REVERTING TO GREATNESS: WHITE -AMERICAN TRAUMA AND THE OCCLUSION OF MUSLIMS IN THE POST-9/11 ‘GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL’

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ABSTRACT

Don DeLillo, in his December 2001 *Harper’s* article, “In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September,” urged fellow American writers to create “the counternarrative” that would take back control of culture from terrorists who threatened it. DeLillo’s call for nation-rebuilding cultural production hearkens back to John William de Forest’s original post-Civil War coinage of the term and concept of the “Great American Novel”. Examining four seminal post-9/11 novels through the conceptual framework of a “new” Great American Novel oeuvre, I demonstrate a concerted effort by the authors to address what I have termed the “Muslim Question”. Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), DeLillo’s own *Falling Man* (2007), Amy Waldman’s *The Submission* (2011), and John Updike’s *Terrorist* (2006) all feature traumatized white Americans creating a variety of mechanisms with which to mitigate the trauma of 9/11 as it resurges at even the thought of Muslims existing in America after 9/11. By examining the mechanisms of repression, appropriation, adversarial othing, and enforced secularization, I critically analyze the iterations of “solutions” while also demonstrating the abandonment of American ideals by the traumatized white Americans. The spectral, fluid, and slippery notion of the so-called Great American Novel looms in the background as a tradition within which each of these novels operates; and it provides the lens necessary to see literary concerns and depictions shifting in America after the terrorist attack. While the original concept of the Great American Novel featured novels with multifaceted explorations of the American Dream, the renewed interest in creating nation-rebuilding texts is threatening to stagnate and congeal particularly around examining the relative success of the mechanisms of occluding Muslims and Islam within and from the United States.
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Introduction

“the cataclysmic events of 9/11 and their aftermath… are a part of the soil, the deep structure lying beneath and shaping the literature of the American nation, not least because they have reshaped our consciousness; they are a defining element in our contemporary structure of feeling and they cannot help but impact profoundly on American writing” —Richard Gray, After the Fall 129

“In American literary history, few bestsellers have required so much of the reader, or illustrated so clearly the public’s hunger for literature as a means of shaping national identity”—Craig Warren 534 (on The 9/11 Commission Report)

“To write the great American novel an author faces a double challenge. The author must not only tell a story that encapsulates the nation but also tell it in a new way, inventing a mode and method of storytelling different from what other novelists have done before. Novelists with the ambition, talent, and daring to accept this challenge come along only once or twice a century”—Kevin Hayes 157

My initial research for a doctoral dissertation involved an investigation of the eschatology of End Times, but in reading about apocalyptic events and various conceptualizations of apocalypse, I was drawn to a specific event that has influenced my life much more than any
When the terrorist attack of Tuesday, September 11, 2001, happened, I was a first-semester junior at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, PA, USA. I remember going to my brother’s room (he was a senior at F&M), watching on TV as the second plane hit the second World Trade Center tower, and then spending the rest of the day hooked to the news, terrified of the sudden violence, afraid of going outside into the mostly white campus, and fervently hoping that no Muslims or Pakistanis were involved in the attack. Of course, that hope was quickly quashed, as it was discovered that the nineteen terrorists were all of Muslim origin; during my last two years of college the US government not only launched its War on Terror in Afghanistan and Iraq, but a year after that, in 2004, also began using Pakistani air bases for drone attacks against Pakistani civilians that it labeled as suspected terrorists. Meanwhile, I graduated from college, worked for two years in Pakistan, and returned to the United States for an MFA in Creative Writing in South Bend, Indiana; the hassles of extra security checks to acquire student visa, flight permissions, and regular clearance from the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS), were cumbersome new additions that lasted a while. But, compared to other Muslims in the Middle East and Southeast Asia that the US drones and troops were targeting, my plight of bothersome hurdles in traveling were minor, and I dutifully complied with all that was required of me because of my race and my religion as a Muslim “other” in the US. The special, targeted treatment of Arab-looking Muslims in the US did not seem problematic to me because I faced little direct discrimination. In 2007, I completed an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Notre Dame, where I not only became critically aware of the concept of the Great American Novel, but even attempted to write a Great Pakistani-American Immigrant Novel of my own (of course, since I am not American, I could only attempt a hybrid version; I may refine that first draft for publication in a few years). In my
manuscript, titled “Americans,” I have attempted to create a meta-fiction that also breaks boundaries between non-fiction and other forms, thereby playing into what Kevin Hayes calls the Great American Novel tradition of inventing a form to fit a new story (157). More recently, while combining apocalyptic studies and research on 9/11 novels at the University of Saskatchewan, I published a creative-critical hybrid essay exploring the pared-down language and signifiers in Cormac McCarthy’s seminal post-9/11 novel, The Road (2006). In the two decades since the terrorist attack, I have deeply engaged with and sought to analyze the ways in which the trauma of white Americans has influenced the lives of Middle-Eastern-looking Muslims in the United States. I now find it reasonable to assume that there have been direct and indirect ramifications of 9/11 on the trajectory of my professional and personal life while living within and outside the US, and that is why I decided to switch tracks. The focus of my research, for this dissertation and for the foreseeable future, is on the terrorist incident’s immediate and short-term aftermaths, and I aim to find avenues by which I can contribute to the scholarship in this field and to understand the influences on my life as a Muslim scholar and producer of literature in North America.

My contribution will enter a milieu rich with excellent contributions, as humanities scholars have produced a range of incisive works on the repercussions of the world-changing event. Among these excellent works of scholarship, I will mention a few here. Judith Greenberg edited an eclectic collection of essays, poems, and personal accounts to create a potent, wide-ranging exploration of the psychological impact of the attack in Trauma at Home: After 9/11 (2003). Studying representation of the event in media and literature, Susan Faludi wrote The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America (2007), Kristiaan Versluys wrote Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel (2009), Richard Gray wrote After the Fall: American
Literature Since 9/11 (2011), and Birgit Däwes published Ground Zero Fiction: History, Memory, and Representation in the American 9/11 Novel (2011). Faludi’s, Versluys’s, and Gray’s works are detailed examinations of the themes and representational patterns that appear in post-9/11 media representations, while Däwes’s monograph is a reference work that categorizes the elements of various fictional representations of 9/11 into a systematic and comprehensive typology. Besides these broad analyses of the post-9/11 literature, there are also specific examinations of literary representations of race relations between (mostly) white Americans and Arab Muslims in Evelyn Alsultany’s Arabs and the Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11 (2012), in Tim Gauthier’s 9/11 Fiction, Empathy, and Otherness (2015), and in Peter Morey’s Islamophobia and the Novel (2018). These are only a handful of the book-length works of scholarship prompted by literary responses to the attack. Besides these sustained examinations, there are hundreds of journal articles examining literary representations of the attack and its aftermath, and sociological and psychological studies on real-life trauma, race-based repercussions, and related topics. As a response to, and as an intervention into, the wealth of academic material in this field, I will position my dissertation as a work that binds several branches of study to analyze early novels by American writers who try to represent the effects of the attack; my aim is to provide fresh, connective ways of looking at the event and its aftermath, and how it has influenced to a great extent how Americans conceive of themselves as a nation.

“The Muslim Question”

My intervention into the study of post-9/11 literature focuses on the nexus of trauma, Islamophobia, and white American exceptionalism, and to do so it focuses on representations of
a variety of treatments meted out to Muslims in four seminal post-9/11 novels written within a decade of the attack. Studies that have focused exclusively on any of these themes have yielded valuable insights for the larger fields of trauma studies and for the study of othering and race scholarship.¹ In my examination of the literature and of the scholarship, however, I have found further broadening of vision possible by looking more deeply at the connection points among these separate themes, all of which weave a well-defined tapestry of post-9/11 American culture and politics, and the way that each influences the other. Specifically, I look at how trauma prompts white American characters to resort to techniques or mechanisms that attempt to mitigate their own post-traumatic stress; however, the focus of these Anglo Americans’ mechanisms shifts quickly from addressing the trauma to the relationship they have with Islam and Muslims of Arab origin in post-9/11 United States. My research indicates that the exhibited Islamophobic reactions appear as a byproduct of the attempt to mitigate or avoid resurfacing trauma, and are not usually consciously intentioned by white Americans in the novels. However, the authors’ depictions of white Americans’ trauma in their fictive universes follow a distinct pattern in which these characters do not address their own distress directly, and so are unable to move beyond the temporary, naïve, and often unsuccessful attempts at mitigation that do more harm and that exacerbate the unaddressed causes of the terror and trauma.

The four novels I examine in this dissertation are mainstream post-9/11 American novels by white authors who examine white characters’ trauma, and in each of the novels appears—in different ways, and with different proposed solutions—what I call “the Muslim Question”.²

¹ Ilka Saal’s “Violence and Narrative Memory in Post-9/11 Theater” is a study about how theatrical productions after 9/11 not only helped theater participants in the “reconstruction of narrative structures” but also helped produce “ethical framing of traumatic memory” (Saal 353). Emily Horton’s “‘Everything You Ever Dreamed’: Post-9/11 Trauma and Fantasy in Ali Smith’s The Accidental” is an exploration of the delayed reception of trauma in Smith’s novel. These are just two examples of a treasure trove of such studies in humanities journals.

² The explicit segregation of American Muslims of Middle Eastern origin into a separate group hearkens back to white Americans’ othering of several non-white groups, including the de-humanizing of Indigenous Americans,
Jonathan Safran Foer, in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), depicts the protagonist child actively repressing 9/11 and thoughts about Islam and Muslims in the year after the attack. In *Falling Man* (2007), set within the first three years of 9/11, Don DeLillo provides a partisan critical examination of his characters’ appropriation and distortion of Islamic scripture and names. In *The Submission* (2011), set two years after the event, Amy Waldman creates a multi-perspective narrative in which a Muslim-American man is thrust into the post-9/11 limelight and must contend with being ostracized and made into the foremost public enemy by his fellow white Americans. In *Terrorist* (2006), John Updike portrays Islam and Muslims in the United States as a marginal concern for the public but a central one for the American government five years after 9/11, and the mitigating mechanism to address the latent trauma in that novel is the complete conversion of a believing Muslim to a quasi-secular American. Through studying these novels, in particular, I have found trends in post-9/11 American literature centering specifically on white Americans’ concern about what to do with Arab-looking Muslims and Islam in the post-9/11 United States. This is what I call the “Muslim Question,” and its Islamophobic connotations link directly to the pre-1945 German concerns associated with the antisemitic “Jewish Question”. The perpetrators of 9/11 were ethnically Middle Eastern, and the fear and trauma that white Americans associate with the attack links directly to the racial characteristics associated with
Middle-Eastern Muslims. In the case of the four novels I am focusing on, the Muslim characters featured are specifically Arab-looking, Southeast Asian, or Arab American by heritage. Black Muslims are not a target of the “Muslim Question”, perhaps also because they are seen as “home-grown” and thus as a benign part of the American national fabric.\(^3\) The outsider Muslim, the one who is visibly Middle-Eastern looking, whether he is from an Arab country or Southeast Asia, is the one being addressed and centered within the “Muslim Question”\(^4\). And the proposed solutions are to prevent Arab-looking Muslims from appearing in public—to avoid, occlude, block, cut off, or even to secularize the Muslims, and so to nullify the threat they pose. The peril of the Muslims is not just in their appearance, but also in the ideology they follow—which, white Americans in these novels believe, can be modified and replaced by the better ideology of American quasi-secularism. I will demonstrate through the course of four chapters, one on each novel, that the authors Foer, DeLillo, Waldman, and Updike address the “Muslim Question” with a variety of mechanisms, with each successive mechanism becoming more sophisticated as the previous one fails to produce an alleviation of the overwhelming trauma of 9/11.

Not only is the “Muslim Question” a central one for post-9/11 literature, it also is a concern for the shift in American novel at the turn of the century, particularly as Don DeLillo articulates it. Within two months of the attack, DeLillo’s essay “In the Ruins of the Future” appeared in Harper’s. In this manifesto of sorts, DeLillo, whose works previously targeted the

\(^3\) This statement is meant in no way to negate the history of the “Black Muslim Scare” (Curtis) or the Black Muslim activism that was a significant part of the civil rights movement, a source of considerable anxiety and Islamophobia for mainstream white Americans in the 1960s. This form of Islamophobia, however, seems distinct from post-9/11 iterations.

\(^4\) As Moustafa Bayrouni points out, the idea of “Arabs and Muslims (who, in the real world are two overlapping categories, but in the world of American perceptions are essentially the same) have entered the American imagination with full force; their entry has been racialized” (112). Not only that, but the racialized existence of Muslims, as Arabs, has also been placed in a hierarchy, thus reducing them to a metonymic existence relegated to obscurity, which Bayrouni points out is “America’s enduring [production of] racial hierarchies mixed with shopworn nostalgia for a WASP-y simplicity” (110), an idea perpetuated through the repression exemplified in Foer’s novel.
late-twentieth-century “surge of capital markets” and the desire of the developed world to live a life “permanently in the future, in the utopian glow of cyber-capital,” bemoaned that “the world narrative belongs to the terrorists” after 9/11, and that that the real behemoth of unchecked rampant capitalism would remain unchallenged. To take control of the narrative back from these terrorists, DeLillo urged his fellow American writers to create “the counternarrative” of multiple stories that exhibit positivity, “hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel” (“In the Ruins”). The language in DeLillo’s essay often comes across as vaguely idealistic, but Martin Randall is especially critical of DeLillo’s “sentimental, disingenuous and perhaps sanitised view of American capitalist democracy, and a deliberately simplistic understanding of the terrorist motivations” as articulated in the essay (29). I tend to agree with Randall’s assessment but also note that the ruins of lower Manhattan were still smoking when DeLillo wrote the essay. The more pressing issue is that DeLillo’s idealism brings into focus, negatively, a single community within post-9/11 United States when he turns an ambiguous lens on Muslims at the end of his essay. DeLillo describes a Muslim woman praying in the open in New York, and then juxtaposes death and the Islamic ritual of the hadj as great equalizers, with the latter being a moment when Muslims recall “in prayer their fellowship with the dead.” He then ends the essay with this Islamic chant and its translation: “Allahu Akbar. God is great.” Often, these are the most frightening Arabic words for a Muslim to speak out loud in public because their public proclamation (outside of prayer contexts) is now associated in popular American culture with the imminence of a terrorist attack. I argue that because he ends his manifesto-essay so specifically with Islam—not the politics of the terrorists but Islam and Muslims as a whole—he thus proposes that American writers should now, in the new call for post-schismatic nation-building works, focus their thoughts on this vague, rather niggling, “Muslim Question”.
The Great American Novel Reborn

DeLillo’s call for a different kind of post-9/11 fiction from his fellow American authors is reminiscent of a historical call and desire by Americans centered on the concept of Great American Novel. I will use the term Great American Novel to designate a particular type of fiction—which, to one degree or another, all of the authors discussed in this study are producing—that conforms to the tradition the term evokes: to encapsulate the nation while using a revolutionary storytelling form, to paraphrase Kevin Hayes (157). At the same time, I will maintain a skeptical distance from the term and its associations, since the term—for all of its influence—is a romanticized one, often implicated in troubling forms of nation-building, that often excludes as much of “the American experience” as it purports to capture. For novels such as these, which dramatize various forms of exclusion, the term Great American Novel is both revealing and deeply problematic. And here it is pertinent to provide the history and complexities associated with the term as it has been used and as I wish to use it.

When John Williams De Forest coined the term in an 1868 essay (Scholes), the “Great American Novel” he conceived of was the either imagined or already written novel that would encapsulate America’s and Americans’ essence and spirit, and provide a landmark event for “national unity and national cultural achievement” in the Civil War’s aftermath (Thompson 9). Curiously, the desire “for an autonomous national literature” predates this concept, because it was felt by critics as far back as the Revolution, and its locus was the “postcolonial anxiety about cultural coherence and legitimation” (Buell, “The Unkillable Dream” 134). However, not until De Forest’s coinage did the idea of a national literature solidify around one patriotic concept, and one so aptly named. Herbert R. Brown yokes the idea to the demand from both the British and American literati for definitive “Americanism in fiction” after the Civil War (1). Thereafter, by
accruing as unreleased pressure over the decades after the Civil War, there was an unusual burden on the concept for generating or identifying “a single perfect work of fiction that would encapsulate the heart of the US, interpret its history through the light of a single, outstanding consciousness, unite the private lives of the characters with the public drama of its politics… the *War and Peace* of the great plains and the Manhattan sky line” (Scholes). It is a massive task to unite such a large country as the United States within a novel, and it has only become harder since the original call for it. The desire for unity and nationhood within literary representation in *one* or even *multiple* Great American Novels can be understood quite easily, though, seeing how De Forest articulated it in the wake of the nation-tearing, schismatic Civil War. The terrorist attack of 9/11, though not as massive an upheaval as the Civil War, was a blatant act of aggression against United States by a handful of hijackers, and the psychic ramifications of the attack and its spectacle may lie unassimilated for a long time. Seen as the manifestations of separate desires for national narrative-restoring exercises, the Great American Novel and DeLillo’s urge to have American writers create counternarratives are not surprising; they are to be expected.

The cultural capital of the concept of the Great American Novel cannot be denied, even as criticism about the concept itself has accrued over the decades since its inception. Tyler Malone envisions the Great American Novel in the same pantheon as “Manifest Destiny” and “The American Dream,” along with such foundational concepts as “The Shining City Upon a Hill [sic]… The First Thanksgiving… Pocahontas and John Smith… Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness… One Nation Indivisible” (8). But, beyond that entrenching of the Great American Novel within the nation’s conceptual fabric, Malone envisions the concept to provide “myths that would renew [the Americans’] sense of common purpose, that would encourage
them to reexamine their foundational values and guiding principles, their darkest sins and loftiest aspirations… a reckoning with themselves… the Great American Novel promised to be just that” (9). Grant Shreve in a 2017 essay articulated the criteria for considering a historical novel as part of the tradition:

- It must encompass the entire nation and not be consumed with a particular region.
- It must be democratic in spirit and form.
- Its author must have been born in the United States or have adopted the country as his or her own.
- Its true cultural worth must not be recognized upon its publication.

While the first of these criteria emphasizes the value of exercising colonial power to consolidate land and resources into one administrative unit, collectively the first three of these conditions also espouse the oft-touted American liberal ideals of democracy and equality. In his last listed condition Shreve desires that works considered Great American Novels be those that stand the test of time or become more culturally potent, and relevant and revered, as time passes. Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), John Dos Passos’s *U.S.A* trilogy (1930, 1932, 1936), and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), and several other works have been called Great American Novels, and proponents of the concept are “continually drawn back to this idea that a single, perfect novel can exist” (Scholes). But the promise of a single fictive universe to create narrative unity for Americans is idealistic given how much American ideology, and the American union of states, has evolved since the original colonies. For critics like Malone, and for Lawrence Buell and George Knox, the Great American Novel has therefore always existed as “an accreptive
continuum of fiction” (Knox 671) and a “pluriverse in motion rather than a unitary conception of Americanness” (Buell, *Dream* 8). Norman Mailer too claims that after Dos Passos’s *U.S.A* trilogy (completed in 1936) it is “impossible to cover all of America” within a single novel, because of the varieties of experiences and the breadth of the nation (Hammond). Laura Miller, like other scholars I have mentioned above, deems it less a sign of ambition and more one of foolishness that within one novel a single author “can speak on behalf of an entire, fractious nation.”

Other common criticisms include the obvious gender bias associated with only white men being considered writers of the Great American Novel (Homestead 455; Laura Miller; Nguyen), with the exceptional inclusion of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that proves the rule; then there is the related demographical bias of race—usually only white Americans tend to be considered Great American Novelists (Warnes 527; Buell, *Dream* 32; Boddy 321). Both these demographic rules have shifted with the publication of novels by non-white writers and women, such as with the addition of Toni Morrison to the pantheon of Great American Novelists, further confirming the “instability” that allows the Great American Novel construct to “self-renew” as a response to the “rise of 1960s feminism and civil rights agitation” (Buell, *Dream* 283, 50). There are also deeper ideological issues with the concept than bias. Andrew Warnes points out that the “exceptionalist myth” underlying the Great American Novel “implies that US writers and US writers alone [are] inspired by the democratic desire to pour all society into their works” (527). While critics have valid points about the biases and precariousness associated with the concept, Kasia Boddy believes it is “more about inspiration than achievement” (“Making it Long” 318); and Buell argues that even though the Great American Novel is an idealistic concept that supposedly represents the epitome of literary achievement by an author, its “serious contenders
are much more likely to insist that national greatness is unproven, that its pretentions are hollow,” and that critical lens in the concept’s contradiction is “reason enough to take the subject of the Great American Novelism seriously” (Dream 18). John Gatta, too, agrees, positing that the Great American Novels are “rarely nationalistic in any simple or parochial sense,” nor “are they, for the most part, celebratory” (xix). In other words, both Buell and Gatta welcome the Great American Novel’s ability to provide sustained self-examination, which enables an unearthing of, and a confrontation with, the nation’s flaws and its failure to achieve its ideals.

I want to use the concept of the Great American Novel not only to problematize the concept as it has been applied historically, but also to use it as a tool and lens for readings of contemporary post-9/11 texts, which are published long after De Forest’s coinage has gone out of vogue and come in for intense skepticism. Indeed, the first of two earnest twentieth-century surges of the concept came long ago, in the aftermath of World War I, in which young “American authors renewed the quest… [t]o create a novel encapsulating the nation” (Hayes 143); and the second and last surge was in the 1970s, as “a reaction formation to the decade’s considerable anxieties,” especially those concerning “masculinity and individualism, and the social upheavals that challenged them” (Perrin 196).5 It is not as though the grand opus in which the authors attempted to capture the sprawl of the United States and its evolution have stopped since the 1970s, but they are not as often referred to as partaking in the so-called Great American Novel tradition with sincerity and gravity. The concept has now become nearly exclusively the domain of “the publishing and education industries, and self-accredited freelance journalists and bloggers” who want to produce canonical lists for sale and proliferation among students and markets (Buell, Dream 9). However, its critical worth as a lens with which to look back at the

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5 Not to discount Time magazine labeling Jonathan Franzen “Great American Novelist” on its 23 August, 2010 cover—but that was a singular instance of the word coming into public eye with earnestness.
twentieth century and view the trends of post-World War II capitalism and excess cannot be denied, nor can the value of its ability to offer up multiple ideas on post-Civil War American national culture—the unity of which remains an ideal, a dream.

And on that note about dreams, it is pertinent to examine how much the Great American Novel tradition before 9/11 stood for, explored, and critiqued the idealistic concept of the American Dream. It is not just a base-level dream of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” that the Great American Novel pluriverse has explored—rather, there is a nuanced interplay of critiques at play, and the first major novel marked out as part of the Great American Novel set indicates as such. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a fictive examination of slavery and freedom, the inequality between races before the Civil War, and a dramatization of the African-American desire to be treated equally or at least of being treated not as property. *Huckleberry Finn*, while also exploring the dream of equal opportunity for the enslaved African-American Jim, contributes to the idea by exploring the extent of freedom that an impoverished white male enjoys—together, they go on all-consuming quests that bring Huck Finn and Jim together on the common purpose to escape American civilizing forces. Like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Twain’s novel “perceptively reflects its time and challenges Americans to do better” (Hartnett). But slavery and racism are much more obvious impediments to the equality of all Americans than the more subtle critique of the American Dream found in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), or even later, in DeLillo’s larger novels, as well as the emancipation from suburbia and existential angst sought by Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom in Updike’s contenders for the so-called Great American Novel. I believe, therefore, that Buell and Clare Eby are right to split at least the pre-9/11 Great American Novel tradition into four different categories:
the “up-from” story of self-making, such as *The Great Gatsby*… the “romance of the divide” focusing on conflict among races, ethnicities, or regions such as *Beloved* and *Absalom, Absalom!*; the “meganovel” that uses a fictional microcosm to comment on the failed promise of American democracy, such as *U.S.A.* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*… [and a]

fourth template [that] reflects forces more external to the literary work: when a novel is referenced and imitated repeatedly… it can, as in the case of *The Scarlet Letter*, attain Great American Novel status retrospectively. (Eby 513)

Despite this classification of the so-called Great American Novels into different categories, I posit that collectively the works placed within these categories attempt to create fictional critiques of the one ideal of Americans’ freedom to choose the kind of life they want to lead. Of course, DeLillo’s major works include heavy critique of the effects of the consumerism that the masses of entitled Americans indulge in; but the examination still centers on the American Dream and its peripheral and attached concerns. Knowing this historical context of the concept,

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6 Grant Shreve, too, includes in his newsletter item three short “templates” or “recipes” to create a “Great American Novel”, namely texts that have led to “memorable rewritings” such as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*; the “romance of the divide” novels featuring “rifts” of the national scale mapped onto the domestic, such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; and narratives that focus on singular “paradigmatic” figures such as Gatsby and Huckleberry Finn. I find Shreve’s recipes compelling, and just as focused as Eby and Buell’s categorizations, about the American Dream as their unifying force for “cooking up” or identifying a so-called Great American Novel.

7 In another novel that participates in the Great American Novel tradition of the twentieth century, *Requiem for a Dream* (1978), Hubert Selby Jr. creates characters who deny their own inner dreams in pursuit of “the lie of illusion” that is the American Dream’s idea of quick fixes in pursuit of happiness (Selby Jr. vi). Darren Aronofsky, in his preface to the 2000 reprinted edition, saw the novel as “a manifesto on Addiction’s triumph over the Human Spirit” (1). The reprinted edition of Selby Jr.’s novel culminated with a re-examination of the American Dream and its unfulfillable nature on the cusp of wholly different circumstances for Americans and America. Until the year just before the 9/11 attack, the subjects of the so-called Great American Novel, while tethered to the American Dream, were as varied as the notion of the “dream” is vague and tenuous. But that focus on the American Dream, and the manifestations of its failure for marginalized African-American communities, the absolute nightmarish implications of that failure in the form of continued racist violence, and the failure of the myths of merit for hard work, class mobility, trickle-down economics, which were part of the criticism of the dream(s) in the Great American Novel traditional canon. That focus definitively and radically shifted after the 9/11 attack. Still, Selby Jr.’s attempt at examining the American Dream revealed the subject as hollow, misleading, and destructive, and that ethical warning should inform the exclusive pursuit of the “Muslim Question” in post-9/11 novels; the blinkered pursuit of this theme is itself a fanaticism bent on representing and solidifying the breach of civil liberties of a community within the United States.
I understand post-9/11 texts as working within various aesthetic and ideological traditions adjacent to the old concept of the Great American Novel while simultaneously shifting the focus from the American Dream to the Islamophobic, exclusionist, racist, and binary formations that signal a retreat to hyper-conservatism in culture and politics within America on all matters associated with the “Muslim Question”.

DeLillo’s desire to have Americans build “counternarratives” on the “Muslim Question” is not unprecedented; in fact, global events in the wake of 9/11 informed such a call to action. Richard Gray sees Islam as the replacement of Communism as the “sinister other that enabled American self-definition” (“Open Doors” 135), while Peter Mandaville points out how “the aftermath of the September 11 attacks” inextricably linked Islam in American consciousness to “terrorism, lack of democracy, [and] oppression of women,” in stark opposition to American value systems (Mandaville 235). In consequence, as Peter Morey notes, “Islamophobia” as both fear and abhorrence of the ideology and religion, “emerged as the dominant mode of prejudice in contemporary Western societies” and, “as the focal point of anxieties about citizenship, loyalty, and liberal values,” Muslims became “the object of heightened levels of criticism, intolerance, and abuse—their cultures homogenized and vilified and their religion depicted as backward and warlike” (1-2). I believe that the conceptual homogenization of Muslims is what especially enables Islamophobia to find grounds to exist. But, more importantly, the nineteen terrorists who carried out the attacks of 9/11 were all Middle-Eastern Muslims, and they perpetuated a most devastating terrorist attack on the United States and American symbols of technology, progress, and security, using American machines to do so. The unassimilable scale of the spectacle itself and the lingering trauma from the event is triggered by not only the government’s anti-terror rhetoric since 9/11, but also the media prevalence of the idea that “Muslims are violent.”
Muhammad Safeer Awan cites popular films as well as post-9/11 novels for perpetuating the idea of “a violent image of Islam” (523)—thus producing a rationalization for Islamophobic responses. So, the cause of Islamophobia is not just the terrorist attack or the government’s response, but also the mass media market perpetuating that idea. However, to read more nuanced post-9/11 novels as only perpetrators of Islamophobia is to not understand the critique they apply when positioning Muslims and Islam as objects to fear within their narratives. As Morey notes, though many post-9/11 novels “appear to underwrite Western assumptions of cultural superiority” and “to have actively aligned themselves with the presumed values of the West,” there are also, like Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, novels that contain “formal ambiguities within their texts” that “make for a complex and often ambiguous interpretive experience that challenges the truth claims of culturally exclusivist agendas” (2-3). In the post-9/11, politically-charged atmosphere, high-culture novelists like Foer have created cultural (and inherently political) artifacts that appeal to the American nation-state’s idea of response, including and expanding on themes such as: reaction to mass trauma, othering of perpetrators, repression, rebuilding, and remembering. Dawes delineates the aim of projects such as these as “shaping and installation of the cultural memory of 9/11” (6). Confronting their fear of Islam was an important event for Americans after 9/11, and so the post-9/11 focus of novelists centered too on the “Muslim Question”, as called to do so by DeLillo.

“In the Ruins” comes in the wake of a massive void created in the American psyche, and DeLillo’s call for multiple nation-building “counternarratives” is akin to the desire for a new pluriverse. DeLillo is not declaring, or wanting writers to assert with their fiction, that America is one cohesive union, or even that it can be, but that the center of American attention is now on the moment and place of the attack—and that the coalescing of American writers’ attention to 9/11
and Ground Zero is a necessary response to terrorism and a counter-terrorist rallying call that moves from New York to the rest of the United States, and then to the world. With “In the Ruins of the Future,” DeLillo is not explicitly urging writers to create more entries into an updated version of the so-called Great American Novel pluriverse, but, with the similarly themed call to bolster ideas of nationhood and unity in literary works after a massive violent upheaval, he may as well be. The essay’s idea is linked to John Gatta’s conception of the Great American Novel as “a concept allied to America’s distinctive, if not quite exceptional, rationale for nationhood based on ideas and ideals, rather than on shared ethnic history or group affiliation” (Gatta xx). DeLillo’s essay is a call to create those cohering fictions in the wake of 9/11 as a response to it. American authors have responded to DeLillo’s rallying call, as indicated by either rather inventively and innovatively attempting to play within, or on the tradition of the so-called Great American Novel, or by at least gesturing in meaningful ways to the tradition. I will demonstrate in this dissertation that Foer, DeLillo, Waldman, and Updike attempt in their post-9/11 novels to represent white trauma as an instigating force for the desire to return safety to the country and begin rebuilding the nation by occluding Muslims from it, but also to represent the occlusions as either naïve and flawed, or as deeply problematic compromises of American ideals. As such, these novelists participate in the cultural as well as political project of bolstering the American sense of nationhood and union- hood, which was and remains a significant part of the Great American Novel project (De Forest), while simultaneously revealing how various forms of racial and religious exclusion problematize nationhood and unity.

Throughout this dissertation, whenever I deploy the term “new Great American Novel,” as above, I use it as a shorthand for the complex concept that has become a tradition with which are associated the multiple themes I have explored above; in other words, the deployment is not a
“straight” or earnest usage of the concept to indicate that I am proposing it as anything producible or identifiable. So, the “renewal” of the Great American Novel, as I use it, is not to signal some kind of nostalgic return to older perceptions of literature, but rather a renewal, in the wake of a calamitous event in the country, of the attempt to use literature to unify and solidify the sense of being American.

**The Various Occlusions**

This dissertation is divided into four chapters, each focusing on one novel. I have chosen these novels because they represent the first six years after the attack in a way that mirrors real-world politics of Bush-era, post-9/11 hyper-conservatism. I have also used these novels as an initiation into studying the post-9/11 occlusion of Muslims by first creating a kind of occlusion myself. The fact that Muslims are being occluded is where I start—I first occlude them myself. While a more diverse study of diaspora and subaltern writings about 9/11 would generate a very different perspective on 9/11, in this dissertation I am restricting myself to studying the works of authors who focus on white American trauma as it links to the occlusion of Muslims, and that study has led me to these novels. My aim is to demonstrate that these novels depict a variety of reactions by white Americans as they confront the post-9/11 presence of Islam and Muslims in the United States. The occlusion begins with repression in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 (as in Foer’s novel); then comes appropriation (featured in *Falling Man*); in the years following 9/11, the primary mode of occlusion of Muslims is ostracism and what I call “adversarial othering”\(^8\) (as in *The Submission*); the final variety of occlusion I have observed involves the attempt at

\(^8\) By adversarial othering, which I will define also in Chapter 3, I mean the setting up of an other against which the white Americans not only define themselves, but with whom they engage, debate, negotiate, and compete for power and policy-making action in the context of post-9/11 cultural representation and memorialization of 9/11.
secularizing Muslims (as in Updike’s *Terrorist*). While examining these occlusive mechanisms and their implications, I will also demonstrate how each of the novels featuring these methods works within the aesthetic, tradition, and concept of the so-called Great American Novel to re-shape it into a single-topic nearly uni-dimensional discussion of what to do about the “Muslim Question”.

I begin, in Chapter 1, by explaining the mechanism of repression as it works in Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005).⁹ After his father dies in the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers, the novel’s child protagonist Oskar Schell goes on a quest covering all five boroughs of New York City to find the meaning of his father’s life and death. Oskar and his family use metonymic devices and severe forms of repressive techniques to avoid thinking or talking about 9/11 and the death of Oskar’s father in the attack. Drawing on the theories of Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva, Cathy Caruth, Ronald Granofsky, Hanjo Berressem, and Jacques Lacan, this chapter will focus on Oskar’s repression and its inevitable shattering once the child narrator reaches the end of his quest. Foer considerably modifies the novel form, including innovative paratextual devices to visually represent much of the imagery of 9/11 as it lies squeezed within Oskar’s psyche, thus illustrating Kevin Hayes’s idea that to create a Great American Novel, an author must invent “a mode and method of storytelling different from what other novelists have done before” (157). However, the story remains essentially folksy and a relatively safe narrative even as eight-year-old Oskar traverses all the boroughs of Manhattan on his own. Much like Huck Finn’s tale of adventure and questing for freedom, Foer’s novel uses the presumed innocence of the child narrator, the purity and safety of the wild landscape (urban in this case),

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⁹ The tactics of occlusion are dramatized in various combinations in all the novels, but for the purposes of understanding them individually I will be confining my discussion more or less to one occlusive mechanism per chapter.
and the mechanism of a quest to tie Oskar to the Great American Novel tradition. My first chapter will feature an examination of the intersections of Foer’s novel with Twain’s and will conclude with an analysis of how the terrorist attack punctures the Puritan myth of having a community secure from outsiders.

Chapter 2 will examine another family’s efforts to occlude Muslims and Islam from their immediate surroundings. In Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007), Keith and Lianne Neudecker, and their son Justin, each deal in their own ways with the trauma of 9/11. While a performance artist in the novel keeps re-enacting the “falling man” to reveal the continuing immanence of 9/11, and thereby shattering the repressions, my study focuses on how immediately after repression fails as a mechanism for them, they begin to appropriate Islamic and Muslim textuality. I will use Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha’s seminal theories of othering to examine the effects of white Americans creating a conceptual homogenized horde out of the Muslim other. I will also use James. J. Sosnoski, Tracy B. Strong, and Gloria Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of appropriation theory to describe the disempowering and harmful repercussions of the Neudeckers’ seizing and repurposing the Muslim other’s textuality. While a pivotal scriptural appropriation is almost certainly attributed to Lianne in the novel, the little room for ambiguity allows a further critique of the narrator, and perhaps even of the novel and author—and the disambiguation of this attribution and examining the implications of each permutation forms a vital component of this chapter. Like Foer, DeLillo too plays into the Great American Novel tradition of using a “particular family” to indicate “a kind of epic universality” of American values and ethical positions (Knox 679), and I will explore the further linkages between DeLillo’s *Falling Man* and the tradition, especially since his relatively short and
focused novel is very un-DeLillo-like, but it speaks to his project of a specific kind of nation-building fiction from American authors after 9/11.

In Chapter 3, I will examine Amy Waldman’s *The Submission* (2011), and the process of occlusion as it shifts when the Muslim does not remain abstract but appears in person. In this case, the white Americans organize protests and try to ostracize Mohammad Khan, who has won a blind competition to design a memorial for 9/11, and urge him to either renounce Islam or give up his right to design the memorial. While building on the theoretical framework provided by Said and Bhabha to explore othering in Waldman’s novel, I will also use theories of sovereign power, as delineated by Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault, to examine the artificial hierarchies that develop between groups seeking either to uphold or suspend American liberties for Muslim-Americans like Khan. I will further examine the American Dream and merit-based links between Waldman’s novel and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, especially in how the victory for both novels’ protagonists is hollow. The chapter concludes by noting that the only thing keeping Khan from claiming his victory is his rather tenuous link with Islam, and so the gestures that Waldman makes in her novel to the so-called Great American Novel tradition is also her way of critiquing public perceptions of American civil liberties hinging on this one issue of the “Muslim Question”.

In the fourth and last chapter of the dissertation, I will examine Updike’s *Terrorist* (2006), and its depiction of an Egyptian-American high school student training to become a suicide bomber. The chapter will focus on the occlusive mechanism of secularization, as employed by Jack Levy, the school’s counselor, to neutralize the threat posed by the student. Using a framework of secularization theory, as constructed by Ates Altinordu, Philip S. Gorski, Jeffrey K. Hadden, Ger Pickel, Detlaf Pollack, and others, I will demonstrate the repercussions
of Levy’s lack of understanding of American ideas about secularization and the meaning of his successful conversion of the Muslim to American secularity. I will further examine power structures in place in the educational system depicted in *Terrorist* using Louis Althusser’s idea of the Ideological State Apparatuses and Slavoj Žižek’s notion of ideologies as orientation tools to modify citizens’ behavior. Updike, as another author that reviewers often link to the Great American Novel tradition of the second half of twentieth-century United States, provides ample reasons to tie *Terrorist* to the tradition of the Great American Novel: the commentary throughout on American value systems and culture, on the “morass of godlessness” (Updike 13) that it has become in the twenty-first century, but also the idea, conveyed through its mouthpiece Levy, that America self-corrects, becoming “an ever more perfect union” (Malone 11)—a fundamental American belief that links the concept of the Great American Novel to the “Greatest Nation on Earth” exceptionalist stance. The chapter concludes with an examination of this blind hope and how it ties to the “Muslim Question” and the process of secularization.

In post-9/11 novels, the Great American Novel ethos evolves further by showcasing structured attempts at dealing with trauma. The quest structure in Foer’s novel leads to Oskar re-organizing how he spends his time and traverses space to keep his trauma in check. For a large portion of the quest the trauma stays at bay. In *Falling Man*, the periodic, haphazardly timed appearance of the titular performance artist does not mitigate trauma—perhaps, if the performances were announced there would be the possibility of catharsis, but the artist’s aim is to rekindle trauma and the apparent randomness of the timing and the place enable the rekindling of 9/11 trauma. The protest organizations of *The Submission* also follow the model of Foer’s novel, where the purpose is not to exacerbate or rekindle but rather to smother the trauma. In Updike’s *Terrorist*, which I will discuss in the next chapter, the bureaucratic role of the
educational institution and other Ideological State Apparatuses is central to the attempt at repressing and redirecting trauma. All these organizational (and, in the case of *Falling Man*, dis-organizational) methods showcase the post-9/11 Great American Novels’ evolution in representing as potent the bureaucratic management of the public’s reactions and responses to the overwhelming trauma of 9/11.

All through the process of constructing this dissertation I wondered why 9/11 novelists focused their narratives on representing white American trauma rather than providing “solutions”, and I have found an answer in the political machinations of how the post-9/11 culture and politics advanced in the real world. Immediately after the attacks of 9/11, there was an opportunity for Americans to conform their idealistic vision of the country with on-ground realities about the United States’ perpetration of havoc in international and domestic politics, but that would have required making changes in the ideological foundations of America’s moral superiority built into the exceptionalist narrative.10 At the schismatic instance of the attack, according to Slavoj Žižek, the choice was thus poised and resolved:

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10 The purpose of this dissertation is not to defend Islam or Muslims; its purpose is to examine the linkages between Anglo-American characters’ trauma and their reactive pursuit of applying coping mechanisms that backfire on them. However, I do wish to point out and reiterate when applicable (even if only in a footnote) that Levinasian ethical meeting points were possible between the two communities created by the schism of 9/11. American theoretical ideals are shared, even universal liberal ones, and they also conform with Islamic ideals (Musselman 79). I would argue that “Islamic” countries’ authoritarian exhibition of power over their subjects should not be confused with Islamic values. Muqtedar Khan points out that although there are some Muslims who believe that the idea of American exceptionalism at the national level belies that “all talk about American values is a hypocritical discursive cover for racism, imperialism and Islamophobia,” there are others who are enamored with American democracy, its freedoms and the tremendous opportunities, both economic and cultural, that it has provided to Muslims and people of other nationalities and faiths from all over the world. They recognize that America is indeed based on an experiment with freedom of religion, expression and thought. They like the fact that in the United States religious values can play a role in the public sphere without resulting in a theocracy or religious tyranny… The idea of religious pluralism for these Muslims is a positive alternative to the extremes of secularism and theocracy… For them, the U.S. model is in many ways consistent with Islamic values; they actually wish to export it to the Muslim world. In spite of their reservations about U.S. foreign policy, they genuinely believe in American exceptionalism. (38)
will the Americans decide to fortify their ‘sphere’ further, or to risk stepping out of it?... America should learn humbly to accept its own vulnerability as part of this world, enacting the punishment of those responsible as a sad duty, not as an exhilarating retaliation—what we are getting instead is the forceful reassertion of the exceptional role of the USA as a global policeman, as if what causes resentment against the USA is not its excess of power, but its lack of it. (49)

Instead of confronting reality by popping the national narrative, Bush-era America doubled down on the supposed exceptionalism and moral superiority of the United States, and “opted to reassert” what was never true in the first place (Žižek 22). Where I would disagree with Žižek is in his assertion that the United States made a clear-headed choice; the trauma fueling the choice was muddling and unassimilable because of the scale of the violence and tragedy, and especially because its “symbolic” repercussions “continue to, as it were, ‘haunt’ the present” (Randall 1). However, I do agree with him that it was, nonetheless, a matter of choice to reinforce the exceptionalist and self-aggrandizing narrative. Rather than pausing for self-reflection, and admitting their culpability through their destabilization of regions throughout the world, American government officials declared the enemy other—the Muslim terrorist—entirely responsible for the terrorist attack, and the United States entirely innocent of any wrongdoing. A central contradiction in such thinking by many white Americans is that they use Christianity as fuel for such exceptionalism, while simultaneously disavowing Islam as violent or complicit in what the mainstream might call “reverse imperialism”. Jean-Francois Lyotard points out that “the sign of legitimacy is the people’s consensus… the people debate among themselves about what is just or unjust in the same way that the scientific community debates about what is true or false; they accumulate civil laws just as scientists accumulate scientific laws” (30). To Lyotard’s
notion of the general population “legitimizing” certain narratives that solidify into an immovable set of “laws”, I would add that the general population also finds it hard to resist the inertia of national myths, which, along with the dominant hyper-conservative political rhetoric, is what most Americans submitted their thinking to in the post-9/11 moment by echoing and perpetuating the myths and “laws” of their supposed superiority. American exceptionalism was “too big to fail” and so the mystical conceptualization of the nation was “bailed out” despite ground realities. DeLillo and Updike are already included in the Great American Novel discourse because of their seminal works in the twentieth century (notably DeLillo’s *White Noise* and Updike’s *Rabbit* series), but new novelists Foer and Waldman too play on tropes and trends found within the tradition. Even as they explore and represent the trauma of white Americans in their novels, Foer, DeLillo, Waldman, and Updike critique these same foundational myths to deconstruct the ideas of the United States’ innocence and immunity from blame, and they do so while re-shaping and mythologizing the nationbuilding framework of the “new Great American Novel” tradition around the “Muslim Question”.

