presence in sexualized terms: he once spots a "woman on a bike ... pedaling hard" (77) later admitting that he "kept thinking that another woman would come by on a bike, someone to look at, hair wet, legs pumping" (78). These kinds of passages call on universal feelings of desire and lust to create fellow-feeling, drawing together reader and character. That Hammad, a proponent of radical Islam, has these physical desires is significant because it frustrates misconceptions of Muslims as fundamentally non-sexual. When "late one night" Hammad "[has] to step over the prone form of a brother in prayer as he [makes] his way to the toilet to jerk off" (80), we are reminded of the nearly universal reality that is shirking your religious, social, or professional responsibilities in favor of immediate physical gratification. This reminder appeals to the reader's sense of a common humanity and connects her world and Hammad's. Additionally, here DeLillo resists contributing to the belief that devout Muslims would not or do not engage in masturbatory behavior, and he thereby avoids presenting an image of a radical Muslim who is sexually repressed in his search for corporeal pleasure.

Borhan and Pirnajmuddin claim there are problems with Hammad's sexualization, interpreting Hammad as a "sensual, bodily young man leading a hedonistic life" (123), and they argue that the character "is reduced to the level of a pleasure seeking man whose identity is torn between strong instinctual desires and religious demands" (124). Moreover, they contend that "DeLillo magnifies Hammad's sexual self at the expense of his social, cultural, and religious selves in order to give a unified picture of his identity" (124). While I understand these concerns, I also depart from them in that I do not perceive Hammad's sexuality as necessarily Orientalist. Sex, after all, is not only an Eastern phenomenon, nor is it one that the West associates singularly with the East. There is a balance that must be achieved in representation, and DeLillo seems to have edged as closely as possible to achieving that balance, in terms of minimizing versus exaggerating Hammad's sexuality. In Nokomis, Hammad's romantic and sexual desires are further developed. He enjoys fleeting flirtations with the checkout girl at the grocery store: "He looked at women sometimes, yes, the girl at the checkout named Meg or Peg ... In the drenching light he saw a faint trace of fine soft silky down on her forearm and once he said something that made her smile" (171). Hammad's attraction to the woman is clear, though less touching for the fact that he cannot remember her name. Nevertheless, his attention to her is erotically focalized, as we see when he notes, in sensual terms, the "soft silky down" of her arm. The fact that he fondly remembers how he once made her smile is telling of his wish to please her; he does not indicate what he said, suggesting that what mattered most was that it elicited a happy reaction from her. This is certainly an odd detail for DeLillo to add to his sketch of the budding terrorist; we might expect instead that Hammad would be consumed entirely with the plot at hand. A similar detail is given later, when "the girl at the checkout rolls the soup can over the scanner and [Hammad] thinks of something funny he can say, saying it internally first to get the word order right" (178). This passage evokes scenes in conventional American romantic comedies: boy meets girl, boy continually goes to girl's workplace, boy works up the courage to speak to girl but must rehearse his lines mentally first. That Hammad's relationship with Meg/Peg is framed and familiarized through the structural and ge-

neric patterns of romantic comedy not only fosters our sympathy, but also aids in the creation of a complex, multilayered character whose motivations and desires are not singular nor absolutist.

Hammad's complexity is showcased, too, in his recurring hesitancy about his part in the plot. While critics tend to emphasize what they see as Hammad's complete indoctrination into the group and his absolute acceptance of the plot, Hammad has multiple moments of inquiry that complicate these readings: "There was the claim of fate, that they were born to this. 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). The seeming absolutism of the first lines is immediately undercut by Hammad's final question, which runs contrary to interpretations of the character as a brainwashed or robotic follower of radical Islam. Later, Hammad poses similar questions about his duty: "But does a man have to kill himself in order to count for something, be someone, find the way?" (175); "Never mind the man who takes his own life in this situation. What about the lives of the others he takes with him?" (176). Hammad consistently challenges his role within the plot, showing compassion in his concern for others' deaths. Through these inquiries, Hammad becomes an active, thinking subject who continually participates in (re-)evaluating his position, and who is also cognizant of the contextual framework for and broader implications of his behavior. Such a portrayal rejects the essentialist master narratives of radical Islamic terrorism in favor of a more contextually and historically informed portrait of a terrorist.