In the conclusion of the dissertation I will examine the collective implications of the variety of occlusions represented in the four novels, and also develop the idea of the “renewed” Great American Novel as I see it. At the end of the conclusion, I will also posit that the post-9/11 novels that play upon the so-called Great American Novel tradition, as they center on the “Muslim Question” may not find room to move on and become the multi-faceted exploration of the American nation that it used to be. Its conceptual return in such a unidirectional form may be a signal that the nation-rallying novel as a concept might be in its death-throes (and signaling thereby perhaps the death of a cultural empire)—unless a great work comes along to open up the
novel form, one by which Americans can feel united in pursuit of a grand nation-building literary purpose without indulging in their hatred of the other.
Chapter 1
Creating Monsters Out of Trauma: The Failed Repression of Muslims and Islam in
Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close

Introduction

For his first novel, *Everything is Illuminated* (2001), Jonathan Safran Foer (b. 2004) won the 2001 National Jewish Book Award, a Guardian First Book Award, and also shared the PEN / Robert W. Bingham Prize. Much like the one under discussion in this chapter, Foer’s first novel is a quest narrative; it centers on a “quirky” American boy’s search for the woman who saved his father from the Nazis. His debut novel’s unprecedented success at the turn of the century situated Foer as a culturally significant writer, a reputation cemented by his second novel, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), which offers an intimate portrait of grief associated with a national tragedy and is often paired with veteran author Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* in studies of seminal post-9/11 novels.

In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Oskar Schell, an eight-year-old-boy, attempts to find meaning in his father’s life and death, but is unable to assimilate, or even confront, the 9/11 tragedy in which his father dies. In the last days of his life, Oskar’s father Thomas bought a vase. Upon accidentally breaking this vase after his father’s funeral, Oskar finds a key within an envelope on which is written the word or name “BLACK”. Oskar constructs from that word and the object a quest to look up and meet every person with the last name Black listed in the New York phonebook. He aims to find the lock that the key will fit into, and thereby solve what appears to him as the last, and perhaps most meaningful, puzzle put into play by his father for
Oskar. The novel juxtaposes Oskar’s narrative, in alternating chapters, first-person accounts in epistolary form by Oskar’s paternal grandfather and grandmother, each of whom chronicles their romantic entanglement as backdropped by their having survived the bombing of Dresden by the Allies. Besides the triple-helical structure of first-person narratives, the novel contains textual manipulations including blank pages, pages with so many layers of text on top of each other that they appear nearly black, colored texts depicting testing pads for various pens, pages with photographs of people, things, and places that Oskar encounters on his quest, as well as iconic images of a “falling man” from 9/11.\footnote{The iconic “falling man” image of 9/11 has been based on pictures taken of those who, instead of waiting for the inferno in the buildings to catch up to them, chose to plunge to their deaths. Foer’s novel does not use the one picture taken by Richard Drew that has become the “falling man” in popular imagination. Drew’s photograph shows a vertical but upside-down man with one knee bent, the pose appearing disconcertingly calm. Instead of this image, the pictures in Oskar’s selection appear to be a series of sequential frames that show a diagonal, airborne body, limbs akimbo and seeming to flail; these images are from Lyle Owerko’s collection. Owerko has mentioned that “he took up six rolls of film of people falling from the twin towers” (Ingersoll 69). Foer’s technique of rendering narrative representation in multiple textual and visual layers is especially resonant with Tim Gauthier’s idea that “9/11 was first and foremost a visual event… The trauma visited upon the nation induced a repetition-compulsion played out in the viewing and reviewing of what have now become standard representations of the event” (39).}

The novel’s insistence on its own textual nature reveals Foer’s interest in multi-faceted means of representation within his novel. This approach to create a narrative out of visually-manipulated text as well as pictures, juxtaposed with the novel’s own narrative, is especially intriguing when considering the fact that the novel’s protagonist avoids—even represses mention of—9/11, just as he represses another important marker of the post-9/11 reality: Islam and Muslims in the United States. Oskar traverses the five boroughs but never mentions encountering a Muslim character or pondering the Islamic ideology that played a major part in his father’s death in the terrorist incident. Whenever the conjoined ideas of 9/11, Islam, or Muslims come close to his conscious thoughts, he attempts to avoid them by distracting himself with some trick of his imagination or by condensing his thoughts into declarative pronouncements—both of
which are mechanisms of repression. However, the repression does not effectively eliminate his thoughts or the trauma he suffers from—instead, there is violent eruption of the repressed material, perpetuating and exacerbating the trauma once the technique of repression fails. Post-9/11 novels like Foer’s dramatize and explore the sense of safety and domesticity that can return to the United States, and especially to New York, at the expense of a comprehensive abjection of Muslim characters and Islam from the United States. But the retreat to domesticity is not unprecedented in American literature, and even in the Great American Novel tradition. In fact, as Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse point out about one of the original supposedly Great American Novels, Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin: “[i]t seems somehow predictable that she should use a domestic novel to think about the consequences of a nation divided over the issue of slavery… a house divided raises the possibility that such a division could be reconciled within the household” (117). Despite the retreat to domesticity being set in historic precedent, though, Tim Gauthier is concerned, as I am, especially about “how exactly the other is, or is not, delivered to us” in the novel (44).

In using a child narrator for both his earliest novels—but especially in this post-9/11 work—and by focusing on the boy’s domestic situation as informed by a larger American political reality, Foer firmly links his fiction to the so-called Great American Novel tradition that invokes Mark Twain’s quest novel The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884). The child dealing with the American political reality has also been used to great effect in canonical novels such as Betty Smith’s A Tree Grows in Brooklyn (1943), J. D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye (1951), and Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird (1960), and more contemporary works such as Alice Sebold’s The Lovely Bones (2003), Philip Roth’s The Plot Against America (2004), and Donna Tartt’s The Goldfinch (2013). Oskar’s story showcases the same technique of an
inherently innocent narrator being thrust into the post-9/11 space of narration to search for an idealized and mythologized pre-modern purity of existence. Oskar’s account especially echoes that of Huckleberry Finn, as each protagonist embarks on a journey to find freedom either literal or emotional. Finn is intrinsically tied to “the mystique of America” (Van O’Connor 8), and in linking his work to such a foundational text in American literature, often touted as a Great American Novel, Foer attempts not only to invoke the old traditions, but also to rework them. Whereas Finn places “no stock in dead people” (Twain 2), Oskar’s entire quest is hinged on his dead father’s last actions. Debra Shostak points out that “Foer’s choice of child narrator… is telling, because the choice enables [a] retreat to sentimentality, to the innocence of a fantasized American prehistory” (37). Leslie Fiedler points out that a “child’s world is not only asexual, it is terrible: a world of fear and loneliness, a haunted world” (xxi). Like Finn, who is terrified because of, and despite, his innocence and naivete, Oskar is haunted by the spectre of 9/11’s trauma and its lingering political aftermath even as he engages, albeit guardedly, with post-9/11 New York.

Birgit Däwes, in her excellent and thorough survey of 9/11 novels, *Ground Zero Fiction: History, Memory, and Representation*, examines and categorizes over a hundred American post-9/11 novels; in her acknowledgements, she notes that Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* “captures, in its multiplicity of voices, its experimental design, and its historical correlations, both the paralyzing sense of crisis and the aesthetic promise to overcome it” (xi). I find Däwes’s conception of the novel more inspirational for her own project of making meaning out of 9/11 through literature than for offering readers or its characters anything for “overcoming” or moving past the trauma of 9/11 by actually dealing with it. For creating an inherently innocent yet involved protagonist, as well as for driving the impetus for quests within the post-9/11 world,
the novel would be worth including in any research on post-9/11 literature. For my dissertation, the novel serves several key purposes, especially an exploration of the fragile repressive mechanisms Oskar uses to attempt rendering New York secure for himself (and by extension for white Americans), for examining the violent repercussions of that enforced and repressive domestication, and for signaling a shift in the novelistic concerns of not just new American authors but all American authors trying to speak of the collective American spirit. As Richard Gray puts it, 9/11 and its aftermath “are a defining element in our contemporary structure of feeling and they cannot help but impact profoundly on American writing” (“Open Doors” 129).

As indicated by this early seminal novel within the post-9/11 tradition, representation of white characters’ psyche as it relates to the trauma is of central concern. Such white American writers’ focus on unifying, nation-building, national narrative-reimagining novels does not involve examinations of the multiple ways in which the American Dream is failing, but the more imperative concern of how to make the United States safe again in the face of a multitude of implications of the unassimilable experience of having been attacked—and Foer not only signals but also drives this shift in Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close. In representing Oskar’s desire to render New York (and by extension the United States) into one whole, nationally-unified safe space, Foer is playing within and upon the tradition of the so-called Great American Novel, whose idealism on the national project was just as fraught with the fantasy of unification.

However, in showing the failure of the project in Oskar’s attempt at domesticating all the dangerous parts of the five boroughs, Foer is indicating that the Great American Novel project itself cannot be realized, and the United States cannot be made innocent like Finn once was, even though white Americans are compelled to reach for assurance of foundational conceptions of the United States’ supposed greatness and innocence once more after the terrorist attack.
Criticism and Implications

Not all the initial reception of the novel was keen on its deliberate avoidances of 9/11’s grander tragedy in favor of focusing on the micro-level travails of one family and the domestication of New York after the attack. Reviews of the novel were either gushing or guarded against Foer’s focus and choice of voices. Michael Faber noted how Foer’s storytelling in both *Everything is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* had generated from one set of reading audiences “a rapturous reception: confetti-showers of praise,” while others found the voices of his characters echoing “an adolescent chatterbox, all artifice and no substance, all cuteness and no grit.” Walter Kirn in *The New York Times* praises the book as for him it “evokes, at a primal, cultural level, the benevolent, innocent New York that was vaporized, even as a fantasy, when the towers were toppled,” but on the other hand, he labels Oskar as the type of precocious child who “drives adults to the bar for a stiff drink.” The novel itself in his summation is an atrocious failure, and he excoriates Foer for his attempt “to take on the most explosive subject available while showing no passion, giving no offense, adopting no point of view, and venturing no sentiment more hazardous than that history is sad and brutal and wouldn’t it be nicer if it weren’t” (Kirn). Ironically, Kirn seems to have missed the critical apparatus that Foer sets up with Oskar’s repression and the failure of that psychological manipulation, as well as the link to Stowe’s usage of domesticity in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to symbolize a divided nation that comes together. In these early appraisals, however, Kirn and Faber did delineate the arguments that would generate many of the strands of later, more detailed, scholarship along dividing lines on the novel and lay the groundwork for my own exploration of the extent to which its characters cope with their trauma by using repression.
Critical positions vary on the novel’s representation of non-communication about larger political realities, and about its exclusion and marginal positioning of the national tragedy in favor of focusing on its white characters’ domestic issues. Charlie Lee-Potter, Kristiaan Versluys, Rachel Greenwald Smith, and Karolina Golimowska have argued, noting Foer’s Adorno-esque gestures\(^2\), that the novel attempts to articulate through its various non-communicative and non-confrontational gestures that the idea of looking “for significance” in 9/11 is inherently “hopeless” (Smith 156); that Foer is attempting to wrest the narrative “away from the terrorists” by not talking about terrorism (Golimowska 123); and that, in Foer’s novel as well as in the real world, 9/11, the Holocaust, and other such calamities, are linguistically inexpressible and “beyond full comprehension” (Versluys 15). On the other hand, Elizabeth Anker, Aaron DeRosa, and Tory Rye Andersen argue that post-9/11 novels such as Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close and DeLillo’s Falling Man miss a critical opportunity to recognize the “other” within the United States and globally. By focusing the post-9/11 novel on domestic minutiae of white people rather than on the event or the larger cultural landscape, these critics argue, the authors put up “No Admittance signs around the event” (Andersen 9), almost in an act of preventing the development of discourse by other writers, with their idea that everything about 9/11 is ineffable simply because nothing consisting of mere words can contribute to an understanding of a tragedy of this scale. These critics imply that just because Foer and DeLillo have nothing substantial to say about the larger event in their fictions, it does not mean that meaningful fiction that centers on the larger tragedy cannot be created. I would counter with Arin

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\(^2\) I refer to Adorno’s provocative idea, “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (162) which is about the banality and uselessness of anything said in response to, or to describe, an apocalyptic tragedy—in his case, specifically, the Holocaust. Foer’s (for large portions of the text) avoidance of 9/11 as subject in this novel—along with a strategy representing repression—is also an Adorno-esque gesture, indicating that nothing that is written about it can come close to describing, let alone encapsulating, the calamity.
Keeble’s argument that “[t]hese novels may have as much to say in their limitations or omissions as in the subjects they cover” (6), not only because the public trauma makes white people retreat to the safety of the domestic, but also because 9/11’s event has disappeared, and it only lingers on in memory: it cannot be directly, physically interacted with after its occurrence and passing.

While critics such as the ones mentioned above have recognized the repression of 9/11 in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, I extend the argument forward to contend that 9/11 cannot be suppressed—it resurges (because it is immanent in the American psyche), and along with it reappear the forcibly removed Muslim characters. Oskar and his grandparents attempt the repression and abjection of Muslim existence to secure New York—and, by extension, the United States—for Oskar. However, Foer’s novel critically demonstrates that the enforced repression adds an ineffective layer of security, the undoing of which is a source of further trauma when the textual and imagined presence of Muslims and Islam overcomes the repression and resurges in Oskar’s imagination as a more malevolent imagined entity than perhaps even the actual one. While repression is a minor coping mechanism for white American characters explored in other post-9/11 novels, Foer’s novel particularly demonstrates an extended use of repression and the springing back of repressed material in Oskar’s narrative. In representing so thoroughly and so consistently the child protagonist’s will to repress the dangerous other, Foer charts and renews the American quest for pre-9/11 innocence even in the face of apocalyptic violence—and, along with it, a new foray into the Great American Novel tradition. However, by

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3 While the phrase “extremely loud” occurs only once in the novel (235), “incredibly close” recurs several times (70, 96, 97, 295). However, those phrases occur in the novel while gesturing elsewhere than 9/11, either to Oskar’s proximity to someone or to the loudness of the “inventions” in his head. Even in its title, the novel indicates an idea of stepping to the edge of the schism or chasm created by the terrorist attack, but then each iteration makes a hasty retreat to safety and familiar terrain, while creating an unmentionable bogeyman out of all things associated with 9/11.
capturing the shift in the American novels after 9/11, as well as propelling the Great American Novel’s concern from that of the American Dream to that of the “Muslim Question”, while also examining the idea of otherness without presenting the other, Foer evades the critical lens needed to provide actual discourse on the other and also renders the enemy abstract. The malevolent other, for the purpose of this post-9/11 novel, is not a Muslim, really, but more an abstract entity that the whole American enterprise is rallying against; for Foer and for several other post-9/11 writers working in this tradition of representing and critiquing the “American Spirit” (the other abstract elephant in the room), the imagined Muslim terrorist is most menacing and least human, and there is no way to understand its motives because it does not physically exist—it only overpowers because of its psychological ubiquity.

**Trauma and Repression**

About trauma novels, Ronald Granofsky writes that “the quest on the part of the novel’s protagonist for psychic balance or integration will take place against a background of significant historical movement and that individual search itself will represent a cultural effort at realignment” (8). So the quest, while it may be specifically important and meaningful for Oskar, also throws meaning outwards by symbolizing a quest larger than itself. To understand how the novel approaches the existence of Islam and Muslims within the United States within the quest and its complex symbology, it is first important to understand how it develops the engagement of its three protagonists with their personal and political traumas. In all three protagonists’ accounts, there are mechanisms of metonymy and repression at play that anticipate and mirror how Oskar engages with 9/11, Muslims, and Islam, and in these streams of engagement the idea of repressed trauma is central in symbolizing white American responses to the terrorist attack.
Oskar’s missing father is represented by the physical object of the key, whereas the missing Muslim characters are not represented by a physical object but by immaterial signifiers. At first, Oskar’s quest with the key is another way of continuing to hold on to his father after the attack, but it is a tenuous physical connection that evaporates in meaning. Oskar avoids confronting his father’s death by entering into the quest, and he symbolically infuses the key and the search with meaningful substitutes for his father and for their relationship. The search for the key’s lock becomes the process by which Oskar is able to confront the idea that his father is permanently gone. However, the key is revealed to be someone else’s property, an answer to a puzzle in someone else’s domestic affairs, and Oskar’s father did not even know he possessed it (Foer 298). Unlike the physical key with its abstract association, Muslims in the United States are physical beings that Oskar’s narrative renders abstract. Oskar associates Muslims with 9/11, and he attempts to avoid thinking and talking about both. Pushing these ideas into the territory of the intangible is another way of repressing them by instead focusing on the physicality of the key and its immanence—meaning, that the key and the search become meaningful substitutes for his father.

A similar set of metonymic as well as repressive mechanisms appears in the narratives of Oskar’s grandparents. After the bombing of Dresden, Oskar’s grandfather, Thomas Schell, loses the ability of speech, likely because of psychosomatic trauma. Instead of communicating by speech, he begins to converse, and in some cases obfuscate true communication, through handwritten notes or the tattoos he gets on the palms of his hands: YES on the left, and NO on the right (16-17). Not only does he withdraw into himself the vocal means of communication, he also does not offer any thoughts on his son’s death in the World Trade Center attack. His narrative thread is addressed to his dead son, Thomas Jr., both before and after Thomas Sr. finds
out he has died; the son likely never reads any of Thomas Sr.’s letters. In one sequence, Oskar’s grandfather runs out of paper and so writes layer upon layer of narrative on the same pages, creating an “over-written” palimpsest that becomes nearly black (281-284). In similar gestures of undelivered epistles and obfuscated communication, the narrative of Oskar’s grandmother, Thomas Sr.’s wife, consists of a single multi-chapter letter she is writing to Oskar, on a typewriter. However, she is unaware that the machine’s ribbon has been taken out, which means that she has been producing nothing but blank pages throughout her narrative—it exists only to be read by readers of the novel, not by the characters within it. Her poor eyesight is cited as the conceit for her belief that the pages contain text; but to showcase for the novel’s reader as well as for his own letter’s audience the blankness of his wife’s narrative, the novel has three blank pages, inserted within Thomas’s letter to his own dead son (121-123). The letters the grandparents write, mostly focused on the autobiographical, domestic world of intimate relationships, will never be read by their intended addressees. This unreceived codification of communication is another mechanism of repression in the novel; the letters begin to represent the loss of meaningful and honest communication, just as the quest for the key’s lock for Oskar becomes a symbolic, but eventually fruitless, means of developing a post-mortality connection with his disappeared father. An even more direct allusion to the people associated with 9/11 not appearing in the novel is the “empty coffin” (169) of Oskar’s father. All of these images of lost people, incomplete communication, and misplaced objects (missing fathers, unreadable texts, over-written and blank pages, obfuscated communications, unreceived letters, an absent lock) resonate with, and also anticipate, the novel’s missing Muslims—who remain unmentioned and un-encountered even as the palimpsests represent how Muslims have been “overwritten” to the point of indecipherability by centuries of Orientalist discourse. Meanwhile, the domestic, in
various modes, especially those of continuing family life for the Schells after suffering personal tragedy, remains at the center of the novel, while the larger calamity of the terrorist attack remains peripheral and repressed.

The novel directly addresses Oskar’s repression and potential treatment for it when Dr. Howard Fein, his therapist, attempts to uncover and therapeutically release Oskar’s repression by making him confront it. Dr. Fein asks whether Oskar thinks any good may have come of his father’s death, but Oskar neither focuses on his father’s death as a memory, nor does he give vent to his frustration and anger by screaming out loud, like he feels an urge to, “No! Of course not, you fucking asshole!” (203). Instead, he shrugs off the question, thereby appearing on the surface to be in control while instead compressing further his memories and feelings about his father, 9/11, and Muslims. This repression and mnemonic manipulation as an avoidance is typical in the representations of repression as delineated by Cathy Caruth, who notes that in the aftermath of an immensely traumatic event memory of it becomes “no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference)” (“Unclaimed Experience” 182). To his own psychic repression Oskar also adds a layer of deliberate repression, and each informs the other. The only problem with Oskar’s wilful as well as involuntary rendering of 9/11 and its perpetuating ideology into the abstract and repressed position is that the abstract becomes immanent—always vaguely present, even if never talked about—and it cannot be put aside as a physical object can be.

Repression can be defined as the pressure placed upon the psyche to avoid and “inhibit the experience and expression of negative feelings or unpleasant cognitions in order to prevent one’s positive self-image from being threatened” (Garssen 471), and it is rooted in Sigmund Freud’s work on the concept. The manifestation of repression in literature is often through
characters exhibiting “non-expression, emotional control, rationality, anti-emotionality, defensiveness and restraint”, and these manifestations in psychoanalytic theory, are, quite similarly, in the form of “non-expression of negative emotions” (Garssen 471). Freud’s student Abram Kardiner conceptualized repression as “protective mental organization” that enables a “denial of reality and splitting the world into good and bad” (qtd. In Cohen 176). Kardiner’s idea of repression becoming a “protective mental organization” (qtd. In Cohen 176) is important to note here, as it echoes Dr. Fein’s attempts to ease Oskar’s self-harming mechanism because his attempt at treatment reinforces the repression. Often, the repressed material is also subjected to abjection, or the attempt at expunging or removing the “other” that is horrific. Hanjo Berressem defines the abject as “things/ events in the face of which the subject experiences absolute dread” (20). Julia Kristeva defines “primal repression,” as being “always already haunted by the Other, to divide, reject, repeat” (12); but the abject body, the “other” that is repressed always returns, according to Kristeva, and when it does, an “abject body shatters the wall of repression and its judgements” (15). Because of his inability to release the repressed trauma through free association and other related therapies, this is precisely what happens to Oskar: the abject Muslim returns, shattering emphatically the mechanism of repression.

Versluys and Charlie Lee-Potter both read the repressive and solipsizing mechanisms of Oskar and his grandparents as linguistic reactions to trauma, and they both interpret the novel’s manipulations of text as grander commentary on language itself. Versluys points out that the novel focuses on the struggle of trauma victims to bring their various losses to language. Honesty and authenticity, in this context, become a function of how language manages to expose its own limits and to suggest that a traumatic event such as September 11 is
ultimately incommensurate and beyond full comprehension. Pain is related to the impossibility of utterance. The three narrator-protagonists of the novel are faced with an ineffable trauma, an unspeakable truth, which they try to reveal through language. In this effort, Foer explores the outer reaches of language, where it borders on silence and where saying nothing and saying everything are virtually synonymous. (15)

Similarly, Lee-Potter posits that the sum total of the textual display in the novel exhibits “despair of bringing meaning at all” to events like 9/11, or anything (174). While both scholars indicate that the novel’s textual manipulations gesture to Adorno’s idea of individual ineffability in the face of monstrous calamity, and quite validly so, I would like to focus on what has been occluded by the barriers the novel creates in terms of immanent material.4 In other words, I want to examine, specifically, what material within the novel is absent. On those terms, not only are Muslims and Islam removed, but also absent are any discussion on Islam’s inherent textuality (its book-based religious ideas), any discussion of the role of Muslims in perpetrating or condemning 9/11, and also any discourse on the religion or its believers existing in post-9/11 United States.

The absence of any Muslim characters, or any discussion on Islamic ideology, or 9/11’s perpetrators, is even more critical considering how it works in conjunction with the other mechanisms that the novel’s characters use to mark spatial representations. Shortly after their marriage, Oskar’s grandparents designate portions of their apartment as “‘Nothing Places,’ in which one could be assured of complete privacy” and “Something” Places, which would operate

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4 As I see it, the creation of blank pages in the novel (121-123) to represent the grandmother’s blank pages, and the over-written pages to represent Thomas Sr.’s writing, exhibit first the inability to convey specific information within the novel. As Thomas Sr. is running out of space, he does make the grander gesture towards the ineffable by writing “there are so many things you’ll never know” (281) to his dead son. And even though Oskar is not able to read his grandmother’s blank narrative, the reader of the novel does receive the information contained within it. The point is that communication has been repressed between the characters, but it starts with specific information being removed rather than all communication being completely removed. While the novel contains blank pages as well as over-written ones, it also contains more than two hundred pages that convey textually, and lucidly, information and plot development. Failure of communication is part of the text’s narrative strategy, not its entirety.
as normal space (Foer 110-111). The words YES and NO on Thomas Sr.’s hands, and the creation of Something and Nothing spaces are reactions to trauma and retractions of existing abilities and space. They gesture at the ultimate with dichotomous notions of presence and absence. Significantly, the seemingly arbitrary attempts at erasure are carried forth into a repression of any discourse on Muslims and Islam within the novel as well, because, with the creation of “Nothing” and “Something” places, Oskar’s grandparents introduce an idea of trauma and safety that also extends into Oskar’s narrative. The terrorist can never enter the “Nothing” place of security that Oskar’s narrative extends across the breadth of New York in his traversal across it. However, there are pockets of “Something” spaces, including ferries, inside elevators, and the tops of tall buildings, where coping mechanisms are not enough—the Muslim will intrude, either through breaking the repressive coping barriers or just by lingering symbolic association with 9/11’s textual or visual aftermath. A chilling rendering of this is exhibited in Thomas Jr.’s coffin, which is an “empty box” (169). It lies ambiguously between being a “Nothing” space where there is safety, absence, and privacy, and being a “Something” space where the Islamic and Muslim influence has rendered destruction—after all, nothing of Oskar’s father remains in the coffin. The novel depicts a United States in which Islam and Muslims exist out of sight and consideration, away from that secure and anonymous “Nothing” space. The implication of the novel’s stance of ineffability and un-representability on Islam and Muslims in the post-9/11 era is that the religion and its followers have been rendered into the same category as the ultimately horrific. The post-9/11 American novel’s purpose seems to become tangible through this positioning, and that purpose becomes articulated as the question: what should be done about Muslims and Islam in the United States after the attack? Foer’s answer for Oskar is
clear: imagine them as not existing. But there are repercussions of such an absolute exercise of imagination.

Repressing Muslims and 9/11

In Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, white characters’ attempts to avoid thinking about 9/11, and their efforts to expunge Muslims and Islam from New York’s landscape are parallel attempts at repression. Marjorie Worthington notes that “for the most part, 9/11 novels tend to evoke 9/11 rather than grapple with it; characters live through and struggle to come to terms with the events, but they do so within surprisingly staid and standard narrative plots and structures” (4). In Foer’s novel, especially in Oskar’s portion, the evocation of 9/11 is inextricably linked to thoughts about Muslims and the “staid and standard” domesticity is a blanket of repression created to avoid the fear. Roberta Senechal de la Roche notes that the standard definition of terrorism, “violence intended to instill fear in a large audience,” seems “too broad” (1-2), but I would argue that it applies to Foer’s idea of what the terrorist act achieves, at least in Oskar’s psyche. Oskar cannot think about 9/11 without also confronting the Islamist and Islamic ideologies that caused it, or without also negotiating the idea of the continued presence of Islam and Arab-looking Muslims within the United States beyond the terrorist event. Therefore, Foer’s novel and its narrators skirt the larger issue of the attack to focus on the domestic circumstances of Oskar’s family and the domestic situations of those people with the last name Black whom Oskar meets on his quest.

There are only three instances of Muslims or Islam being mentioned in the novel, all of them associated with fear, terrorism, and a threatening presence. The first of these is at the outset
of the quest, when Oskar indicates to what extent Muslims and Islam influence his psyche when he lists his fears:

- taking showers… getting into elevators, obviously… suspension bridges, germs, airplanes, fireworks, Arab people on the subway (even though I’m not racist), Arab people in restaurants and coffee shops and other public places, scaffolding, sewers and subway grates, bags without owners, shoes, people with mustaches, smoke, knots, tall buildings, turbans. (Foer 36)

The fear of Arabs is never directly stated to originate or link with 9/11, but the word-cloud-like appearance of “airplanes,” “tall buildings,” “elevators,” “turbans,” and “bags without owners” builds a picture of the September 11 hijackings while also ensconcing the fearful associations among more familiar fears of quotidian urban environmental hazards such as “sewers and subway grates” and “germs.” No Arab actually appears in the novel, and Oskar mentions no other race, specifically, of which he is wary. The disconnection between the one racial tag that Oskar creates within his fears is a blanket of fear that also blankets a race—covers them up, distances them without any encounter with them at all.

The fears he lists are as indicative of Oskar’s guilelessness as are the methods he consciously employs to counter them, but they are exposed for their naivete. Soon after mentioning the racial fear, Oskar resolves to “not be sexist again, or racist, or ageist, or homophobic, or overly wimpy, or discriminatory to handicapped people or mental retards, and

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5 Here, it is quite interesting to note the insertion of technologies as well into the matrix of fears, and these technologies are associated especially with places of leisure. Airplanes, subway trains, suspension bridge, and tall buildings all denote technological innovations that are relatively modern. Ronald Granofsky notes that “the shock at the destructive potential in human depravity given free rein by modern technology is the basic cultural origin of the trauma novel” (11). But there are also underlying technologies within “coffee shops” with their sophisticated coffee brewing machines and public places, designed with the free flow of human traffic and interaction—designed often with the help of modeling using complex technologies. So, Granofsky’s idea applies more thoroughly even at the micro level in producing a matrix of novelistic terror for Oskar, who must even tame and “domesticize” even the mundane technologies of public space in order to feel safe.
also [to not] lie unless [he] absolutely ha[s] to” (87). This is Oskar’s re-definition of himself and his demeanour at the outset of the quest. Like his fears of Arabs specifically, he slips in a promise to not discriminate against other races as well within a list of several other resolutions. The naivete of this specific resolve against racism is tested in two ways: the entire race of “Arabs” that he fears does not actually appear other than in an already dead terrorist’s name in the novel; and actual encounters with other races are very discomfiting for Oskar. In the two instances of very brief encounters with non-white characters in his environment, Oskar appears either flustered or admits to feeling uncomfortable. The first is when, at Ada Black’s apartment, “[a]n African-American woman” serves him a beverage:

I told her, “Your uniform is incredibly beautiful.” She looked at Ada. “Really,” I said. “I think light blue is a very, very beautiful color on you.” She was still looking at Ada, who said, “Thanks, Gail.” As she walked back to the kitchen, I told her, “Gail is a beautiful name.” (150)

Oskar does not talk to Gail; he talks at her. When Ada mentions that Oskar may have made Gail feel “quite uncomfortable,” his response is that he “was just trying to be nice” (150). Oskar’s race-related naivete and lack of sensitivity is highlighted in this instance by his need to “be nice,” which causes him to apparently praise Gail but in effect to highlight her position through praising her maid’s uniform.\(^6\) There is another brief encounter with a non-white person in the novel during Oskar’s search for an Agnes Black. This time, the “little” person who indicates Agnes’s whereabouts, whom Oskar perceives as “Mexican… [o]r Brazilian, or something” (194), does not speak English, and Oskar is unable to communicate with her. Even with her

\(^6\) Gail’s appearance as a silent African American, as well as the inclusion of a wheelchair-bound non-English-speaking Latina woman (mentioned in the next sentence above) does have the feeling of a “token” existence that prevents near-uniform whiteness in Oskar’s experience of traversing New York.
Oskar becomes at least instructive and likely condescending when he says, “I don’t understand you. Could you please repeat yourself and enunciate a bit better” (195). The disconnection between Oskar and non-white races is depicted as naïve and full of humor, but also fraught with potential racist othering, especially with the condescension in the subtext of hierarchical descriptions Oskar chooses to associate with them.

One more instance of encountering racial otherness is significant to the discussion at hand, but this encounter is not with a living person. In the very first apartment he visits, Oskar encounters “neat photographs on the walls,” among which, in one of the photographs, “you could see an African-American woman’s VJ, which [makes him] feel self-conscious” (93)—Oskar’s words for describing the picture of a nude woman’s genitalia. The self-consciousness that Oskar feels might be the Freudian fear of “castration” that a young boy may feel when being confronted by female genitalia—again, a gesture at feared absence or removal, and a symbolic link to the repression at play within Oskar’s psyche. It is not explicitly stated whether it is the openness of the photograph’s displaying the VJ, the African-American-ness of the VJ, or the VJ itself that makes Oskar feel self-conscious. Is the discomfort racially tinged? I believe so; otherwise, there would be little or no need to mention that the VJ was that of an “African-American” woman at all. Oskar admits to his basic, flawed, familiarity with female sexual organs later in the novel: “I know that VJ is cunt, and also ass” (192), but, more pertinently than his lack of anatomical knowledge, Oskar does not admit to any discomfort about confronting the images or ideas associated with it on the Internet. Only that particular picture, of an “African-American VJ,” is what makes Oskar uncomfortable.

These instances of a picture and characters without agency over the narrative’s textual progression (the characters have no speaking parts) are the only examples of racial otherness in
the novel and are strikingly similar to how the Muslim presence has been racialized and then dismissed by invoking the “Arabs” and then disregarding them. Elizabeth Anker writes that “the 9/11 novel has tended to either magnify racial panic by exploiting the logic of the stereotype or, as with gender, submerge race entirely… non-white characters are virtually absent from the 9/11 novel, an obstruction that mirrors American myopia as well as signals a damaging denial of that event’s global repercussions” (468). I concur with Anker’s idea but also argue that not only do racially homogenizing post-9/11 novels like Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close critique the denial of the event’s global repercussions, but they also examine the marginalization and even throttling into silence of the intra-American multi-racial repercussions of the event. Removing race from the picture unearths the absurdity of limiting the trauma to white America, as if the target of 9/11 was, and its repercussion are felt by, only an “us” contained by that racial boundary. A fixation on examining white Americans’ racialized trauma becomes a visible marker of the American post-9/11 fiction landscape, and Foer seems to be depicting it as a childish and naïve limitation by positioning it within Oskar’s juvenile understanding. But the post-9/11 novels that have become canonical, including Foer’s, Updike’s, and DeLillo’s, all focus nearly exclusively on white Americans’ trauma—because this trauma is the unifying force and center of the “Great American Novel-renewing” movement instigated by DeLillo in his urgent plea to American writers to generate multitudes of “counternarrative”. Even if it is meant to wrest control of the cultural narrative from the terrorists, the plethora of “counternarrative” is still rooted in the trauma caused by terrorism. The “national interrogation” (Boddy 2), or in other words, the so-called tradition of the Great American Novel being used to interrogate the post-9/11 moment, becomes in the case of these novels a unified, and unifying, solipsistic national white American examination of their own psychic trauma. A question then becomes more
pertinent: how much does even a critical representation of the absurdity of white characters’ trauma-based reactiveness become consolidated because of its rationalizations in the novels? There is no Muslim Bigger Thomas (a la Richard Wright’s *Native Son*) or invisible man (a la Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*) providing counterpoints to the discourse created in both Foer’s and DeLillo’s novels, so does that leave the author or the reader more responsible for providing a more overt critique of prejudiced reactions by characters in a post-9/11 novel that does not include the racial other? I will discuss this further in the next chapter, when dealing with DeLillo’s white American characters manipulating Muslim textuality in the absence of the Muslim. But the question is a pertinent one for all such texts, including Foer’s.

**Metonymy and Repression**

The second reference to the Muslim threat in the novel is one of the text’s most direct references to 9/11 via the mention of a Muslim name, and it is also a reference that Oskar uses to link 9/11 to his father rather than to Islamic ideology. In Mr. A. R. Black’s apartment, after perusing several entries from an index-card system employed by his host, Oskar asks his host, “Do you have a card for Mohammed Atta?” while also stating, “Mohammed is the most common name on earth” (159). After 9/11, Mohammed Atta became known as the leader of the nineteen terrorists who hijacked the planes on September 11. However, Atta was not the mastermind behind the attack. That role of planning and being the face of the Al Qaeda movement belonged to Osama bin Laden, and, in the post-9/11 age of terror during which the novel is temporally located, bin Laden’s looming presence in the world out there is more of a living threat than Mohammed Atta’s obliterated body. Oskar, though, is not interested in Atta’s name for its involvement in 9/11, or for its potential for future terror, but more so in how Atta parallels his
own father in that they both died in the same terrorist attack—one as the perpetrator, and the other as a victim. When the index card reading “MOHAMMED ATTA: WAR” does appear in Mr. Black’s collection, Oskar declares “My dad was good. Mohammed Atta was evil” (159). Just as the index card collection reduces the lives of “biographically significant” (157, 159) individuals to one-word associations for brevity’s sake as well as to tag them with connotative associations, Oskar has also, within his own construct of morality, used one-word assignations for the perpetrator of 9/11 and the victim closest to him. By associating the World Trade Center attack with him, Oskar signifies Atta, rather than bin Laden, as the one evil entity standing in, metonymically, for the terrorist attack. Atta rather than bin Laden becomes a symbol of the schism, and also becomes a center and a locus of information systems that fuel and perpetrate certain kinds of malevolent acts that cannot be eradicated from the barbaric world out there, beyond the United States.

The novel and Oskar’s gestures of disengaging from the 9/11 event and then only indulging in minimalist references to it is indicated as well in how the index cards are metonymic encapsulations that attempt to remove everything but single-word, essentialized, root-associations. The creation of one-word associations is a reductionist approach, which forces discourse to be both less and more meaningful. Versluys takes the position that the one-word “biographies are so reductionist in their logic that the manageability of the information has been acquired at the expense of meaningfulness and relevance” (112). But, while I agree with Versluys that meaning has been reduced or metonymically contained, I also agree to some extent with the argument of Mr. Black, the creator of the index card system, that the system is used for tagging rather than exhaustive biographies, and that even tomes of biographies may be incomplete (Foer 157). In other words, the system is used to generate swift mental associations,
or to trigger a certain set of ideas using one-word associations which have their own connotations. For instance, Tom Cruise’s name being associated with “money” rather than “acting” in Mr. Black’s system, and Mick Jagger’s with “money” rather than with “music” (whereas “Ornette Coleman” is associated with “music”) shows how the associations are meant to color the perception of a celebrity’s motivations behind, and quality of, their cultural production, even though they may be producing that product in another field. And on that note, it is interesting that Atta is associated with “war” and not “terrorism” or “terror”—perhaps Mr. Black’s set of associative words does not include “terrorism,” but if any act on the United States would warrant the inclusion of a new word, it would be the attack on home soil on September 11. The War on Terror was instigated by the attack on the United States on 9/11, so perhaps Mr. Black’s association of “war” with Atta’s name is more indicative of the essential contribution, and the long-term repercussions, of the terrorist’s actions. Or, maybe, the one-word reference is to the centuries-long war between Islam and Christianity, or the war between fundamentalism and secularism. Perhaps it is all these wars, and therefore the only way to encapsulate them as well as the attack on the World Trade Center towers is the one word “War,” rather than the word “Terror” (159). In that case, I would counter Versluys’s point by saying that rather than “at the expense of meaningfulness and relevance” (Versluys 112), the index card system is an attempt at encapsulating meaningfulness and relevance in words that bloom with associations in its readers’ minds.

The index card system, especially with its encapsulation of associations that Mohammed Atta’s name brings up, perpetuates the idea of metonymic repression, in which multiple facets of an explosive set of associations are tightly packed. This is an impossible containment of an explosion of associations—something that cannot be repressed, of course, because doing so is
like attempting to put an exploded grenade’s viscera back into its container and pinning it with one word. One look at any of the names would bring multiple associations without even the “triggering” association already present on the card. Seeing the name Tom Cruise, for instance, brings to mind a series of associations: not only money, but also the *Mission: Impossible* series, his couch-jumping lunacy on Oprah, his first wife Nicole Kidman’s name, his association with Scientology, and so on. Henry Kissinger’s name would bring up not just the idea of war, but also political deceptions, his gravelly-nasal voice, the establishment of US relations with China, his successful outreach to nations during the Cold War, and his possible multiple war crimes. To contain and repress the associations of any of these names with pin-words like “money” or “war” is not possible, because the sight of their names triggers the explosion of associations; the only thing those one-word associations do is to add a word that otherwise may escape the word cloud appearing in a reader’s mind. In Atta’s case, even if “war” is forced to appear in a reader’s mind, so do, spontaneously, the ideas of terrorism, hijacking, 9/11, Ground Zero, the towers burning, and so on. The explosion is always moving outward, not toward a target but away from the center that cannot hold.

Among the explosive set of associations with Atta’s full name, Oskar separates out the terrorist’s first name, uttering a supposedly benign fact about it, but in effect creating a metonymic idea that indicates the immense threat he feels from all the material he has repressed. While Oskar’s statement that “Mohammed is the most common name on earth” (Foer 159) could appear as a throwaway fact, like a short snippet from the Guinness Book of World Records stated offhandedly, it works very differently from the supposedly casual way in which Oskar states it when it is so closely tied to Mohammed Atta himself. In a novel that uses absences, repressions, and metonymic gestures to signify much more, this is an intriguing and seemingly
innocent placement of this idea, because it appears ensconced in the middle of the novel, as an innocuous aside; but to the idea of Islamic textuality it is a direct threat. The majority of the world’s Muslims would associate the name Mohammed (and its variations in spellings, e.g., Mohammad, Muhammed, Mohamet, Mehmet, and so on) with the Islamic prophet; however, in this instance, Oskar links the name to 9/11’s notorious terrorist and invokes a contemporary, negative, violent, and political slant. Oskar’s association of the name with Atta, and his proclamation that there are many, many more Mohammeds out there, implies that under the guise of that seemingly benign first name countless evil people like Atta may be lurking and biding their time before committing something as atrocious as another 9/11. The novel only mentions one Muslim name, so it is significant that it metonymically gestures towards other Muslims out there, “on earth,” as though Muslims and Islam are linked textually and by actions to Mohammed Atta’s name and his act of “war”. The reduction and repression of all discourse about Atta to that one word, “war”, also appears to be Oskar’s repression of an explosion of associations of “war” to all other Mohammeds, if not to all other Muslims or to Islam itself.

Besides rendering Muslims, by association with Atta, into a textually different and metonymically compressed threat, the cards play a pivotal part in defining Oskar’s own quest by propagating explosions of associations. It would be remiss of a chapter on the metonymic ideas encapsulated in one-word associations in post-9/11 American fiction not to mention one of the most obvious linkages to the word “son” in Foer’s novel, as it appears in Mr. Black’s index card system when he enters a card for Oskar within it. By associating the word “SON” (in capitals) with Oskar (286), Mr. Black has also invoked the original Son, Jesus Christ. It is, of course, the Christian notion of the Son, the Redeemer, and thereby a subtle reassertion of an inherent Christianity in the United States even in secular guise. When attempting to have his father’s
memory become significant enough to be entered into the index system, even Oskar describes his mission in Christ-like terms, hoping “everything” along his quest “had been worth it, because [he’d] made Dad into a Great Man who was biographically significant and would be remembered” (286). Not only does this association cast a quasi-religious ideation into Oskar’s quest, it also creates the absurdist notion of Thomas Jr., the father, having been somehow raptured by 9/11 while the son seeks to fulfill an earthly mission that will either purify him as well or justify the father’s redemption. In no other way does the novel undermine its secular reading with any religious symbolism. In fact, Oskar’s mission is utterly secular, and the index card with “SON” next to his name only stuns him so he does not express any regret about his father’s name still not being in the system. But I agree with Lee-Potter that the creation of that index card, and Oskar’s discovering it, does serve the purpose, near the end of his quest, of solidifying the idea of his ideal “son-ness” and of giving him a sense of accomplishment that the result of the quest does not (108). Because he is encapsulated as “son” within this system of signification, he can link himself with his father even beyond the death of his father. The “son-ness” he associates with himself can continue, even give him a seed-word from which to sprout a new meaningful way of living in the reality that has been created for him after his father’s death. Simultaneously, the index system itself, with its metonymic encapsulations, becomes a

7 Besides Mr. A. R. Black’s biographical index, there is the other intriguing word association mini-narrative in the novel. Oskar’s psychiatrist, Dr. Howard Fein, prompts him to play a word association game with him. When Oskar responds to Dr. Fein’s prompt of “Yellow,” with “The Color of a yellow person’s bellybutton,” the psychiatrist instructs him: “Let’s see if we can keep it to one word, though, OK?” (202). This instance of enforced reductionist associations from outside of Oskar’s internal thought processes mirrors Mr. A. R. Black’s index card system, and though it is used as a psychiatric cure by inducing intense focus, it also mirrors the way Oskar has already repressed his trauma. When viewing the index card with Mohammed Atta’s name, Oskar encapsulates the terrorist with the word “evil,” and labels him in opposition to his own father, who for Oskar symbolizes all that is “good” (159), which exhibits a classic symptom of repression: the “denial of reality and splitting the world into good and bad” (Cohen 176). It also mirrors a one-word association of sorts that Oskar plays with himself earlier in the novel, when he mentions “Arab people” he also mentions “turbans” (Foer36) as if, by association, sprouting an indicator where none was required. It is as though social pressures and supposedly curative “games” and “indexes” are colluding to keep Oskar’s thinking on his trauma minimalist, or, vice versa: they are echoing his internal condition in a minimalist way, projecting his thoughts in tiny snippets of information.
mechanism of repression—even if his own card pleases Oskar, it nevertheless is an attempt to box him into one word from which he must draw out his own meanings. The repressive one-word signifiers for both Atta and for himself appear at first as redemptive for Oskar, as if “the final word” on the subject. But the quest does not end with those words, and neither does the repression succeed, because the wellspring of the one-word associations contains its own potential to bloom. For instance, is it even worth being a “SON” if the father who makes him one is no longer alive?