We should not, however, hasten to declare DeLillo's creation of sympathy here a representational success. There are some serious ethical problems with DeLillo's rendering, one of which is that it toes the line of infantilization and condescension. This is best exemplified in the relationship between Hammad and Amir, the dynamic of which troublingly positions the latter as the "controller" and the former as the "controlled." When Hammad worries about the fate of their victims, he asks Amir: "what about the others?" (176). To this, Amir replies: "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). That Hammad is so easily persuaded by Amir's empty rhetoric elicits our compassion because it codes him as sympathetically ignorant and in need of guidance. It suggests that he is being naively led along by the morally questionable Amir, rendering Hammad childlike. In such a depiction, DeLillo risks establishing a narrative wherein poor, inferior Hammad just wants to be "normal" (read: white and U.S.-American) but has been brainwashed by his evil counterpart, Amir, and by the inherently violent and rage-fueled religion that Amir seems to represent here. Underneath this demeaning narrative lies the presumption of Hammad's intellectual or moral inferiority—either he is not smart enough or not morally strong enough to resist succumbing to Amir and to the "propaganda" espoused by radical Islam. This narrative denies that Hammad is an individual acting for particular reasons, and it conceptually erases the context out of which he might come to support the radical Islamic movement on his own terms and without interference from Amir. The other problem here is that Islam is implicitly positioned as the catalyst for this brainwashing; it is Amir's unwavering reliance on the words of the Koran that seems to fuel his dictatorship over the others and, by extension, fuels the plot to take down the towers: "Amir switched from English to Arabic, quoting. *Never have We destroyed a nation whose term of life was not ordained beforehand*" (173). This line, a translation from chapter fifteen of the Koran, is used as Amir's justification for the attacks. The issue with the usage of that line here is that for an unknowing reader, these justifications establish that the Koran, or Islam more generally, is fundamentally supportive of the attacks or that it inherently fosters the kind of supporter who acts out in violent ways. In reality, only a small subset of Muslims—some members of radical Islam—were involved in the real-life event and it is largely that subset that continues to protest and act out in ways that the West defines as terrorism.

Another issue is that Hammad's most endearing traits or behaviors—the ones that DeLillo uses to foster a sense of fellow-feeling—tend to be those that align with dominant behaviors of white North America. Examples of these include his casual flirtations (171); his preoccupation with his appearance and his beard (83); his desire for fame (173); his penchant for television and takeout (173); and his fleeting wish to live the "American dream" by marrying and having children (82). Conversely, those parts of Hammad that are associated with Islamic beliefs or Arabic culture are the ones that DeLillo uses to demonize Hammad. Take, for example, when Hammad kills a camel in a sacrificial ritual: "In the camp they gave him a long knife that had once belonged to a Saudi prince. An old man whipped the camel to its knees and then took the bridle and jerked the head skyward and Hammad slit the animal's throat. They made a noise when he did it, he and the camel both, braying, and he felt a deep warrior joy, standing back to watch the beast topple. He stood there, Hammad, arms spread wide, then kissed the bloody knife and raised it to the ones who were watching, the robed and turbaned men, showing his respect and gratitude" (174). DeLillo describes this scene as if it were especially primitive or barbaric. The verbs emphasize the violence and aggressiveness of the act while the passage downplays the spiritual and ritualistic qualities that underlie the process; the camel is first "whipped" then "jerked" before Hammad "slit[s]" its throat, and the animal "topple[s]." The image of Hammad kissing the blood-soaked knife contributes to DeLillo's attempt to make Hammad look barbaric, though perceptive readers will be able to see past this bloodied scene and recognize both the relative ethicality of this method and the spiritual "respect and gratitude" Hammad feels that marks the animal's death as more responsibly carried out than deaths that occur more thoughtlessly in slaughtering houses across North America.

This discussion begs the question: if the only qualities of Hammad that inspire our sympathy are those that stem from his various departures from Islamic beliefs and Arabic customs and cultures—if his most obviously sympathetic parts are portrayed by DeLillo as his Westernized ones—what does

that say about the effect of sympathy in discourses of terrorism more broadly? Perhaps these sympathetic representations are not much better, politically or ethically speaking, than the more simplistic representations that dominate the public master narrative of terror. If sympathy, fellow-feeling, and relatability are only used to celebrate those parts of radical Islamic terrorists (imagined or otherwise) that align with the goals, interests, and dominant culture of white North America and its governments, while aspects that are typically thought by the West to align with the East (deep commitment to religion and the spiritual world, condemnation of worldly concerns, Islamic rituals and beliefs) remain vilified, then we have not moved very far into productive representative territory. Imagining the radical Islamic terrorist as brainwashed, barbaric, and intellectually and physically inferior—even if he is relatable, sometimes hesitant, and enjoys activities such as sex, dating, eating fast food, and watching television—will not help us understand the political, cultural, and economic issues out of which such terrorism emerges. Importantly, DeLillo is not the first writer to introduce sympathy into the terrorist narrative, and the trope of the sympathetic terrorist is not altogether rare in literature, as we know from such texts as Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907), Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist* (1985), and John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006). Birgit Däwes has identified a literary trend in which "writers and their characters have expressed sympathy for certain acts of political violence as well as for the unorthodox means to achieve them" (501). This trend seems to be growing in popularity, as Elaine Martin suggests in her identification of the global phenomenon of the "humanized" (to use her term) terrorist: in many authors' and filmmakers' works, "there seems to be a single project: to contextualize terrorists and terrorism temporally, causally, and historically. In [their] opposition to the officially promulgated [war against terrorism] ... literature and films thus play a revolutionary role seemingly aiding and abetting terrorism by explaining/rationalizing/legitimizing it and by 'humanizing' terrorist figures" (<<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1023>>). Martin identifies some of the ways that this humanization takes place: typically, the represented terrorist is conflicted; they are often young and attractive; they turn to terrorism because of a wrong done to them, or because of their status as social outcast; they often have "admirable motivation[s]," even if those motivations lead to violent ends; they experience doubt or regret; and the actual violence itself is usually represented indirectly, so that its impact is muted (<<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1023>>). The function of literatures that do this, Martin contends, is to "give a voice to multiple perspectives rather than only the official one, in this case the counterterrorist rhetoric of the state" and to "directly challenge official governmental responses to terrorism by insisting upon context"; these literatures thus "constitute a kind of revolution, or even terrorist practice, in themselves" (<<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1023>>).

While I agree with Martin's comments and perceive, as she does, literature's role in expanding and interrogating discussions of terrorism, I urge us to continue to scrutinize how this humanization takes place, and what its implications might be. These considerations are increasingly vital as, with the passing of Bill C-51 in Canada and parallel legislation elsewhere, fictional spaces are becoming some of the only ones left wherein we can safely and productively develop alternative narratives and understandings of terror, and even these spaces could be under threat from C-51 or future legislation. We must continue to insist that it is not enough to judge the process of humanizing terrorism a representational success, or even necessarily a step in the right direction; not all representations are equal, and a sympathetic portrayal of a radical Islamic terrorist—one that seeks to humanize, to engender fellow-feeling—can still (re)produce damaging narratives that inhibit rather than advance perceptions of terror. We must be wary of the wider scholarly trend in which literature is always-already seen as the more complex counterpoint to official or governmental views on terrorism, even when some literatures reiterate or themselves produce similarly problematic narratives. I have tried to avoid this critical pitfall by addressing the ways that Hamad's sympathetic portrayal resists, but also complements, the state-sanctioned master narrative of radical Islamic terror. If, as Said has written, this master narrative relies on a conceptual process by which the government and the public collectively "isolate [the] enemy from time, from causality, from prior action, and thereby ... portray him or her as ontologically and gratuitously interested in wreaking havoc for its own sake"

(<<http://www.thenation.com/article/essential-terrorist/>>), then DeLillo's *Falling Man* succeeds in putting forth a vision of a terrorist figure who is contextualized rather than contextually isolated. However, that success is drastically limited by the rhetoric of sympathy that undermines any sense that the terrorist figure acts with cause, intention, and a broader understanding of his political actions.