Moreover, while Oskar’s “son-ness” is developed through the quest narrative, and even the “YES” and “NO” on Thomas Schell Sr.’s hands are contextualized and re-contextualized via various instances of their usage, Mohammed Atta’s name is left associated with “WAR” without any exploration of the associations other than Oskar labeling the terrorist “Evil” (159). Instead of ruminations on terrorism’s causes, repercussions, and remedies (even at wondering whether any are available), and even on religion’s role in acts of terrorism, there is just that one blanketing word from Oskar. Discourse on Islam in the novel is thus reduced to that one textually differentiated index card and the metonymic word: “war,” as associated closely with Mohammed Atta, who is linked by name to all the other Mohammeds “on earth.” Repression, even in this case, leads to its opposite: overwhelming profusion. Meanwhile, the quest yields only tangential moments of post-9/11 paranoia, such as when Oskar mentions that the ferry may be an “obvious potential target” (240), and when he mentions the “Arabs” he fears, but all of that is left unexplored, as if avoiding that information is a means of ensuring safety.
Repression Shattered

The only moment of Oskar’s confrontation with an Arabic or Muslim presence is the instant at which his constant repression of 9/11 breaks down when he reaches the observation deck of the Empire State Building and imagines a hijacked plane heading straight for him:

the whole time I was imagining a plane coming at the building, just below us. I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t stop. I imagined the last second, when I could see the pilot’s face, who would be a terrorist. I imagined us looking each other in the eyes when the nose of the plane was one millimeter from the building. I hate you, my eyes would tell him. I hate you, his eyes would tell me. (Foer 244-245)

Oskar allows this menacing being only one signifying attribute: he is “a terrorist”. Even within this imagined but vivid sequence, in which Oskar goes on to ponder the aftermath of an explosion and ruminates on 9/11’s final moments for the people trapped in the building, he retracts vital information. Is the terrorist pilot Mohammed Atta? Is he a Muslim (or does that go without saying?)? Oskar evades naming the terrorist, or attributing any race or other indicative information about him, which mirrors the other avoidances and absences in the novel, creating in this instant the transformation of existing people into non-people.

His violent, loathing encounter with the terrorist Muslim spectre shows how ineffective and counter-productive the repression is for Oskar. The sequence, though imagined, is “explosive” and catastrophic because it bursts through the layers of Oskar’s carefully constructed repression. The explosion echoes the 9/11 crash, in which planes tore through skyscrapers constructed layer upon layer. In his simple description of the mirrored hatred between the spectre and himself, Oskar briefly passes through the Lacanian “mirror stage”—essentially an
infant stage of progress in which the child begins to identify his own image in the mirror (Lacan 110). Just as an infant would imagine subjectivity for the image in the mirror, Oskar imagines a feeling existing within the spectre. In fact, the imagined sequence defies all of the repression and abjection of Muslims that Oskar attempts in order to re-establish security for the United States, and it re-invokes the repressed memories and haunting, lingering, and seemingly eternally recurrent, monstrous existence of 9/11 in both literal and metaphorical ways. It brings back to the center of Oskar’s conscious thoughts ideas he had repressed, including especially the thought that terrorism can occur at any time, and it brings back the abject because it reveals that Islam and Muslims continue to exist in the United States after the terrorist attack.

Oskar and the other protagonists mention no kind of terrorist in the novel other than the radical Islamic one, and their narratives include no other kind of terrorism except that of planes striking buildings. That this imagined scenario is a re-enactment of the 9/11 plane crash is self-evident, but, in this sequence, stemming from Oskar’s paranoia, there is an irrevocable mutual loathing felt and expressed by Oskar and the imagined terrorist. The hatred and the sense of “evil” that the name of Mohammed Atta evoked for Oskar earlier has by now “erupted” outwards from that focused antipathy into a general hatred for an imagined entity that mirrors the perpetrator of 9/11. The retraction of the name surrenders to the idea that there are likely more threatening people like Mohammed Atta out there, and they are nameless, faceless, essentially detestable, and rabidly mission-driven to crash planes into buildings. But, crucially for Oskar, not only is the threat of such an attack “out there”; it is also an internal and thoroughly internalized one, created via the very mechanisms that he uses to push the threat away.

Oskar, like other post-9/11 novels’ white characters who attempt to suppress the manifestation of Islam and Muslims, or to render them one-dimensional, does so at his own peril
and as a result of naiveté. While in the “Nothing” places of forcibly domesticated and secured New York these coping mechanisms do work, in the “Something” places of high potential terrorist risk, the intrusion into even imaginative territory is a constant threat. No matter how much Oskar has pushed away Muslims and Islam from his own conscious thoughts, the idea does not disappear. It only becomes repressed, coiling like a spring in his psyche, waiting for Oskar’s entry into a “Something” place so it can burst forth. Repression by Oskar here in this novel, and in similarly repressive gestures by white Americans in other post-9/11 novels, creates the monstrous, imagined or otherwise, fearful entity—one far more powerful than the repression was meant to counter. By depicting the abject failure of Oskar’s flawed coping mechanism, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* interrogates the idea of the post-9/11 white Americans’ psychological rendering of Islam into a monstrous ideology and Muslims into the physical beings mindlessly adhering to that ideology.8

When the repression begins breaking down, Oskar is first able to confront 9/11’s reality while at the same time re-organizing his thoughts about the terrorist act so they become dissociated from the still-repressed Muslim horde. By the novel’s end, and at the culmination of his partially fruitless quest, Oskar finally articulates the truth about his father’s death without attempting to obfuscate some of the facts; “He died in September 11. That’s how he died,” Oskar tells William Black, the true owner of the key that Oskar has been carrying (299). But though he is able to lucidly express the fact of his father’s death in the attack, Oskar’s last vision of the Muslim terrorist is tainted by trauma and emotions that he cannot face or articulate except in the language of extreme and unrelenting hatred, which he has until then repressed. In the end, he

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8 At some point, I facetiously thought about creating a dissertation about the ‘zombification’ of Muslims in American cultural production since 9/11 (consider their conceptual linkages through ideas of “unreasonable” “mindless” “hordes”)—until I realized how serious and worthy that enterprise would be. It may be investigated in a later project.
mentions that his father “died”, not that he was “killed,” in 9/11. Oskar attempts to remove Islam’s connection to the homeland even in this small rendering of the act of his father’s murder into a passive action, erasing the tragedy inspired by Islam. In order to remain on even keel, Oskar creates another retraction—he attempts to stop himself from feeling hatred by expunging the Muslim from his narrative. But the abhorrence is not removed; via repression, it recedes further inwards, and bides its time, as do all Muslim and Islamic associations to which hatred is linked.

Foer’s novel depicts the perpetuation—even as it critiques that continuation—of centuries-old ideation of Muslims as the worst enemy, the entity that must be condemned to suffer abjection in order to “secure” the homeland. But, as Iraj Omidvar and Anne R. Richards point out in the introduction to their two-volume study, *Muslims and American Popular Culture*, “Islam is represented in the minds of many Americans by the events of 9/11 first and foremost” (xiv). The post-9/11 American conception of Islam as a threat provides more impetus to novelists to engage with the idea of Muslims, who are perceived as strangers who resist assimilation, whose religious conviction seems to militate against their integration into what is thought of as a rational secular order (even though in fact strongly influenced by Christianity), and whose visibly different culture, expressed through clothing and customs, is seen as backwards, a foreign element, a nuisance or a threat. (Achinger 241)

By disengaging seemingly entirely from discourse that either resists or perpetuates the idea of Muslims as threat, the domestication that Oskar’s narrative stays focused on is an attempt to exhibit the kind of placidity that can be achieved once Muslims and Islam are expunged from the country. The implications of this stance for post-9/11 fiction are, on the surface, ethically
compromising and along far-right, hyper-conservative lines of thinking: erasure or elimination of
the other is the only way to secure the self. Islam is rendered heinous, and Muslims as at least
potential terrorists if not actual ones. But a more critical approach within the novel shows that
repression of the feared other only enhances the feeling of being threatened, creating a spectre of
the other, an immaterial entity that becomes much more menacing and powerful than the
physical threat. The one instant of shattering of the repression also brings to fore the possibility
of a repetition of the event, though “unavailable to consciousness,” in how it can and may
impose itself “repeatedly on sight” (Caruth, “Traumatic Awakenings” 90). Seen in light of
Caruth’s idea of the potential for repetitions, the novel’s climactic, imagined encounter with the
terrorist is more aptly read as a layered critique of the conservative mindset that perpetuates a
failing mechanism among the American demos, and even leaving them no choice but to keep
attempting the failed mechanism of repression, with inevitable (though unpredictable) explosions
from triggers in their surroundings or within. The “Muslim Question” of the new intervention
into the concept of the Great American Novel, for Foer, is not addressed, therefore, by vilifying
the Muslim, but by critiquing the trauma-based regression to hyper-conservatism. The focus of
the twenty-first century invocations of the Great American Novel concept, however, remains on
the “Muslim Question,” showing that the American Spirit—that abstract, overarching guiding
mechanism for the country—is suffering from a myopia, focused entirely on this single issue.

The absence of physical Muslims in Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close is a crucial part
of what makes it so domestically inclined even as Oskar traverses across the entire city; there is
no dangerous “other” Muslim or Islam to contend with once the textual presence of either is
reduced and removed. And, while this removal of Muslims and Islam from New York is absolute
in Oskar’s narration, the absence and removal are not because Oskar retreats from the city’s
public spaces where they may appear. On the contrary, he ventures into diverse areas of the boroughs and uses many different means of transportation, but never encounters a Muslim person. In effect, the novel attempts to expunge Muslims and Islam, especially their textual presence, via metonymic reduction, and then to enforce a simplistic abjection of that condensed material. In other words, Foer’s novel seemingly secures New York—and, by extension, the United States—for Oskar mostly by condensing Muslim and Islamic presence within it into one textually “othered” name, labeling the person with that name evil, and then obliterating even the name from the rest of the novel, even in the final encounter with the resurgence of the repressed spectre of the terrorist. However, the enforced but ineffective layer of added security is also a source of further trauma, when the textual and imaginative presence of Muslims and Islam overcome the repression and resurge in Oskar’s imagination as a more malevolent imagined entity than the actual one.

Mirroring the metonymic mention of Islam and Muslims in the novel, the terrorist attack of 9/11 shows up in the novel in varied ways, some subtle, some blatantly pointing to the event, but all in minimalist gestures. The falling man appears as a middle image in a series of images Oskar flips through in “Stuff That Happened to Me,” his scrapbook of sorts, before going to sleep (Foer 52, 59). At another point, he clarifies for a temporary helper on the quest, Abe Black, that his father “didn’t run away,” but was “killed in a terrorist attack” (149). At the moment when he says it, Oskar means to clarify that his father is not a runaway, like Abe Black’s dog, and to reassert the gravity of his quest to himself as well as to Abe Black. Oskar stating his father’s cause of death out loud is part of his process of accepting it by first vocalizing it. Another brief and tangential reference to the attack appears when Oskar asks Mr. A. R. Black whether his collection of index cards includes one on Thomas Schell (which it doesn’t), followed by the
query whether it includes one on Mohammed Atta (which it does). At this point, Oskar states what is the foundational fact of his relationship to the events of 9/11: “My dad was good. Mohammed Atta was evil” (159). Only a few pages later, in the middle of an argument with his mother, Oskar blurts out that his father’s “body was destroyed” and his grave contains nothing “but an empty box” (169), thereby evoking the obliteration of human bodies in the heat generated by the burning and collapse of the towers. His father “died the most horrible death that anyone could ever invent” he tells his psychiatrist (201), without going further than that on the subject at that point. Later on, invoking the post-9/11 paranoia about further potential attacks, he points out to Mr. A. R. Black that the ferry is a prime target (240). This is just before the most violent vision he has on the observation deck of the Empire State Building, an imaginative re-enactment of the terrorist attack, in which he sees a plane coming directly at him.

This vision, this re-enactment of the Twin Towers attack on a similarly iconic New York building, is the novel’s crescendo in terms of 9/11-allusive moments. It is as though up to that moment the references to 9/11 were getting closer and closer to the actual act of a plane crashing with a building, whereas after that confrontational vision—of, and with, the catastrophe—the allusions taper off in their intensity, even though they become relatively more direct in their reference to the actual events on the day. While that imaginative confrontation with the terrorist in the plane serves as a climactic recall of the actual 9/11 event, as well as a metonymic reference to Muslim self-immolation on American land, it also subverts and negates Oskar’s repression. Everything Oskar has done to avoid 9/11 and its connection to Muslims until that point is rendered useless and counter-productive because the trauma does not go away, and neither does the terrorist Muslim; he reappears, seemingly of his own will, to re-traumatise Oskar at his most vulnerable moment atop the Empire State Building.
Before this instance of Oskar’s imagination working against him, he mostly uses it as a tool for repression and a means of escape from precisely the kind of fear-based thinking that overtakes his psyche later. One of the ways he creates diversions for himself is by, at regular intervals throughout the novel, mentioning the need to “invent” things in order to cope with his anxieties. Among these invented “things,” skyscrapers show up again and again. He wonders about the idea of “skyscrapers for dead people… built down,” which could “be underneath the skyscrapers for living people that are built up” (3). He imagines “air bags for skyscrapers” (160), and “skyscrapers with moving parts, so they could rearrange themselves when they had to, and even open holes in their middles for planes to fly through” (259). The reference to the 9/11 attacks on skyscrapers is not indirect in any of these “inventions”, of course; the ideas for mitigating and even eradicating terrorist threat to American technological landmarks are centered within them. Despite his elaborate imaginative ideas on means to prevent the tall buildings from being attacked, however, Oskar’s coping mechanism fails him the one time he actually does physically interact with a skyscraper in the novel. Instead of being able to invent an escape by imaginatively manipulating the building, Oskar’s imagination falters as his repressed trauma resurfaces in the form of a terrorist causing a plane crash and an explosion; the skyscraper fails to protect him despite its imagined potential technological possibilities. This imagined event takes over Oskar’s psyche and renders impotent his otherwise fertile imagination’s ability to counter threats with “inventions”; it is also the moment when he is forced to confront the repressed horror of his father’s death in the most visceral way.

6 The urban “frontier” that Oskar traverses contrasts with the natural landscape that Huck Finn and Jim go across—and skyscrapers are imposing urban symbols of American technology and progress that replace, and in a sense indicate a conquering, of America’s past natural center of the wild outdoors and the untamed West. Ironically, it was Fazlur Khan, a Muslim, who contributed to the creation of skyscraper technologies that enabled “a new vertical scale for the modern day city” (Mufti and Baidar 238).
The resurgence of the repressed material does not happen spontaneously; it keeps getting closer the more Oskar traverses the city’s terrain, because Oskar’s repression of 9/11 falters more frequently as his quest progresses. In the last quarter of the novel, Oskar’s anxieties and his post-traumatic stress keep resurfacing, especially when he unavoidably begins to think about the terrorist attack. He attributes his preoccupation partly to not knowing how exactly his father died, whether “inside an elevator that was stuck between floors,” or climbing “outside the building… or trying to use a tablecloth as a parachute” (257). In this invocation of the possibilities, Oskar is able to draw out the process of the attack’s immediate aftermath. The violence perpetrated on September 11 did not consist of a single instantaneous explosion—it took time and a variety of methods for the victims of the attack to succumb to injuries, suffocation, or other ways of dying. Summoning once again the falling man, Oskar catches himself “thinking about the pixels in the image of the falling body,” noticing that “the closer you looked, the less you could see” (293). In the penultimate textual reference to the event, Oskar conveys and confronts the truth about his father when he tells William Black, the rightful owner of the key and the terminal Black of his quest, that his—Oskar’s—father “died in September 11. That’s how he died” (299). Previously, he had referred to it as “a terrorist attack” and “the most horrible death,” but this is the one point at which he connects the infamous date and event to his father’s death. Soon after, Oskar and his grandfather dig up Thomas Jr.’s empty coffin, after which Oskar invokes the final reference to 9/11, the chronologically reversed flipbook he makes of the falling man, imagining as he flips through it that time would also flow backwards if the man were flying up safely into the window, and the plane “would’ve flown backward away from” the building and his father (325). He imagines and ruminates on how the reversal of time, if continued further, would have his father returning to tell him again a story he concocted about the existence in New York of a mythical
“Sixth Borough,” and that the ultimate meaning of the return would be this: “We would have been safe” (326). With those words, Oskar appears to finally express the true reason for his anxiety and face his trauma, but even in this direct visually inverted representation of 9/11 Oskar is attempting to repress the truth he has just faced. The final pages of the book, following these words, consist of the images that make up the flipbook, which is 9/11 in reverse.

Revelations After Repression

Instead of 9/11 and the World Trade Center attack, what appears more, and more directly, in the novel is the idea of a sixth borough—a myth that Oskar’s father creates to entertain Oskar. According to the myth, the “Sixth Borough was also an island, separated from Manhattan by a thin body of water” (217). The island, described as full of people living lives like the residents of Manhattan, began to move away from Manhattan (219), and then to drift south to “Antarctica” (222). The myth of this borough, which Thomas Schell Jr. tells as a bedtime story to his son, is invoked once just before Oskar finds the vase containing the key, and then it reappears in its own chapter near the end of the novel. On one level, this story serves the purpose of creating a myth by which Oskar can hold on to storytelling that involves magic realism and imaginative escapes from reality. Just as importantly, remembering the story is Oskar’s means of imaginatively keeping his father alive rather than facing Thomas Jr.’s death. The dialectic style in which the story is related—Oskar questioning constantly the reality of the story and asking for meanings of words, and his father insisting on not being interrupted, albeit with light humor—is a way of keeping the memory and the conversation intact while also preserving the personality of his father. By helping to maintain his father’s telling of it, the chapter-length mythic narrative is also an analogous way of coping with the trauma of the actual pieces of Manhattan that “disappeared”
on 9/11 without having to refer to the actual event, and thereby also avoiding any mention of the perpetrators of that event. The Sixth Borough’s disappearance is, in effect, 9/11 without any Muslims or Islam. By creating this alternate world and history, Oskar’s father enables his son to imagine an ideal landscape where nothing as colossally terrible as terrorism can occur. It also enables Oskar to imagine a geographical space which can be completely purged of any of the things he fears, including Muslims and the threat they pose by historical and anticipatory associations. In this depiction of an alternate American space, Foer too is positioning an imaginary space where Oskar’s fantasies can play out. It is the author’s contribution to creating an American mythic space where there is no disunity, where harmony and freedom, in fantastical ways, exist as they always were promised to within the United States; it is the seeming idealistic, unrealizable end to which Oskar’s quest points, and to which Foer’s own Great American Novel-esque gestures are aesthetically, thematically, politically, and culturally directed. In the mythic, idealized Sixth Borough, an idyllic society exists where Muslims can actually disappear (and not just be ignored and blurred out through the tenuous and inherently weak mechanism of repression). But it is the only place where Oskar can successfully and assuredly keep imagining Muslims not existing, because everywhere else in New York the repression eventually shatters.

The story of the Sixth Borough is the only story-length imaginative sequence that Oskar engages with and recounts in the novel; the other snippets, which he calls “inventions”, appear at regular intervals, especially at points when he is feeling vulnerable or depressed at night before sleeping. Beverly Haviland posits that, as a coping mechanism, Oskar’s “over-active imagination becomes both a torture chamber and a survival kit… the magical thinking that characterizes both childhood and the denial of unbearable loss” (435). That many of Oskar’s skyscraper-linked inventions have to do with trying to prevent planes from colliding with them supports Haviland’s
idea. Her characterization of the inventions and his escape to imagination as a “torture chamber” and “survival kit” positions Oskar’s imagination as a mechanism by which he is avoiding confrontation, which is both necessary for his immediate well-being but also a means of perpetuating the pain caused by denying reality more and more as the repressed material resurges. But reality keeps bleeding through the cracks of denial: an Islamist terrorist caused his father’s death; his father is dead; he was killed in a terrorist attack; not all terrorists are dead; and the living Muslims cannot all be repressed into non-existence.

Because he is a child, Oskar’s naïve belief in repression prompts him to manage and mitigate the tragedy for a considerable period. The trauma of 9/11 is so personal for him, the loss so irrevocable, that the post-traumatic moment is both temporally and spatially colossal. As with his grandparents, whose textual narratives are visually manipulated to exhibit their ongoing trauma over their own loss in Dresden and over the additional loss of their son in 9/11, Oskar’s textual narrative is often and regularly interrupted by pictures and textual manipulations that replace directly narrative story-telling. However, while other images only occur in single instances as they are mentioned within the narrative, the one recurring image is of the falling man. Sonia Baelo-Allué notes that “to be traumatized is to be possessed by an image or an event not assimilated or understood at the time” (188). The first time the image appears, it is nestled among other full-page photographs (Foer 53–67) but not specifically singled out in Oskar’s

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9 Oskar’s desperation to gain emotional control over his own narrative of 9/11 is also enacted in a class presentation he gives on the bombing of (188). In this presentation, he shows first an interview with an emotionally distraught victim. After that, he speaks in detached scientific terms about the bomb’s impact, exhibiting more interest in the “hypocenter,” the “maximum charring effect,” and the “degree of burning and color” rather than in the human idea of loss. It appears as though he is masking his emotions about 9/11 through a fact-based presentation in which he tries his best to appear scientific and detached in the face of tragedy. Hiroshima stands in for 9/11 because of its similarities: many of the victims were burned alive, the ideology of the attack came from outside the country, and the event is considered a singularity in history. The term “Ground Zero” for the site of the Twin Towers also evokes the irrepressible marker of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (Post-Hiroshima and post-9/11 reports also show congruity in how they exhibit the American tradition of avoiding culpability for an apocalyptic event.)
stream of thoughts. However, immediately after he flips through that sequence, Oskar retrieves the phone that contains messages his father left on 9/11—something he has not done “since the worst day” (68). Another image of the falling man is inserted into the novel after Oskar’s psychiatrist asks him, “Do you think any good can come from your father’s death?” (203). While Oskar does not show a reaction, inside he seethes with anger, wanting to destroy the psychiatrist’s office. When he reaches home, he again plays a message from his father from 9/11 (207). The image of the falling man is tied to the event, which is tied to the messages from his father, but it is not revealed in the text until the very end that Oskar questions whether that image is of his father. “Was it Dad? Maybe,” he says, before rearranging his collection of photographs of the falling man in the reverse chronological order, making it appear as though “the man was floating up through the sky” rather than down from the building (Foer 325). This is an example of what Baelo-Allué calls an attempt at catharsis in which “a traumatic experience is reenacted belatedly through a series of images that cannot be assimilated, preventing linguistic retrieval” (188). But I would argue that the actual retrieval of his father, or even of a stranger who could be the falling man, is impossible. Linguistic retrieval is precisely what the novel achieves through this final sequence of both imagery and description of what would have been had the man been flying back up to safety rather than falling to the pavement below. Unfortunately for Oskar, however, retrieving the father also retrieves the terrorists who played a part in his father’s death, which is another reason Oskar remains fixated on the imagined instant of his father’s death. He attempts to detach his father’s death from the action of Muslims and from association with Islam, and to link it to image of the falling man, who willfully came out of the building, choosing his own means of violent death rather than dying directly by the terrorist’s actions.
By imagining the possibility that the falling man in the images could be his father, Oskar lends him a tragic, iconic significance while also personalizing and domesticating even more for his family the national tragedy. The micro and macro scales collapse into this metonymic image; Oskar’s personal tragedy becomes representative of the national one, and vice versa. Karolina Golimowska also comments on this dimension of Foer’s novel when she writes that “[t]he concept of family is highly exploited in post-9/11 fiction, as reflecting the impact of the attacks on the smallest social unit can serve to domesticate it, thereby making it more accessible” (123). The event certainly seems accessible to Oskar, who feels his home life was specifically targeted by Mohammed Atta. But his narrative does not indulge in the minutiae of the rhetoric that fuels the terrorist act even as he fears more such events might occur, either on a ferry or on another iconic building such as the Empire State Building. Instead, Oskar focuses on what Golimowska calls retrieving “the global narrative back home, taking it away from the terrorists who tried to seize it on 9/11” (123). According to Ilka Saal, novels such as Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close stifle the post-9/11 opportunity for reconciliation of globally conflicting narratives:

9/11 momentarily disrupted the nation’s narcissistic understanding of itself, providing it with an opportunity to acknowledge its interdependency with other nations; yet, the narratives triggered by this event immediately shored-up a first-person perspective that reasserted impenetrable boundaries between self and other. (362)

While I concur with Saal’s assessment of the post-9/11 novels’ domesticity taking the narrative away from the global, there is logical explanation for why the 9/11 novels have done just that.

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10 This retrieval is akin to DeLillo’s insistence in his manifesto that fiction in the post-9/11 era be created with counternarratives that focus not on the perpetrators but on the victims. But unlike DeLillo’s “In the Ruins of the Future”, which insists at its end that a Muslim character praying is part of the domestic, quotidian landscape in Manhattan, Foer’s novel problematizes the idea of Muslims existing anywhere in New York city. But this problematization is echoed even in DeLillo’s own Muslim-othering novel, Falling Man (examined in chapter 2 of this dissertation), and it is an idea that I will explore at length, because each novel creates different means of occluding Muslims and Islam and of representing their post-9/11 counternarratives.
Novels set in the immediate aftermath of the incredibly traumatic, even apocalyptic, event, could perhaps only engender (especially from a child’s perspective) solipsistic narratives that continue to focus on the self’s place in the world rather than the world’s political impacts on the self. In Oskar’s ultimately failed quest, even as he goes around New York meeting strangers with the last name Black, he is building a network of domestic environments not very different from his own home, while all the time meditating on his relationships with his father, his mother, and his grandmother. The “Great American Novel-renewing” exploration (of catastrophic trauma rather than of the American Dream) is an inside-out approach rather than one of letting the violent outside into the safety of the domestic interior, no matter how much the former has punctured the latter. The occluded Muslim never truly disappears, however, even as space within New York is rendered domestic by the narrative’s imposition of an absence.

In a final act of expunging the Muslim presence from New York, Oskar imagines at the end of the novel the possibility of 9/11 never having happened. That final disengagement, a confrontation as well as an attempt at re-repressing the explosion that has already happened, takes the shape of textual and visual reverse-ordering of the falling man’s image sequence. Smith calls it an attempt at “ultimate temporal reversal and restoration of order” that is “disturbingly regressive” (157). But seeing the reversal as Oskar presents it is only one way of seeing it. That he actually presents the terrorist attack’s iconic image, and engages textually with it as well, is a resolution of the entire narrative’s forceful avoidance before this point. Finally, Oskar is able to assimilate the images, face the traumatic event, and come to a conclusion. The conclusion, in his

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11 The partial failure of Oskar’s quest links back to Perry Miller’s idea in “Errand into Wilderness” of the failure of the Puritan quest in moving to the United States—the dream of building a model society had been a “fool’s errand” that failed, and the second generation of settlers were left with the question of “what now?” (13). But, even though Oskar is left at the end with that same questioning feeling of “what now?” after facing his father’s death, his quest does produce a purification (however tenuous) of New York with the supposed purge of threats from it in order to render it familiar, familial-ized, and domesticated.
own words is that had 9/11 never happened, his father would have been alive, and “We would have been safe” (Foer 326). That “We” is as domesticated, as “Us”ed as possible, and can include the whole world except the terrorists, if the argument for the singularity of 9/11 holds. The novel ends at that gesture of removal and exclusion of the Muslim presence, but it also states quite clearly what is left out in the “We would have been safe” statement. The reverse-engineering of that statement yields Oskar’s more ominous conclusion: now that 9/11 has happened, and now that his father is dead, and now that terrorism and an Islamic presence from the outside has penetrated the United States, “We” are no longer safe. Denying any space for Muslim presence, textually or visually in the United States, is Oskar’s and Foer’s critical contribution to the question the so-called Great American Novel oeuvre poses regarding Muslims and Islam: is the only way to domesticate the United States and render it safe and innocent again to remove them? This is both in line with and radically different from how Huckleberry Finn faces his central concern of not wanting to be civilized—he escapes back to the wilderness of the frontier. Similarly, Oskar reverts to feeling unsafe and re-constructs, at least partially, his repression. However, whereas Finn’s resolution is one that enables freedom and a renewal of the quest for freedom, Oskar’s quest is at a dead end—there is no more frontier available in the twenty-first century; as Foer invokes and plays within the Great American Novel tradition, he also indicates that there is no further escape possible, because the frontier no longer exists. William Van O’Connor points out that Huck Finn is of “limited usefulness… as a symbol” because he is an eternal child (10). In closing off the possibilities for Oskar, Foer also implies what would have happened to Huck Finn, the eternal American innocent child, if he had grown up: he would have had to lose his innocence, as Oskar does, and that loss is not only tragic, it is also inevitable.
Conclusion: 9/11’s Potentials and the Great American Novel Reborn

In some ways, Oskar’s grandparents never get over their trauma of the Dresden bombing, and the novel portends a similar long-lasting effect of 9/11 on Oskar. That he heals as much as he does is credit to the process, to his mother’s angelic overlooking of his quest, and to the fact that his father (before dying) prepared him to engage with New York in such a way that it has become “tame” for him (Golimowska 126), something he no longer needs to fear. In short, Foer is successful in creating a counternarrative by wresting control of the narrative in an American voice, with its concerns centered on an American individual—something DeLillo would likely approve of. Rather than seeing gaps in communication between characters and lack of engagement with 9/11’s perpetrators as a series of absences, the way the narrators deal with absence should drive readers to find more in the novel than there at first appears to be—because it is gesturing, even at the incipient stage of the trauma, at a future potential mitigation of the overwhelming trauma of 9/11, if not by repression then by other possible coping mechanisms. This idea of containing multiple potentials is why Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close is a suitable place to start understanding how American novelists begin to tackle the schism brought about by 9/11 by creating a schism of their own in by hearkening back to, and creating complications within, the Great American Novel tradition. Oskar’s reactions are fresh and raw in the trauma-laced aftermath of the tragedy; the representations Foer makes of trauma and engagement with the Islamic “other” are incredibly complex even though they may appear simplistic because of their minimalist presentation. I would argue that it is important for some 9/11 novels to have captured the initial reaction and mindset of white Americans who considered themselves targeted and most harmed by the terrorist attack. Foer’s novel takes the smallest possible portion of that larger tragedy by focusing on one person’s individual loss. But he
enlarges and universalizes that idea of loss onto the American psyche by encapsulating multiple ideas in one-word signifiers, as well as by juxtaposing the 9/11 apocalypse with the calamitous, and similarly sudden, Dresden bombings and the atomic explosions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The potential in the repression of Muslims and Islam is indicative of the multitude of potentials of 9/11 itself—the immediate aftermath of the tragedy could have been seized by American policy makers to engage with Muslims and Islamist ideologies that fueled the terrorist attack, as well as to confront the United States’ own culpability in creating and instigating political and militant pockets of instability throughout the world. Much like the political repression of 9/11’s causes within public discourse, Foer’s novel eliminates Muslims and Islam through repression. But the repression and removal backfire especially when Oskar is at his most vulnerable. The resurgence of precisely that supposedly eliminated material in Foer’s novel, and its echoing of the Gothic novel’s idea of repressed fears turning into monsters, may be taken as a demonstration that the occlusion of the Muslim in public discourse is doomed for failure as well. If not politically and culturally engaged with, 9/11 as a metonymic instance and the Muslim as bogeyman will take a hold of white Americans’ collective psyche and continue to relegate many novelists working in the Great American Novel tradition to focus on white characters’ regressive attempts at approaching the “Muslim Question” rather than addressing the underlying trauma that prompts the occlusive mechanisms.

In Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, Foer invokes through Oskar an American “sense of common purpose” and forces a different kind of “reckoning” than the one prompted by the failure of the American Dream. (Malone 9). DeLillo’s new call to write what are essentially

12 Judith Greenberg, in her essay “Wounded New York,” pointed to the open potential of 9/11 when she asked “Will the attacks cause us to widen our conceptions of home or to build tighter ‘gated communities’?” (34). In Foer’s novel, there is a representative idea of both extremes being enacted: an extension of the idea of home by straitjacketing the whole of New York city into a gated community.
interventions into, and invocations of, the so-called Great American Novel concept of providing a unifying front in the face of terrorism’s effects, for Foer, and for his successors, becomes not about American failure, but about American resilience and the search for methods with which to address the issue—while the search for solutions is not fruitful yet, at least the problem has been identified. This fictional rallying call to American spirit is as potent as DeLillo’s manifesto, though it is just as fraught with the danger of stagnating over the one topic of the “Muslim Question”, and thus hindering the idea of progress and discovery of newness from the twenty-first century’s forays into the united-cause, nation-building set of novels.

The novel’s depiction positions 9/11, the Dresden bombings, and Oskar’s father’s death as the essential, out-of-focus backdrop to the closer, much more micro-scaled, overtly domestic, events in the immediate surroundings of the three protagonists. Macro-level politics is a concern for a larger stage, which these protagonists cannot accommodate, or choose not to focus on. Instead, Oskar negotiates the politics of the landscape by extending his own domestic environment across the entire city. Venturing into the five boroughs of New York becomes especially safe because racially other, especially Muslim, presences are rendered invisible in the novel, but their repression itself becomes the means of enhancing their menace.

Toni Morrison posits that “in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse… To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body” (9-10). In effect, Morrison argues that the American literary project has been partly to other, and distance, non-whiteness from the United States, as colored characters indicate “little or nothing in the imagination of white American writers. Other than as the objects of an occasional bout of jungle fever, other than to provide local color or to lend some touch of verisimilitude or to supply a needed moral gesture,
humor, or bit of pathos” they provide no purpose and have none of their own (90). In Foer’s novel, there is at least embodiment of African-American-ness, and thus a place within the hierarchy that has been created—either as representational or as material for critique, or both. But the Muslim or Arab body has not even been—well—embodied in a character. It remains textual and abstract. This too speaks critically of the “Muslim Question” in post-9/11 fictional invocations of the concept of the Great American Novel, in which the discussion about the other remains abstract. The idea of the so-called Great American Novel is thus, now, in the twenty-first century further reduced because it does not need to provide the existence of the subject of its discussion—the Muslim can be dealt with without representation. None of the pre-9/11 novels associated with the label that focused on race did so without at least partial, if not immersive, representation in the life, action, or perspective of the racial other, so this too is a radical, reductive, hyper-conservative shift dramatized—and subtly critiqued, of course—by Foer’s work.

This is not to say that Oskar’s reaction and the scope of his limited and reactionary (dis)engagement is “wrong” but rather to insist that it is thus for good reasons but leading to dangerous effects, as explained in the theories on repression by Caruth, Granofsky, Kristeva, and others. Trauma by itself can take away the will to engage with an “other” that causes devastation. Unlike DeLillo’s much older characters in Falling Man, who do go on to engage with Islam in incipiently meaningful ways (which I will examine in chapter 2), Oskar has suffered personally from the tragedy, which makes him much more like Amy Waldman’s character Claire Burwell, who loses her husband in 9/11, and becomes recalcitrant and repressive as the narrative progresses (which I will examine in my discussion of The Submission in chapter 3). The more personal the loss is for a character, these counternarratives in Foer’s, DeLillo’s, and a portion of
Waldman’s novels seem to suggest, the more difficult it is for that character to move past a certain position of seeing the “other’s” ideas. By focusing on their own domestic affairs after the attack rather than on the political implications of 9/11, white American characters in post-9/11 novels avoid the story of the Muslim victim of the event from the Muslim victim’s perspective. In any case, Foer’s novel is an excellent starting point to examine the trauma associated with the 9/11 attack, and also to observe what metonymy can achieve via gestures to the ineffable. At the same time, the novel also encapsulates what cannot be achieved by the attempt to domesticate and tame the imagination: post-9/11 Anglo-American characters in post-9/11 novels who attempt to expunge Muslims and Islamic ideas and characters via repression can only do so temporarily and ineffectively, because this flawed coping mechanism ensures violent eruptions and explosions elsewhere within the narrative, giving the trauma more power than it otherwise had before.
Chapter 2
Americanizing 9/11: Appropriating and Repurposing Islamic Signifiers in Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*

Introduction

Unlike the twenty-first century novelist Jonathan Safran Foer, Don DeLillo (b. 1936) has long been an established literary icon in the United States, lauded for his fictionalized critical examinations of American consumerism and the culture of excess.¹ He has enjoyed both cult and mainstream success with his works, and especially more of the latter since the publication in 1985 of his eighth novel *White Noise*, for which he won the National Book Award, and which has been adapted into film in 2023—showing the author’s longevity and cultural currency. DeLillo has also won the Pen/Faulkner award for *Mao II* (1992). For his achievements and for his influence on American literature, DeLillo’s name appears alongside celebrated American authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Phillip Roth, Cormac McCarthy, John Updike, and Toni Morrison. DeLillo is especially relevant as a novelist and commentator in the post-9/11 era because he had anticipated well in advance of September 11, 2001 that terrorism would become a global force in shaping mass consciousness.² His post-9/11 contribution to literature, in two

¹ These include *White Noise* (1985), a novel of consumerism; *Libra* (1988), which focuses on Lee Harvey Oswald’s early years and his assassination of John F. Kennedy; and *Underworld* (1997), a sprawling, multi-themed work with meditations on topics ranging from waste management, stand-up comedy, and baseball, to nuclear proliferation, death, and American politics. This last work, especially, has often been called a Great American Novel.

² His 1991 novel *Mao II* featured not one but two Islamic extremists and an intricate plot in which the protagonist becomes involved in hostage negotiation on behalf of a terrorist outfit; in an interview with the *New York Review of Books* after the publication of that novel, he lamented what he considered was an inability of literature to negotiate the concept of terror, and his belief that “the men who shape and influence human consciousness are the terrorists” (qtd. in Gauthier 78).
works of different forms, is the subject of this part of this dissertation. The major work under discussion in this chapter is the seminal post-9/11 novel, *Falling Man* (2007), while nearly as pertinent to the discussion is the essay DeLillo wrote for *Harper’s* within two months of the attack. I have referred to “In the Ruins of the Future” in the introduction of this dissertation as well, and now in this chapter I will use that essay as an ideological prelude and a stepping stone to examine the novel that the author published a few years later.

“In the Ruins of the Future” was a philosophical musing, a taking stock and stepping back, a moment of suspension of a novelist’s duties in order to re-evaluate the worth and merit of those tasks that he had been performing within culture. In the essay, DeLillo urges American writers creating fictional works in the wake of 9/11 to resist focusing on the terrorism committed by “men who have fashioned a morality of destruction,” and have with their violence intended to halt technological progress (“In the Ruins”). At the same time, DeLillo also repels the similarly monolithic official American political narrative of 9/11 that wanted to portray the terrorist attack as the clash of absolute good with absolute evil. He appeals to and urges writers to work in direct opposition to the rigid and inflexible dichotomous narratives by creating what he calls sets of “counternarrative”. Tim Gauthier interprets DeLillo’s appeal to create collective counternarrative and the differentiated individual counternarratives as “emergent stories that serve to either complement or complicate” monolithic narratives that seek to “bind all peoples together” into an us-versus-them narrative; for Gauthier and for DeLillo, the counternarratives “undermine the hegemonic tendencies inherent in these drives for sameness” (Gauthier 81). DeLillo asserts that only the tiny stories are assimilable, while the terrorist attack itself is unfathomable. He argues that many of the “100,000 stories crisscrossing New York, Washington, and the world” can help populate the “howling space” and disempower the singular awesomeness of the spectacle,
enabling a wrestling of narrative-constructing power from the terrorists and from those who wish
to perpetuate violence in revenge (“In the Ruins”). “In the Ruins” can be considered a mission
statement for the production of counternarratives focused on smaller-scale stories after 9/11, and
DeLillo followed his own guidelines in the article when producing the relatively short and
focused Falling Man. In other words, “In the Ruins” is the outline of DeLillo’s reasons for
creating a different kind of novel after 9/11, and it includes the methodology for creating his own
counternarrative, Falling Man. It also serves as a call to DeLillo’s fellow American writers to
build an oeuvre of works that mitigates the massive trauma of 9/11 through literary rallying and
unifying against it—thereby creating a canon of works that support DeLillo’s idea of the
counternarrative; this post-9/11 call for a new canon is DeLillo’s contribution to the conscious
shift toward the post-9/11 “renewal” or new iteration of the so-called Great American Novel’s
unifying, nation-building concept, by both his peers and himself.

DeLillo’s previous novels are sprawling social-fabric epics that take multiple
perspectives and accounts into consideration to create a panoramic view of American culture,
while the slim and rather focused Falling Man differs quite significantly in terms of both length
and scope. Rather than taking in a vast landscape to paint a picture of a politically and culturally
significant moment after the terrorist attack on the United States, Falling Man centers on the
domestic fallout of 9/11 on one particular family, and it juxtaposes that in alternating chapters
with a pre-9/11 psychological examination of one of the 9/11 terrorists. Instead of the expected
“cultural trauma novel” which would “focus on the social and cultural consequences” of 9/11,
DeLillo produced a “psychic trauma novel,” which Baelo-Allué explains is an examination of
“suffering on the mind” of a collection of individuals (64). In its close examination of the fallout
on the Neudecker family members (Keith and Lianne, and their son Justin), the novel depicts a
familial setup of white, quasi-secular Americans who are most concerned with their own domestic affairs. However, they intermittently also ponder or discuss the United States’ connection with Muslims and Islam. The white American protagonists display various reactions within this discussion, ranging from immediate horror and revulsion against anything even seeming Islamic, to the later, more considered attempts at engaging with concepts from the religion and attempting to build an understanding of it. *Falling Man* portrays this incipient understanding of Islam and Muslims by white Americans of Judeo-Christian heritage as partial and indirect, but it also depicts a move forward, out of the immediate trauma of 9/11 that prompted total repression of the Muslim other, as in Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. This recognition of needing to engage with the Muslim other is also in accord with DeLillo’s call in “In the Ruins” to white Americans to produce the texts that build an understanding that comes out of the attack and is not governed by how the terrorists desire the clash of civilizations to come about.

A brief synopsis of *Falling Man*’s main events shows how much more its characters engage with the attack of 9/11, and with Islam and Muslims, than do the characters in Foer’s novel. *Falling Man* begins on 9/11, after middle-aged lawyer Keith Neudecker survives the collapse of the Twin Towers by walking out of one of them. Keith had abandoned his wife and son a few months before 9/11. But, having just survived the attack, he wanders to his wife’s home and begins a second stint at domestic life. Lianne, his wife, is unsure about the permanence of her husband’s return and ponders constantly the possibility that he may leave again. In Lianne’s company, her mother, Nina, and Nina’s European boyfriend, Martin, argue about the political and religious motivations of 9/11’s perpetrators and about the repercussions of the event for Americans. Meanwhile, Lianne and Keith’s son, Justin, and Justin’s friends, create a fanciful
quest in which they search for an anglicized version of bin Laden, whom they call Bill Lawton; this search echoes Oskar’s (by the end) futile quest in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Contrary to how it is seen through a child’s perspective in Foer’s novel, the terrorist attack is sifted primarily through adult points of view in *Falling Man*, but official historical or objective rendering of the attack is not as central a subject in the novel as are the local, personal experiences of the event as played out through domestic politics of family and relationships.

Keith starts an affair with a fellow 9/11 survivor Florence, whose briefcase he rescued from the building where he worked. Short-lived though the affair is, it makes Keith re-evaluate how he lives and spends his time, and by the end of the novel he becomes a professional poker player, attending tournaments and returning home for short stints between them. Meanwhile, Lianne and Justin gravitate toward trying to understand the repercussions of 9/11, and they walk through an anti-Iraq war rally near the end of the novel in an attempt to learn about Islam by reading pamphlets on the topic. Upon “finding out” what she believes is the Quran’s first line, and becoming horrified by the kind of rigid human beings Islam as an ideology must create of Muslims, Lianne completely abandons her curiosity about Islam, and retreats for sanctuary into attending churches while also asserting her right not to believe in religions. One of the recurring motifs running through the novel is that of a performance artist periodically re-enacting, with the use of a safety harness, 9/11’s iconic and tragic image of the falling man, one performance of which Lianne witnesses up close. Another important section is Lianne’s irritation with her neighbor playing music that sounds Islamic. There are three interspersed segments at the end of each of the novel’s three parts, and these sections narrate in third-person omniscient voice the

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3 DeLillo refers in the title and in the performance artist’s reenactments to Richard Drew’s iconic photograph of the bent-knee upside-down falling man, and not the Lee Owerko pictures that Foer includes prints of in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. 
pre-9/11 thoughts and actions of a fictional version of one of the nineteen 9/11 terrorists, Hammad, as he abandons secular life and commits fully to prepare for the hijacking and attack of September 11, 2001.

Falling Man goes further than Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close because it signals the way forward, out of the repression of 9/11’s trauma and of the Muslim other, and especially because it depicts an incipient meaningful engagement with Islam on the part of white, quasi-secular, American protagonists. DeLillo’s novel shows that interaction beginning with Justin reading from pamphlets, and Lianne remembering what she (mistakenly) believes is the Quran’s opening line—with its white American protagonists interacting with textual information rather than with humans. Within that interaction, though, Falling Man also anticipates post-9/11 fictive universes set further along in time from the attack, such as in Waldman’s The Submission and Updike’s Terrorist, in which the Caucasian Judeo-Christian Americans in those novels interact with living Muslim characters and with authentic Quranic text. Foreshadowing Waldman’s and Updike’s Anglo-American characters’ treatment of Muslims with intellectual and ideological condescension and suspicion, however, DeLillo’s characters do the same with the textuality of Islamic names and the Islamic scripture, thereby working to produce a fictive continuum of treatments meted out by white Americans to the Muslim other in post-9/11 United States.

In this chapter, I will focus on how the Neudeckers and other white Americans in Falling Man apply repression before turning to other occlusive mechanisms to counter what they perceive as the threat of Islamic ideas and Muslims in post-9/11 United States. I will demonstrate that these inherently flawed coping mechanisms influence the creation and rationalization of an American identity in direct opposition to an imagined but inauthentic monolithic Muslim menace. The novel depicts Lianne, Keith, and Justin’s attempts at repressing Islam and Muslims
as untenable and brief, but even so their acts of repression are worth examining as the characters’ immediate reactions. Because Lianne and Justin’s attempts at repression fail completely, they then turn to mitigate their trauma using a different and marginally more effective method of occluding Islam and Muslims. In the later portions of this chapter, I will examine Justin and Lianne’s anti-intellectual method of appropriation, through which Justin mitigates the threat of a living terrorist out there in the world, and Lianne creates her knowledge of Islam based on false information. The novel’s depiction of Hammad is similarly critical to the discussion, as the would-be terrorist’s judgement on American society is based on limited and skewed information and carries its own burden of appropriation. Critical implications of appropriation are linked to intertextuality, intercultural performance, adaptation, and postcolonial anxieties about representation. I will use theories of appropriation as developed by Gloria Anzaldúa, Tracy B. Strong, and James J. Sosnoski to demonstrate that once Lianne makes a crucial error in appropriating a pivotal text of Islamic theology, there is a radical shift in her ethical concerns and her enactment of American citizenship: instead of protesting the US-led War on Terror spreading to Iraq, she becomes a bystanding supporter of the increase of violence against Muslims in the Middle East.

In its earlier sections, the novel is critical of repression as a coping mechanism, and every attempt at it is shown as childish and easily thwarted by reality; however, the novel’s depiction of appropriation, while obviously shown as naïve when Justin attempts it, is seemingly reinforced and upheld when Lianne quotes a false, and distorted opening line to the Quran. DeLillo’s attempt at creating counternarrative is successful on some level, especially in Lianne’s brief questioning of her own beliefs about Muslims. Eventually, however, because the narrative voice and Lianne rationalize the discourse of monoliths as a conclusive and justified idea by the
end of the novel, and because the novel itself (seemingly uncritically) propagates false information about Islamic scripture to create the image of Muslims as horde-like, inflexible, and almost inhuman, *Falling Man* in fact reinforces the monolithic narratives that DeLillo aims to rally writers against in “In the Ruins of the Future”. The effect of this misconceived conclusion is that the novel seems to depict Lianne’s version of American ideology and identity in opposition to a false understanding of an Islamic one as justified. Other than Amir Khadem, hardly any critic has examined the effects of the novel’s and Lianne’s very fundamental mistake in quoting from Islamic scripture, which she uses to create ideas about her own American “self” in response to a non-existent monolithic “other” and thereby produce an unnecessary and self-deluding defense against a nonexistent enemy, while also condoning military action against the other. DeLillo’s theoretical ideas notwithstanding, his fictive contribution, though subtly critical of simplistic white American understandings of Islam, prevents potent examinations of false starts in the aftermath—for this reason of its indulgence in the faltering, failing first interaction between white Americans and Islam, *Falling Man* signals the same desire as voiced by Oskar in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*: the desire to be safe, to be rid of the debilitating terror of Islamic fundamentalism, at any ideological cost. For the purpose of achieving this return to safety, DeLillo and his white protagonists are willing to shape the identity of the enemy to whatever provides most comfort and ease. Conceiving of Muslims as other helps DeLillo create “cognitive maps that imagine how US citizenship feels… both for Americans and for others” (Rothberg 158), which Michael Rothberg feels is what post-9/11 novels should aim to provide. But, by apparently following Rothberg’s line of thinking rather than his own essay’s, DeLillo’s contribution to post-9/11 literature implies that he sees post-9/11 novel-writing as simultaneously a critique as well as embrace of the conservative political project; this cognitively dissonant
constriction only creates politically conservative calls to rally behind US military action in the Great American Novel tradition, the ultimate aim of which seems to be to shore up the United States against terrorism and suspected terrorists rather than to examine America, Americans, and American ideals. Whereas before the schismatic shift of 9/11 “historical record suggests that serious contenders [were] more likely to insist that national greatness is unproven” and that “pretensions” to living up to American ideals by the American people is “hollow” (Buell, *Dream* 18), in the post-9/11 forays into the Great American Novel tradition there is an overt rebuilding of the myth of American greatness—a buttressing of the naïve belief in the nation and its peoples’ superiority despite their childish and uninformed innocence, even as that re-construction of greatness is softly critiqued. Of course, the locus of DeLillo’s novel remains in the immediate vicinity of the “Muslim Question” because that is not only a driver for personal and political concerns in the aftermath of the attack, but also the pivot on which turns much white American regression to hyper-conservatism, as well as the central concern in the new canon that DeLillo champions.

**Criticism and Implications**

Critical positions on the novel have been varied, though perhaps less so than they have been for *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Given that DeLillo was held up as a champion of American social fabric novels and that he had dealt with the subject of terrorism previously, it was expected that he would create more of an epic-scale novel, if not in number of pages, then at least in its breadth of focus on a variety of sub-cultures within the post-9/11 United States. His rallying call to American authors in “In the Ruins of the Future” also fueled the anticipation, and desire, for a novel that would overwhelm with its scale of coverage. But the novel’s intense focus
on domestic affairs, and what they viewed as its sidelining of the main issue at hand, surprised many critics. Some of them, including Beverly Haviland, Sonia Baelo-Allué, and Clemens Spahr, assailed *Falling Man* for offering “nothing that we had not seen in the media” (Baelo-Allué 191) about 9/11. While that assessment is unforgiving, it exemplifies the dominant strain of critical appraisals of the novel. Catherine Morley, Kristiaan Versluys, Tory Rye Andersen, Joseph M. Conte, Magali Cornier Michael, Rachel Greenwald Smith, and Amir Khadem note the ethnocentric, white-man position of victimhood asserted through solipsistic gestures in the novel. They accuse DeLillo and the novel of essentially “failing to move beyond the American subject, the domestic interior, and the personal crisis” (Morley, “How Do We Write About This?” 723); instead of “a vast panorama that put[s] the event into global perspective and contribute[s] to a better understanding of the causes and effects of the attack” the novel provides a close-up “of a dissolving marriage” (Andersen 9). Spahr and Haviland are especially critical of DeLillo’s indication with the end of the novel (which reverts to September 11 once again, and to Keith’s escape from the flaming tower), that there is only the possibility of “an endless loop” (Haviland 444), and “no vision of the future” (Spahr 228) with which to counter the bleakness and the trauma of 9/11. Versluys concurs with Spahr and Haviland, calling the ending an “endless re-enactment of trauma” that “allows for no accommodation or resolution” (20). Surprisingly, only Amir Khadem notes that DeLillo takes quite extensive poetic license, and problematically so, while mis- translating a specific line from the Quran, and re-positioning it to become the opening line of the scripture to give it more significance—creating the opposite of illumination on the work, and rather distorting its meaning to suit what Khadem sees as Islamophobic purposes (189).
However, not all analysis disparages DeLillo’s novel and its negotiation of post-9/11 New York life or its depictions of Islam or the Muslim other. Morley indicates also that *Falling Man* “meditates on the role of the artist, the politics of reshaping memory and grief and even the redundancy of the artist in effecting change or bringing about illumination” (“How Do We Write About This?” 722). Unlike Versluys, Spahr, and Haviland, Marco Abel defends DeLillo ending the novel with a return to the 9/11 attack, this time from inside the struck tower, which Abel sees as DeLillo’s attempt to “suspend” the event, to make it an immanent occurrence (1237), happening in the now, so it can be faced in the continuing and evolving present moment. Abel argues that such a suspension of that apocalyptic moment is valuable because it allows an ongoing interrogation of “how the event works and what it does” (1237). In their attempt to open up and introduce variation and nuance in the critical debate on DeLillo’s novel and on post-9/11 novels in general, Morley and Abel give fresh impetus to re-examine *Falling Man* and its depictions of 9/11, and of the other, from newer perspectives. My intention is to use Abel’s approach to analyze the mechanisms of occluding Muslims and Islam in the novel, and the implications of these attempted occlusions on the single-focus trajectory of post-9/11 American fictions playing within the tradition of the Great American Novel. While scholars have focused on a variety of aspects of *Falling Man*, they have not paid enough attention to why DeLillo produces such a non-DeLillo-like novel in the post-9/11 era, or to how it relates to his stated project of creating a different kind of fiction now that the terrorist attack has created a schism in political life in America and in cultural representations of that political life. In this chapter, I will attempt to fill this lacuna within scholarship on the novel.
Repressions Countered

As in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, the characters of *Falling Man* at first attempt to occlude Muslims from their environment by repressing them into non-existence. But DeLillo’s representational strategy is to constantly confront the characters with the presence of the Muslim or the reminder of 9/11 as linked to Muslims. White Americans in his novel keep running up against the hard reality of the world and thereby having their attempts at repression thwarted. Like in “In the Ruins,” DeLillo wants white Americans to contend with Muslims living within post-9/11 United States, and not to try to ignore them into non-existence; confrontation for DeLillo is the necessary first step in understanding the larger implications of the “Muslim Question”.

Like Oskar in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, *Falling Man*’s characters express repressive and reductive thoughts about Muslims and Islam, though they are much less successful in maintaining the worldviews they attempt to create through their repressions. Like Oskar, who in passing mentions his fear of “Arabs”, Keith has a fleeting thought a few days after 9/11 on how “it might be hard to find a taxi at a time when every cabdriver in New York [is] named Muhammad” (28). Keith’s allusion to Muslim prevalence in New York comes as the last line of a chapter, and he neither brings it up again nor does it lead to an encounter between him and any Muslim. Both Oskar and Keith are putting into effect metonymizing moves of labeling the feared other with one ethnic description or one representative name. Of course, not every cabdriver in New York is a Muslim, let alone one named Muhammad, and this statement of reductive coalescing of all Muslims into a mass of similar people echoes another instance in Foer’s novel, when Oskar finds Muhammad Atta’s index card and states, “Mohammed is the most common name on earth” (Foer 159). While Oskar represses his fear of “Arabs”, Keith’s
reference is more directed to point out the religious identity of the group he mentions, and he does not try to repress the thought. Also, whereas Oskar’s reaction is one of admitted fright, Keith’s idea of the difficulty of obtaining a cab stems perhaps more from political repercussions of the attack, or from the practical improbability of hailing a cab because Muslims are going to make themselves scarce after the event for their own protection. Keith is in this thought acknowledging rather than repressing the prejudice in New York in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attack. *Falling Man* depicts the post-9/11 Islamophobic current in the American air after the event, and the repressive mechanisms operating in a different way than in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Keith clearly indicates the repressive mechanisms at play right after 9/11, while also acknowledging the Muslims who are entrenched in the fabric of New York.

This early acknowledgement of the presence of Muslims in the United States after 9/11 is only the beginning of the novel’s reference to them, as several other characters in the novel echo Keith’s singling out of Muslims as a group after 9/11. Lianne’s reflexive revulsion to the music she believes is vaguely “Middle Eastern, North African, Bedouin… or Sufi… music located in Islamic tradition,” music that Lianne insists on labeling “noise” (DeLillo 67), is implicitly her reaction to the existence of Muslims in New York after 9/11 and her attempt at repressing them. Lianne plans to chat with Elena, the resident of the flat from which the music emanates so loudly, to complain about the noise. The music bothers her not because it indicates “noisy-neighbor syndrome,” which can be irritating in itself (Simpson 198), but because its association with Islamic culture constitutes to Lianne a violation of post-9/11 sanctity. But, as David Simpson points out, this auditory image “of the penetration of alien sounds into the home within the homeland, the space of privacy, leisure and relaxation… undercuts the fantasy of patriotic purity, reminding us that the ‘other’ already lives next door” (198). In other words, not only are
many cabdrivers in New York Muslims, so are many residents of the city and of the country. Islamic culture may be foreign, but it accompanies Muslims where they embed themselves within American civil life. When she eventually confronts Elena about the music, Lianne feels so much pent up anger that she finds it hard to even articulate her complaint in full sentences: “The music. All the time, day and night. And loud… Why now? This particular time?... It’s loud… Under these circumstances. There are circumstances. You acknowledge this, don’t you?” (DeLillo 119). When Elena refuses to turn down the volume of the music, Lianne starts forming sentences full of expletives and condescending questions: “It’s fucking loud… The whole city is ultrasensitive right now. Where have you been hiding?” before she resorts to physically shoving Elena back into her apartment (120). But the music continues to play after that, and Lianne’s attempts at repressing her environmental triggers fail miserably even in such close proximity to her own home. In this way, as Magali Cornier Michael notes, in *Falling Man* “the domestic realm functions neither as a space separate from the public world nor as a space from which to oppose foreign elements” (75). Whereas repression in Foer’s novel fails because of the coping mechanism’s inherent flaws (the resurgence of the repressed material is nearly guaranteed), repression in *Falling Man* disintegrates even as it is attempted because the novel depicts how rapidly the public world keeps intruding on characters creating private delusions in an attempt to cope with 9/11’s traumatic aftermath.

Lianne’s act of attempted repression is not the sole overt attempt at using the coping mechanism in the novel. Her son Justin, eight years old like Oskar in Foer’s novel, refuses to believe that the towers have collapsed even months after the attack, and he has to be disabused of this notion repeatedly until he starts facing the truth (72). These instances for Lianne and Justin echo Oskar’s avoidance of thinking about his father’s death and Oskar’s fear of being immensely
vulnerable inside and on the top floors of skyscrapers in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. However, because in *Falling Man* there is in each character’s attempt at repression another character who prevents the repression from becoming cemented, there is no later springing back of spectral repressed material in the novel. Even so, the pattern is quite visible, and it will continue in other post-9/11 novels as well, at least in some characters; repressing the terrorist act or Islam or Muslims, or all three, is a nearly-ubiquitous mechanism for fictional white Americans to cope with the terrorist attack. The characters trying repression in each novel are attempting to deny reality. They endeavor to negate the existence of Muslims, Islam, and Islamic artifacts, especially within the comfort and security of American domesticity, because the continued existence of these threats is too painful to bear after 9/11. But *Falling Man* demonstrates quite as emphatically, even if in a different and much more quickly disillusioning manner than Foer’s novel does, that repression is a childish mechanism that does not succeed, and DeLillo moves past this mechanism that remains the mainstay of Oskar in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*.4

It bears mentioning that repression as a first-response mechanism to the terrorist act is not insignificant, and *Falling Man* depicts it as a common response when facing trauma; in fact, some of the adult characters in the novel attempt repression quite actively, and in a variety of ways, as examined above. However, the Kristevean shattering of repression (Kristeva 15) is not as traumatic for characters in *Falling Man* as it is for Oskar, because each time a character attempts to repress 9/11, Muslims, or Islam, they are faced with reality of life after the event: 9/11’s violence has occurred; people did fall from the burning buildings; the towers have fallen;

4 A strong argument for the ineffectiveness of repression in *Falling Man* is the recurrence of the performance artist, David Janiak, in the novel, repeatedly and unexpectedly reminding New York about the ones who fell or jumped from the towers. Despite news outlets having stopped airing footage of falling people, the idea of people falling—or of other horrors of 9/11—cannot be repressed. The performance artist’s repeated and unexpected reenactments of the falling act are symbolic of how repressing trauma does not work, because it can reappear in the imagination at any time since it is ubiquitous in cultural memory.
and Muslims, Islamic cultural artifacts, and Islamic texts do continue to exist in the United States. And this is precisely where *Falling Man* becomes so different from all of DeLillo’s other novels, because it remains centered on the “Muslim Question” without any notion of the sprawl of his previous works such as *Libra* or *Underworld*. The focus of *Falling Man* on this one theme is a statement that nothing else occupies the attention of white Americans like Lianne and Justin, even as they are unable to assimilate and mitigate the trauma that it brings. That *Falling Man* is also narrowly themed and a slim volume is itself a move past the muddling and obfuscation of central points that the sprawl of an epically scoped novel like DeLillo’s previous texts allow.

There is no digression or secondary exploration worth noting in the post-9/11 moment, DeLillo seems to be arguing with the presentation of this text, as even the childish quest of the novel is directly linked to 9/11. By first calling for American novelists to write different kinds of novels, and then by emphatically countering repression via these deliberate changes to the way he writes novels, DeLillo, one of the so-called Great American Novelists, is presenting a new kind of novel for the new era: a work focused entirely and unifyingly on what white Americans can and will do about Muslims and Islam once they move past the repression.

**Creating the Other**

Once the Anglo-American characters of *Falling Man* realize that it is impossible to repress the entrenched Muslim other, they stop attempting to deny the other’s existence and instead attempt to create a version of the other with which they are more comfortable. The characters of *Falling Man* move decidedly beyond actively or passively repressing to applying a mechanism that does not deny the occurrence of 9/11 or the existence of Muslims in the United States but instead creates a monolithic entity of them, re-shaping them in ways that traumatized
white Americans can understand. The first instance of this “creation of the other” is when Keith, who cannot deny the existence of Muslims because he interacts with them on New York’s streets, instead opts to create a monolithic other out of them within his fleeting thought about “every cabdriver” being “named Muhammad” (DeLillo 28). Keith, in this fleeting thought, creates of Muslims a monolithic other, an entity that lurks out there, after part of it has perpetrated 9/11. His and other white Americans’ attempt at accreting Muslims into one entity is an attempt to replace reality once they realize that reality cannot be repressed—they try to “create the other” once their elimination of the other does not work. Homi Bhabha points out that “[t]he objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin” (23). Even in the supposedly postcolonial world, the colonization continues within discourse; Keith’s thought is contribution to the discourse that aims to associate the Muslim other with barbarism. The other white Americans in Falling Man actively “create” Muslims as a “degenerate” type as well. Lianne, lying awake and feeling oppressed by the Islamic-sounding music coming from Elena’s flat, muses about Muslims: “They’re the ones who think alike, talk alike, eat the same food at the same time. She knew this wasn’t true” (DeLillo 68). In this instance, even as she meditates on the idea of Muslims as a mass rather than as individuals, either her own meta-thinking or the narrative voice—it can be construed as both, though I read the latter as more valid from the sentence’s construction—of Falling Man intervenes to emphatically state that even though Lianne is currently thinking of Muslims as one horde-like entity, she does not actually believe that. However, even though the narrator states plainly that Lianne knows this thought to be untrue, she entertains it as valid, creating a kind of cognitive dissonance in which she keeps her pre-9/11 factual knowledge separated from her post-9/11 opinion. Within this cognitive dissonance it is indicated that it is
her traumatised self that accommodates the dissonance to produce a narrative that helps her condense, simplify, and thus cope with the complex geopolitics of 9/11 terrorism. The narrator implies that the us-them creation is rooted in 9/11’s trauma and indicates the flaws in Lianne’s reasoning by stating simply that Muslims acting as one monolithic entity is simply “not true”. The narrator is playing the role of repression-remover.

However, Lianne’s reductive dichotomization of Americans and Muslims does not cease after the narrative voice’s interjection on her behalf; in fact, there is plenty of encouragement from Lianne’s environment to keep thinking in us-them terms. Lianne’s mother, Nina, and her European boyfriend Martin perpetuate the othering of, and reductive thinking about, Muslims by the constant use of “they” when referring to both Islamic terrorists and to Muslims in general, while Lianne remains a generally silent witness to their arguments. Sometimes the references are through allusion and are subtle, such as when Nina flippantly remarks that God is “back in the desert now” (46), implying that public discourse on religion has shifted to focus on Muslims. Then there are the instances of her alluding to either all Muslims or just Islamic terrorists as “they” who “attack out of panic,” who have “no goals” except to “[k]ill the innocent” or to demonstrate that the “great power” of USA is “vulnerable” to infiltration by those who have no aim but to destroy civilization (46-47). What starts with a critique of the terrorists’ motives becomes in Nina’s words a lambasting of the ambiguous, extended whole of the Muslim world, or even, according to Khadem “to the majority of non-Western people” (195). Martin, meanwhile, even though he insists that the terrorism has more to do with “history… politics and economics” than it does with religion, concedes that the terrorists use the “language of religion” while publicizing their heinous acts (DeLillo 47). But his rationalization of the terrorist’s motivations is a debate he carries against Nina’s conflations of the terrorists with all Muslims,
and so the two of them are not arguing about the same parameters. Nina’s “they” encompasses “societies” while Martin’s “they” attempts to stay limited to individuals even though it strays into the mass-scale bifurcation with its idea of “[o]ne side” that “has the capital, the labor, the technology, the armies, the agencies, the cities, the laws, the police, and the prisons” versus “[t]he other side” which “has a few men willing to die” (46-47). This is directly related to Edward Said’s conceptualization of colonialism and othering in the preface of the 25th edition of his seminal work, Orientalism:

Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others, that its circumstances are special, that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort. And, sadder still, there always is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say calming words about benign or altruistic empires, as if one shouldn't trust the evidence of one's eyes watching the destruction and the misery and death brought by the latest mission civilizatrice. (xvi)

Martin’s idea of civilization does not take into account the alternate technologies and epistemologies in other civilizations; it is a thoroughly Orientalist projection of the West, trying to map it onto the East, and finding the latter lacking. Moreover, it does not take into account the perpetration of US foreign policy that has created havoc in the Global South. Even after 9/11, though the War on Terror has begun in the timeline of the novel, there is no mention in Falling Man of the violence perpetrated by the United States forces on Afghanistan—a flaring and glaring occlusion from not only Falling Man, but from a majority of post-9/11 novels. The Orientalist discourse of othering will not tolerate indiscriminate violence being associated with Western civilization, because it is so intrinsically linked to the Islamic ideology and Muslims, and so the United States’ wanton destruction of two countries that had little to do with the
terrorist attack is expunged from the us-them discourse. Nina and Martin’s political discussion serves as backdrop and kindling for Lianne’s own developing thoughts on 9/11 and Muslims. In a subsequent interaction where “they” is used, it is just as difficult to ascertain whether Lianne means all Muslims or just the terrorists when she says to Keith, “They killed your best friend. They’re fucking outright murderers” (DeLillo 74). Lianne’s language in this instance, reinforced by her earlier silent participation in Nina and Martin’s discourse, indicates fluidity of meaning in the “they”, and it creates a concomitant fluid othering of both Muslims and Islamist terrorists into that group.

The process of conceptual othering culminates in a final instance that immediately shocks Lianne when she discovers her own xenophobic beliefs. While musing on Martin’s possible past as a politically motivated activist who may have used violence, Lianne’s line of thinking strays into uncovering her deeper bias: “Maybe he was a terrorist but he was one of ours she thought, and the thought chilled her, shamed her—one of ours, which meant godless, Western, white” (195). Earlier, the narrative voice had made the intervention for the reader to clarify Lianne’s actual understanding versus her trauma-compromised post-9/11 belief about Islam as a monolith. However, this time Lianne herself balks at her ability to think rationally and politically about Martin, the white terrorist, while not being able to afford the same rationality to political considerations behind Islamist terrorism. This revelation of what she is willing to accept, just because it comes from a person with the same skin color and belief system as herself, appalls Lianne. She becomes conscious of her selective occlusion of violence based on how different the perpetrator is from herself. The other does not even need to be mentioned for her to realize how utterly compromised her ethics are. This moment comes at the close of a chapter, and so DeLillo seems to be placing emphasis on the myopic distortions of white America’s secular belief
systems. Because Martin’s possible past acts of violence are not associated with Islam, and
perhaps also because he is linked personally to Lianne through Nina, Lianne is willing to
overlook any terrorism-like violence he may have perpetrated. The opposite of Martin’s
characteristics of “godless, Western, white” are: religiously motivated, non-Western, colored.
The narrator is indicating that Lianne can reason away, and even excuse, a terrorist attack by the
former group, while she cannot do the same for the latter group—and the significance of that lies
in the grave possibility that it is not terrorism that is the issue but rather the identity of the
terrorist. In other words, the “they” are suspect not because of their acts, but because of their
ideological and racial differences from the “us”. Terrorism gives an excuse for Lianne’s deeper-
seated prejudices and preconceived notions to be revealed; the narrator indicates that perhaps
9/11 does not bias her against Muslims and Islam so much as it unveils the bias she already has
against them because Muslims and Islam are so alien to her.

The novel’s depiction of white Americans viewing Muslims either directly or by
insinuation as hordelike, monolithic, and inflexible has multiple implications. Lianne’s
perception of them as monolithic and lacking individual critical reasoning obviously places
Muslims in the category of sub-human, and that in itself is enough to create a cascade of effects.
First, this leads to Lianne de-humanizing Muslims, and once rendered without agency and
dehumanized as barbarians-in-training, Muslims can be acted upon without compunction by
those with agency, in this case white Americans. Rendering them less than human allows action
against Muslims to be more conscionable, and that includes action within the United States,
hidden in non-narrativized instances after 9/11, and especially outside the United States, by the
Americans, in the on-going violence in the War on Terror.
While ostensibly Nina’s, Martin’s, and Lianne’s assertions about the Muslim other appear to be defining the characteristics of the vaguely grouped “they”, their effect is also to create an idea of American “us” in opposition to the other. Nina’s declaration that Islamist fundamentalists attack “out of panic” to “[k]ill the innocent” (46-47) reinforces the opposing notion of Americans, including the American military, using force in a calm and measured way and limiting their aggression so that it is targeted specifically at terrorists or would-be terrorists, with little or no collateral damage. Martin, “reasoning” with Nina, goes a step further in creating an even more divergent reality between the two groups. His version of the Muslim world is deprived of basic American infrastructure: “the capital, the labor, the technology, the armies, the agencies, the cities, the laws, the police, and the prisons” (47). In other words, Martin represses any notion of Islamic civilization by calling the Islamic world barbaric, based on his assertion that it does not have public institutions that work to the degree they should, while the United States is the bastion of civilization because it has highly developed versions of these institutions. As is often the case with such Orientalist comparisons, Martin in his simplistic analysis treats the American institutions as already realized, rather than as ideals espoused by a flawed and ethically compromised historical record. In “In the Ruins of the Future” DeLillo bemoaned just such a potential’s loss because of 9/11: that the technologically promised utopia of a future United States would now be deferred or canceled because of the terrorist attack—but at least his concept of such a United States was still distant, something towards which the nation was aspiring. In Martin and Nina’s thinking, the United States was already that utopia before 9/11. Many post-9/11 novels, including the ones I examine in this dissertation, create and examine this notion of pre-9/11 American utopia by finding characteristics within Islamic fundamentalist ideas that can be countered with what (conceptually at least) Americans idealize of their own
country’s recent past. Trauma theory provides answers for why this could be so. Richard Crowshaw posits that “trauma might introduce a dialectical understanding of violence and terror… that reveals the dependency of ‘us’ on configurations of ‘them’” (770).

Once Americans demonize Islam and Muslims after 9/11, the possibility of putting halos above their own heads is only the next logical step in othering. Creating us-them dichotomies is a fictional way of depicting post-9/11 American identity, even if false, even if temporary, and along with that othering comes the creation of a fabricated, rallying-call utopian notion of pre-9/11 United States and a nostalgia for that false historical version—and the new rallying call by DeLillo for post-schismatic novels that individually contribute to a collective nation-rebuilding narrative. Re-defining the “American Spirit” through fiction—the purpose of the Great American Novel, according to De Forest—by first defining who the Muslim is in the “Muslim Question” becomes fundamental to DeLillo’s conception in “In the Ruins of the Future” and within his own novel of the new purpose for American fiction. While Oskar avoids facing the question in Foer’s novel, DeLillo moves his characters past that denial stage and has them create rudimentary definitions of the enemy and thus solidify notions of the self. That white Americans and white American residents like Nina, Lianne, and Martin create holistic pictures of “us” versus “them” in relation to brown Muslims is entirely the essentialist and exceptionalist narrative that the concept of the Great American Novel critiques even as it perpetuates it. DeLillo is not directly stating that his project in “In the Ruins of the Future” and Falling Man is to usher in Great American Novels that define Americans as the opposite of Muslims, but that is exactly what he does create and perpetuate, even as he critiques it, in these works.
Re-Purposing the Other’s Texts

So far, this chapter has outlined the extent to which *Falling Man*’s characters attempt and fail to repress Muslims and Islamic ideas, because their environment almost immediately thwarts their attempts at repression; this fact prompts them to attempt other strategies of coping with 9/11’s trauma and their perception of threat from Muslims in the United States. Now I will shift focus to examine how the novel’s white American characters use their *imagined* versions of the Muslim other to attempt a different kind of occlusion through appropriation and the re-purposing of Muslim textuality. In *Falling Man*, Lianne and Justin’s major mechanism for contending with and processing 9/11, Islam, and Muslims is the appropriation of the other’s identity and ideology. This shift in focus corresponds to the shift from repression to other mechanisms by which post-9/11 American novels depict white American characters confronting the Islamic other with the creation of an “us” versus “them” mentality, as shown earlier in this chapter, followed by the manipulation of information about the “them”. At this point in the dissertation it is appropriate to explain the mechanism’s processes and implications, to explain the ways in which appropriation works as a sophisticated but flawed coping mechanism, and for more thorough close readings of the novel’s depiction of it.

Appropriation goes beyond intertextuality, beyond adaptation, and even beyond the colonizer referring to the cultural artifacts of the colonized as inferior. When someone appropriates a text, they take it from another culture and try to reshape its original meaning and insist that the new meaning is the original meaning. There is “active critical commentary” in this process, and it “rais[es] ethical questions about who has the right to speak for or on behalf of others or indeed to access, and potentially rewrite, cultural heritage” (Sanders). Especially when it occurs across the dividing line of a binary construction of cultures, such as the “Us” vs.
“Them”, as in *Falling Man*, there is potential for actual harm within political and cultural discourse. Despite its still nascent inclusion and development in literary theory, appropriation has caught the attention of postcolonial studies researchers such as Susan Bassett and Walter Woods, who pose further questions about the harmful entry of appropriations into discourse:

> literary critique might investigate… how and where authorial voices are engendered, ethnicised or classified socially; when and how appropriative acts are identified; what compromises result through appropriative devices, and for whom; if and when authorial right to the signifier is preserved, and for whom is it prioritised; and which ‘others’ does the appropriative act oppress? (54)

Especially in the case of power differentials between cultures, it is fitting to examine who is benefitting from the appropriation, and what effects on the power dynamics, and violence, are introduced or perpetuated because of one community’s or individual’s textual manipulation of another’s cultural heritage. Appropriation as a process with serious implications has been used to describe what James J. Sosnoski calls the “arrogation, confiscation, [or] seizure of concepts” (50). Combined with Tracy B Strong’s observation that the word etymologically contains “not only property, but also [notions of what is] proper, stable, assured” (125), appropriation becomes the seizure or confiscation of a foreign idea from its “proper” position. Strong elaborates upon his idea:

> I have appropriated something when I have made it mine, in a manner that I feel comfortable with, that is in a manner to which the challenges of others will carry little or no significance… A text is successfully appropriated insofar as the appropriator no longer is troubled with it; it has become a part of his or her understanding. (125)
While appropriation starts with a positive intention for oneself, it changes too much of the original text of the other, so that it is not even recognizable as the original. Gloria Anzaldúa argues that appropriation even “steals and harms” (xxi). To the extent that appropriation obfuscates facts, proliferates misinformation, and compounds layers of misinformation on a false foundation, it does certainly cause harm given the extent that false discourse can lead to violence. Quoting Jeremy Hawthorn, Bassett and Woods note that appropriation “‘neutralises’ opposition, resulting in a merging with the ‘dominant structures of power’; the appropriated object or subject becoming ‘the total property of the appropriating authority’” (52), which in the narrative of *Falling Man* means that the textually appropriated other becoming violently subjugated to the status quo. Using this theoretical framework, I will examine instances of blatant appropriation in *Falling Man* further, when Lianne tacitly condones violence against Middle Eastern Muslims.

Scholars have paid little attention to depictions of the appropriation and re-purposing of Islamic textuality, especially of the Quran’s text, in post-9/11 American novels in general, and definitely not enough to the appropriations depicted within *Falling Man*. I intend to rectify this neglect by demonstrating that the theoretical work by Sosnoski, Strong, and Anzaldúa enables a glimpse into how thoroughly and significantly white American characters wrest control of the narratives about Muslims and Islam. I will examine Justin’s and Lianne’s appropriations in *Falling Man* as representative of similar instances in other 9/11 novels, which exemplify the use of this mechanism, by which white Judeo-Christian American characters attempt to obfuscate, obstruct, and occlude Muslims and Islam from authentic representation and to remove their agency in the United States after 9/11, while also silently endorsing action against Muslims. The first step, that of desiring to know the other, in this mechanism links directly to DeLillo’s quest
to have American writers address the “Muslim Question” by first defining the Muslim other. But, at the very incipient stage, if the Muslim is not being defined as the Muslim would define themself, then white Americans are creating and “seizing” (as defined by Sosnoski) hold of a chimera, and building an edifice of so-called post-9/11 Great American Novels on that illusion that is their conception of the Muslim other. This illusion and the misinformed actions of white Americans, whether they be to support American aggression or ignore the suffering of Muslims in the Middle East, will then be perpetuated merely on the misunderstanding caused by knowingly or unknowingly falsifying information about the other. The appropriator either willfully or ignorantly hides the truth about the other from themself, which is damaging to their own conception of the other and can lead to the misinformation becoming concrete unless corrected before a crucial stage of crystallization.

Within *Falling Man*, the first major occurrence of appropriation is a hybrid one that contains elements of repression as well. Justin conceives 9/11 through a lens of trauma that also alters the event for him: he believes for quite some time after their collapse that the Twin Towers still stand. In a combined form of repression and appropriation, he either consciously or ignorantly re-imagines the name of bin Laden, along with all its associations, to a very different and much more American name. When Justin and his friends render “bin Laden” into “Bill Lawton” and start searching the sky for him (73-74), they are in effect altering significantly the reality of the terrorist mastermind of 9/11. Bill Lawton, according to Justin and his friends “has a long beard” like bin Laden and “wears a long robe;” however, they also attribute to him a mythical “power to poison what we eat but only certain foods,” to travel “everywhere in his bare feet,” the ability to “fly jet planes” and also to speak “thirteen languages but not English except to his wives” (74). Significantly, in Justin’s appropriation, the original bin Laden’s ideology does
not figure into the equation—instead, the morphed Bill Lawton’s ability to strike from the sky and his threat to New Yorkers is paramount. Primarily, the children’s focus on their “anglicizing of Bin Laden’s name” (sic) indicates that they feel threatened and “they, too, are gripped by the collective paranoia” that traumatized Americans feel in post-9/11 America (Versluys 29). They make an appropriation of precisely the most threatening element that remains active after the attack is over: the terrorist mastermind, still out there, likely plotting more of the same. The sociological phenomenon of this appropriation is the equivalent of seizing (Sosnoski 50) the original threat and creating a manageable version of it in the childish game of searching the sky for him. By changing his attributes, Justin and his friends render bin Laden harmless, and by changing his name into an American one, they confiscate (Sosnoski 50) the original, other and othered, bin Laden, to make him American property. Joseph M. Conte points out that this instance of appropriation is indicative of the “presumptuousness of American Culture” (570). This presumptive appropriation is, of course, primarily a juvenile defence mechanism in play, even though it has multiple effects. Justin and his friends manipulate bin Laden’s name, either consciously or unconsciously, so as to stop being “troubled with it” (Strong 125). I agree with Rachel Greenwald Smith who writes that anglicizing the terrorist’s name indicates the novel’s “capacity to assimilate the seemingly unassimilable” and that it also rings of solipsism (154). Anglicizing the terrorist’s name has the implications of symbolizing an ethnocentric idea of the United States’ worldview, where even foreigners’ identities are filtered to become palatable to an American audience. But on the personal level it is also just a childish ludic enterprise to cope with the incredible trauma of 9/11. Justin and his friends’ “childish” act of ignoring reality and developing their own game out of a distorted assumption of facts mirrors the earnest-but-silly-but-serious questing of Oskar, who builds for himself a mission just as much as do the children
in *Falling Man* who search the sky for Bill Lawton. In both novels the children create games to cope with the traumatic aftermath of 9/11. Oskar’s game is one built on repression and willful ignorance of a community and an ideology, while the foundation of Justin’s is what could be considered “fake news” or an alternate world-building. Like Oskar, who renders New York safe by repressing the existence of Muslims within it, Justin renders an Islamic terrorist safe by reshaping the information about him into the form he can most easily fathom and therefore defend himself against: he creates an Americanized comic book super-villain out of him, an Americanization with all of its imperialist erasure of Arab particularity, the name bin Laden. Like Oskar, Justin follows in the tradition of the Great American Novel character, Huckleberry Finn, and his ilk within canonical American literature, embodying American naïve innocence; but, *Falling Man* depicts Justin in a much less central role. Instead of focusing on it directly, his misrepresentation of facts appears in the narrative through the perspective of his parents, who show concern for what they consider his denial of reality even as they understand his need as a child to cope with the trauma by creating a post-9/11 fantasy version of reality.

There are several implications of Justin’s denial of the falling towers and of the appropriation of facts to suit his desired form of reality, but the primary one is the indication that while reality may exist “out there”, white American privilege allows characters to create alternative versions of reality to suit their needs. This name-changing appropriation signals American neo-colonial forces of cultural imposition, and an “American propensity for seeking shelter in the known” (Gauthier 16). At the same time, the name change is also a joke for the reader, who finds out the punch line well into the novel’s first section, which is titled “Bill Lawton”, when Lianne and Keith discuss how their son and his friends came to call bin Laden by a different name:
“What was he hearing?”

“He was hearing Bill Lawton. They were saying bin Laden.” (73)

Like an over-explained joke, it does not remain humorous after the revelation. Adding to its lack of funniness is the implied possibility that bin Laden hides among Americans, having shaved his beard and changed his attire and name, posing as one of them. In that case, the name that Justin and his friends give him could be considered a Freudian slip, too—revelatory despite its unintended utterance. Even though Katie, one of Justin’s friends partaking in the quest for Bill Lawton, has “got to know the real name” according to Lianne, Katie “probably keeps the other name going precisely because it’s the wrong name” (74). She keeps the ludic, mythic, appropriative mechanism going, obfuscating reality and creating its alternative as a shared coping mechanism.

Beyond the cultural imposition of American-ness on a Muslim character, and beyond the idea of turning the appropriation of his name into a joke, and even beyond the idea that “Bill Lawton” is a Freudian slip, there is the political implication that in this shift of monikers an Islamophobic undercurrent is apparent in the coping mechanism of Justin and his friends. For these white American children, as for Oskar in Foer’s novel, the concept of Islam or Muslims attacking their country, especially their own city, is so unfathomably horrific that they erase all characteristics of the religion from the attacker, and especially from his most identifiably Islamic attribute: his name. Based on his innocence and naivete, Justin’s childish Islamophobia is also DeLillo’s projection that perhaps nearly all Islamophobia is childish in the way it is conceived, because of its inherent rootedness in appropriation. Justin’s Islamophobia signals the classic response of fearing what you do not know much about and making your own phobia-laced “facts” about it. Like Oskar’s attempts at repression, much of Justin’s appropriation collapses not
because of its inherently false foundations but because of its veneer of repression—the real name
is hiding just beneath the surface. His parents and his environment eventually disabuse Justin’s
conception of bin Laden as Bill Lawton. Once he faces the facts about bin Laden’s name, and of
the towers’ collapse, he stops trying to create an alternative world, and instead he consciously
and willfully searches for information about Islam and Muslims (185). *Falling Man* depicts this
search, as opposed to Oskar’s fantastical quest, as a means of negotiating past the childishness
and ignorance of Islamophobia as well as moving past the ultimately falsifying and distorting
mechanism of appropriation. The important question to ask here is whether there is actual harm
created by Justin’s temporary appropriation. I would argue that despite the seizure and
manipulation of bin Laden’s name, Justin and his friends do not actually cause harm to any
Muslim other or even create or perpetuate power differentials other than in discourse. In fact,
Justin remains open to understanding Islam once he is disillusioned, and he tries to fulfill his
curiosity in the most innocent and straightforward way he can imagine—he wants to attend an
anti-war rally and consult texts and people on the issues involved.