### Works Cited

- Abe, Noemi. "Triangulation and Gender Perspectives in *Falling Man* by Don DeLillo." *Altre Modernità* (2011): 65-75.
- Däwes, Birgit. "'Close Neighbors to the Unimaginable': Literary Projections of Terrorists' Perspectives (Martin Amis, John Updike, Don DeLillo)." *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 55.3 (2010): 495-517.
- DeLillo, Don. *Falling Man*. New York: Scribner, 2007.
- DeRosa, Aaron. "Alterity and the Radical Other in Post-9/11 Fiction: DeLillo's *Falling Man* and Walter's *The Zero*." *Arizona Quarterly* 69.3 (2013): 157-83.
- Gamal, Ahmed. "'Encounters with Strangeness' in the Post-9/11 Novel." *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies: A Journal of Criticism and Theory* 14.1 (2012): 95-116.
- Heneghan, Tom. "Hamburg Set to Be First German State to Officially Recognize Islam." *The Globe and Mail* (2010.10.19.): <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/hamburg-set-to-be-first-german-state-to-officially-recognize-islam/article4329474/>>.
- Kauffman, Linda S. "The Wake of Terror: Don DeLillo's 'In the Ruins of the Future,' 'Baader-Meinhof,' and *Falling Man*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 54.2 (2008): 353-77.
- Keniston, Ann, and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn, eds. *Literature after 9/11*. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Kumar, Deepa. *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*. Chicago: Haymarket, 2012.



- Martin, Elaine. "The Global Phenomenon of 'Humanizing' Terrorism in Literature and Cinema." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 9.1 (2007): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1023>>
- Mauro, Aaron. "The Languishing of the Falling Man: Don DeLillo and Jonathan Safran Foer's Photographic History of 9/11." *Modern Fiction Studies* 57.3 (2011): 584-606.
- Pirnajmuddin, Hossein, and Abbasali Borhan. "'Writing Back' to Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*." *Journal of International Social Research* 4.18 (2011): 119-29.
- Pöhlmann, Sascha. "Collapsing Identities: The Representation and Imagination of the Terrorist in *Falling Man*." *Terrorism, Media, and the Ethics of Fiction: Transatlantic Perspectives on Don DeLillo*. Ed. Peter Schneck and Phillip Schweighauser. New York: Continuum, 2010. 51-64.
- Ratcliffe, Sophie. *On Sympathy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.
- "Relatable, adj." *oed.com* (subscription-based access).
- Rowe, John Carlos. "Global Horizons in *Falling Man*." *Don DeLillo: Mao II, Underworld, Falling Man*. Ed. Stacey Olsster. New York: Continuum, 2011. 121-34.
- Said, Edward W. "The Essential Terrorist." *thenation.com* (2006.08.14.): <<http://www.thenation.com/article/essential-terrorist/>>.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. 1978. New York: Vintage, 1979.
- "Sympathy, n." *oed.com* (subscription-based access).
- Versluys, Kristiaan. *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*. New York: Columbia UP, 2009.
- Webb, Jen. "Fiction and Testimony in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*." *Life Writing* 8.1 (2011): 51-65.
- What does C-51 Mean for Academic Freedom & Campus Free Speech? *CAUT Analysis of Bill C-51. Canadian Association of University Teachers* (2015): <<http://www.caut.ca/docs/default-source/reports/bill-c-51-caut-analysis-%282015-03%29.pdf?sfvrsn=8>>.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on 11 September and Related Dates*. New York: Verso, 2002.

Author's profile: Jessica McDonald is completing her Ph.D. in literature at the University of Saskatchewan. Her interests in research include Canadian literature, literary cartography, and postcolonial literatures and theory. McDonald's publications include "Beyond Generic Hybridity: Nalo Hopkinson and the Politics of Science Fiction," *Canadian Literature* (2016). E-mail: <[jessica.mcdonald@usask.ca](mailto:jessica.mcdonald@usask.ca)>