Compared to Justin, a child, Lianne and her act of appropriation is all the more intriguing
because the novel depicts her in ways unlike how most other characters are depicted in post-9/11
fiction: her dearth of authentic knowledge about Islam does not come from lack of her attempt to
acquire it. In fact, she has attempted deep engagement, and remains most open to the
ideologically other, and can be considered the representation of a white, potentially liberal,
quasi-secular character invested in engaging with the other to try to understand socio-political
and cultural positions different from those she operates within and espouses. She has traveled
through “much of the Middle East,” interacted with people there, and attempted to become a
 scholar of “languages or art history,” but the program petered out into glorified “tourism in the
end… not determined inquiry into beliefs, institutions, languages, art” (46). After that opportunity is lost, and until 9/11, she exhibits what Richard Hofstadter would label “political passivity” (35), letting the program and political events guide her level of awareness rather than being proactive in learning the politics and engaging in deeper understanding through effort. Even after 9/11, her lack of actual scholarly engagement with any intellectual material on the terrorist act and its motivations are emblematic of a large segment of the American public that does not engage with policy and repercussions at the intellectual level and is even wary, if not afraid, of intellectualism. Becoming an audience to Martin and Nina’s armchair political discussion is the closest, in the months right after 9/11, that Lianne comes to grappling intellectually with the issues of the “they” that keep cropping up in conversation. However, the discussion does drive Lianne’s subsequent deeper reflection on political issues, and instills in her a newfound ability to at least suspect if not recognize her prejudices. Her political position in the novel, as initially a traumatized and reactive person who spurns even cultural artifacts that can be associated with Islam, evolves when she recognizes her prejudices on terrorists of different races as appalling. That change leaves her open for further transformation that occurs when the novel’s timeline skips to two years after 9/11.

But despite all her openness to change and understanding, Lianne’s non-scholarly, even anti-intellectual, approach to understanding Islam creates a pivotally misinformed understanding of the religion, for her and for the reader, by the end of the novel. At this time, Lianne is truly engaging with an idea of the other (rather than with the physical other), through vicarious reading of the scripture that misinforms her of the other’s ideology:

People were reading the Koran. She knew of three people doing this… She could imagine herself doing this… She knew two of them but not well. One, a doctor, recited the first
line of the Koran in his office.

This Book is not to be doubted. (231).

The line appears parsed through Lianne’s consciousness as italicized, separately paragraphed, and differentiated from the rest of the text, as if directly quoted from scripture. However, crucially, this is not the opening line of the Quran at all. The true first line of the Quranic text is (in Arabic): Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim, which is often translated as “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful” (Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al.’s translation) or “In the name of God, The Most Gracious, The Dispenser of Grace” (Muhammad Assad’s translation). The actual opening line of the Quran is thoroughly familiar to Muslims, just as the first line of Genesis is to Judeo-Christians: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” The line Lianne believes is the first of the Quran is actually a rather skewed translation of a portion of the second line of the second chapter of the Quran. A more accurate translation of that whole line would be: “This is the Book in which there is no doubt, a guidance for the reverent” (Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al.’s translation) or “This Divine writ—let there be no doubt about it—is [meant to be] a guidance for all the God-conscious” (Muhammad Assad’s translation) (Quran 2:2).\(^5\) Compared to Justin’s relatively childish and ludic appropriation, Lianne’s is more serious: it is a misreading and incorrect relaying of factual information that seeks to re-work the opening line of Islamic scripture. The Quran is an uncannily preserved text; it is believed by Muslims to be in an

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\(^5\) While there is some similarity in the translation from Falling Man and Nasr et al.’s translation, the novel’s provided translation is both incomplete and more emphatic in its insistence against doubting the scripture. The continuing lines indicate that emphasis is placed in the Quran not on the inerrancy of the text, but the conditions of the believer, who is asked to “believe in the unseen,” be “steadfast in prayer,” and “spend out of what We have provided for them,… who believe in the Revelation sent to thee and sent before thy time and (in their hearts) have the assurance of the Hereafter. They are on (true) guidance from their Lord and it is these who will prosper” (Abdullah Yusuf Ali translation of Quran 2:3-5). To separate one portion of the second line of its second chapter and to call it the first line of the Quran is not only to de-contextualize the line and appropriate the Quranic text, it is also the de-contextualization of the Quran as a disconnected set of lines, perpetuating the Orientalist myths about the Muslim scripture being gobbledygook rather than a coherent ideology, albeit containing an obviously different epistemology from the Judeo-Christian secularity of America.
unaltered sequence of lines in Arabic since it was first collected in mid-seventh century. But *Falling Man’s* depiction of the text is fragmented, lacking any presentation of it as a whole, while also removing its “proper, stable, assured” (Strong 125) textual integrity, thereby creating a blatant appropriation. The novel, in effect, appropriates and reworks the most Islamic thing: the Quran’s text. Several implications of the line’s reconfiguration, and of its rather faulty translation and presentation as separated from the rest of the book, must be considered.

The novel situates the quotation without definitively attributing its faultiness, or even its attribution, to any specific person; it cannot be ascertained with absolute certainty whether DeLillo, the narrator, the doctor, or Lianne have decided to shift the line’s position, its length, and its translation’s tone. It appears as either the doctor transferring incorrect information, or as Lianne’s error in correctly remembering the quote’s placement, length, and tone, especially as she reacts later by embracing the doubt that American secularity affords her even as she begins attending church. In the chain of information transferal from text to one person and to the next person, and then stored in memory for later recall, the information is as if parsed through a game of “telephone”, distorted beyond the original into something with entirely different significance, meanings, and connotations. Only the bare minimum of checking the reference will reveal that this is not only a harmful translation, but also what Sosnosky would call a “seizure” (50) of the original Quranic text to create something new, which serves a different purpose for the appropriater. Lianne centralizes the translation she remembers on the value that the Quran seems to place on “doubt”, and reacts immediately after recalling the line with her own insistence of the freedom that doubt allows: “She doubted things, she had her doubts” (DeLillo 231). Lianne first re-shapes the Quran, and then she reacts to the re-morphed version, creating “her understanding” (Strong 125) of the text and basing a reaction on that. She is so “comfortable” with the
appropriation that she is no longer “troubled with it” (Strong 125). Crucially, she stops attending any anti-war gatherings that protest the impending extension of the War on Terror into Iraq. The appropriation has direct repercussions on how she behaves as an American citizen who goes from being curious about Islam to being apathetic about attacks on a Muslim country because of a crystalizing false belief about Muslim ideology. Significantly, the repetition in the sentence emphasizes how strongly and actively she feels opposed to the Quran’s “first line”. In creating an identity for herself in opposition to the imagined stance of the Quran, Lianne is creating (and placing herself within) a false dichotomy, and that initial textual error borne of appropriation has further implications.

Lianne’s focus on the centrality of “doubt” appearing in her remembered version of the Quran’s opening line is the foundation of her further compounded errors in appraising the Muslim other and Islam, and it bears examination. Khadem provides a succinct critique of what he calls the line’s curious mistranslation. The original Arabic line has a much more neutral tone and a simple declarative structure, while DeLillo’s version is imperative and dogmatic. Two commercial translations of the book, for instance, present the same [portion of the] line as ‘This is the Scripture in which there is no doubt,’ and ‘This is the Book about which there is no doubt’ (Abdel Haleem 4; ‘Quran.com’). The original Arabic line is, of course, somewhat vague in its tone, so a less declarative and more assertive tone can also be construed. Thus, the quote is not as much a simple mistranslation as an intentionally
harsh translation of the line. In any case, its deliberate grimness and obvious dogmatism serve the purpose of the novel quite well. (Khadem 189)\(^6\)

But while Khadem sees in this “curious mistranslation” deliberate manipulation by DeLillo to suit a “purpose”, which is perhaps to portray Islam as dogmatic and one-dimensional, I find DeLillo’s manipulation of the line compelling as an instance of the author’s or the character’s appropriation, and wish to examine how it becomes indicative of a much larger condition than simply Islamophobia, and also how it lays the foundation for Lianne’s justification, even vindication, for having othered Muslims earlier, and how Lianne relinquishes responsibility for American attacks on a Muslim country. While I do question why the novel includes such an obvious mistake regarding the Quran, as it stands the mistake symbolizes how the Anglo-American public (here represented by Lianne), from its privileged position, receives information about, or ideas of, any “other” community: indirectly (“a doctor, recited” it “in his office” we are told), anecdotally (the relation of the doctor quoting it is quick and narrated as if the chain of narration itself were an important part of the story’s text), and without the character feeling a need for proactive intellectual investigation to verify the orally-conveyed text before dismissing its soundness. Especially in her traumatized state, Lianne stands for white Americans who consider themselves victims and threatened with further trauma, and also as willing to gather any information if it helps to generate an image of the Muslim other that provides comfortable reinforcement of their beliefs. I am interested in examining this morphing of information about the other as a coping mechanism, and of the effect of the inauthenticity of the information, with which the text of this novel, and that of the post-9/11 inflection to the Great American Novels

\(^6\) On that note, I would also like to quote Anushiravani Alireza and Abolfazl Khademi’s assertion that in the novel DeLillo “condemns Islam for dogmatism and claims that Islam does not allow Muslims to criticize their thoughts and correct themselves” (10).
tradition, can be read in new light, once Lianne’s mistake is exposed. That the exposure does not happen with a narrative intervention in *Falling Man* indicates perhaps that DeLillo believes authentic representation of characters’ beliefs is more important than is authentic understanding of the other in fictional representations of the post-9/11 moment.

To aid a detailed examination of the significance of Lianne’s appropriation and seizure of Quranic text, and by implication the significance of perpetuating inaccurate information in post-9/11 forays into the Great American Novel tradition, I must briefly provide the background for the significance of the gulf in meaning that arises between the original and the reshaped versions of the Great American Novel. It would be prudent, therefore, to summarize here the Quran’s actual directives about doubt and the flexibility of belief within the religion and regarding its own text. Even though neither its actual opening line invoking God’s Mercy nor the misquoted line from the second chapter are so declarative, the Quran is overtly assertive about a few matters, including the necessity for Muslims to proclaim unequivocally the oneness of God (Quran 20:14, among others), to avoid strictly the imbibing of alcohol and drugs (5:90), and to save themselves from fornication (17:32) and usury (2:278). But those are the forthright rulings about what Muslims should and should not do; regarding its own text, the Quran contains a few portions of meta-commentary, emphasizing absolute freedom of choice in belief in the book and the religion (2:256) and warning against approaching the text with malevolent intentions, and against looking for decontextualized excerpts to favor a political agenda. In a pertinent passage in the third chapter, the Quran’s states that it contains messages that are clear in and by themselves—and they are the essence of divine writ—as well as others that are allegorical. Now those whose hearts are given to swerving from the truth go after that part of the divine writ which has been expressed in
allegory, seeking out [what is bound to create] confusion, and seeking [to arrive at] its final meaning [in an arbitrary manner]. (Muhammad Assad’s translation, Quran 3:7)

Addressed here are all readers, including ultraorthodox Muslims and Fundamentalist Islamist terrorists, many of whom consult and seek support from the Quran for their political agendas, who find scriptural justification for their violent actions against other people. Often, the way that terrorist outfits get around injunctions against harming innocent bystanders (Quran 5:2; 2:193-194) is by pronouncing a clerical ruling or fatwa that labels even unarmed civilians as combatants—they create political loopholes and play with semantics. Using such cherry-picking and manipulation of meanings, terrorists subvert the very belief system they claim to follow. In effect, they appropriate scripture to sanction their political activities. Along with these Islamist outfits creating confusion about the Quran’s text, individuals or communities (political or otherwise) in countries with Judeo-Christian heritages often mirror the fundamentalist Islamists who cherry-pick portions from Islamic scripture and remove context from quotations, especially those exhorting the oppressed to defend themselves with aggression. Hammad is representative of the former group—the terrorist who derives justification for his violent action using the “sword verses” and other decontextualized excerpts (83). Lianne is representative of the latter. Like Lianne, these individuals of both Judeo-Christian heritage and secular ethics believe themselves well-informed about Islam and Muslims through reading excerpted information and hearsay, and they consider further investigation either too confusing an undertaking because of its cultural otherness and complexity, or a wasteful enterprise. Both the Islamist fundamentalist and the Western anti-intellectual approach create distorted images of Muslims and Islam. A more thorough, less agenda-driven investigation by each would yield the opposite of their ill-informed

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7 Indicative of the “allegorical” or symbolic portions are passages about heaven and hell, described with superlatives, which cannot be fathomed by those who have not yet witnessed them.
assumptions, because it would reveal the Quran to be a complex text with its own sophisticated guidelines that differentiate between justified and unjustified aggression, and Muslims to be a multitude of individuals and disparate communities rather than a monolithic horde. A narrativization of *Falling Man* with a correct and more nuanced understanding of the Quran and of Muslims than the simplistic one Lianne believes in, would perhaps lead to very divergent narrativization and characterization. One thread might follow the error to its logical conclusion, as Lianne does by abandoning the anti-war effort, and the other might stay back at the fork where Lianne took the mistaken turn and negate the rest of Lianne’s assumptions about the Quran and Muslims. The two threads together would provide a holistic picture of the error from within and without.

Instead of the potential bifurcation of information developing after the faulty quote, the narrative voice does not intrude with a correction of Lianne’s erroneous understanding of the Quran’s opening, even though it does earlier to point out the discrepancy in Lianne’s beliefs by indicating a moment of cognitive dissonance for her: “She knew this wasn’t true” (68). The narrative voice is depicted as familiar with the Quran, describing Hammad and the terrorists gaining strength of will in their actions by revising “the sword verses” (83), alluding to these portions as if expecting an understanding of the allusion from the reader. So, either the narrative voice’s familiarity with the Islamic scripture is obviously selective and limited, or its depiction of Lianne indicates that her quasi-Judeo-Christian, quasi-secular, semi-progressve pseudo-liberalism is *misinformed*.

Besides the obvious implication of the distortion of Islamic scripture being a missed opportunity for Lianne to encounter and understand authentic Islamic religious and intellectual textuality, another significance of her appropriation of the Quranic text is the implicit judgement
in her stance of reckoning Muslims to be rigid and inflexible based on her belief that their scripture is as such. Removing individual will from Muslims, Lianne creates them in an image of an anti-American mob. Reacting to the line about doubt that she quotes, Lianne does not compare it to Judeo-Christian scripture. “She doubted things, she had her doubts” (231) is an assertion she makes about herself and her will and ability to think critically about Judeo-Christian beliefs and culture. She chooses to highlight her own ability and will to remain flexible and to exercise “doubt”, which implies that she believes the followers of the Quran are the opposite—that they are inflexible by will and in their collective ability. In other words, she constructs Muslims as dogmatic, rigid, unthinking, and unyielding people who do not and cannot exercise flexibility in their beliefs or actions. Additionally, using her limited and skewed knowledge of the Quran, she reinforces her mental pigeonholing of Muslims into a group—a horde or mob—that does not have either the ability or the permission from their religion to think critically. By returning to church (233) but not turning to the Bible as a counter to her impression of the Quran, Lianne attributes more authority to the Quran over Muslims than the Judeo-Christian scriptures have over their believers, further removing agency and individuality from Muslims while reinforcing her belief in her own agency through partial and flexible enactment of her Judeo-Christian identity.

Lianne’s re-embrace of her own Judeo-Christian heritage comes about because of her opposition to and revulsion for Islam—that is, her return to church comes about because of her developing justification for feeling horrified by Islam. At the rally, she partakes in the liberal politics of supporting diversity and preventing the United States from going to useless wars. But she is also someone who recognizes by this point her own conservative reactions to Islamic-sounding music, her support of “our terrorist” Martin, and her revulsion toward non-white
terrorists—the phrase linking to Bhabha’s idea of othering, which produces of the other “a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin” (Bhabha 23). Even as she helps Justin pronounce Arabic words, she feels “uneasy” (184). The anti-war crowd at the rally reminds her of a crowd of Muslims in “Cairo, some twenty years earlier,” which had induced in her a “panic” (184-185). She is not only partly fooling herself, but also leading on the other protestors by pretending to take up a position on behalf of Muslims, posturing as a liberal while being counted among them, before abandoning their cause and retreating inwards to her conservative reaction of panic in a predominantly Muslim crowd. The novel portrays her as on the brink of understanding that her fears are “white person’s thoughts, the processing of white panic data” (185), which indicates that she is cognizant of her position as a traumatized, privileged person. And yet, it is her traumatized self that surfaces to embrace the conservative stereotype. Her participation in the rally reinforces her idea of Islam and Muslims as monolithic, overpowering, relentless and thoughtless. She uses the feeling of being crowded in at the protest to reinforce her beliefs against Muslims as a collective, enabling her to embrace the post-traumatic conservativeness that 9/11 has awakened in her. Having enacted (even appropriated) a liberal stance by attending the anti-war rally, and by reading through pamphlets on Islam with Justin, Lianne feels as though she has done her part in “seeing” the other side of the argument and can fully justify her vilification of Islam and Muslims. Her rather sudden return to church comes shortly after attending the anti-war rally, not out of belief in the church’s rituals but prompted by a need to protect herself from Muslim ideology. “Others were reading the Koran, she was going to church,” she notes, not really believing in anything beyond a vague “something, half fearing it would take her over” (233). She turns to church with something akin to righteous
indignation, even recalling the line from the Quran as a non-sequitur, using it to bolster her spirit for rejoining the fold of Christianity:

After mass she tried to hunt down a taxi. Taxis were scarce here and the bus took forever and she wasn’t ready yet to take the subway.

This Book is not to be doubted.

She was stuck with her doubts but liked sitting in church. (233)

Even immediately after attending Mass, Lianne does not recall any Christian belief, or a passage from the Bible, to support her convictions. Instead, she invokes again the line that encapsulates for her the villainous ideology of absolute certainty, and then counters it once more with her adamant desire to be able to doubt. Lianne takes refuge in church not because of what the church offers, but because of the threat of Islam and its believers outside the ecumenical sanctuary.

Lianne’s liberal outlook withers away to reveal a conservative set of political beliefs, and her retreat into Judeo-Christian sanctuary when threatened by the Muslim other’s ideology, are not singular events; rather, her reactions are typical of the anti-diversity and crucifix-gripping stances that American political decision makers and literary representations of victimized Americans exhibit after 9/11. Despite DeLillo’s stated desire to have Americans write novels that dismantle binaries, in presenting Lianne’s retreat he consolidates the binary. Within the political sphere, the United States government initiated nearly religiously-aligned wars overseas in the Middle East while domestically creating more hurdles for foreign Muslims to get visas or permanent immigration—an extension of which continues with occasional arbitrary actions such as President Donald Trump’s “Muslim Ban”. Within fiction, there are diverse ways in which

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8 As in the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) I mentioned in the Introduction.
9 A great resource for understanding the Muslim Ban can be found on the American Civil Liberty Union’s (ACLU) website. The ACLU is an activist organization that operates within America, and within the same space as the so-called Great American Novelist, to note, critique, and fight against the breaches of American ideals by the United
Anglo-American characters display hyper-conservative political stances and reflexive re-alignment toward Judeo-Christianity, partly to restore religious sanctification to the United States and themselves, partly in an attempt to protect the homeland from what they perceive as a foreign threat in the form of Muslims and Islam, but also to tacitly sanctify American aggression against Muslims in the Middle East.

It appears as though DeLillo and the narrator are more interested in representing Lianne’s reactions with integrity than they are the Quran, and this also puts forward a reading of *Falling Man* in which DeLillo himself makes the appropriation, and deliberately shifts around the text of the Quran. This leads to the meta-level commentary that *Falling Man*, the novel itself, is an exercise in appropriation and seizure, and that it presents inauthentic information about Islam and Muslims for consumption by Anglo Americans who are able to confirm their biases against Muslims and Islam along with Lianne. Read another way, the novel and DeLillo put the reader in Lianne’s shoes by putting the burden of verification of the Quran’s opening line on the reader. In a literal reading, the narrative voice’s ethical and moral leaning is firmly towards supporting Lianne’s rationalization for believing Muslims to be a horde of rigid, unthinking non-humans, which is detrimental to both Muslims and to white Americans’ authentic understanding of them. Because of her belief in a monolithic Muslim threat within and outside the United States, Lianne’s appropriation leads to as much of a ubiquitous but unseen menace as does Oskar’s repression of the Muslim other in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly*—the effect of both mechanisms of occlusion is to temporarily mitigate trauma, but to magnify the threat to, and to diminish the understanding of, the one applying it. In *Falling Man*, DeLillo’s more nuanced, and more

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States government and individuals acting on behalf of government institutions. The timeline the ACLU provides showcases the tussle between then-President Trump and the judiciary in defining what kinds of Muslims should be banned from entering the United States; eventually, with a “5-4 ruling,” the Supreme Court ratified “the Trump administration’s third Muslim Ban” (“Timeline of the Muslim Ban”).

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sophisticated, contribution to the post-9/11 reorientation of themes within the Great American Novel tradition is to distort information about the Muslim. For readers who get information on Islam and Muslims from novels such as *Falling Man*, or from pamphlets (as does Lianne in the novel), the distortion of vital information about the group pitted as the villain amounts to propaganda; and, while Lianne’s appropriation may be seen as the act of an uninformed, anti-intellectual American if viewed critically—thereby a critique by DeLillo—on a much more basic level it also solidifies the idea that “alternative facts” are valid understandings for some people. This is a dangerous notion that remains unexplored. Perhaps DeLillo’s novel came at the cusp of the public proliferation of what would later be called “alternative facts”¹⁰, and so it can be excused from dismantling such a phenomenon. However, the distortion of the other has a huge negative impact on Muslims, when they emerge in public, because of the Islamophobia that the distortion has perpetuated both within public discourse and the seemingly uncritical representation of it the post-9/11 addressal of the “Muslim Question” in novels that are supposed to be unifying and unified responses to the Islamist terrorist attack. I will explore the implications of misinformed ideas about Islam and Muslims, especially as they concern the Muslim appearing in the public sphere, in the next chapter.

**Appropriations on the Other End**

Similarly, and parallel to Lianne’s passive acceptance of information, an under-investigated and uninformed impression of the other plays a large part in would-be terrorist Hammad’s beliefs and actions in the novel, which also suggests that DeLillo is dramatizing

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¹⁰ Kellyanne Conway, then-president Donald Trump’s senior advisor, cited “alternative facts” as the basis for supporting press secretary Sean Spicer’s claim that Trump’s inauguration crowd “was the largest audience to ever an inauguration” (Bradner). Since then, the term has become incorporated in popular culture as a euphemism for calling out falsehoods that are disguised as facts.
mutual cultural misunderstanding between white Americans and Islamist terrorists. Like Lianne’s limited interactions with real-life Muslims at the anti-war rally and in her past as a student, Hammad’s contact never extends to encountering the American other as a human being with subjectivity. Like Lianne, who (despite not wanting to) thinks of Muslims in terms of monolithic hordes (184-5), Hammad visualizes a holistic picture of the United States rather than a country full of individuals, and he senses threat from it: “Everything here was twisted, hypocrite, the West corrupt of mind and body, determined to shiver Islam down to bread crumbs for birds” (79). His thinking devolves further in the narrative to see Americans as “these people” who are “becoming invisible to him” (171).

The novel depicts Hammad exactly as Lianne envisions each member of the Islamic horde to be. At first quite full of doubts about the violence he is being asked to wreak on Americans, Hammad is soon brought back in line through “Islamic” indoctrination. When Atta excoriates him for indulging in extramarital sex and excessive eating, Hammad begins to “struggle against himself” (83), surrenders his individual freedom in favor of the group’s mission, and abandons his multi-ethnic girlfriend, whom the novel depicts as a symbol of Hammad’s last tether to secular life. He and the other inhabitants of the cell “study the sword verses of the Koran… determined to become one mind… Become each other’s running blood” (83). This description of Muslims as sharing blood vessels is a vision of Lianne’s feared monster as much as it is Hammad’s aspiration as he gets his priorities re-aligned with scriptural excerpts to become one with the hive-mind. For Hammad, the assurance that conformity with his “brothers” provides is a way out of doubt; it gives him structure that he craves—or is forced to crave—from the environment in which he lives. This hive-mind that Hammad connects to and
becomes part of is exactly the threat that Lianne fears, and she believes every Muslim to be ideologically connected to it.

While the terrorist act itself is a political one, Hammad reinforces his twin beliefs in a brotherhood among the terrorists-in-training and in the righteousness of their violent cause using support from what on surface reading appears to be Quranic verses throughout the novel, but in fact is an illusive gesturing to the Quran rather than the Quran itself. Ahmed Gamal sees the novel’s depiction of the terrorists’ ideas as having a source more in politics that is then reinforced by cherry-picked scriptural excerpts to “consolidate” the political mission (118), though Hammad repeatedly indicates his sincere belief that religion is the driving force of the terrorist brethren’s actions. He especially seeks scriptural support to quell his doubts over the thought that the death of innocent Americans is preordained by scripture. When his cell leader Amir quotes from the Quran the verse: “Never have We destroyed a nation whose term of life was not ordained beforehand” (173), Hammad associates it automatically, and conveniently, with the American world of “lawns to water and hardware stacked on endless shelves;” a kind of materialism embedded in American life that Hammad considers “total, forever, illusion” (173). The above line is the only completely and correctly translated Quranic excerpt in the novel. Despite this singular instance of textual accuracy, the line is still presented without any context of the proclamation it contains, and the remaining Quranic references are made through either labeling the verses—“sword verses” (83), “sacred words” (238)—or by morphing the original almost beyond recognition (231, 233), all of which shows Hammad’s own cherry-picked understanding of the ideology he thinks he follows completely.

The novel’s sprinkled deployment of Quranic verses in Hammad’s consciousness to make him appear Muslim enough, and the commentary on Hammad by scholars, creates an
appropriative discourse based on either a misunderstanding or a deliberate critical distortion. DeLillo’s inclusion of Hammad in the novel is itself an appropriation, in the larger sense of a white American creating a character who is a Muslim other. Hammad’s dichotomous relationship between rank materialism and a terrorism-linked spirituality reads as a caricature of a Muslim. Using these bare bones of religious accoutrements, DeLillo creates Hammad as the novel’s sole Muslim character and a representation of a collective, who—when he begins practicing his religion—believes that he and his terrorist “brothers” are aiming for Islam’s highest purpose, which can only be achieved through killing and dying (174). Ethnocentric scholarship on the novel creates precisely the kind of misreading that Lianne produces when misquoting (or mis-remebering a quote from) the Quran; David Martin Jones and M. L. R. Smith call Hammad’s terrorist attack “Koranically inspired” and borne of “unquestioning belief” (942). While ostensibly they create a dichotomy between Hammad’s fanaticism and Lianne’s “paralyzing uncertainty” (942), the term “Koranically inspired” linked with “unquestioning belief” makes it appear as though the Quran, if taken literally, inspires its believing Muslim readers to commit terrorism. There are truly horrific implications in this appropriative assumption. Jones and Smith perhaps did not mean to lead the readers of their analysis to such a conclusion, but the phrasing of their summation of Hammad is lacking in precision. The appropriation, in my experience with the novel’s text and within scholarship about it, is not limited to Lianne’s assumptions but quite suffused in the discourse within and about post-9/11 fiction. A more precise phrasing in this instance by Jones and Smith would have been: “inspired by his interpretation of the Koran”. This attribution of an interpretation to him rather than the “essence” of the scripture would indicate that Hammad is as guilty of a politically-biased interpretation of the Quran as is Lianne; as it stands, the bias creeps into the work of even
DeLillo and scholars who make summative statements despite their unfamiliarity with the Islamic text—again, betraying the white American literary desire to return to safety against the horde of others rather than a desire for true engagement and resolution of the political ill-will generated by many years of American imperialism and meddling in world politics.

As with Hammad’s misreading of Americans and the Quran and Lianne’s distorted understanding about what she believes is the first verse of the Islamic scripture, the novel also depicts a lamentable bridge or gap in knowledge as a self-reflexive exercise in reading: that the lack of direct intellectual engagement with Islamic scripture indicates and leads to a much larger impediment to white Americans’ understanding of Muslims and Islamic ideology. Getting the simplest textual facts wrong, such as an exact quotation of the first line of the Quran, leads to compounded misunderstanding and angst and to ideation about the United States in a false dichotomy against Islam. Lianne does try to break out of her shell by going to the war rally, but she finds no means of escaping her trauma, and no exit from her own internalization and passive reception; her understanding of the other is also made impossible because of incorrect textual information. This is perhaps the novel’s inadvertent contribution—and perhaps one of the larger contributions of the post-9/11 shift in the Great American Novel tradition—that incorrect information about the other, assimilated into the self’s knowledge systems, prompts violent reactions (and perpetuates them) against the other. Hammad’s is obviously the more destructive misunderstanding and appropriation, but Lianne’s is no less damagingly reductive in terms of its ideological implications of enabling violence by losing empathy for the other and ceasing to protest war perpetuated against that other.
Conclusion: Failures of Appropriation

DeLillo’s *Falling Man* is pivotal for understanding post-9/11 American fiction and its representation of the relationship Americans develop with Islam and Muslims in the aftermath of the terrorist attack. DeLillo and his novel must be appreciated not for attempting to recreate a diffuse breadth of post-9/11 culture, but instead for focusing on a significantly representative mindset that white Americans, especially, adopted shortly after the attack and how that mindset evolved with initial interactions with Islamic ideology. Reconciliation with truth and with the self’s participation in a politicized world is most deeply felt possible at this incipient moment of a white American’s interaction with the Islamic text in *Falling Man*, because it is a moment full of potential to increase understanding. Even Lianne’s interaction with the other may continue, and her understanding may develop further, with facts slotted into their place to correct the distortion of the other’s scripture in her mind. But it was, and is, essential to acknowledge that following the events of 9/11, misinformation became part of the narrative.

By starting with representations of repression and then moving into appropriation and misinformation, *Falling Man*’s narrative becomes almost a natural extension of the idea in Foer’s novel of how white Americans react to the Islamist terrorism of 9/11. The extended timeline of DeLillo’s novel and its American protagonists’ more direct engagement with Islam is indicative of the extension. But there is a definite limit to the engagement. While Lianne, Justin, Nina, and Martin do discuss Islam and the causes and effects of Islamist terrorism at various instances, they do not directly interact with any Muslim characters in the novel. Similarly, the novel’s Muslim character, Hammad, does not interact with any white American character—even though his inclusion in the novel shows DeLillo’s engagement with the Islamic other. Only 9/11 itself is shown as the point where Hammad and Keith come into close contact, but that is the end of
Hammad’s life, and the beginning of the novel’s timeline of events about Keith and his family. Much like *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, *Falling Man* is not an attempt at capturing the entire gamut of responses by Americans to 9/11 and its ideological causes. Instead, like Foer’s novel, DeLillo’s focuses on a very specific three-year timeline of events, and while it depicts some of the repression of 9/11 and Muslims, it also moves beyond that, towards characters developing a sense of security through appropriating and reshaping the ideas they encounter about Islam and Muslims. In limiting the scope of their novels, DeLillo and Foer may be indicating that post-9/11 novels that play upon the concept of Great American Novels have to focus on shorter spans. This bears out in the other two novels I will examine in the second half of this dissertation.

While appropriation in *Falling Man* is not a one-way act by white Americans alone, the novel does take a subtle position to justify one kind of appropriation. Hammad is equally manipulative about the ideological other, and the consequences of his appropriation are more devastating. But by including Hammad as a Muslim character, and by creating him as a parallel to Lianne in the way he introspects about religion and doubt earlier on, DeLillo humanizes him and, despite his eventual participation in the terrorist attack, makes him almost a tragic figure caught up in the act rather than perpetrating it through his own designs. The overwhelming difference is that appropriation in Hammad’s case leads to direct physical harm for the nation and the people he has judged so harshly. DeLillo’s depiction seems to be solidifying the idea that some appropriations are worse than others, especially ones made by people who are self-righteous and act physically against other people out of that excessive sense of certainty. As opposed to Justin’s re-imagining of bin Laden, which is ludic, childish, and based on mythic ideas of ordinary citizens being able to protect the American homeland through vigilance,
Hammad’s ideation of the United States and Americans is on the opposite end of the spectrum: willfully blinding and leading to rage against other human beings, and in direct opposition to what is considered normal within American cultural parameters. But while *Falling Man* portrays appropriations by Justin and Hammad as naïve, uninformed, and unsound, it goes to some length to project Lianne’s assessment as a justifiable one, and her wilfull abandonment of an incipient participation in the anti-war process as a rational decision. While she checks herself for thinking in an us-versus-them manner about Americans and Muslims early in the novel, she is able to feel comfortable and justified thinking in that way by the end of the novel, when she begins to value her own belief system’s flexibility as opposed to what she considers Islam’s rigidity. She is neither internally nor externally disabused of the false notions she has about the Islamic text, nor does she seek out more information about the possibilities of flexibility within Islam. Her idea of Islam and Muslims as part of a monolithic horde is made comfortable to her, and even her withdrawing supportive participation from the anti-war rally is seen as not just a rational reaction but a justified one. In effect, she is absorbed back into an “Us” from the liminal space between the two binaries, where she could have understood, and maybe even bridged, the cultural breach.

The depictions of Hammad and Lianne in *Falling Man* highlight a crucial aspect of white Americans writing after 9/11 about Islamic Fundamentalist terrorists from the dual perspective of Muslim and secular-cum-Judeo-Christian characters: each of the depictions indicates quite emphatically that it is *excerpts* of scripture rather than a nuanced understanding of the entire text, that terrorists as well as Anglo-Americans cite as support for calling the religion’s entire ideology a militant one. Lianne believes that what she views as Quranic rigidity of thought is the foundational issue with Islam; based on that belief she dismisses the ideology of Islam as barbarically antithetical to the American ideal of flexibility of individual choice. In a similarly
reductive fashion, *Falling Man* depicts Hammad’s terrorist act as informed and motivated specifically by three short violence-instigating verses of the Quran. The novel depicts them both as individuals who believe they understand the true version and mission of Islam, but it also indicates that both of them are guilty of reducing, appropriating, and repurposing the religion’s discourse. Like repression of Muslims and Islam in Foer’s novel, Lianne’s and Justin’s—and even Hammad’s—appropriation of Muslims and Islam in *Falling Man* echoes other mechanisms of occlusion in the novels I will discuss in subsequent chapters. In each attempt at occlusion, the American characters fail to remove Muslims and Islam from the post-9/11 landscape without also rendering either conceptual or actual harm to themselves and to the United States by creating the idea of a false menace nearly as all-powerful as Oskar’s repressed Muslim monstrosity. In Foer’s novel, Oskar’s repression of the physical presence of Muslims renders them more powerful and ubiquitous, even if in spectral form, and much more damaging to Oskar’s traumatized psyche. In *Falling Man*, the characters employ appropriation as their main mechanism of coping with 9/11’s trauma, but to similarly detrimental effect: Lianne’s and Justin’s appropriations in *Falling Man* create just as ubiquitous and just as omnipotent—as well as just as false—a threat as Oskar’s repression does in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*.

Despite the eventual similarity of effect, appropriation in *Falling Man* is shown to provide at least a more lasting illusion of comfort and security than repression does in Foer’s novel. Whereas repression denies the existence of reality, which then erupts, appropriation manages to distort reality to render it different enough to fit a person’s own worldview without outright denial—it is a re-rendering rather than a forced exclusion. Instead of the forced removal of people of color, and a complete disengagement with Muslims and with Islamic and Islamist political and religious ideologies, as in Foer’s novel, the characters of *Falling Man* engage with
and re-shape these ideas. For Justin, bin Laden becomes a safer and more familiar Bill Lawton with whom he can play-act. For Lianne, who fails at repressing Islam and Muslims, the appropriation of Islamic scripture becomes a way to render Islam as aberrant. The appropriations occur at nearly the incipient moment of receiving information, and the recipients of the information at once go about neutering and neutralizing Muslims and Islamic ideology from the outset of coming into contact with it. However, the effect of appropriation for Lianne is just as dramatically threatening as that of repression is for Oskar: Lianne begins to fear an imaginary threatening horde of Muslims in much the same way Oskar becomes menaced by the spectral Muslim. The spectre of 9/11’s perpetrators—and their kind—haunts the post-9/11 American landscape not despite, but perhaps because of, the occlusive mechanisms that Americans use to counter it. The shift in the pluralistic so-called Great American Novel from focusing on the American Dream to being, perhaps unwillingly, compelled to deal with the “Muslim Question” may thus be contributing to the trauma rather than addressing its roots as DeLillo had originally desired in his essay-manifesto.

11 While writing this chapter, I was constantly reminded of the process of phagocytosis in cell biology. When threatening bacteria or viruses enter the body, white blood cells called macrophages engulf the bacteria and render its material harmless by disintegrating it. The re-working of the material is an appropriation. In comparison, repression would be akin to denying the bacteria entered the body at all and letting it multiply within the extracellular environment, enabling it to become unnecessarily powerful.
Chapter 3.
Not Exceptional Enough: The Occlusion of Muslims and the Quran in Amy Waldman’s
*The Submission*

**Introduction**

Before writing her debut novel *The Submission* (2011), Amy Waldman (b. 1969) was a journalist for the *New York Times* for many years, including a stint as South Asian Bureau co-chief. Shortly after 9/11, she turned to fiction. In *The Submission* (2011), Waldman builds a compelling narrative about the post-attack milieu of New York, and depicts a fictional memorialization of 9/11. Nearly universally praised by reviewers, *The Submission* was shortlisted for the Hemingway Foundation/PEN First Book Award and the Guardian First Book Award, included in NPR’s list of 10 Best Novels of 2011, named *Entertainment Weekly*’s #1 Novel for 2011, and won the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize for fiction as well as an American Book Award. *The Submission* is especially important to my study because of its realistic depiction of the Bush-era American political and cultural relapse to hyper-conservativism regarding the ”Muslim Question” as Muslims began to appear in public. By creating a novel in which its American-Muslim character reaches for, and fails to secure for himself, the merit and equality promised by the American Dream, Waldman not only showcases another variety of
oclusions against Muslims, but in examining the American Dream of a Muslim character in the post-9/11 era she also creates a meeting point between pre- and post-9/11 traditions of the so-called Great American Novels.

As she is a woman, traditional Great American Novel rhetoric would exclude Waldman from contention (Nguyen), but she positions her work in such a monumental and monumentalizing manner as to insert it deeply into the conversation of how 9/11 should and will be remembered, while also providing a panoramic (though also domestic) picture of New York City—and, by extension, the USA—after the terrorist attack. This self-reflexive gesture toward memorialization, and its examination of the American Dream in the post-9/11 era already puts The Submission into the territory of the traditional Great American Novel, while also complicating the hitherto nearly exclusively male canon of Great American Novels. Furthermore, Waldman is the rare post-9/11 novelist writing such an inclusive and representative work that features a spectrum of American characters who bring their political and artistic opinions to bear on the “national interrogation” (Boddy 2) of the “Muslim Question” and on what it means to hold and exercise post-9/11 American citizenship.

The novel’s fictional controversy of a Muslim designing the 9/11 memorial is a near carbon copy of the real-life public dispute about a proposed Islamic center, “Cordoba House,” near Ground Zero, and it is also depicts how far a Muslim-American is allowed access to the American Dream. What has come to be known as the “Ground Zero Mosque” dispute began in 2009, just a year removed from the Bush presidency, when Lebanese architect Michel Abboud proposed the construction of the center two blocks from the site of the fallen towers. Conservative political groups in the US raised varied levels of concern about the establishment of a building with any Islamic associations near the site of the attack in New York, and so started
the movement to abort the plans through public demonstrations and political pressure. Intrigued by the idea of a fictional investigation of “an American Muslim” designing the memorial, Waldman began writing her first draft of *The Submission* in 2006, well before any real-life controversy arose over the Ground Zero Mosque (“Guardian First Book Award Shortlist”). Set two years after the terrorist attack, *The Submission* focuses on the commemoration of 9/11’s victims at Ground Zero. The parallel responses between groups of people in Waldman’s novel and real-life groups during the Ground Zero mosque controversy reflect an Anglo-American resistance to letting Muslims participate in the commemoration of, or even cultural representation near, the site of the attack. The argument of such anti-Islamic protestors is often explicitly stated thus: Muslims caused 9/11, so it is entirely inappropriate—even sacrilegious—to have them build anything close to its primary site. The assumptions underlying this argument, that anything Islamic is linked to the terrorists’ actions, clumps together Muslims into a monolith. The proponents of this argument imagine Muslims as a collective (much as Lianne does in *Falling Man* and as Oskar implies he does in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*) rather than as individuals with agency separate from the terrorists’. In her fictional investigation of the issues associated with such a reductive approach to encountering the other, Waldman uses diverse and highly individualized Muslim and white American voices to challenge the Bush-era political and cultural reinforcement of this “Muslim other” monolith. Her contribution to post-9/11 fiction not only imagines a realistic post-9/11 America where civil liberties are ignored when a Muslim’s rights come into question but also imagines a United States where the conversation about those rights—along with emotionally-charged repercussions of that discussion—play out in public. Furthermore, in creating a Muslim-American outsider reaching for, and failing to acquire the American Dream, Waldman also wonderfully evokes a similar
struggle by a seminal character in American literature—Jay Gatsby of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby, despite achieving the American Dream of independent wealth and access to all strata of society, is unable to get everything he wants, especially access to his former lover, Daisy Buchanan, and so fails in his primary objective. By contrast, Mohammad Khan in *The Submission* fails to achieve the American Dream because he enters public discourse too soon after 9/11 as a Muslim.

The central contention in *The Submission* arises within the novel’s first few pages, after a jury selects a memorial for the 9/11 site in a blind competition only to discover that the name of the winner is Mohammad Khan—a quintessential Muslim name (Waldman 15). The political and social fallout of that revelation is developed over the rest of the novel, with Khan and his supporters standing by his right to have his design constructed as the memorial. The proposed design—a garden with a raised platform on which the names of the victims will be etched—is not at first the central issue. In fact, the idea of the garden is so appealing as a memorial that it wins the blind competition. Six voices serve as alternating narrative points of view in the novel: Claire Burwell, the widow of a 9/11 victim, who is unambiguously in favor of Khan’s rights and of his design in the beginning, but switches completely to the opposite camp by the end of the novel; Paul Rubin, the bureaucrat who oversees the jury that decides the winner; Alyssa Spier, an intrepid and ethically compromised tabloid reporter; Sean Gallagher, a ne’er-do-well who in Khan’s design finds a cause to work against after losing his brother in the 9/11 attack; Mohammad Khan, the designer, a secular Muslim who re-evaluates his religious and political identity as an American Muslim through the course of the opposition he faces in the novel; and Asma Anwar, an illegal alien in the United States, whose husband dies in the 9/11 attack, and who becomes, as Khan’s supporter, a surprise voice of conscience for the American public
shortly before being outed as an alien and murdered just before she is to be deported to Bangladesh. Most of the novel is taken up by exploration of these characters’ developing perspectives on the public and private debates and protests over Khan’s right to have his design become the official 9/11 Ground Zero memorial. For the agnostic Khan, having his work validated by the jury’s selection elicits a pride that makes him unwilling to relinquish his position as winner despite escalating opposition from Islamophobic groups, traumatized family members of 9/11 victims, and even some American Muslims who urge him to surrender his right to make peace with the agitators and appease their sentiments of outrage. The hullabaloo ends when Khan backs down shortly after Anwar’s murder and removes his design from contention for the memorialization, thus indicating a less obvious link to the title of the novel: “a ‘submission’ of the American Muslim, who must give up certain rights in order to reside in a post-9/11 United States” (Leggatt 217).

In effect, the representation of non-terrorist, even seemingly benign, Muslims may promise a step forward—almost akin to a Levinasian embrace of the other— but the potential realized in the interaction between culturally different people is in fact quite the opposite. As soon as Muslims are thrust into the middle of the novel’s narrative, the white Americans indicate their desire to not have Muslims exist in the United States. As in real life during the Bush era, the majority of white Americans in The Submission resist the advancement of Islamic and Muslim participation in post-9/11 American public life within a few years of the attack. Waldman

1 Here I refer to Emmanuel Levinas’s work on the other, and especially Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority, in which he wrote: “To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression… The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic reaction, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching… it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain” (51). The encounter between white Americans and Muslims in The Submission is far from this ideal “Levinasian” ethical meeting, because both Khan and the general American public react by exhibiting at least “allergic” reactions to the others’ point of view on the memorialization, if not outright hostility. Instead of points of learning, the meetings are political events, in which negotiation and powerplay are central to the interactions.
dramatizes how American culture moves several steps backward at the post-9/11 moment of coming face-to-face with the Muslim other, but her depiction of the politics and culture in that moment is more nuanced than mere representation of the antagonism between the two parties. Eventually, the Muslim is neither vindicated nor fully villainized, but—perhaps more importantly—individualized and humanized. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that by juxtaposing the subjective positions of white Americans suffering from 9/11’s lingering trauma with those of Muslims being othered and persecuted, especially in the figure of the murdered Anwar, Waldman critiques the accounting of lives by their associated country of citizenship, and she also questions the degree of democratic participation allowed to various parties, especially racialized Americans, in developing the aesthetics of post-9/11 United States. As an answer to DeLillo’s rallying call to address the “Muslim Question”, *The Submission* is not only one “counternarrative” but includes many smaller “counternarratives” or perspectives that wrest control of the post-9/11 structuring of the country’s story after the calamity. Waldman’s novel, with its significant contributions in multiple areas, is thus a much heavier critique of the status to which Arab-looking Muslims have been relegated within the American social fabric; even as *The Submission* plays into the Great American Novel tradition by both addressing the “Muslim Question” and the American Dream in the post-9/11 era, it also positions Khan’s fall as a failure of American ideals, and the question as an absurd limitation on which to yoke the Great American Novel’s examination of the “American Spirit”.

My interest in this chapter is to contribute to the already considerably nuanced critical analysis of *The Submission*, to put it in conversation with other novels in the post-9/11 era that work within the tradition of the Great American Novels, and also to posit a hitherto overlooked link between two seemingly separate streams within previous scholarship on the novel:
Waldman’s focus on white American families’ trauma and anxiety, and her critique of the Islamophobia that the anxiety instigates. Over the course of this chapter, I will develop a link between the focus in American fiction on white nuclear families after 9/11 and how in *The Submission* the collective domesticity of nuclear units begins to overspill into public life in the form of “the families” protesting Khan’s rights. The lingering and ongoing mechanisms of post-9/11 occlusion fail in *The Submission* just as they did in Foer’s and DeLillo’s novels, because instead of mitigating trauma and limiting the influence of a supposedly dangerous other, repression and conflation only reinvoke the terrorist act and yield more power to “the enemy”. I will extend the argument of this dissertation to focus on the subsequent, more nuanced, mechanism that white American characters in *The Submission* use to marginalize Muslims and limit their public participation in post-9/11 United States: adversarial othering. Whereas mere othering would be to label a person or a community as “different from us,” by adversarial othering I mean that in the fictionalized post-9/11 Bush era of *The Submission* white Americans put Muslims into an “opposite of us” category. By enforcing this adversarial othering, the traumatized Anglo-American families aim to enact sovereign right to strip the selected adversarial group of Americans of their rights, which is the next variation in the mechanisms of post-9/11 occlusion of Muslims. Simultaneously, there is also in the creation or recognition of an adversary a modicum of equality granted to the other. While he is obviously the enemy, he is also the citizen-subverter, and not a foreigner; and so he must be reasoned with to some extent, and convinced to give up his right, making the process seemingly one of logic rather than emotion. In this mechanism, white America is not only subverting American ideals of inclusiveness and merit, it is also enacting the American legacy of facing a civil liberties challenge that, ideally, it will overcome down the line—Muslims will be embraced by white
America, just as other communities have been. Meanwhile, white Americans will oppose vociferously, through legislation, due process of protest, and democratic resistance, the rights of the Muslim other as he appears in public. The adversarial other is rooted in a discourse in which the United States is “continually rewriting itself, moving toward some better unification of its manifold parts while simultaneously acknowledging the inability to achieve such a union,” and “the task of the Great American Novel is to mirror this process of creating an ever more perfect union” (Malone 11). Becoming an adversary is not just a placement of the Muslim on the other side of a binary, it is also an honor and a welcoming into the role of discourse-creation on the meaning of “American-ness”. However, until the adversary is accepted (down the line) into the fold of the “self”, he is only given power to articulate his position and to acquiesce when he is told to do so, while the power of giving rights or withdrawing them rests, by default, with the white majority.

Triggered white American families in The Submission operate from a position of power because they believe themselves to be representative of the majority demographic, but they also resort to demanding extra-democratic rights, and for that reason I will use theories of power and sovereignty to examine the underlying apparatus, mode of operation, and objectives of the new occlusive mechanism. In analyzing Waldman’s depiction of white Americans’ need to vilify all Muslims, I will apply Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben’s theories of biopolitics, sovereign power, and the use of exceptions, especially Foucault’s idea that, as a punishment, the state (or other powerful institutions) can revoke an individual's right to freedom of self-expression and vocational practice (Discipline and Punish 17). A key feature of the adversarial othering mechanism is that traumatized white Americans try to convince the Muslim Khan to voluntarily give up his right to build the memorial; and here, Agamben becomes especially pertinent.
because he is especially concerned about “the point at which voluntary servitude of individuals comes into contact with objective power”, which he finds unexamined in Foucault’s works (6). Agamben’s ideas on sovereignty and the sovereign’s right to create legal exceptions are pertinent to how various parties in *The Submission* attempt to assume the role of the sovereign, to proclaim that they have the right to choose whether to accord Khan—or strip him of—rights of citizenship in the post-9/11 era.

I conclude this chapter by demonstrating that the trauma and Islamophobia that “the families” and characters such as Burwell exhibit connect especially in the ripe potential of the physical encounters white Americans have with Muslims in post-9/11 United States. Like DeLillo and Foer do in their novels Waldman depicts in *The Submission* the schismatic violence of 9/11 as so overpowering that traumatized Anglo Americans are unable to collectively encounter the Muslim other in the Levinasian ethical mode—in fact, their encounter is nearly collectively antithetical to that model, full of hostility for, and suspicion of, the stranger. However, this anti-Levinasian manner of encountering the other contributes to the perpetuation not only of the trauma of being unable to remove the supposedly dangerous stranger but also an escalation and diversification of the mechanism of othering until such point as the othered person becomes both subject and object of the othering and vilification. Waldman in *The Submission* indicates that pervasive xenophobia in American culture after 9/11, and active protests against Muslim and Islamic participation in public life, means that the only imaginable position of Muslims is that of submission. The erasure—by submission to the Islamophobic mainstream—of Muslims in post-9/11, Bush-era United States also has repercussions for the Anglo-American characters and the white American family units that persecute Muslims out of fear. In collapsing the xenophobic othering of “the families”, and in showing how they eventually become the
targets of their own occlusive mechanisms, Waldman exposes the rift between the oft-touted American values of inclusion, democracy, merit, and equality, and the lack of their actual implementation in American politics, arts, and culture in the post-9/11 era. She demonstrates through *The Submission* that a narrative of American future potentials, if centered on the “Muslim Question”, will only devolve and disintegrate the idealism of United States, not just for the Muslim adversarial other, but for the white Americans as well.

**Critical Appraisal & Implications**

Several critics have focused on *The Submission*’s themes of memorializing a traumatic incident and of its depiction of the Muslim other who is suddenly brought into the limelight. Betül Ateşci Koçak notes that memorialization has as much to do “with the future” as it is “concerned with marking past incidents” (214). Kristine Miller cites Erika Doss’s related idea that “memorials or monuments” are “‘archives of public affect’ engaged in reifying and ‘privileging particular histories and values’” (213). In the eyes of his most vociferous detractors, Khan is not the individual named Mohammad Khan, but one of the horde of Muslims “out there”. If his design becomes the memorial, not only would Muslims have caused 9/11, but a Muslim would have archived it, leading to the thorough “Islamization” of Ground Zero. The thought of ceding ground to an ultimate other is especially problematic for a predominantly Judeo-Christian, quasi-secular United States that almost immediately mythicizes and sanctifies the site of the attack, Ground Zero, as “hallowed or sacred ground” (Crownshaw 757), which leads to white Americans in the novel displaying “self-justification and even self-righteousness” (Lee-Potter 213) in the memorialization process. Sonia Baelo-Allué uses Michael Rothberg’s idea of “competitive memory” to point out the combative and aggressive stances on memorialization in the novel (175). None of the characters in the novel is a terrorist, and neither
side actually wishes violence on another person or group. But each group wishes to commemorate the site of the terrorist attack with its own idea of what heals the rift caused by 9/11. There is the possibility, if subjectivities are laid bare, for what Baelo-Allué labels “reconciliation and collaboration in the construction of a multidirectional collective memory that escapes exclusivist visions” (175). However, she indicates that “the debate becomes more complex because it stops revolving around Khan’s Muslim identity and moves to the design itself” (175)—which has no subjective position and can have many meanings for different people. For traumatized white Americans, their fear that the garden might mean something celebratory to Muslims becomes the central point of contention and the reason for competitive memorialization. Baelo-Allué points out that “trauma discourse” has been “used to justify the ideology of American innocence, moral clarity and pre-emptive action” as well as a crystallization of thinking about American history in the form of a “collective melancholia for an idealized past that never really existed” (167). I aim in this chapter to consolidate the criticism Lee-Potter, Baelo-Allué, and others on the memorialization process and the related Islamophobia that white characters exhibit because of their sense of superiority and ownership of United States. I will also attempt to fill the gap in scholarship related to the novel’s post-9/11 addressing of the “Muslim Question” and its tie-in with the American Dream as centered on Khan’s rights and American liberal values.

Within its depiction of the public memorialization of 9/11, The Submission prominently features non-terrorist Muslims in a post-9/11 United States, and critics have paid due attention to its portrayal of white Americans reacting to the Muslim other. Tim Gauthier notes how in Waldman’s novel white Americans after 9/11 become “hyper-conscious” of the “Arab and Muslim others” whose continued existence in America “cause[s] discomfort and suspicion”
(214). Amir Khadem observes white American characters suffering “moral panic” in their interactions with Muslims in the novel (68), while also noting Claire Burwell’s constant invocation of “the American exceptionalist ideology in order to defend [Khan’s] design” and then later to attack it (74). Margarita Estévez-Saá and Noemi Pereira-Ares find the interaction more complicated; on the traumatized Americans such as Burwell and Sean Gallagher, whose “enemies” shift from the decision-makers in the memorialization process to the group that can be labeled an adversarial other, Estévez-Saá and Pereira-Ares argue that “The Submission reflects the difficulty of even knowing who the enemy is” (270). However, Sini Eikonsalo posits that even though novel depicts Muslims “with empathy” and with “powers of rational thought and articulation,” its ultimate offering of “simplified positions, stereotypes, and sacralization” of 9/11 relics contribute to “reinforcing” rather than challenging the ideas of earlier 9/11 novels, especially that of considering Muslims a mob (81). I agree to some extent with Eikonsalo, but I also posit that Waldman’s portrayal of the stereotypes and simplifications, and her juxtaposing them with the complex and different portrayals of Anwar and Khan, is to critique rather than reinforce the Bush-era’s absurdist, hyper-conservative persecution of a supposed Muslim horde.

Related to Eikonsalo’s idea is Ayşem Seval’s observation that the depiction of events in the novel exposes “existing problematics in the nature of liberal tolerance” (101)—which, again, I believe Waldman depicts in order to critique. Seval argues that “liberal tolerance was possibly illusionary to begin with” (113), and that “under extreme conditions, respect for the Other proves false and the liberal idea of tolerance collapses” (119). Seval’s invocation of “liberal tolerance” is closely tied to the idea of American exceptionalism, which white Americans who support Khan invoke when saying the United States is “better” than the countries that would not allow an equivalent memorialization by a member of the group that had perpetrated such an attack.
Richard Crownshaw finds that we must look within the trauma caused by the terrorist attack to understand the collapse of liberal tolerance:

9/11 trauma could be more productively defined as the puncturing of national fantasies of an inviolable and innocent homeland, fantasies which themselves rest on the (failed) repression of foundational violence in the colonial and settler creation of that homeland, and on the subsequent notions of American exceptionalism at home and, in the exercise of foreign policy. (757)

As a character deeply invested in these past fantasies, not only is Claire Burwell representative in *The Submission* of an individual white American in the Bush-era United States, but of white America as a national collective, especially in symbolizing the post-9/11 reversal in political discourse of the ideals of universal liberalism toward which the United States was supposedly progressing. Burwell’s desire to return to an imagined pre-9/11 “pur[ity],” with the proposed garden free of any associations with Islam and Muslims (Waldman 272), echoes a longing for what “the Bush administration evoked” in the form of “national fantasies of virgin land and historical innocence,” which are “the staples of discourse of colonialism and Manifest Destiny” (Crownshaw 770). The novel therefore shows Burwell not enacting anything new in her reversal on liberalism, but, rather, producing and perpetuating the exact self-contradiction on which the United States was founded, as she believes in equality as an ideal while perpetuating hierarchical social structures through her actions.

Like with other novels I examine, my analysis of *The Submission* reveals that not enough critical attention has been paid to how, and in what form, the lingering trauma of 9/11 prompts Islamophobic reactions among white Americans. Critics have linked the trauma of the event to a subsequent concentration on family narratives within domestic settings in post-9/11 novels
(Crownshaw 761), but they have not developed the intricate links between trauma and Islamophobia, taking that connection almost for granted rather than analyzing its nuances. My reading of this novel bridges a vital gap in critical understandings of the reactions of The Submission’s Anglo-American characters by positing that the ultimate othering they perpetuate is an attempt to mitigate the trauma that reappears upon a sudden confrontation with actual Muslims living among them. In other words, the grouping and adversarial othering of Muslims is another coping mechanism for traumatized white Americans. However, unlike Oskar’s repression or Lianne’s appropriation, which white Americans enact in the absence of Muslims, the othering by the families of the victims in The Submission surfaces as a coping mechanism after they come face to face with the non-terrorist, Muslim American, and they enact it externally, onto the Muslim other. Once presented as a real character rather than an abstract concept in the novel, the Muslim now exists in the time and space of the narrative, and he cannot be eradicated via repression or dismissed by first recreating and seizing his ideas to suit the framework of one’s own thinking. Instead, traumatized white Americans in The Submission feel an urgency to create a mechanism by which to force the Muslim to cede his right to participate within the public sphere. The effect of this coping mechanism, once Muslims submit to the Islamophobic mainstream, is the erasure of Muslims from post-9/11 public space. I aim in this chapter also to delineate and examine the novel’s most overlooked intriguing political proposition: since her novel also addresses the “Muslim Question” as it has come to inhabit post-9/11 conceptions of the so-called Great American Novel, Waldman both critiques and partially solidifies the ideas that the United States and Islam are ideologically incompatible and that Muslim-Americans must choose one or the other part of their identity.
Impotent Repressions, Lingering Conflations

As in both *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Falling Man*, the first response to the trauma of 9/11 for many white characters in *The Submission* is to repress the Muslim other. But Waldman’s representational strategy is to confront the Anglo-American characters in her novel with the reality of Muslims living among them. When faced—as if suddenly—by Muslims and Islam over two years after 9/11, the Anglo-American characters attempt to amalgamate Muslims into a collective community and to occlude their participation in public American life. However, Khan does not disappear or recede from the spotlight; in fact, he relentlessly pursues what he perceives is his right to execute the memorial once he is revealed to be the winner. In his perseverance to demand his rights as the competition’s winner, Khan symbolizes the resurging spectre that cannot be repressed—however, Khan is not an imaginary threatening being like the one in Oskar’s vision on the upper deck of the Empire State Building; instead, Khan is a living, breathing Muslim with his own subjective position and arguments.

Early in the novel, the revelation of Khan as the winner causes a resurgence of 9/11’s uncontrollable and unassimilable repressed memories for many on the jury. The bureaucrat Paul Rubin’s first reaction is a “tightening in his jaw” as he reads Khan’s name in the envelope (15). The reactions from others around the room are similarly suggestive of repression failing, releasing horror: “Jesus fucking Christ! It’s a goddamn Muslim!” says another bureaucrat. Some of the jury members question whether Khan is American, and wonder hopefully whether Khan is a lapsed Muslim who has converted to another religion (17). The resurgence of a spectral Muslim in the form of the name is akin to Oskar encountering not just the name of Mohammed Atta in the index card collection, but also his confrontation with an imaginary terrorist in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*; however, in *The Submission* the name Mohammad Khan is
that of a living, non-terrorist Muslim after 9/11. Khan himself is not a criminal, but Islam and Muslims are so vilified in the post-9/11 white American consciousness that association with them automatically brings thoughts of terrorism. The jury’s subsequent desire to relegate the Muslim back to his previously marginalized, even occluded, status is in line with Foucault’s idea of biopolitics and power structures, which dictate that “[t]he more monstrous a criminal… the more he must be deprived of light: he must not see, or be seen” (*Discipline and Punish* 14). The traumatized white Americans want not Khan the individual, but the terrorists and terrorism, returned to the oblivion from whence they have surfaced, but even as they see only Khan they cannot help but visualize the terrorists with which they associate him, and they would rather make him retreat from public space than accept his existence within it.

Once confronted by the Muslim name, and by the reality it signals of Muslims living among them in the United States, Anglo-American characters in the novel suffer from the shock and painful dismay of the failure of repression as a coping mechanism. Gallagher, who says that his “mind closed towards Muslims” on 9/11 when “they killed” his brother (88), likens it to “being stabbed in the heart to hear that a Muslim could” be chosen to create the 9/11 memorial (83). More proactive white Americans initiate movements and protests such as Design Against Terrorism (42) and Save America from Islam (SAFI) (130), attempting to prevent Muslims from being involved not only in 9/11’s memorialization process but also in American public life in general. These movements are Anglo-American attempts to return the other to a repressed state to prevent the return of the unassimilable horror of 9/11, *a la* Kristeva’s “primal repression” (Kristeva 12). By creating these organizations, traumatized white Americans also attempt to resist the result of the jury by creating quasi-official entities under whose banners and titles all the protestors can gather, thereby showcasing the role of bureaucracy in managing American
trauma. Naming the organizations provides purpose to traumatized white Americans that can appear simplistic or childishy ludic, something akin to the game Justin and his friends invent through their search for a “Bill Lawton”, though what appears game-like in Falling Man is more seriously enacted in The Submission because adults (not children) are creating the enterprises, with real-life (and not imaginary) consequences. The common purpose of SAFI and Design Against Terrorism—and other such movements—is to occlude Islam and Muslims and thereby mitigate the trauma of their members; however, in The Submission these quickly-organized groups symbolize the failure of bureaucracy in the face of trauma, because the institutions that are supposed to manage and redirect trauma often end up either repressing it even further under the weight of their own bureaucracy.

Even outside of any institutional organization, individually and collectively, traumatized Anglo Americans group Khan with other Muslims, and they operate on the assumption that all Muslims think like, or have sympathy for, the terrorists of 9/11. An outcome of this conflation is a caricatured and Islamophobic understanding of Muslims as a barbaric horde of bearded killers (91). Once Khan is revealed in the news as the competition’s winner, print media begins circulating ideas about Islam’s inherent “problems” and “incompatibility with democracy and the American way of life” (109). Movements, such as SAFI, and leaders of such movements, such as Debbie Dawson3, hold rallies and gatherings in which they chant “terms like ‘dhimmitude’” in the manner of “cheerleading squad[s]: ‘Hey, hey, ho, ho, dhimmitude has got to go!’” (131). Not only do these rallies and chants Americanize and take ownership of obscure Islamic terminology without fully understanding the context of its original application, they also conflate two entirely

3 SAFI, Design Against Terror, other movements like them, and personalities such as Debbie Dawson are fictitious, but they find strange parallels in movements such as Stop Islamization of America, started by Robert Spencer and Pamela Geller. Spencer famously called the proposed Cordoba House (Ground Zero Mosque) a “victory mosque” for radical Islamists (Ackerman).
separate issues—whether someone who does not self-identify as a believing Muslim should have access to public participation in post-9/11 United States, and whether an Islamic law inapplicable in a non-Muslim-majority state like the United States is of any concern to the American public. The conflations escalate, gain potency, and spread exponentially. Traumatized white Americans misrepresent Islam as a “political ideology” rather than a religion (151), they imagine the proposed design as a “martyr’s paradise” (116), and corral the more than one billion Muslims into a pool of potential “recruits” (203) for terrorism. Chief among the traumatized is Burwell, and she too begins to suspect Khan’s motivations once there is mass-media conflation of the design, Khan, and all Muslims and Islamic cultural artifacts into an unwanted “other”. After that, the garden no longer holds a personal sense of healing for her (Zabihzadeh et al. 54), and this final most significant reversal of Burwell’s position is Waldman’s way of showing how infectiously the conflations operate.

Waldman depicts Khan as capable of withstanding, critiquing, and dismantling the conflations and disinformation at the personal level, but she also shows that the amount of these misinformed portrayals and their scale surpass any one person’s ability to counter them with logic. Khan himself is lumped with all other Muslims, and when he is asked questions about his faith or his design, his answers are ignored. Because of the associations of his name to the faith, Khan is unable to escape the conflation when facts, “once made,” become “alive, defying anyone to tell them from the truth” (126)—so much so that he becomes “reinvented by others, so distorted” that he finds it impossible to “recognize himself” (293). Like white characters suspecting any and all Muslims in Falling Man, Anglo-American characters of The Submission mistrust Khan, specifically, because for them he is part of the horde. As in Falling Man and Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, The Submission depicts othering as an all-or-nothing, a
“with us or with the terrorists”4 kind of politicization of individual Muslims. However, in Waldman’s novel, this is stated not about the Muslim in abstract, but at and to the Muslim as he physically enters the spotlight. Khan is both provided the opportunity to defend himself, but also unable to convince any of his detractors, and this stalemate is Waldman’s critique of the post-9/11 Great American Novel’s absurd focus on the unresolvable “Muslim Question”; it is a quandary with no easy solution, and the easiest compromise comes eventually in the form of suspended American ideals of merit and pursuit of happiness for a specific American racialized community.

Adversarial Othering and “The Families”

Whereas in Falling Man white Americans only other Muslims in the abstract sense, without confronting them, in The Submission, the othering of Muslims becomes so overriding and blatant that it morphs into a new mechanism of occlusion. Adversarial othering differs from mere othering because traumatized white Americans in Waldman’s novel do not use it just to differentiate between an “us” and a “them,” but to identify a member of the “enemy” community. In turning Muslims and Islam into the adversarial other, these traumatized white Americans invoke what Edward Said calls the original Orientalist vision of what white Europeans imagined Islam to represent: “terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians” (Said 59). For the Bush era, and for white characters in The Submission, 9/11 renewed not only the trauma of white Europeans’ original encounter with Islam, but it also brought back the language and conceptions of political relations associated with that trauma, such as: “crusade” (Waldman and Popestaff), “with us or with the terrorists” (“Text: President

4 I refer here to the George W. Bush government’s quasi-official policy after the 9/11 attack, as put forward in crude terms by the then-President in his speech to Congress and the country on 20 September 2001 (“Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation”).
Bush Addresses the Nation”), and the “global conspiracy of a billion Muslims who hate the West” (Waldman 20). With this linguistic encapsulation of the other as an enemy, white Americans in the novel generate concomitant absolute de-humanization of the other. Said decried the stereotypical politicized depiction of “Oriental Arabs” as dishonest, easily fooled, and illogical, while within the same political discourse white Westerners were depicted by their own kind as “rational, peaceful, liberal, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion” (Said 38 and 49). Anglo-American protestors in the Bush era and in The Submission bring back and reinforce a redundant, powerful, reductive, threatening, and bloodcurdling image of the Muslim other when they depict the Muslim mob as barbaric and inherently violent, and then go on to describe their own mission as one of securing the United States from this menace.

A distinguishing aspect of their deployment of adversarial othering in Waldman’s novel is how Anglo Americans communicate their desire to occlude him and his religion to the Muslim Khan to convince him submit to the occlusion. At first, and in their first meeting after the jury picks the winner, Paul Rubin tries to ascertain the level of Khan’s association with Islam, asking him hopefully whether he is “secular” or “moderate”—but Khan refuses to position himself on a continuum of Muslim-ness to placate Rubin’s objection to his heritage. Rubin suggests to Khan: “I’m not sure you’ll want credit” for the design (Waldman 64). But when Khan insists that he will not cede his rights, Paul’s plea becomes more urgent: “You won’t want to tear your country apart,” because “it’s hard to see how this plays out any other way” if Khan “persist[s]” in desiring “the kind of battle the selection of a Muslim would cause” (65). Rubin is not wrong in anticipating a backlash after a Muslim name is officially announced, but in this instance, he becomes the spearhead of Khan’s opponents by asking Khan quite emphatically to step down while relaying a threat or warning about the violence that will ensue if Khan does not submit.
The irony is that while Rubin appeals to Khan’s sense of patriotism, he also severs Khan from his identity as an American, indicating that merely by publicly claiming his American citizenship and rights in the post-9/11 era Khan would be instigating an internal “battle” on the country. The image of this battle hearkens back to Bush’s reference to the “crusade” that the United States would begin after 9/11. By stating Khan’s position as he does, Rubin thus reinforces political Orientalist rhetoric in the world of art competitions and memorials, and solidifies the notion that the only position of a Muslim in the United States (or in the West) is in the position of a Foucauldian monster, invisible, “deprived of light” (Discipline and Punish 14) and deprived especially in Khan’s case, of the limelight.

Besides Rubin, other Americans also directly threaten Khan over his refusal to submit, while the majority address Khan indirectly, through messages also available to the public, with the implication that the occlusion goes beyond just the act of stopping Khan from contributing to the 9/11 memorial. Soon after he is officially declared the winner, outraged Americans send emails and letters telling Khan that they will burn him just “as the terrorists had incinerated their victims” and stab him “in the heart as he [is] stabbing America” (Waldman 123). The threats are attempts to intimidate Khan into acquiescence, but they are also reminders of how Islam and the Caucasian world have a relationship fraught with violence and what Samuel Huntington calls the “clash of civilizations”. Along with these direct threats to Khan, resisters who have indirect access to him employ a related strategy of intimidation: fomenting public opinion against Khan to persuade him to withdraw. In the novel’s fictional opinion pieces, The New York Times (115) raises questions about Khan’s design bearing Islamic influence, while the Wall Street Journal rails against his “assault on America’s Judeo-Christian heritage… [and] a covert attempt at Islamization” (116). In The New Yorker, a rhetorical but pointed statement also calls for Khan to
reconsider his entry: “Mohammad Khan has absolutely, unequivocally every right to proceed with his memorial… The question is whether he should proceed” (124; italics added). Depicting the mainstream media as so vociferously against Khan’s participation is Waldman’s way of showing the Orientalist streak of American opinion-forming intellectual punditry even in mainstream liberal media, which according to Derek M. D. Silva, “constructs Muslims as outsiders to dominant Western cultural values and activities” (156). By showing the media apparatus in the Bush era working in line with the ideology of the governmental policies, Waldman shows how pervasive the regression to political conservatism is in American culture. Rubin and other white Americans’ ultimate othering of Khan and Muslims has implications beyond just the memorialization process and the public participation of Muslim; it is accompanied by a resurgence of Orientalist public discourse about the supposed fundamental incompatibility of Islam and Muslims with American values, and thereby creates an urgency for Americans to remove Muslims from the country.

In response to this adversarial othering, even from the liberal Americans he had not expected to oppose him, Khan and his few supporters desperately try to re-attach him to America to prove he is not an “other” and that he definitely does not support Islamist terrorist ideology. Once public opposition to Khan and his design has reached its peak, Khan’s attorney, Scott Reiss, has a very explicit strategy: “We’ve got to humanize you. No, Americanize you” (Waldman 209). Another supporter at the hearing also insists that Khan is “as American as” himself (220). In both these cases, Khan’s supporters are invoking his right as a citizen to be included within the country’s configuration of freedoms, but they are also attempting to thwart the othering he is encountering. For Reiss, it is not enough that Khan appears human to his opponents, because the Orientalist streak that has taken over political discourse does not allow
mere “humans” to participate in the West’s public domain. Khan, as a symbolic representation of the ultimate outsider, is made unwelcome by white Americans in the novel even if his humanity is proven, because Orientalism, as Said argues, “fail[s] to identify with human experience” or “to see it as human experience” (328). The Bush-era neo-conservative brand of Orientalism, as depicted in the novel, only sees the Middle-Eastern Muslim man through the lens of that de-humanization. When confronted by tabloid reporter Alyssa Spier on his choices, Khan is left sputtering, angrily, the same phrase over and over: “I am an American. I am an American” while also claiming he has “the same rights as every other American” (Waldman 261). In effect, neo-conservative Bush-era Orientalism reduces Khan and his supporters to the abject, hopeless position of insisting on his Americanness over any other criteria for his participation in American public discourse.

In its depiction of the process of adversarial othering, the novel sets up another, differently segregated, group: the surviving relatives of 9/11 victims. This depiction is pivotal when examining the occlusion of Islam and Muslims from the United States after 9/11. The Submission depicts surviving relatives of the victims of 9/11 as a community of “the families”, and that community is considered by their fellow Anglo Americans to have “moral high ground” because “they’ve done nothing but lose husbands, wives, children, parents” (65). Early within the novel, even before the winner of the design is revealed as Muslim, Burwell’s reason for being on the jury is revealed thus: “only she had lost a husband” among them (3). She invokes his death twice within the jury’s final deliberations, once before and once after the revelation of Khan’s name, saying not her husband’s name, “Cal,” but rather, “My husband” (5, 21) before trailing off each time, as if she has played a trump card that has no answer. Burwell asserts that being the family member of a victim gives her more rights than others on the jury, and she even
stops the ones who have not lost any family members from invoking the feelings of “the families” when trying to make a point; only one of “the families” can speak for them (17). As an especially privileged person, because of her wealth and her race, it is Burwell among “the families” who gains the most power from her association with Ground Zero and who then applies that power to instigate and perpetuate differentiation between Americans. While Burwell repeatedly claims a different position from people who have not lost a relative, Sean Gallagher is the one who articulates what makes a family member different when he sees people other than “the families” clamoring to be part of the exclusive community at a protest:

*to lose a loved in this way was a privilege as well as a curse. The overfed, overeager faces listening to him hungered for what couldn’t be bought, and he pitied them for the desire to go somewhere deeper, be part of something larger. Horrible as the attack was, everyone wanted a little of its ash on their hands.* (150)

Not all surviving relatives are against the design or against Muslims, as some even come out in support of its healing essence at the public hearing (220, 222, 224); however, the vocal ones march in protest, and eventually they have Burwell—previously Khan’s most vocal supporter—backing their cause to have Khan’s victory nullified. As depicted in the novel, these exceptionalized white Americans, along with their supporters, go further than wanting Khan to withdraw his design; the implication of their arguments is that Islam and the United States’ ideals are incompatible, and that Islam and Muslims should not exist in the United States at all. Unlike Oskar in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and Lianne in *Falling Man*, Burwell and the other bereaved members of “the families” actually have power to change the fate of the Muslim other in the United States.
So potent is the power of “the families” over their fellow Americans that a bereaved member from this exceptionalized community, despite being a Muslim, imposes a moment of reflection on her fellow citizens when she publicly denounces the adversarial othering of Khan and Muslims. Asma Anwar, before she is revealed to be an illegal immigrant, stands up in the public forum to support Khan with a short speech that implies points of fusion in Khan’s (and other Muslims’) Muslimness and Americanness. Like Burwell, Anwar first invokes her husband’s death in the terrorist attack, and she insists that her husband “was a man of peace because he was Muslim. That is our tradition” (215). In support of Khan, she proclaims the garden as “right” (216) just as Burwell earlier called it “perfect” (88), but Anwar goes further than Burwell by attempting a definition of America: “that is what America is—all the people, Muslim and non-Muslim, who have come and grown together” (216). Whereas all other vocal members of “the families” had come out either vehemently against or benignly in support of Khan and the garden, Anwar is loud and insistent in their support; and because she yokes American liberal ideas to the idea of the United States as a nation of immigrants and settlers, while also declaring Islamic ideology as peaceful, Anwar produces a pause in the clamor against Khan by becoming what one of the jurors calls “[a]n authentic voice” even a voice of “conscience” (236). In being both a member of the adversarial group and the wife of a 9/11 victim, Anwar is so thoroughly exceptional that she represents for the American public a one-person juxtaposition of the pinnacle and the nadir of American-ness in the post-9/11 moment. Liberal Americans value her voice even more than they do that of white American members of “the families”, because Anwar’s speech is one that espouses liberal American values and indicates that the way out of post-9/11 hyper-conservatism is through embracing Khan and his design. But the possibility of a mainstream embrace of American liberalism is short-lived
because soon after Anwar’s elevation within the media circus Alyssa Spier reveals her to be an illegal alien who has also received a million-dollar payout from the American government, just like all other relatives of the victims of 9/11 (247). With these revelations, Anwar instantly loses both the unique status of being the “conscience” of America and the exceptionalism enjoyed by other members of “the families”—she becomes a definite outsider and belongs solely with the adversarial other group. Her earlier invocation of American liberalism counts for nothing, however reasonable it sounded, because it did not come from an acceptable (American) member of “the families”. The implications of Anwar’s rapid crowning and dethroning are that liberalism only has validity if it comes from an American voice, and that the only suffering that counts in the aftermath of 9/11 is that of white Americans. By depicting Alyssa Spier’s pointed revelation of Anwar’s immigration status and of the supposedly unethical government payout to Anwar, Waldman criticizes not only the media circus but also the post-9/11 hyper-conservative stance of reducing the value of the experience of anybody other than white Americans in the Bush-era political culture.

The post-9/11 desire of the American media and public to decide an individual’s or a group’s worth and their place within the United States is tied closely to how the groups vie for power while either espousing liberal American values or decrying them. The parties in the debate, while focusing on the issue of Khan’s rights as the winner of the competition, are vying for what Agamben and Foucault label “sovereign power” (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 135). Agamben quotes Carl Schmitt’s definition of a sovereign party as one that “decides on the state of exception” (Agamben 11), while also claiming that “the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power” (16). Since Khan becomes overtly politicized
with his emergence into the public eye, he cannot help but have his biopolitical body become
the center of a power struggle. Foucault posits that

The power exercised on the body is conceived not as a property, but as a strategy… this
power is exercised rather than possessed… this power is not exercised simply as an
obligation or a prohibition on those who ‘do not have it’; it invests them, is transmitted
by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their
struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them. (Discipline and Punish 26)

Foucault would argue that none of the parties in The Submission possesses sovereign power, but
all are attempting to acquire it through the process of exercising the exception that the power
would allow. In other words, only by enacting the power to decide on the memorial do “the
families” come into possession of the power. Using this theoretical framework, I posit that “the
families”, Burwell, Khan’s American supporters, and the jury, are each fighting for the power of
sovereignty over Khan’s rights as the winner by attempting to apply the exceptions that
sovereign power would allow.

Furthermore, Foucault argues that the sovereign seldom enacts the power of choosing an
exception in an “absolute and unconditional way, but only in cases where the sovereign’s very
existence [is] in jeopardy” (The History of Sexuality 135). In the post-9/11 Bush era, the then-
justifiably heightened fear of terrorism, and the corresponding fear of Muslims and Islam among
traumatized white Americans, produce for Americans an existential threat that makes them want
to use desperate means to avoid what they fear. It is thus logical that the characters in The
Submission who conflate all Muslims and anything Islamic into a terrifying “other” will be
mortally afraid once Khan’s name springs up and once Anwar is revealed to be an illegal Muslim
other; the traumatized Anglo Americans are even willing to make exceptions to their otherwise
liberal values and immediately safeguard themselves. While in monarchies or other vertical power structures the sovereign is easy to spot, in democracies it is assumed that the power, though hierarchically structured with the head of state at the top, is dispersed among the public. The diffuseness, or multi-valence, of the power structure in a democracy allows for individual votes counting equally in elections and selection processes, but that equality shifts specially after the schismatic break of 9/11 when traditional power structures come into question; certain voices becomes more meaningful for Americans, and the value of votes intersects with membership in “the families”. Various parties use this moment to attempt to take control of national ideological direction. In deciding whether Khan’s memorial should be created, the supporters and decriers and “the families” of Waldman’s novel, and American novelists working within the ethos of the Great American Novel, are in fact arguing for their interpretation of what 9/11 meant and what post-9/11 America should look like, and who should be included and excluded from it.

**Blindness, Merit, and Racial Othering**

With her sprawling, “Great American Novel-renewing” fictional depiction of the Bush-era’s fragmentation of American society in *The Submission*, Waldman exposes the naivety of believing that American meritocracy applies equally to all Americans, the childishness of considering racial relations in the United States historically resolved, and the flimsiness of American popular culture liberalism, which collapses in the backlash generated by the adversarial other’s participation in public space after the 9/11 attack. By depicting American ideals as so fragile and Americans as so naïve to believe in ideals rather than face the reality that their ideals have never been realized, Waldman’s contribution to the post-9/11 Great American Novel plurality is more self-reflective than any of the other post-9/11 novels in this study, and it
offers ambiguity and uncertainty of response as a valid option to contend against the hyper-conservatism presented within most other post-9/11 American novels as the only imaginable response to the “Muslim Question”. Waldman’s methodology for representing the fragility of American ideals is at first to represent the jury for the memorial as not even considering the existence—let alone public participation—of Khan and other Muslims in American, and then to confront the panel and white Americans in general with the adversarial other as real, space-occupying humans living among them. Upon that revelation, Waldman exposes how easy it is to dismantle the popular white culture’s quasi-religiously held beliefs in the superiority of American values.5

While the jury’s process of choosing the winner in The Submission is assumed to be meritorious because of the “blind” selection of the winner, the process of revelation undoes “blindness” as a necessary characteristic of the meritocracy. Until the revelation of Mohammad Khan’s name, and its baggage of associations, the selection process is conducted with few macro-level political entanglements, and the jury is focused entirely on the aesthetic and symbolic merits of the two finalist designs: the garden or the multi-storey “black granite rectangle” called “The Void,” which to Burwell “mis[s]e[s] the point” of being a memorial because of its starkness (4). Supposedly without knowing who has created the designs (though Ariana likely knows the designer of the Void) (20), the jury members and other enactors in the process believe they are choosing on merit alone, narrowing “five thousand entries, all

5 Of course, not only white Americans but Americans of other races have also historically “bought in” to the notion of American ideals being equally applicable to all citizens. Herman Cain, for example, who wrote a brief but unequivocal defense of American exceptionalism (based on his own success), was an African-American Tea Party Republican whose success in a white-majority culture is intriguing as an exception rather than the norm; at the expense of toeing the Republican party line, and in his blindness to his own exceptional success as a Black businessman and politician he ignores how the myth leaves so many others of his race behind. I wish to point out that Cain and other successful Americans of racial minorities like him play the role of “token” outsiders (like the token minority characters in predominantly white-centered cultural productions) who may also reap some benefits of wealth and fame, even if the system is geared primarily for the success of the racial majority.
anonymous, down to two” (3). This “blind” process is symbolic, and an enactment, of the
grander assumptions of the American Dream: that everybody in America can “make it”, because
the United States is the land of opportunity and meritocracy. However, the jury’s reaction after
the revelation indicates that the “blindness” is in fact the inability to visualize that a Muslim
would enter, let alone win, the competition. As soon as the jury finds out Khan’s name, however,
the innocent hope that merit would prevail begins to undergo an elaborate dismantling until,
ultimately, it is the idealized version of the United States offering “boundless freedoms” and
even American meritocracy that are shown up as blind hopes and not the supposedly solid
foundation on which to base lofty ideologies of the American Dream and American
exceptionalism.

Besides the blindness of the competition, the notion of a “jury” picking the winner of the
competition is another symbolic gesture Waldman makes to the larger American enterprise of
assuming fairness between Americans when they are judging their fellow citizens. Unlike in a
civil or criminal trial, in which a decision by a jury must be unanimous in order to return a
verdict, the panelists in The Submission only need to cast “ten of thirteen votes” in favor of one
design to declare it the winner (Waldman 8). By invoking a number just one beyond the twelve
required in criminal trials in American courts, Waldman sets up the implication that this panel’s
deliberation is not just a choice between the visions of two different architects, but something
much more meaningful, because it invokes the foundational documents of American law—in this
case, a popularized version of the Sixth Amendment. In The Submission, the jury is composed
entirely of white Americans, and most of them express horror at the resurgence of the repressed
memories of 9/11. But for Khan’s initial supporters on the panel, including Claire Burwell, any
attempt to change the result would be “a total betrayal of” American values (21), especially the
value of “tolerance” (18). Instead, declaring him the winner would be “a good message, that in America it doesn’t matter what your name is… that your name is no bar to entering a competition like this, or to winning it” (18). But others backtrack on their votes, reasoning that they have “no obligation to pick him” (18) now that they know his identity, and that being Muslim makes Khan “unsuitable by definition” (20). In effect, the jury becomes a split one, or a “hung” one, after it has decided the outcome of the case—it takes the case back into deliberation after the victor is revealed as a Muslim. While the jury’s function may not in this case be as grave as deciding Khan’s guilt or innocence related to a crime, the panelists are deciding whether he has a right to participate in public via artistic expression, a decision that will limit his freedoms, enable or bar him from his American Dream, and that will also derail the idea of merit as inherent and foundational to the jury’s decision. The seriousness of the jury’s function hearkens back to Foucault’s idea of “judgement” in contemporary criminal justice systems being made not only on a person’s criminal activity, but also “on the passions, instincts, anomalies, infirmities, maladjustments, effects of environment or heredity” (Discipline and Punish 17)—in effect, on the individuality, even the “the soul… the heart, the thoughts, the will, [and] the inclinations” of a person (16). According to Foucault’s claim, in Khan’s case the jury is deliberating whether he has any right of self-expression, a fundamental privilege accorded every citizen by the US Constitution’s First Amendment. Foucault also points out that “the judicial institution is increasingly incorporated into a continuum of apparatuses (medical, administrative, and so on) whose functions are for the most part regulatory” (The History of Sexuality 144). In other words, the panel’s constitution is more tied to ensuring smooth running of the process than to an ethical outcome that the members of the jury keep citing as their function. According to this framework, the word “jury” in The Submission should not be an indicator or assurance of
“justice” in the process of selecting the winning design, but rather that the bureaucratic processes will run smoothly to ensure the selection of a single winner.

By yoking art, bureaucratic processes, the law, ethics, and the frameworks that allow or suppress public expression by certain groups within the United States, Waldman indicates that the American value system is naïve, biased, corrupt, and standing on watered-down ideas of justice that often end up being merely chanted slogans and not enacted convictions. Just as Americans have assumed that the “blindness” of the competition would ensure a fair decision, they place similar hopes in the process of a “jury” deciding the winner. But both processes break down: the blindness reveals itself as more overarching than at first the participants in the process imagine; and the jury is compromised not only because of the trauma that some of its members experience from the resurgence of the disregarded American Muslim, but also because its function is a more Foucauldian process-oriented rather than ethics-oriented one. The underlying reason for the failure of meritocracy by both the jury and by the supposed “blindness” of the competition is the resurgence of trauma brought about by the immanent, physical (as opposed to merely psychic or conceptual) manifestation of a racially other Muslim in post-9/11 American space.

When Khan emerges as the winner, his detractors decry his participation in the memorialization of 9/11, but they do so in racialized terms, which causes the traumatized white Americans to conflate past American racial tensions with current ones. As with the real-life protests against the “Ground Zero Mosque”, which Evelyn Alsultany sees as an indication of “the racialization of religion… alive and thriving” (167), Waldman depicts Gallagher’s understanding of American exceptionalism as especially problematic because it undermines the
idea of unity along racial lines and thereby conflates two different dimensions of divisions within
the country. Speaking to a congregation of would-be protestors, Gallagher says:

we’re going to take back the site, literally—we’ll lay our bodies down on it, and not leave
until they agree to hold a new memorial competition. We’ll turn Martin Luther King’s
 techniques right back at them. (132)

In his attempt to justify a protest of Khan’s victory, Gallagher conflates African Americans with
Muslims, and the civil rights movement with post-9/11 activism against Islamophobia. In his
usage of “them”, Gallagher could perhaps mean Muslims, but by his implication that all non-
white others are part of the problem, the “them” becomes anybody with a darker skin and their
progressive white liberal supporters. This racially charged, and even racist, conflation can be
attributed to Waldman’s depiction of Gallagher as unintellectual and boorish. However, this echo
of the real-life profiling and othering of Muslims in the Bush era is not an isolated instance of
creating or identifying such othering in the novel. When Waldman’s popular right-wing radio
presenter Lou Sarge advocates stricter profiling and “separate security lines for Muslims to be
searched at the airport,” his Muslim guest Issam Malik is quick to point out how the idea of
isolating Muslims for “flying while Muslim” echoes the repugnant racist acts of stopping African
Americans for “driving while black” (41). Laila Fathi, Khan’s Muslim lawyer points out the
connection between Germany’s othering of its Jewish population before the Holocaust and
Muslims being declared “less American” in the protests and media (175). Khan himself makes
the connection between the “Japanese American internment camp” and post-9/11 United States,
but only in passing, picturing “himself within the confines of a wire-fenced camp” and
wondering if he would have the “same tenacity of spirit” as the Japanese Americans did to
survive such demonization and physical imprisonment (175). At the public hearing, Asma Anwar
sees Rubin’s refusal to moderate comments, which link Khan’s design to “paradise for the killers” and “the name Mohammad” to violence, as indications that “Muslims [are] second-class citizens—or worse, as if they [deserve] no respect” in the United States (229).

Of all these allusions to intra-national collective discrimination against non-white citizens, Gallagher’s call to “take back” the site and to “turn Martin Luther King’s techniques right back” at an ambiguous “them” is the most pernicious and all-encompassing, because it segregates Americans by creating “group-ness” (Garner and Selod 14); that is, it slices off all non-white Americans, and clusters them with the Muslim other, creating of them a common enemy, which indicates a more widespread regression in American liberal politics. King’s techniques were of non-violent disobedience, for a cause that enabled equal legal rights to African-American citizens in the United States, while Gallagher’s implied rallying call to reverse those rights for all of non-white America is the white supremacist notion of protesting any other group claiming equality. For Gallagher and his fellow protestors, there is no complicated, graded hierarchy, only a white ‘Us’ and a dark ‘Them’; and when these white Americans’ trauma is unleashed at the thought of Khan becoming the memorial’s designer, they make one simple all-embracing demand: the other must submit to whatever the white (the only real) Americans want. In effect, Gallagher’s statement exhibits an underlying desire to reverse everything achieved by the civil rights Movement, and a latent desire (unleashed along with the trauma of 9/11) to uphold and perpetuate the superiority of white Americans over all other races, not just Middle-Eastern-looking Muslims. Waldman’s further contribution to this post-9/11 invocation of the Great American Novel is her liberally slanted warning regarding Gallagher’s extreme

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6 The stark difference between a civil rights march and the anti-Muslim protests is clearly shown when Gallagher actually lies down at the Ground Zero site, but he and the other protestors are removed without too much fanfare by the police. It is a whimper of an outcome, even “enfeebling” (Waldman 152).
position—that the hyper-conservative orientation of politics, arts, culture, and public participation in the post-9/11 era could easily become a violent far-right movement that destroys not decades but centuries of progressive political achievements in the country.

**Burwell & “The Families”**

Depicted as a more sophisticated member of “the families”, Burwell wishes to reclaim Ground Zero, and the United States, as white American space, and her motivation is more subtle than that of Gallagher and the other protestors: it pivots on how she perceives Khan’s intentions behind proposing the design. Shown to have repressed her trauma earlier in the narrative, Burwell begins breaking down when confronted by the supposed Islamic associations of Khan’s design. But the underlying reason for her reversal of her liberal position on Khan’s rights is primarily because of resurging trauma. As for many other Americans, for Burwell, too, 9/11 was a schismatic event, one that caused significant rupture in the her privileged white American psyche. Tania Zittoun defines “rupture” as an event or incident that causes a person to “consciously or unconsciously” re-examine “her sense of self and sense of continuity” (190), and such a re-examination or self-questioning (akin to Lianne’s in *Falling Man*) would account for the vast difference in Burwell’s believed and enacted values.

By the time Burwell confronts Khan about his intentions as a last attempt at finding a compromise, she comes having unequivocally reversed her position on his rights after also embracing the privileges that immense wealth, her initial championing of his design all the way to victory in the blind competition, and her membership in “the families” accord to her. She tries to clarify her reasons for now opposing the design by saying:
it's hard for me to have you design the memorial if I don’t know what you think… you
wouldn’t know this, but I was the only juror who didn’t waver when we learned your
name—I need to know more. I need you to, if not denounce, distance yourself from some
of these ideas, or just make some accommodation in your design. This isn’t about you.
It’s about the religion. (271)

Burwell’s demands have little to do with him as an individual, and more to do with how she and
other opponents to his memorial fixate on Khan’s religious and cultural “baggage”. Shortly
afterwards, Burwell walks out of the meeting with Khan and stages a press conference in which
she makes her last official demand of him in these words: “Mr. Khan says he shouldn’t have to
say what the Garden is, or where it came from, and he’s right… But I want him to” (277). In
both instances of vocalizing her wishes, Burwell uses not the collective “we” that would signify
either “the families” or other grieving Americans but an “I” that indicates it is she, most of all,
whose sensibilities Khan must assuage. She is also doing two other things by using “I” instead of
“we”: she is invoking (and thereby claiming) Agambenian and Foucauldian sovereign power—
wringing it from the demos—while also exercising the sovereign power of creating an exception
to American liberalism. In her “I”, Burwell invokes the privileges of being white and wealthy, of
having a Judeo-Christian heritage, and of being related to a 9/11 victim, whereas by calling Khan
“him” rather than addressing him as “you,” she deigns him by now not even worthy of being
addressed directly from the throne of the sovereign power she is presuming to take over. He is
her exact opposite by virtue of being a hyphenated American, and he belongs to the adversarial
other “enemy group” at least by association if not in his beliefs. Burwell’s “I” asserts therefore
that her American-ness is worth much more than Khan’s.
In her final confrontation with Khan, Burwell is most offended not by his refusal but rather by what she views as his attack on her exceptionalized and privileged status. Burwell’s status as an important member of a grieving United States after 9/11 depends largely on the mysticism that envelopes the artifacts of its aftermath and the people most closely linked to the victims of the tragedy. She invests in the idea of the site and the families becoming enshrined in “holiness” and becoming “sacred” because it elevates her tragedy and gives her status that she finds suitable. However, instead of explaining the design’s inspiration or his own intentions as Burwell would like him to, Khan tries to explain his own position by hypothesizing the analogical possibility of her husband, Cal, being deemed collateral damage in 9/11 just as Khan’s own work and life are being undermined by white Americans’ eagerness to punish all Muslims:

How would you feel if I justified what happened to your husband by saying it wasn’t about him but about his nationality—his country’s policies—damn shame he got caught up in it, that’s all—but you know, he got what he deserved because he paid taxes to the American government. I get what I deserve because I happen to share a religion with a few crazies? (Waldman 271)

Rather than focusing on the logic of Khan’s statement, Burwell is shocked at Khan connecting himself with her husband in any way, even if by analogy, since Khan belongs to the enemy camp, whereas her husband, Cal, is “holy” because he is a victim of terrorism. Eikonsalo points out that it is Khan’s de-sanctification of 9/11 victims and “sacred memory” that bothers Burwell: “The fact that [Khan] drops the 9/11 victims from the pedestal where they have been put, and where [Burwell] clearly puts her husband, drives her into a blind rage” (86). I would posit that more than his de-sacralization of her husband, it is Khan’s equation of himself with Cal, and the accompanying de-sanctification of Burwell herself that is the final straw for Burwell before she
walks out of the room; it indicates Khan claiming an equality that she is unwilling to consider or yield to. Before this instance of claiming an analogical equivalence with a 9/11 victim, Khan has been asking for equal rights with other Americans; but his equation of himself with the “holiest” of Americans is for Burwell crossing a line. It both reduces her husband’s and her own status and elevates Khan’s, and that leaves her as an equal of Khan’s rather than his superior. Burwell not only denies to Khan the possibility of dialogue on this point, she also storms out of the room and refuses to have any conversation with him after that. Her subsequent “I want him to” is a statement of resolve to keep the status quo “holiness” of post-9/11 intact; it is also her way of reasserting her status as a 9/11 widow, which ought to, in her understanding, negate any of Khan’s attempts at equivalency with either her or her husband.

At the press conference, Burwell also for the first time publicly announces that she has reversed her original position on Khan’s memorial design, which complicates and even compromises her original stance that the country stands for liberal values and equal rights (Waldman 22). Burwell’s U-turn in the novel is representative of the liberal reversals and support for action against Muslims that happened in the real-world, post-9/11 United States. While in the aftermath of 9/11 there were a few journalists and dissidents who called for a reasoned approach, many supposedly liberal outlets, including The New York Times, The New Yorker, and The Washington Post supported the Iraq war with jingoistic cheerleading of American occupation. Ayşem Seval points out that The Submission shows “existing

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7 In the 2007 documentary Buying the War, Bill Moyers cites one example after another of supposedly liberal newspapers filling up with pro-war editorials and The New York Times and The Washington Post giving their “stamp of approval” to action against Iraq. Thomas Friedman, in his appearance on Charlie Rose on May 29, 2003, reduced diverse global communities of Muslims to a singular “they” against whom the US could have taken action by “hit[ting]” Saudi Arabia, Pakistan or any other Muslim country. Dan Murphy mentions that the desire of even liberal journalists to “hit back at them” blinded these pundits with emotion, clouding their empathy and their reason in jingoism and “fear”. Even those “[l]iberals who had traditionally opposed the use of military force overseas now lined up alongside the neoconservatives and conservative nationalists in support of the wars in Afghanistan and
problematics in the nature of liberal tolerance” in an era when “the image of the Other is defined in increasingly radicalized terms” (101). Burwell’s reversal of her liberal values indicates “liberal tolerance was possibly illusionary to begin with” and cannot survive being “challenged under pressing conditions” (113) like 9/11. In accepting that her own liberalism was a façade, Burwell does pick a side unequivocally, and she puts herself at the head of it—claiming power via the cards of her privilege—by saying “I” instead of “we”. Eikonsalo is in this sense right to argue that “while Waldman’s novel creates a real antithesis to the early 9/11 discourse,” the novel’s “simplified positions, stereotypes, and sacralization” of 9/11 relics contribute to “reinforcing” the ideas already in the discourse (81). The dangers of consolidating conservative regression even by representation is a realistic threat. Like Eiknosalo, I see Waldman’s novel as one among a continuum of works that depict white Americans trying to occlude the Muslim other.

Burwell’s demand to have her rights considered more imperative than Khan’s also has the further implication that the trauma of 9/11 undermines any possibility for her to enact any of her liberal values. It is inconceivable for Burwell to be equated with someone so absolutely different from herself. However, Khan’s comparison of Cal’s situation with his own not only collapses Burwell’s imagined hierarchy of Americans, it also brings back the trauma of 9/11. When Khan says the words “[d]amn shame” and “[w]hat he deserved” in a complex sentence about Cal, they are the only words that Burwell can hear as the repression breaks down; she is not “exactly sure” what Khan says (Waldman 271) because, as Seval mentions, “the experience of trauma and the resulting paranoia render communication” with the traumatized nearly impossible (119). Since she now positions Khan among the “billion Muslims in the world” who

Iraq” (Ryan 669). Tony Judt called these “hawks” who “fell over themselves in the hurry to align their editorial stance with that of a Republican president bent on exemplary war” by the term “Bush’s Useful Idiots”.

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are potential “recruits” for terrorists, countenancing Khan, Cal, and herself together through Khan’s analogy shatters her repression violently. The force of the sudden trauma is akin to what Oskar faces in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* on top of the Empire State Building when suddenly confronted by the spectre of the terrorist he has been repressing throughout the novel. In reaction to Khan’s words, Burwell feels “sickened” by what she believes is Khan’s thinking: that her husband is “mere collateral damage” (Waldman 271). This breakdown of one coping mechanism prompts enough fear and anger within Burwell for her to storm out of the room and stop all communication with Khan and to later pronounce her verdict on the matter of desiring him to submit merely because she “want[s] him to”. Burwell’s reaction underscores Seval’s idea that the trauma of 9/11, once unleashed, overrides the liberal values by which white Americans claim to live. Burwell’s selective hearing and selective, bias-filled understanding of what Khan says leads to discriminatory enactment of her liberalism. By claiming that her rights have more value than Khan’s, Burwell’s trauma makes her invoke “the tragic or ironic distance between America as dream and ideal” (Byers 96), reinforcing also a refusal to examine one’s own enactment of the values of American-ness while judging others by those very same vague values (Lagon 42). The result of this missed opportunity to enact liberal values is that though the creation of Khan’s memorial would have been difficult before, it becomes much harder now that even a supposed liberal such as Burwell opposes Khan so openly. Burwell and Khan’s final meeting and Burwell’s reaction exemplify how Waldman imagines a violently altered relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim Americans in the post-9/11 era, one that reverses considerably the progress that liberal values of inclusion, merit, and equality have supposedly enabled white Americans to make in the twentieth century.
The history of the Great American Novel is replete with examinations of how these ideals have failed for individuals before, even as the national mythos keeps resurrecting those ideals like Fourth of July fireworks. The spiritual ancestor of *The Submission* and a novel that also dramatizes the hollowness of “achieving” the American Dream, *The Great Gatsby*, was also written in the aftermath of a violent upheaval, and in it “Fitzgerald poignantly synthesizes the ambitions, dreams, and delusions that defined America after World War I” (Hayes 147).

Waldman’s novel echoes in its fictive depiction of a resolution to the “Muslim Question” a similarly disillusioned baring of the flimsiness of American ideals when they are tested. Agnieszka Lobodziec points out a pertinent poignant fact about *Gatsby*: “In Fitzgerald's novel, amidst all the marginalized representatives of multiple ethnicities and nationalities, black men appear as the most fearful group that needs to be excluded” (292); in Waldman’s fictional critique of the American Dream, it is the colored person depicted as pursuing the American dream, but he is still the one that white America fears.

Like 9/11’s influence on Lianne in *Falling Man*, the trauma of that day also emotionally compromises Burwell in *The Submission* to the extent that she questions her judgement of the Muslim other. Despite her initially liberal disposition in the novel, Burwell relies heavily on the media for information about Islam and Muslims. Like Lianne, Burwell discovers her conservative repressions and unspoken assumptions that lie underneath supposedly open-minded and unprejudiced value systems. By the end of both novels, Lianne and Burwell are adamant in their opposition to what they understand is Islamic ideology, and in both novels the affirmation of the conviction is made with the idea of having a right to “doubt” the Muslim other and Islamic ideology (Waldman 298; DeLillo 231, 232). These similarities between Lianne and Burwell, and their positioning within each novel as Anglo-American ethical and moral compasses, are
indicative of underlying faults within Anglo-American mythic ideas about equality, justice, and fairness, all of which become exposed by the schism of 9/11 (though they have regularly also been dismantled by the Great American Novels of yore). Estévez-Saá and Pereira-Ares argue that “The Submission reflects the difficulty of even knowing who the enemy is” within America (270). However, I would argue, as Alaina Nutile does, that, since the novel ends with seeing the ethical dilemma from Burwell’s point of view, putting her doubt in as justified a position as Lianne’s is made out to be in Falling Man, Waldman’s The Submission has a “clichéd ending in which the ‘Other’ is defeated” (Nutile). The question arises: if Americans even as supposedly liberal, self-examining, and open-minded as Lianne and Burwell differentiate among other Americans based on their religious ideology—separating “good” fellow citizens from “bad”—and even if the line starts with Muslims, does it really end there?

De-Sanctifying “The Families”

In The Submission, other Americans at first acknowledge that “the families” should be considered spokespeople with more rights on, and even a justified sense of “ownership” of, Ground Zero than other Americans (Waldman 21). The jurors especially wonder whether they will cause offense to the families if they declare a Muslim the winner of the competition (17). Continuous insistence by Burwell, especially, that every other American defer to her opinions constitutes an overuse of the privilege that other Americans at first willingly grant to her but eventually are fatigued by. In this way, Burwell’s insistence on sanctifying the families while vilifying Khan provides impetus for her fellow Americans to de-sanctify the families—and thus, Burwell’s new coping mechanism of attempting to assume what Agamben and Foucault might call sovereign power begins to disintegrate once her fellow Americans refuse to yield her that power.
Evidence of other Americans pushing back against the elevation of “the families” appears in how the other jurors treat Burwell when she begins to express doubts about her original support of Khan’s design and when she differentiates between his rights as a Muslim-American and those of other Americans. In a jurors’ meeting, Claire mentions that “the families” feel resentful toward Khan’s design, but one of the other jurors refuses to accommodate the feelings of that group of Americans any longer: “‘Tell them to get over it,’ Maria said… ‘To be blunt, I’m tired of hearing about the families. You wouldn’t know from the way we talk that an entire nation was devastated by the attack’” (237). With this brief but significant leveling of all Americans, Maria implies that Burwell has invoked her privilege of being the widow of a 9/11 victim heavy-handedly, and this privilege now stands nullified after too prolonged a usage. Maria’s words reduce Burwell’s status so much that Burwell feels herself being stripped of something “talismanic,” as though “power” is “leaking from her like a liquid” (237). Chided for it, but still believing in her elevation above other white Americans, Burwell approaches the subject using another tactic, arguing: “The families aren’t the only ones… Americans, many of them, are afraid” (237). Burwell acknowledges that other Americans too have suffered due to the terrorism, but she continues to position herself as the spokesperson and leader for all Americans. However, another juror, Ariana Montagu, quickly cordons off even this route for Burwell to assume the helm of American exceptionalism: “Before we had to weigh her stance more because she stood for all the families. Now she stands for all of America. Now she wants us to accommodate her ambivalence, her pivots. Enough!” (237). Montagu echoes Maria’s sentiment that Burwell no longer can be considered special and singular among all Americans, and she also urges the jury to vote and exercise equality and democracy among themselves (238).
Burwell, however, is not satisfied with her peers’ assertion of equality, and she changes tactics to attempt to remain “sovereign”. Having been rebuked by her peers on the jury and, having thereby lost her position at the helm of white Americans, Burwell allies surprisingly with the very community she believes is the adversarial other: Muslim Americans. She speaks at the press conference surrounded by Muslims who agree with her assessment that Khan should exercise less of his rights than other Americans because they fear that Khan’s pursuit of his rights will cost “more lives” (277). This group of Muslim Americans has motivations that tangentially overlap with Burwell’s desire to make Khan withdraw his winning proposal, but Burwell asserts her own leadership among the group by first reading out the statement they have prepared (273), and then by speaking the last sentence as if it is condoned by the group: “I want him to” (277). Using Muslims as a backdrop to claim sovereign power indicates Burwell’s pursuit of power at any cost, despite how much other Americans no longer wish her to have it, with the implication that Burwell is willing to forego being a spokesperson for America’s wishes as long as Khan does not enjoy equality as a citizen. Of course, there is the added implication of the Muslims who surround and support Burwell considering themselves lesser Americans by implication of being associated with her phrase “I want him to”. These, then, would be a group of “Uncle Tom” Muslims who themselves also pivot to join with the white status quo power-holder to deny agency to one of “their own”. *The Submission*, in its larger contribution to post-9/11 American literature, might be suggesting that, motivated by a desire to give space and help mitigate the trauma inflicted by a member of the largest notion of “their” community, even Muslims will support the artificial othering created by the rift of the terrorist attack. However, Burwell’s assertion that she wants Khan to make substantial concessions to her clashes with the change in stance the Muslims surrounding her at the press conference make: they want to
accommodate the sentiments of all Americans who are traumatized, while she co-opts the accommodation as if it is specifically for her.

The novel depicts the de-sacntification of “the families” as a process exacerbated by characters like Burwell claiming more rights than her fellow citizens, but also as a certain process that takes time—until all Americans are considered (nearly) equal again. In the epilogue, the country is seen as having “self-corrected” (Waldman 287) away from fragmentation of its citizens’ rights, with even American Muslims considered nearly as exceptional as other Americans. In the novel’s version of the future, 9/11 will not vilify Muslims forever, because, like World War II and communism, which created previous adversarial others within America, the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 will also recede into history, leaving Americans to enact liberal values in less troubled times. Anticipating equality among nearly all groups of Americans, the novel depicts a distant future moment when the passage of time has healed the national trauma even if individual trauma cannot be healed; in that future scenario, none of “the families” will remain exceptional. In that future scenario, Burwell’s struggle to retain her ideas about the adversarial other eventually backfire because she remains among very few traumatized individuals within a nation and a world that has moved on from the moment and occasion of her suffering.8 Her continued experience of trauma may be the novel’s and post-9/11 American literature’s larger duty of representing the trauma that lingers, and the individuals within which it lingers, as projected within near-future and distant-future scenarios.

8 Khan still wishes to provoke Burwell’s suspicions of him, and she responds just as she did two decades earlier, by demanding more explanations from him because she feels it is her right (298). I see this as an individual’s attempt at reinforcing 9/11 dichotomies when the state and general populace have moved on from the event.
Conclusion: Adversarial Othering and Further Occlusions

However absurd, paradoxical, and artificial Waldman’s post-9/11 creation of an adversarial other is, it echoes the reality of Muslim Americans’ political situation during the real-life drama of the “Ground Zero Mosque”, when various factions wanted to decide what the post-9/11 Muslim participation in American public life should look like. American writers such as Foer, DeLillo, and Waldman have written novels that play within the Great American Novel tradition while shifting it, novels in which Anglo Americans’ conception of the Muslim other, and then their confrontation with the Muslim other, is fraught with traumatic invocations of 9/11 and the terrorist threat that still lingered—or at least lingered, in the early 2000s—within white American consciousness. Lee-Potter states that “The Submission is, itself, a form of memorial” and that it “attempts to act as a memorializing meditation on the attacks, in a way that earlier works cannot” (208); I largely agree, because in The Submission, Waldman takes the encounter in a new direction by thrusting a non-terrorist Muslim onto center stage, so that the imagined other becomes real and present. However, even the earlier works had been anticipating the encounter with the other, and Waldman’s novel continues the representational strategy of echoing within fiction what was destined to be an anti-Levinasian encounter because of all the trauma that white Americans accumulated on and after 9/11. Rather than imagining the Islamic threat as something “out there,” The Submission brings the threat home, which prompts the questions and reactions rooted in “ownership” of Ground Zero and of America. With their backlash stemming from the trauma, white Americans and white American mainstream culture are depicted as resolved on reversing all the progress made toward inclusion. Struggles such as the Civil War, the suffrage movement, and the civil rights movement, especially the activism
linked with race, are depicted (from the perspective of especially conservative, boorish Americans like Gallagher) as aberrations and impediments to the established supremacy of white Americans above all other domestic or foreign demographics of people.

White Americans’ treatment of Muslims as the adversarial other in the post-9/11 era is not an anomaly, but rather an illustration of the long-standing conservative American approach to enabling American exceptionalism for Caucasian Americans while stripping the constitutional rights of whoever is considered politically the central other at that moment. Historical instances of Americans creating an adversarial other bring to mind the demonization and genocide of Native Americans, the complete disregard for human rights in the creation of the Japanese internment camps during World War II, and the McCarthyist vilification of communists in the 1940s and 50s. As with previous instances of division appearing within American society, white Americans attempt to strip constitutional rights from Muslims by appealing to the enormity of the occasion. Waldman’s depiction of Islam and Muslims displays the same structural positioning of the othered as do Foer’s and DeLillo’s novels (as well as anticipating the treatment of Muslims in John Updike’s Terrorist), and therefore The Submission is most suitably seen on a “Great American Novel-renewing” continuum that addresses the post-9/11 “Muslim Question” and represents a historical trend rather than as an iconoclastic fictional statement. In the dénouement, Waldman also depicts a post-9/11 culture that is itself entertaining ideas to address the “Muslim Question” by death (Anwar’s murder) or ostracism (Khan’s vilification

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9 Waldman depicts mainstream American culture in her novel as viewing Anwar as a transplanted “noble savage” figure, the last of the morally-upright Muslims who deserved white Americans’ respect—until she stops deserving that as soon as she is “outed” as a non-American. Anwar’s placement, of course, is also Waldman’s critique of post-9/11 mainstream American culture’s rather depressing stance that the only truly good Muslim is a dead Muslim. Moreover, by juxtaposing her loss with that of Burwell’s, the novel portrays the artificiality and absurdity of considering the suffering and the status of an American citizen worth more than those of a non-American one, let alone more than the suffering and status of one American compared to that of another.
and self-exile)\textsuperscript{10} as mechanisms of dealing with those who refuse to accept their status as 
adversarial others.

In *The Submission*, the more liberal white Americans feel themselves hampered by other 
forces opposing their mechanisms of occlusion as well: the very values of merit and equality, and 
the law of the country, that they hold dear as Americans. To uphold their vision of a just and 
merit-based society, these liberal Americans need the spectre’s acquiescence, his submission, 
and his willing withdrawal from the public space from which they wish to cast him out; and parts 
of their appeal and pressure—even while vilifying him—are directed straight at him, begging, 
and demanding him to agree with them. Waldman depicts in this quandary that the erasure of 
Muslims from the United States is impossible without the consent of the Muslims, which is why 
repression and appropriation have failed.

The assemblage of the novels in this dissertation demonstrates that the mechanisms used 
to occlude Muslims in post-9/11 United States are exhibited as a variety, a veritable menu of 
options: Foer, DeLillo, and Waldman, in works that connect directly to the Great American 
Novel ethos, have recorded and imagined these early stages of white Americans addressing the 
“Muslim Question” by trying to “do away” with Muslims and Islam from the United States: first 
by denying their existence; then by engaging with them in limited and often fantastical ways; and 
then, when actually confronted by Muslims, by attempting to cordon them off from at least the 
public sphere. In the final chapter of this dissertation, I will examine the next variety of occlusive 
mechanisms in John Updike’s *Terrorist*, which features a post-9/11 suspicion turned into actual 
terrorist threat. I will demonstrate that the attempt to enforce secularization on the Muslim is 

\textsuperscript{10} Explicit introduction of death as a possible resolution to “the Muslim Question” in the United States—while also 
sustaining unease with, and suspicion of, an American Muslim far away from the homeland—references the United 
States’ uneasy relationship with the predominantly Muslim Middle East and of the lack of acknowledgement of 
absolute and unquestioned American exceptionalism by all other countries.
another partially-failed attempt to mitigate the trauma of 9/11. Just as repression, appropriation, and the adversarial othering of Muslims fail and even collapse when confronted by reality, enforcing secularity on Muslims also backfires on Anglo Americans because it is based in the naïve hope that all fundamentalist Muslims can be converted to secularism if they can be shown the light. The failure of such hope diminishes rather than increases the sense of security and comfort for white Americans, and it compromises rather than protects their utopian vision of the United States, pushing that vision further into the realm of fantasy. In depicting this process, post-9/11 “Muslim Question” novels collectively demonstrate that the hyper-conservative relapse in American politics and arts as reaction to the trauma of 9/11 is a dead end.
Chapter 4.

Losing Their Religion: Enforced Secularization in John Updike’s *Terrorist*

**Introduction**

John Updike (1932-2009) graduated from Harvard University in 1954, after which he swiftly homed in on literary targets and achieved them, including working for *The New Yorker*, and then writing and publishing prolifically in multiple modes. In all, he published more than seventy books, including novels, and collections of short stories, poetry, essays, and articles.¹ Like DeLillo, Updike is considered a Great American Novelist especially for his four *Rabbit* novels, which feature everyman Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom and his lifelong quest to find meaning and fulfillment against the backdrop of major historical events of the twentieth century’s second half. Updike won Pulitzers for two of the *Rabbit* novels, and his other awards include two National Book Awards, the National Medal of Arts, the National Humanities Medal, as well as a 2008 Jefferson Lecture, the U.S. government’s highest honor for achievement within the humanities. Most of Updike’s work is characterized by its focus on—and from the viewpoint

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¹ It would be remiss of me to exclude David Foster Wallace’s comment on Updike’s output: “Has the son of a bitch ever had one unpublished thought?” (qtd. in Menand).
of—average white suburban American men who suffer from existential angst and explore extramarital libidinal excursions. His status as a supposed Great American Novelist would suffice to keep his reputation intact within the twenty-first century, but Updike also wanted to leave a mark on post-9/11 literature. This chapter will focus on Updike’s flexing of his literary clout to write *Terrorist* (2006), in which he addresses the “Muslim Question” as it lingers in the mid-distance of five years after the terrorist attack, and in which he offers a more successful and longer-lasting mechanism of occluding Muslims and Islam from the United States: secularization. Nothing less than the proposal of an absolute solution to the predicament could be expected from perhaps the most popular and most productive of all the so-called Great American Novelists who lived to see 9/11.

The study of *Terrorist* is an essential component of this dissertation not only because it brings to light a new mechanism of occlusion, but also because it depicts the legacy of Bush-era politics and the failures of previous hyper-conservative methods of occluding Muslims. Until the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, Islamist terrorism remained the foremost national security concern. Updike’s novel depicts this fear with references to 9/11 from the vantage point of a future in which most Americans have generally returned to quotidian concerns and tried to move past the attack, while only government officials keep vigil and warn the public if the national intelligence agencies suspect a potent threat emerging (Updike 32, 43). The plot of *Terrorist* is focused not on 9/11, but on whether such a terrorist act can recur within the United States if Islam and immigrant Muslims continue to exist within the country (236). In the novel, Updike uses the real-life US government threat-level indicators to create a rather straightforward plot, and he attempts “to write from the perspective of the ultimate Other” (Versluys 16), which in this case is not just a Muslim, but a Muslim on the verge of becoming a terrorist.
The novel’s plot is simple to the point of being simplistic. Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, the teenage son of an Egyptian father and an Irish-American mother, is a loner who feels inspired by Islamic spirituality and judges American culture and people harshly for their seeming obsessions with materialism. In the opening lines, he expresses the fear that secular Americans are godless “devils” who “seek to take away [his] God” (Updike 3). In Mulloy’s estimation, the American way of life is meaningless compared to the Quran-inspired Islamic life he wishes to lead.

Eventually radicalized by his mentors, Mulloy is goaded by his spiritual teacher, or imam, Shaikh Rashid, as well as by his Muslim employer, Charlie Chehab, to drive a rigged truck and blow it up in the Lincoln Tunnel under the Hudson River. Before and during the training for this event, Mulloy studies the Quran with his teacher, and converses clunkily with every character he encounters, commenting often with non-sequiturs on how vapid and unfulfilling he finds American culture and non-religious people (35, 67, 148). Attempting to help Mulloy reverse his trajectory of becoming a terrorist is his high school guidance counselor, Jacob Levy, a self-

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2 I believe Kristiaan Versluys’s ideas can be of use here: he voices the general belief that “[i]n the instantaneity of its horror and in its far-flung repercussions, 9/11 is unpossessable” (1), but he adds that “yet somehow it must be possessed” (2). By creating a much simpler plot in his re-iteration of 9/11 (one driver and one van instead of nineteen hijackers and multiple airplanes), Updike crafts an assimilable version of 9/11. Versluys is, unfortunately, right that in his attempt at simplification “[t]he problem Updike wrestles with can be formulated as follows: how to avoid a dichotomizing discourse, whereby, under the pressure of extreme circumstances, the world is simplistically divided into ‘us versus them’” (16).

3 Mulloy’s voice poses several problems for readers. He speaks in a stilted diction that operates on an artificial register. As example, consider these sentences he speaks out loud in conversation: “I am a good Muslim, in a world that mocks faith” (69), “I seek to walk the Straight Path… In this country, it is not easy. There are too many paths, too much selling of too many useless things” (148), “I of course do not hate all Americans. But the American way is the way of infidels. It is headed for a terrible doom” (39), and “I do not desire uncleanness” (185). Mulloy’s diction and syntax seem inauthentic and forced according to critics and reviewers including Sylvia Mathé, Christopher Hitchens, Sheikh (myself) and Catherine Morley. Mathé points out that perhaps more surprising, coming from a writer whose agility in prose shines through practically every page of his work, is the artificiality of the language he wrought for his teenage voice: Mulloy thinks and speaks in some kind of archaic version of the English language, formal and foreign-sounding at best, stilted and implausible at worst.

Updike eschewed an American voice for Mulloy, and instead made him vocalize his thoughts in what I consider badly translated Arabic or an Orientalist’s version of how an Arab American might speak. Mathé also notes quite astutely that the implication for this is not only poor rendering of an American character in an “artistic” artifact; it also has “ideological bearing” (Mathé) and consequences on how Terrorist depicts even the “home-grown” Muslim American as a different kind of human being.
proclaimed atheist with Jewish heritage. On the pretext of wanting urgently to guide Mulloy away from a career in trucking and back on an academic stream, Levy enters Mulloy’s personal life and begins an affair with his mother; on regular visits to Mulloy’s house, he finds out more about the fanaticism threatening to overtake the teenager’s belief system. In the final scene, Levy and Mulloy are both in the front seats of the truck that Mulloy is driving into the Lincoln Tunnel to explode it while Levy tries to talk him down from the proverbial ledge. Ironically, Levy too finds American culture as vapid and meaningless as Mulloy does, but he also cites it as a reason to live (301) when he argues against what he considers is Mulloy’s insipid belief in Islam. That Mulloy is impressionable is evident throughout, especially in how easily his imam convinces him to commit a terrorist act (237) and then how easily Levy’s ill-conceived chatter, and the sight of two children in the car ahead of his own rigged truck (301-3), convince the Muslim teenager not to press the button at the end. The novel ends with Mulloy coming full circle to the novel’s opening idea when he admits that he has lost his belief in God, and that an American has stolen it from him, but not before Levy convinces Mulloy to convert from Islam to “American-ness”, which is my understanding of the United States’ quasi-secular rationality informed by Judeo-Christian heritage (310). This conversion to “American-ness” connects *Terrorist* directly with the Great American Novel ethos, as it invokes De Forest’s “American Spirit” and the myth of American self-correction (Malone 11), which Levy uses invocations of to counter the menace of Islamic ideology.

While *Falling Man* and *The Submission* feature white Americans conceiving of Muslims as a monolithic horde from which terrorists can marshal new recruits, Updike in *Terrorist* actualizes that feared potential, depicting the worst fears of white Americans about the continued existence of Muslims in the United States. At first, Mulloy is not a terrorist, but he often
vocalizes his criticism of American culture and of his peers in school for their immersion within this culture. In his judgemental proclamations, he appears as a mirror image of terrorist-in-training Hammad from *Falling Man*, as both men create appropriated versions of the American other as viewed through the lens of what they consider Islam. Updike depicts Mulloy as a naïve, fatherless teenager whose search for a role model leads him to the terrorist-recruiting charlatan imam Rashid. Rashid is the mini-mastermind (miniscule relative to Osama Bin Laden) behind the terrorism plot. While Levy successfully converts Mulloy at the novel’s end, Rashid remains at large and continues to pose a threat (300). A third Muslim character in the novel, Charlie Chehab, is more laissez faire with his faith: he simultaneously helps to recruit Mulloy for the terrorist scheme (183) while encouraging him to violate part of his faith by having premarital sex (176). While recruiting Mulloy, Chehab operates under false pretenses; he works for the CIA, and it is his mission to ferret out any would-be terrorists by posing as a facilitator of terrorism (290). Chehab’s speech—unlike both Rashid’s and Mulloy’s—is un-stilted; it meshes with how an American-born Muslim might speak. Also, as indicated by his first name, “Charlie,” in his casual transgressions of the boundaries of his inherited faith and his working for the CIA, Chehab is thoroughly assimilated and secularized to an extent of which Levy would approve. It is just as unfortunate as Anwar dying in *The Submission*, then, that Chehab too ends up being killed (290), which is this novel’s rather uncritically-perpetuated idea that while sinister, believing Muslims like Rashid continue to live anonymously among Americans and out there in the world, the only truly good Muslim is a dead lapsed one.

Meanwhile, the conversion of the living Muslim remains a priority for this and other white Americans in post-9/11 novels. Mulloy is entirely different from Khan in Amy Waldman’s *The Submission*; whereas Khan was explicitly agnostic and not committing violence, Mulloy is
anti-secular and is training to become a terrorist. The treatment meted out to both by white Americans in their respective fictive universes, however, is similar—there are attempts to make them surrender their faith, and to convert them into decidedly secular members of the labor force. With the introduction of enforced secularization as a mechanism by which to mitigate some of 9/11’s trauma and to thwart further Islamist violence in the United States, Updike depicts Levy’s attempts as a more thorough occlusion of Islam and Muslims than those achieved by repression, appropriation, or the creation of an adversarial other. Converting Mulloy is akin to rendering him un-recruitable by the terrorist masterminds—it is an extraction of Mulloy from the enemy horde. With Levy thwarting Mulloy’s attempt at terrorism, Updike portrays the counselor’s secularization mechanism as a solution not just to save other Americans from Islamist terrorism, but also Muslims from Islam, thereby creating a mechanism of producing reliable members of the American labor force out of them. Updike depicts American secularization as the belief system of previously Christian or Jewish individuals who have lapsed, and who retain mostly cultural vestiges of their previous religious allegiances. Once Muslim Americans have had their ideology re-aligned with the process of American secularization, these ex-Muslims, now Arab Americans, will have their primary motivation changed from wanting to worship God or seeing the world through the lens of Quranic verses; instead, their main purpose will become what Anthony Giddens, drawing on Max Weber, sees as the secular worker’s “duty in day-to-day world” (xii).

In this chapter, I will focus on Levy’s uncomfortable confrontations with Mulloy’s belief in Islam, and on the counselor’s preaching American-ness (or American secularity) as a belief system to first counter and then replace the teenager’s religious ideology. I argue that despite not overtly exhibiting remnants of trauma from 9/11, Levy and other white Americans in Updike’s
novel are vigilant against such a spectacular terrorist act recurring. I have noticed a lack of critical attention to the fact that that Updike depicts Levy as a character suffering from the lingering, incompletely understood, and mostly unassimilated trauma of 9/11, which manifests as disenchantment with American culture and his life—and that Levy’s desire to restore safety to even a culturally-deficient United States stems from that trauma. Moreover, the mechanism Levy employs to address that trauma and mitigate his fear is to convert Mulloy to his own supposedly inert secular belief system, and thereby prevent more terrorism. However, I believe that rather than believing in true secularity (as in neutrality vis-à-vis religion), Levy has invested his faith, without perhaps knowing it, in a distorted version of secularization theory. Updike situates this supposed secularity within a critical context by positioning it as deeply entrenched in American liberal values, and it is mostly a religiously-based belief system because of its link to American-ness, and thereby to the United States’ Judeo-Christian heritage. I am especially interested in the ways Updike positions Levy as both symbol and proponent of secularization theory, which posits in general that as scientific progress increases in societies the influence of religion in the public sphere decreases (Pickel 5; Gorski 60), implying causation or at least correlation between the two processes. I will explore the counselor’s failure to understand his role in the conversion, and his misunderstandings about American notions of secularity. I will posit that Levy’s distrust of religion of all kinds, including his own Jewish heritage, is his reason for adhering to what he believes is complete secularization; however, his touting of American-ness as a belief system violates secularization and allows the religious implications of American-ness to persist in both subtle and overt ways within the national ideology, and thus position even contemporary Americans as believers in the idea that they are “God’s chosen people” (Weber 111). I will also critique how the occlusive mechanism in Terrorist is essentially a conversion from one faith to
another, so that the Muslim no longer remains an enemy “other” and instead becomes a reconfigured member of the salvaged, acceptable, racialized, ex-Islamic, quasi-Judeo-Christian Arab-American community that upholds the state’s dominant ideology of Judeo-Christian “secularity”. Updike’s direct response to the “Muslim Question” in this novel obviously plays with, and within, that collection of traditional ideas characteristic of the Great American Novel tradition: equality, freedom, merit, and American exceptionalism, not to mention the desire to capture what David Bradley, in a discussion of Richard Wright’s Native Son, called “an ineffably sad expression” of “what once were the realities of this nation” (207). The text of Terrorist proposes and (somewhat) critiques the idea that conversion to the state’s ideology is a solution that completely eradicates the threat of the Arab Muslim who has infiltrated the homeland. The proposed method is not a mechanism of mitigation, but one that is positioned as a final and complete removal of Islam and Middle Eastern Muslims by turning such Muslim Americans into secularized Arab Americans. To connect the various streams of my analysis, I will critique how Updike’s consummate solution to the “Muslim Question” provides a terminal point to the Bush-era variety of post-9/11 mechanisms of occlusion, while also noting that the conversion functions as self-deluding and naïve.

As the main creator of occlusion in the novel, Levy operates on a model of what Foucault would call “Enlightenment”, in which critical self-examination itself is seen as the highest intellectual ideal (“What Is Enlightenment?” 38). The counselor believes that his own ability to discern the vacuousness of American culture is an achievement afforded by American secularization, while Mulloy’s inability to critically examine his belief in Islam exhibits the unenlightened nature of Islamic ideology. As counsellor, Levy’s subject to teach is how to participate in the labor and academic forces after students graduate from high school, and he sees
it as his job to re-align the students like Mulloy who believe in a different ideology or epistemology. I will examine Levy’s preaching of secularity through his repetition of what Louis Althusser would call an ideological “hail” (105), to which Mulloy eventually responds positively. It is imperative to examine the counselor’s role as a member of the educational institution he represents, and to view that role and the educational institution through an Althusserian theoretical framework, which is centered on the state’s desire to uphold and perpetuate a single dominant ideology. Althusser proposes that schools and education are the most powerful of the Ideological State Apparatuses that support the dominant ideology of the state, and I will examine how Updike positions Levy as a functionary of the school and so able to influence Mulloy’s ideological training and realignment to the dominant American ideology.

Updike presents, critiques, and upholds in *Terrorist* a post-9/11 version of the American secular belief system and a proposal for what to do with Muslims and Islam in the United States, but critics including Catherine Morley, Lisa Hartnell and Anna Hartnell, and Peter Morey see the novel as lacking enough merit to be considered either a literary response to 9/11 or as an addition to the American literary canon. While noting that *Terrorist* features a refreshing literary representation of post-9/11 terrorism because it does not “privilege the category of ‘trauma’,” Hartnell and Hartnell also rue the missed opportunity for Updike to dismantle “the colonial binary” (479). Morley is more critical of Updike’s and other post-9/11 American novelists’ reinforcement of “trends that were already under way” in American fiction (“Introduction” 14)—as if 9/11 were just a minor speed bump and not a catastrophe that signaled the need for reflection about the United States’ international policies and national culture. Peter Morey is more forgiving of Updike’s attempt, urging that readers approach the novel as a statement of “desire to believe that disaster can be averted through a critical reading of texts and situations
that can bring about the ‘conversion’ of the miscreant” (55); however, even Morey allows that
the only successful aspect of the novel is “in presenting an appraisal of the contemporary
American materialist malaise” (24). While he places it within the larger frame of American
literature, Morey is more scathing in his criticism; he argues that the novel’s racial depictions
and “grotesquely stereotypical representations” reek of a “longing for a supposedly unified
culture of the past” (57) —a longing that hints at white American insecurity about contemporary
national race relations that hearken back to a much older race-related set of traumas, including
but not limited to the enslavement of Africans and the genocide of Indigenous peoples. I argue
that the novel’s simplistic plot, its reach back into the supposed innocence of the country’s
origin, and its conversion-therapy solution for impressionable Muslims indicates that Updike’s
proposed “complete solution” for the “Muslim Question” (preference being given to conversion
of Muslims rather than their extermination) is indicative of a desire to settle the quandry for
good, one in a series of variations that is part of the theme of the post-9/11 “Great American
Novel-renewing” thrust. The post-9/11 novel, with its imperative as a nation-building and
narrative-restoring cultural artifact linked to the Great American Novel ethos, especially in the
case of Updike’s novel, becomes—as DeLillo proposed such counternarratives to in his
manifesto—a weapon against Islamist terror. In becoming this tool of ideological conversion,
Updike’s Terrorist builds a rather supportive portrayal of ultra-conservative white American
responses to threats of terrorism, no matter how naïve their attempts at creating safety may be.

Critical Appraisal & Implications

Critical appraisal of Terrorist has tended to focus on the most obvious representational
strategies that Updike employs: on the author’s (mis)representation of the subjectivity of the
ultimate other, and on his shoe-horning of the titular theme into his usual novelistic concerns with middle-aged white American men’s obsession with sex and the state of American culture. David Martin Jones, M. L. R. Smith, Mita Banerjee, Kristiaan Versluys, Jeffrey Severs, Maryam Salehnia, Muhammad Safeer Awan, and Catherine Morley all point out Updike’s abject othering of Mulloy and Muslims, his diminishment of the Muslim character “to a variation of a familiar” (Severs 67), and his reinforcement of an “Orientalist and Neo-Orientalist binary opposition of the ‘Self’ / ‘the Other’” (Salehnia 484) to attempt a justification of a hierarchical difference between the two. Morley labels the novel a “failure” due to Updike’s inability “to get under the skin of the bomber” (“How Do We Write About This?” 718). Banerjee, meanwhile, makes a persuasive case for the novel and its writer advocating the repugnant idea “that the only legitimate reason to tell an ethnic story is the attempt to draw a psychological profile of the killer” (16). She cites the way Updike places whiteness in a hierarchy within which the salvation of Judeo-Christian faith “pivot[s]” on the whiteness of characters in the novel (17), and she sums up the novel as a study in “racial profiling” (19). Katherine Dodou notices that the othering works from both subjective positions in the novel; both Islamic religious leaders and American government representatives refer to each other as “cockroaches” and both “create moral justifications for violence against” the vermin (195); Dodou also invites a re-examination of the narrator’s ultimately advocated “assumptions of (moral) exceptionality underlying patriotic narratives of America” (196). Jo Lampert argues that Levy’s paternalistic urge to mentor Mulloy makes Levy believe that Mulloy “was never genuinely a true believer” in Islam; “to Jack he is just a grieving American” (184). In other words, Lampert believes that Levy is not converting Mulloy; he is merely shepherding a lost sheep back to the flock. Lisa Hartnell and Anna Hartnell (as has Banerjee) also notice the “recognizably Judeo-Christian culture” that Levy and other Americans pit against Mulloy’s
“values of Islam” (479), while Birgit Däwes observes that “the novel relies rather heavily on firmly drawn cultural boundaries, reinscribing the Judeo-Christian tradition as a religious and cultural norm” (507). Francis Blessington and Bob Batchelor credit Updike’s novel for creating “a framework for harshly critiquing American society and culture” (Batchelor 176), with Blessington noting that Mulloy’s idea of the United States as “cheap, boring, spiritless, and hypersexual… the world is that of Updike’s other novels [as] seen through the eyes of Islamic anger and judgement” (123). Versluys too sees Updike plugging a topical theme and his created other into a narrative that “recycles his familiar signature themes: religion, sex, adultery, [and] high school rivalries” (171). While I agree with most of these critical appraisals of Updike’s depiction of the Muslim other and the condescension white American characters exhibit toward people of other demographics in the novel, Levy must also be seen as one who critiques American culture while aiming for the lofty ideals of the original and perpetuated myths of American greatness—he wants that idealism to be reality, and he is attempting to convert Mulloy not to the morass of meaninglessness that he sees around him but to the ideals that he, naively, believes American life will reach one day. Reading him with such a lens, as one American among many others attempting to address the “Muslim Question” but one with absolute faith in the American project, would enable a much different understanding of his actions—and perhaps even build sympathy for his project to convert the Muslim other. As such, Levy could be read as simultaneously pursuing the pre- and post-9/11 Great American Novel ethos of examining the importance of the myth of innocence and purity as they are attributed to America, but in the most naïve way imaginable, as if there is no unconquerable obstacle in the way of either achieving the American Dream or of occluding Muslims and Islam from the United States.
Even as they criticize Updike’s novel for upholding the false nostalgia of a unified white American past, critics note also his meticulous, if tainted, research on Islam. Since Updike includes several ideas from Islam and multiple quotations from the Quran to depict what inspires and shapes Mulloy’s violent inclinations, some of the scholarship on the novel engages with the way Updike has chosen to quote the scripture. Awan counts “thirty-three” ayahs of the Quran quoted in the novel (521), and Versluys notes how prolifically Updike refers to the Quran, “sometimes with the panache of a show-off,” but that the result still comes across as “research rather than… lived experience” (171). Awan is more critical of the usage, which he sees as deployment based on an agenda; he accuses Updike of heavily implying “that the followers of the Qur’ān are irrational and cannot listen to or understand common reasoning and human counseling” (528) and that Mulloy’s terrorist inclinations are a direct result of his engagement with the Quran and Islam (530). Pirnajmuddin and Salehnia see Terrorist as perpetuating “Orientalist conceptions of Islam” and “in line with the dominant political discourse… focused on representing Muslims as ‘the others’ and Islam as a totalitarian and retrogressive religion which orders its adherents to use violence against unbelievers” (171). For this reason, they label the novel “blatantly propagandistic” (184). Batchelor lends credence to Pirnajmuddin and Salehnia’s idea of Terrorist as agenda-driven by citing Updike’s interview at the time of writing the novel, in which the author said, “I’m interested in Islam as a more fiery and absolutist, some would say, fanatical brand of theistic faith… I can kind of understand it, and I’m not sure too many Americans can” (qtd. in Batchelor 178). Whereas I have argued that writers such as DeLillo and Waldman depict the post-9/11 Islamophobia of white Americans to critique the trauma-based behaviour, it seems—given his stated prejudice—that Updike deploys criticisms of the religion in Terrorist to reinforce Islamophobia. At least on a surface reading, more so than to
any other novel I have examined in this dissertation, Awan’s analysis of the “agenda” of 9/11 novels seems to apply to *Terrorist*:

The ultimate goal that post-9/11 narratives written from a western perspective seek to achieve is that they present Muslims living in their midst as the ‘orient other’ that poses a danger to the society and therefore has no right to live there until and unless they assimilate themselves culturally into the western way of life [sic]. (532)

While I agree with Awan that Muslims in *Terrorist* appear as “the orient other”, I would argue that this is not the “ultimate goal” of 9/11 novels, and nowhere is this more apparent in *Terrorist*, though it indeed appears to be the most obviously Orientalist narrative among all the post-9/11 novels I have examined. However, even though Updike’s treatment of the Muslim subject obviously reeks of the “familiar binary between faith and reason” (Eaton 109), in that binary, it is necessary to examine what Updike upholds as “reason”.

The more intriguing idea is not what Updike, the narrator, and Levy are seeming to attack, but what they are attempting to salvage: America and American-ness. There is obvious naïveté, over-simplicity, and clumsiness in the treatment of the Muslim Mulloy’s conversion at the novel’s end, and Blessington finds it “unconvincing… probably more hope than expectation that such abdications will be the resolution of the terrorist dilemma” (123). But within this rather immature and naïve desire is also an optimism among traumatized (and lapsed) white Judeo-Christian Americans that the abdication by Muslims of their (obviously irrational and obviously violent) belief system (*their* lapsing) will bring reason, calmness, safety, and security back to the United States. The post-9/11 novels’ effort towards nation-building, and thereby their evocation of the ethos of the Great American Novel concept, must be understood in the light of this idea—that they are attempts at examining what it would take to return absolute security to the United
States, and any vilification of Islam or Muslims is a by-product and not the “ultimate aim” of that project. Levy, an everyman character critical of American culture’s slumbering decadence and meaninglessness, is an unlikely protagonist because of his rather non-heroic qualities and his belief in the insignificance of anything America stands for; however, I want to focus more on the implications for the concept of the Great American Novel that Updike depicts the otherwise ordinary Levy as successful in both his attempts: preventing another 9/11, and converting the Muslim character away from an ideology that promotes violence.

**Post-Post-9/11 Muslims as the Other**

In the timeline depicted in *Terrorist*, set five years after 9/11, Muslim Americans once again seemingly enjoy public and private freedom even though an underlying structure of suspicion pervades the culture, as exhibited by the minor taunts directed at them and the overarching government surveillance that targets them specifically. Bureaucratically, Mulloy is fully incorporated within the American systems of education and employment; he is enrolled in school and, after graduating, can get his trucking license without any suspicion or any mention of his religious beliefs (Updike 140). But there are more subtle mechanisms at play in the post-9/11 power dynamics of the fellow high school students with whom Mulloy socializes. Cynthia White Tindongan notes:

Navigating multiple identities between one's family setting and mainstream U.S. culture is demanding. Living in the liminal space of the adolescent developmental processes of emerging identities and the public school environment is highly complex and often a confusing state of mind for young people. Growing up requires walking through emotional mine fields at best, but for immigrant students from marginalized groups the
journey may be daunting… [an] increase in negative sentiment puts Muslim immigrants, including public school students, at continual risk of narrow and erroneous belief systems and discriminatory actions… Muslim students feel rejected by their own country. (79, 81, 84)

In the narrative voice of the novel, Updike depicts Mulloy as uncomfortable about his place within popular culture. There are some instances of Mulloy being singled out for both his race and his religion by other Americans. A school bully, with the ironic name of Tylenol, mocks Mulloy by calling him “Arab” as a metonym for Mulloy’s racial background as half-Egyptian, and for his belief in Islam (15-16, 97). Levy and Mulloy’s own mother, Teresa, also tease the teenager about his faith (95, 141), and though their taunts are less hostile and more sarcastic, they could be labeled micro-aggressions because of their pointed humor. Sunaina Maria notes that because their “religious and national affiliations are [now] politically charged issues, Muslim youth” already “grappl[e] with issues of displacement, belonging, and exclusion that extend[s] well before and after 2001, but [are] heightened in the post-9/11 moment” (700).

Besides the regular politics of being seen and scrutinized in high school, unknown to all the principal characters, a governmental surveillance system that monitors threats to the nation at large, with a special focus on domestic threats from Muslims and Islam, is also monitoring Mulloy. Foucault points out that for “subjects” of the state, their “visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised,” and that “this fact of being constantly seen, of being able to always be seen, … maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection” (Discipline and Punish 187). Levy’s discovery of Mulloy’s intention to bomb the Lincoln Tunnel depends directly on this surveillance of Muslims in the United States. In initial mentions of the surveillance, the Homeland Secretary frets about Muslims as “the enemies of freedom” (Updike 43), a phrase that
echoes George W. Bush’s unsophisticated proclamation about Islamist terrorists carrying out their acts because they hate America’s “freedoms” (“Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation”). Homeland Security employee Hermione reveals over the phone to her sister, Levy’s wife, that “most reports” of possible terrorist activity are coming in from “northern New Jersey” where “some imams… preach terrible things against America… advocating violence against the state” (Updike 134). Eventually, she makes the connection between one specific imam and a “young Arab-American” that Levy had mentioned to his wife, the boy who “had gotten a licence to drive a truck because the imam at his mosque had asked him to” (265). Although Mulloy acquires the license legally and with due process, his being a Muslim and under the influence of a New Jersey imam makes him a terrorist suspect in the eyes of the government, which indicates that the surveillance mechanism singles out and reaches into the personal lives and daily activities of Muslims. The implication of this structure of simultaneously surveilling and allowing freedom to Muslims is that while not overtly threatened enough by Muslims in Terrorist, white Americans still harbor a latent distrust, if not fear, of them, and the bureaucratic structures and civilians conduct a silent war on terror within the US borders even as the US military is in the larger war in Afghanistan and Iraq (Maria 701). In effect, Updike’s fictive United States in Terrorist lies somewhere early in the twenty-year post-9/11 continuum imagined

4 Sally Wesley Bonet posits that one reason for the post-9/11 Muslim youth disengagement from active citizenship can also be rooted in the USA PATRIOT Act, a federal law designed and implemented after the terrorist attacked [sic] of 9/11… [which] has contributed to the over-targeting of Arabs and Arab-American families and students, and has had damaging effects on their educational outcomes, psychosocial well-being and sense of nation and belonging. (Bonet 46)

Updike positions Mulloy in a disaffected and hyper-critical stance against American culture without mentioning the new law that critics see “as a dangerous encroachment on civil liberties guaranteed by the Bill of Rights” (47). Not only does the law provide cover for the government to surveil Muslim American youth, it also by extension enables an added layer of scrutiny, and even ostracism of them from their social networks, based only on suspicion. But Updike’s “solution” to the terrorist implies that he—like other heralded writers in the post-9/11 moment—condones the oxymoronic idea that (especially Muslim) “citizens [should] surrender certain individual freedoms to a government in exchange for the guarantee that their liberties will be secured” (Bonet 47-48).
by Amy Waldman in *The Submission*, between white America’s persecution and ostracism of Khan and its celebration of his achievements two decades later. Here in *Terrorist*, set five to six years after 9/11, the American government’s surveillance of Muslims is ongoing. However, as Foucault points out, “[s]urveillance is permanent in its effect, even if it is discontinuous in its action” (*Discipline and Punish* 201). The Muslims once labeled suspect after 9/11 never really leave the list, and a visible Muslim working in America is even more threatening and under stricter surveillance.

The status of Muslims changes with the passage of time within the post-9/11 interventions into the concept of the Great American Novel I have so far examined in this dissertation, and along with these changes the mechanisms of Muslim occlusion changes as well. In *Terrorist*, five years on from the 9/11 attack, Mulloy is the kind of Muslim tolerated by white Americans in Updike’s fictive universe—the Muslim teenager is out of the national limelight and working within the system as a partially educated and skilled member of the labor force. But Levy begins suspecting Mulloy and mentions him to the security apparatus through the counselor’s sister-in-law especially because of the boy’s strong belief in Islam. This time, though, removing the Muslim from the limelight or from the labor force into state detention is not enough; even his religious ideology must be erased. The mechanisms of occlusion vary as the status of Muslims changes in the timeline depicted by these novels. Whereas repression and appropriation were mostly *internal* mechanisms *within* white Americans, the creation of an ultimate other and the enforced secularization of that other are *internal as well as externalizing* mechanisms of occlusion, and they are enacted *upon* the Muslim other.

Updike’s novel puts forth the idea that Muslims, left to their own devices and their own ideology, cannot be trusted, because they will always veer toward terrorism—so they must be
actively converted away from the religion. As with other post-9/11 novels addressing the “Muslim Question”, by concentrating on assigning blame and dismantling the Muslim other’s internal belief system rather than finding solutions to what ails themselves, traumatized white Americans of the fictive universe of *Terrorist* miss a crucial opportunity to enact the ideals of the oft-touted American national liberties. Beyond failing to enact the country’s liberal ideals, traumatized white Americans such as Levy perform “colonial practices” that “continue to perpetuate power imbalances” against immigrants (Homi Bhabha qtd. in Tindongan 74). But the power imbalance is precisely what helps Updike’s protagonists “solve” the Muslim issue here. I propose that in his attempt to delineate the spirit of the country that can rally the American masses, Updike portrays the American nation geared up to provide a decisive solution to the Muslim issue, which links his work further to the concept of the Great American Novel serving to rally the nation’s American spirit. The secularization solution is contrived, obviously, because the proposed conversion needs to be so thorough and so successful as to be idealistic for white Americans who have a blanket fear of Arab-looking Muslims—but that is entirely the point of Updike’s proposal, that the ultimate ideal is what should be reached for, without stopping along the way for half-measures like repression or appropriation; the Muslim must be convinced to not be a Muslim anymore—that is the only solution to the “Muslim Question”. The “Great” in the phrase Great American Novel demands such a grand solution for Updike, and he provides it in Levy’s grand and yet everyman solution to the overwhelming menace of the would-be terrorist.

**Secularization Theory and Levy’s Preaching**

Secularization theory is the range of ideas associated with the belief in the inevitability of secular enlightenment’s prevailing over religiosity. The theory, which “has been the dominant
paradigm in studies of religion,… focuses on the ‘demand’ for religion and predicts that religion will decline as societies develop” (Dhima and Golder). A most damning criticism of secularization theory is that “there is no theory” (Lechner 1105); however, it is worth examining especially because of its pervasive hold on American cultural ideas of progress, and especially here in my research for how Levy deploys it as a mechanism for occluding Islam in Terrorist. To define secularization as a process and to envision a consensus between theorists of secularization are both difficult endeavors, because the extent of the removal of religion in the process differs according to scholars (Fokas). Detlaf Pollack, Altinordu Gorski, Gert Pickel, and others present the generally accepted idea that secularization and its theorists focus on “the fundamental tension between modernization and religion,” and that “[t]he place of religion is no longer at the center of everyday life, but on the edge of it (if at all)” (Pickel 5). Some of the theory’s scholars further assume that eventually any “religious darkness will give way to secular enlightenment” (Gorski 60). Mark Chaves nuances discourse on the theory by positing that “[s]ecularization is best understood not as the decline of religion but as the declining scope of religious authority” (750). Critics of the belief that societies move, inevitably and teleologically, toward secularity argue that the relationship between rationality and the decline of religious influence on individuals or states is neither a linear one nor is it dichotomous. Pollack’s observation that individuals and even state ideology sometimes view modern ideas and institutions with what appears to be religious reverence (61) is pertinent to the discussion of Levy’s embrace of American-ness as a religion. Americans often view even symbols of American secularity, such as the Declaration of Independence, the US Constitution, and the office of the American President, with religious veneration, so that when these are “desecrated” the American response is one of self-righteous indignation articulated using religious diction—for example, when Ground Zero appears as holy
space in *The Submission* (Waldman 5). While critics of secularization theory see modernity and religion as merely “compatible” (Pollack 61), I would posit (the rather obvious point) that faith in American modernity, progress, or secularization is itself a belief system and an ideology and that American nationalist ideas about these are akin to fundamentalism. Therefore, it should not be surprising that further criticism of secularization theory posits that “fundamentalism itself is a response to secularization” (Bryan 60) and that “fundamentalism constitutes a genuine and surprising reversal of the very process of secularization” (Lechner 1113). Since secularization keeps coming up against fundamentalism as an oppositional force, the idea that secularization will eliminate religion eventually seems a mere pipe dream. Bruce Ledewitz makes the further critique that Americans’ efforts to secularize their political and bureaucratic processes is only to pay “lip service” (xi) to the idea, because political election cycles are becoming “more religiously oriented” (xii) and because the unstated but rather obvious Judeo-Christian streak within “American constitutional law st[ands] in the way of any serious engagement of secularism with religion” (xiii). Within the United States, supposedly objective and rational notions of history and ideals of progress are so thoroughly infused with Judeo-Christian beliefs that, in *Terrorist*, Levy’s perception of a clash between Mulloy’s Islam and Levy’s American secularity is in fact a fictional representation of the attack of a threat-bearing Islamist ideology on “what is recognizably a Judeo-Christian culture” (Hartnell and Hartnell 479). By depicting Levy as confident that he understands American national culture’s flaws, but not going any further in examining that supposedly secular culture’s underlying religious nature in his critique of Islam, Updike misses a chance to examine the true dichotomy of power play (the tensions between supposedly secular culture and the nation’s underlying religious culture) in the novel.
In *Terrorist*, the dichotomy of the United States’ version of secularity and religiosity is depicted as generational and inherited for both Levy and Mulloy, and for each of them the dichotomy is manifested in strong oppositional tones. While Mulloy believes his embrace of Islam is a conscious choice made as a young adult (Updike 85), it is no coincidence that the religion he begins to practice is the same one he believes his estranged father follows. Similarly, Levy’s belief system is an inherited one. Levy’s father was “a scoffer” (42) and his grandfather “hated Judaism” and “blamed religion for the world’s misery” (295); the counselor implies that his anti-religious views come from them as an inherited understanding of the world:

His grandfather had shed all religion in the New World, putting his faith in a revolutionized society, a world where the powerful could no longer rule through superstition, where food on the table, decent housing and shelter, replaced the untrustworthy promises of an unseen God. (295)

Levy’s secularity and his belief in, and practice of, the value of secularization is not the removal of belief, but an alternate belief system in which he and his ancestors have placed “faith”. The patriarchs of his family have replaced intangible “superstition” and “untrustworthy promises” with a focus on fulfilling their material needs. For Levy, this empirical approach to belief works and provides security because the materiality of abundant food and adequate shelter (his secular ideals) is verifiable, and hence rational, whereas religions require believers to be satisfied with textual, empirically-unverifiable promises of reward for behaviour or actions that cannot be measured, such as “goodness”, and that reward is often deferred to the afterlife, as in Islamic theology. The counselor is a strong supporter of secularization and champions the main argument of the theory, that “religious darkness will give way to secular enlightenment” (Gorski 60). He relates to his family’s lapsed Judaism as though it is part of the process of enlightenment.
spreading among religious people, and he implies that his own mission to disabuse religious Americans is a mission of spreading rational thought. William H. Swatos points out that secularization theory’s proponents hold an underlying, unexamined assumption: that in the past “people were significantly more religious than they are today” (219). This assumption creates a hope among secularity’s believers that steady technological progress will eliminate religion altogether. Jack Levy in Terrorist is symbolic of this hope for secularity and rationality’s eventual overcoming of any irrational beliefs, especially ones upheld by religious people who mean to harm the United States. But since Levy believes so strongly in secularity, and opposes all religions, he becomes an uncritical proselytizer of a reductionist belief system and refuses to examine the faith-based underpinnings of the ideology he inherits and preaches.

Underlying the processes and assumptions of Levy’s embodiment of secularization theory is a more complex power struggle partly focused on pitting secularity against religion and partly focused on reasoning from different perspectives. Lechner posits that since “Western societies have been most affected by processes of rationalization, they have become deeply secularized” (1104). While I agree with Lechner to some extent, the idea that all non-Western ideologies are antithetical to rationalization and progress is a rather Orientalist one. But Updike nuances the representation of Muslim rationality in Terrorist: Mulloy’s Americanized Muslim mentor, Charlie Chehab, is annoyed not by the American government’s opposition to Islam as a religion, but by his concern with how “Western powers steal our oil… take our land” (Updike 188). Even when Mulloy interjects with an addition, “They take our God,” Chehab reverts to the secular concerns he has: “Yes, I guess so. They take from Muslims their traditions and a sense of themselves, the pride in themselves that all men are entitled to” (188). While Mulloy is focused on how his faith is being attacked (3, 310), Chehab’s attention is on the emasculation of Muslims
via the West’s extraction of their material wealth, and on “universal” liberal values “that all men [sic] are entitled to”. Whereas Mulloy’s concerns are depicted as one-dimensional, abstract, and based on his religious inclinations alone, Updike depicts the Americanized Chehab as more concerned with the status of Muslims in the political and cultural milieu of the United States, and, in the vein of the materialist Levy, concerned with material well-being of Muslims and rights of Muslim countries over their own natural resources. Chehab’s critique of the western powers’ exploitation of Muslim lands is a rational critique that, presumably, western secular education provides him the means to access and create. Chehab, because of his assimilation into an Americanized Enlightenment which affords him the ability to think critically, is positioned as the preferable kind of Muslim, one with whom reasoning is possible. Like Levy, he appears to operate in a Foucauldian mode of Enlightenment, which features most of all a rational and “permanent critique of our historical era” (“What is Enlightenment?” 38).

Besides positioning Chehab as a preferable kind of Muslim, Updike also depicts the Quran as a text that promotes violence and is irrational, while also suggesting a hierarchy of scriptures by positioning, in the epigraph, a single, overarching quotation from the Bible. In instances when the narration quotes the Quran, it is shown as promising and promoting violence in the afterlife from a “Crushing Fire” or from the “heavens split[ting] asunder” (Updike 6, 47), or heavenly rewards of bliss from “dark-eyed virgins” (170) that “one cannot imagine without concrete images” (71), as well as “houris chaste as hidden pearls: a guerdon for their deeds” (170). In another instance, the Quran is quoted as saying “God giveth you life, then causeth you to die: then he will assemble you on the day of resurrection: there is no doubt of it” (175). In all these instances of quoting the Quran, the narrative is positioning Mulloy either discussing these verses with his imam Rashid, or revising them for himself. They focus on the apocalyptic and the
Islamic belief in an inevitable afterlife. This cherry-picked set of verses is appropriate to inculcate the idea that the Quran is only focused on the eschatological, but the violent images of “crushing fire” and firmaments splitting apart mention nothing of what a human being’s duty is in Islam. The Quran is replete with verses that describe human psychology, but imam Rashid’s teaching is neither comprehensive about other facets of Islam, nor focused on what the Quran most asks humans to do: pray, practice regular charity, and build a strong and upright character. Again, this delimited reading of the scripture is appropriate training for the terrorist that imam Rashid wants to create out of the impressionable Mulloy, so Updike has shown appropriately, in what Versluys calls “‘research rather than… lived experience’ (Versluys 171), which the act of uncontextualized and less-informed selecting from the Quran can produce. By contrast, Updike positions the Bible as a different kind of text and scripture, by quoting only one line within the epigraph of the novel while also posting a secular excerpt from Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s novel, Of Love and Other Demons right next to it:

> And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.
> And the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?” –Jonah 4:3-4
> Disbelief is more resistant than faith because it is sustained by the senses. –Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Of Love and Other Demons (Updike)

These are not the narrator’s choices but Updike’s, so they must be understood and critiqued as authorial interventions into the novel’s structure. In my own 2006 review of Terrorist, I have noted because of this singular presence of a quotation from the Old Testament, Updike creates a hierarchical positioning of scriptures in the novel:

The book's two epigraphs are unsuitable, not for their content, but for their overarching threat to the structure of the novel. One of the epigraphs is a quote from the Bible, the
only quote from Christian and Judaic scripture. And it is in contemporary translation (meaning no thee's and thou's), whereas the Quranic translations within the novel are all in older English (with lots of lofty, distancing thee's and thou's). The juxtaposition [and hierarchical positioning]... extinguishes the hopes for an understanding illumination. (Sheikh).

Besides creating a distance and a distinction between the scriptures, Updike also combines the Judeo-Christian Bible with a secular text’s touting of secularity. Had Updike used the Quran itself as a source for anti-violence, perhaps it would have shown that Mulloy’s cherry-picked understanding of Islam is a limited one. But positioning “disbelief” and calmness (as opposed to “anger”) as better and as solution-oriented ways of countering the problems posed by the Quran, Updike upholds his vision of Islam as “as a more fiery and absolutist, some would say, fanatical brand of theistic faith” (qtd. In Batchelor 178). Decontextualized or appropriative quoting of Islamic scripture without providing a summary is not uncommon among white American novelists writing after 9/11, as also indicated by DeLillo’s misquoted, summative excerpting from the Quran. This is not to slight Updike’s or DeLillo’s methods, but rather to indicate that the need for white Americans to mitigate the trauma of 9/11 is evident not only among novels’ characters, but also among their writers.

Another major overarching textual element of the novel indicates a post-9/11 shift in the Great American Novel tradition’s concerns and its compilation of the American national endeavor to move past the terrorist attack. The novel is not titled The Terrorist; its title is simply the one word “Terrorist”, and in this way it hearkens back to the index card system that Oskar encounters in his quest to find meaning in his father’s death in Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close. Whereas in that index card system the word “terrorist” is not available
as a label to indicate the profession or action of any individual, this one-word metonymic link in the title of Updike’s post-9/11 novel seems to provide a closing of the loop started in Foer’s novel, just as conversion away from Islam provides closure and finality to the Muslim problem that Oskar actively attempts to repress without success. That both novels are considered major entries into the so-called Great American Novel’s depiction of a post-9/11 pluriverse is not a coincidence, but instead an indication of how singularly the concept of “the American Spirit” seems to focus on the need to mitigate the trauma unleashed by the terrorist attack.

**Ideological State Apparatuses & Mulloy’s Muslim Labor**

By depicting the US government and culture’s tacit monitoring and coercing of Muslims in *Terrorist* as a seamless continuation of the Bush-era’s policy of overtly othering Muslims within the country, Updike unintentionally demarcates the gullibility of believing that American secularism is religiously neutral, the absurdity of considering secular authority figures objective and ideologically neutral, and the fragility of white Americans’ hope to avert future Islamist terrorism through the removal of Islam from the United States, all of which collapses in the face of the novel’s Islamist terrorist mastermind remaining at large at the end of *Terrorist*. Updike’s methodology to represent the “Muslim-American” as an oxymoronic hyphenation from the perspective of white Judeo-Christian-secular Americans is to at first make these white Americans (without facing their trauma) admit their fears of 9/11 recurring, and then to position them as preachers of their ideology to the Muslim other with the aim of converting them into “ordinary” members of the labor force and “secular” members of American society. Constructing such an ideologically-charged narrative, Updike exposes how easy it is in the post-9/11 era to dismantle
popular culture’s quasi-religiously held belief that there is (and has been) acceptance, tolerance, and even a welcoming of differences and diversity within liberal American values.

An implication of the ideological re-alignment of Muslims is the further dismantling of American liberal values when their conversion is seen through an Althusserian lens. The French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser argues that “[a]ll Ideological State Apparatuses, whatever they are, contribute to the same result: the reproduction of the relations of production, i.e. of capitalist relations of exploitation” (96). By Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), Althusser means “a certain number of realities which represent themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions” (92), and these range from educational, to political, legal, and even familial ISAs (110). Even though ISAs appear to operate independently from the state’s ideological leanings, and sometimes apparently even contradict them, eventually all the ISAs combined serve the purpose of perpetuating the ideology of the state and “of the ruling class” (95). In other words, the co-opted effect, if not the inherent purpose, of the operations of these apparatuses is to maintain the economic and financial status quo, and to prevent the emancipation of any subjugated labor class or marginalized community. Slavoj Žižek too points out how deceptively ISAs work, so that the end effect is that “[i]deology is strong exactly because it is no longer experienced as ideology… we feel free because we lack the very language to articulate our unfreedom” (2). While being presented with the state’s ideology enacted as an individual or an institutional ethical framework, it is no longer easy to distinguish the layers of interpellation.

In *Terrorist*, the most obvious ISAs with which Mulloy interacts are the educational institutions he attends, one in the form of the school and the other the mosque where Rashid teaches him Islamic theology. Richard D. Wolff points out that ISAs “such as families, churches,
schools, mass media, and so on all ‘call’ individuals in particular ways that prescribe and enforce (a) thinking in specific ways about their identities, their relationships with other individuals, and their connections to social institutions, and (b) acting accordingly” (225). Between the authority figures presented to him by the mosque and by the school, Mulloy in his subjective position is encouraged by each to be deceptive to the other. As student counselor at Mulloy’s school, Levy represents an extension of an American educational ISA within the novel’s framework. Meanwhile, Rashid is depicted as having significant authority over Mulloy’s interpretation of the Quran and Islam. The imam keeps putting the United States in a binary with Islam while explaining the religion to Mulloy:

The atheist Western scholars in their blind wickedness allege the Sacred Book to be a shambles of fragments and forgeries slapped together in expedient haste and arranged in the most childish order possible… They claim to find endless obscurities and cruces. For example, there has been a recent, rather amusing controversy… the enchanting youths, likened to scattered pearls, cited in the sura called ‘Man’ should be rendered ‘chilled raisins’ referring to a cooling raisin drink served with elaborate courtesy in paradise while the damned drink molten metal in Hell. I fear this particular revision would make Paradise significantly less attractive for many young men. What say you to that, as a comely young man?... even if the dark-eyed houris are merely white raisins, does that lessen your appetite for Paradise? (Updike 106-7)

Rashid’s presentation of contemporary Qur'anic interpretations in the novel is seemingly to provide the range of opinions on the scripture’s text, but the way he positions the Western interpretation as “blind” and “wicked” colors the interpretation as nefarious and ill-willed. Using such a pejorative view of “Western” scholarship, he is able to successfully position the opinions
as rhetorical questions to which Mulloy can only answer “I thirst for paradise” and assert that his “appetite for Paradise” is not whittled down one little bit (106-7). In the presentation of either ideology by the ISAs, Mulloy is being groomed for something; Levy is attempting to create a valuable secular member of the labor force, while Rashid is attempting to make not a worker but a soldier, a suicide bomber out of him.

Even the fundamental binary of religion versus state is not an insignificant representation in Terrorist, because, according to Althusser, while the foremost ISA used to be the Church, the most dominant contemporary ISA is now “the School,” which “is coupled with the Family just as the Church was once coupled with the Family” (98). David I. Backer elaborates on this idea by describing the magnitude and scale of the process:

The way schools take, drum, and eject students into production—and the duration and repetition of that process—combined with the commonsensical necessity of schooling for success in the economy, exerts a concentrated reproductive force through its practices. This unique concentration of reproductive force gives schools a pride of place in the ensemble of ISAs in modern capitalist societies. (57)

As the sole representative of the school who stays in contact with Mulloy beyond his graduation, Levy continues to exert the power of re-aligning Mulloy’s ideology in Terrorist. He literally couples with Mulloy’s mother, reinforcing the relationship between the school as ISA and the family as ISA, thus creating direct and emphatic impact through his physical as well as ideological penetration. Before this intrusion into Mulloy’s home with the excuse of caring for his post-education future, Levy acts as what Foucault would label a “teacher-judge” and “educator-judge” of the teenager (Discipline and Punish 304). After this intrusion as a kind of social worker, Levy enforces another level of the ideological state apparatus; he also becomes a
Foucauldian “‘social worker’-judge”—and “it is on them,” these kinds of everyday judges within a person’s network of interaction, Foucault asserts “that the universal reign of the normative is based” (*Discipline and Punish* 304). Levy judges, in all his roles, Mulloy’s Islam as deviant, and he preaches to him the “American” way of life, American-ness, as the normative.

Just as successful as his physical penetration of Mulloy’s home and family, but also just as ethically questionable, is Levy’s ideologically-charged intrusive querying of Mulloy’s belief system and his constant dismissal of the student’s chosen faith. As both a representative of the educational ISA and as an educator himself, Levy goes beyond—and even against—the scope of his duty to provide counsel and feedback on not just practical options for education and employment open to Mulloy after high school but also regarding religious matters, on which Levy has neither the expertise nor an ethical position to impart advice. In their first encounter, when Mulloy mentions that he studies “the sacred Qur’an” with Rashid at the mosque, Levy is revolted, though he “tries to suppress his distaste” (Updike 37). This phrasing is not only indicative of Levy’s inherent disapproval of Mulloy’s religiosity; it also signals his discomfort at a rival apparatus of beliefs and ideology—one that does not uphold or perpetuate the same ideology of American-ness that Levy is ultimately working to support. It is perhaps the fact that Mulloy attaches the word “sacred” to the Quran that rankles the counselor most, because it indicates the teenager’s willful allegiance to a supposedly anti-American ideology. Levy’s first instinct is to show tolerance despite his distaste, because that is the appropriate American liberal response: to accept and even embrace belief systems different from the state’s sanctioned Judeo-Christian secularity. However, Levy’s tone becomes “bristly” without his meaning to make it so, until he admits he wishes Western culture were truly “Godless” (38). This entirely religious digression in the conversation is inappropriate territory for a school counselor, and Levy knows
it—it is outside the scope of his job as a student counselor in an American public school (and as an agent of the educational ISA) to provide counseling on the student’s faith and religion, or to talk about religion at all. Recognizing his own ethical breach, Levy backtracks to a safer topic by asking Mulloy whether Mulloy’s religious teacher also guides him to consider and “confront a variety of viewpoints” within the “diverse and tolerant” American society (39). Levy can ignore his own distaste with Mulloy’s belief in the Qur’an by invoking the American liberal ideals, though the counselor fails to adhere to these principles when he begins discouraging Mulloy from continuing to be a Muslim. Levy’s personal bias against religiosity, and especially against Islam, comes up again at the end of that first conversation as he asks Mulloy directly whether “God—Allah—is very real” for the teenager (42), again veering into territory that breaches the secular norms of the counselor-student relationship. Receiving an affirmative reply, and then pursuing it further by asking Mulloy what his age was when he “found [his] faith” (42), Levy proceeds to deprecate Mulloy’s early embrace of Islam by equating it sarcastically to an act such as “giving up the violin” and by making the personal declaration: “Dust to dust’s my sense of it all. Sorry” (42). These are not benign statements from the counselor; he is articulating ideological challenges to Mulloy’s faith, and these are only the beginning of his attempts to make the boy “see reason”. In that first conversation, Levy establishes a pattern and a self-perpetuating feedback loop with which he attempts to draw out Mulloy’s reasons for believing in Islam, and then he trivializes them with his own atheistic statement or sarcasm (95), which exhibits not an engagement with the information Levy has sought but, rather, a repetitive dismissal of faith as insignificant, immaterial, and misleading.

When Levy attempts to convert Mulloy, he is trying to create a secular, Americanized individual out of the Muslim youth, like the lapsed Chehab, someone who can be rationally
critical. However, for Levy, Mulloy’s being a Muslim and being an American are incompatible, and so Mulloy must choose one. Levy believes Islam is a “grotesque, violent superstition” (Updike 85), and though he also believes that the Torah has “a lot of repulsive and ridiculous stuff… too” (295), he identifies as a Jew even after lapsing from the religion (36) and does not attempt to cleave apart Jewishness and American-ness as incompatible in his final, most direct appeal for Mulloy to become an American: “Hey, come on, we’re all Americans here. That’s the idea, didn’t they tell you that at Central High? Irish-Americans, African-Americans, Jewish-Americans; there are even Arab-Americans” (301). This is Levy’s last-ditch attempt at turning Mulloy into an American by trying to include the teenager within the embrace of American-ness, and it is also an attempt at making Mulloy, who is already an American, believe that American-ness is the part of his identity most worth keeping. With this appeal to inclusiveness, Levy tries to convince Mulloy that “even Arab-Americans” are as American as other sub-groups—the condescension and othering in Levy asking Mulloy “didn’t they tell you that?” and the “even” he uses before “Arab-Americans” are subtle but present (301, italics added). Whereas Levy’s sister-in-law and the bully Tylenol use “Arab” derisively to include Muslim-ness and potential fanaticism in the group they point at (15, 16, 97, 133), for Levy, the word “Arab” is devoid of religious connotations. For him, an Arab is a lapsed Muslim. However, whereas for Levy secular American Jewishness incorporates ethnicity as well as lingering religious associations, being an Arab does not include any remnants of Islamic religious dimension—an Arab can also be a Christian, a Jew, or Buddhist, while there is no possibility of Jewish Muslims or Jewish Christians. For Levy, the Jewish American is preferably a lapsed Jew, but an Arab American is
someone who has either voluntarily converted from Islam or, in Mulloy’s case, been guided away from the violent and grotesque superstition.\textsuperscript{5}

There is plenty to critique in Levy’s final and most blatant, even ridiculously irrational, attempt at secularizing Mulloy, especially in how a superficial reading of his short speech on American-ness as an ideology reeks of both fanaticism and jingoism. In a review in The Washington Post, Amitav Ghosh is especially critical of Levy (and Updike); quoting the passage I have mentioned above, Ghosh writes:

Not a word about humanity, family, friendship, sport, poetry, love, laughter: it is as if a belief in American multiculturalism is the only good reason a human being could have for staying alive. Why indeed do the billions of non-Americans who walk this earth refrain from blowing themselves up? I suspect that Updike cannot see that they have any good reason not to.

While appropriately critical of Levy’s reasoning (though attributing it also to Updike), Ghosh does not give credit to the trauma that might lie behind the reductive, simplistic, even emotional rather than rational reasoning, and the inclusiveness that the counselor offers to Mulloy. Scholarship has not addressed how much trauma avoidance plays a part in Levy’s attempts at secularizing Mulloy. For Levy, the trauma of 9/11 is not just the terrorist spectacle and violence but also the re-introduction of religion, as an ideology and as an actionable belief system, violently into the country. Mulloy’s religious belief in Islam when it is joined with the teenager’s

\textsuperscript{5} Here, too, Foucault’s idea of Enlightenment applies:
The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them. (“What is Enlightenment?” 50)

Levy believes that Mulloy is unable to operate in an enlightened mode because he is unable to critique himself or his beliefs and is thus incapable of “going beyond them”. Therefore, he must be converted away from his beliefs to be at least rendered benign.
contempt for the American cultural malaise that Levy too finds abhorrent, rekindle Levy’s trauma of 9/11. As with the anti-American religious discourse from imams that prompts the Homeland Security officials into action, Mulloy’s anti-American Islamismist rhetoric rattles and triggers Levy’s latent trauma, and the only weapon he can find to neutralize that resurgence of trauma is the vague secularization that being an “American” will promise “even” to Arabs, if they “lay down” their religion and “step away” from it.

Built upon instances of his trivializing Mulloy’s faith, Levy’s final ideological wave of the hand to Mulloy comes in the form of a literal hail, with which the counselor successfully converts the Muslim teenager to American secularism. Before this hail, Mulloy has rebuffed any trivialization of his faith, and finds inspiration within his faith to perform his job: following imam Rashid’s advice he has obtained a trucking licence (265); within “the solitude of the [truck’s] cab he is not alone, God is with him” (211); and as he heads out for his terrorist mission he feels like “God’s instrument, cool and hard and definite and thoughtless, as an instrument must be” (265). The novel depicts this phase, when Mulloy’s faith and job are so thoroughly entwined, as the most dangerous, vulnerable, and ripe stage of an Islamist terrorist’s development. At this point Mulloy’s highest calling has become his faith in Islam, and this needs to be reversed not by the counselor deriding Islam (as he has done in all instances previously), but by upholding a powerful alternative so Mulloy can be converted to it. Deborah Youdell points out that the “recognition of the hail and transformation of the individual into a subject is simultaneous and inseparable” (516), making Mulloy’s subjection to the state, and “to relations of power through discourse” (517) an automatic process once Mulloy is interpellated into a different subject position by recognizing Levy’s hail. What Althusser calls the “hail or interpellation” or an act by which “the hailed individual” with a different ideology from the
state’s “will turn around” and become “a subject” (Althusser 105), is literally and physically manifested in Terrorist’s denouement: Levy literally flags down Mulloy, who is driving the rigged truck, on a street corner, and climbs on board to initiate the final conversion by which Mulloy can be remade in a mold that is comfortable for the state’s ideology (105). In this instance Levy does not mock Mulloy’s faith; instead, as I have examined above, he asks condescendingly why Mulloy hasn’t learned already that the one ideology that works and is meaningful in America is American-ness, and so Mulloy must become an “Arab-American” instead of a Muslim (301). Once Mulloy responds positively to the counselor’s hail, the student’s belief in God overriding everything in his daily activities, including his labor, is reversed in line with Giddens’s understanding of the Protestant work ethic: that secularized attendance to a job or “calling” is an individual’s “highest form of moral obligation” as sanctioned by God (xii). In other words, Levy convinces Mulloy in the Giddensian and Weberian understanding of Protestantism’s work ethic that if Mulloy chooses to drive a truck, he should do so without religion—especially Islam—dictating what he does with the truck. Mulloy should consider not his belief in God but the driving of a truck as his highest religious obligation. God should no longer enter into the equation once the direction and mode of labor has been established—after that, only secular concerns should remain central to Mulloy the worker. By marrying Weberian ideas to Althusser’s theories of Ideological State Apparatuses, it is possible to see that when labor and occupation become divinely assigned duties to fulfil, the individual becomes a cog in the machine whose purpose is to perpetuate the economic status quo of society (Althusser 109). At the same time, Levy is also rescuing Mulloy from becoming a “cog” within the machinery of the Islamist terrorist ideology. This alternate “cog-ness”, rather than anything more lofty or ideal, is what Levy as an ISA is proposing to convert Mulloy to, as he diverts the teenager from his
terrorist ambitions and proposes that instead of disrupting the status quo with violence the teenager become a “working” member of society by conforming to its dominant ideology. Levy even foresees Mulloy being rehabilitated by the American government, becoming “a good lawyer,” and fulfilling the imminent economic demand of the society, when “Arab-Americans are going to need plenty of lawyers” (Updike 309). In Levy’s mind, Mulloy’s freedom and rehabilitation are intrinsically tied to the youth’s serving a purpose of production or service to fellow Americans, and this can only be achieved once his previous ideology is replaced. Of course, the larger part of the ideological battle at play turns out to be a play put into action by the CIA and the US intelligence apparatus (which is a component of the state itself in the form of the Repressive State Apparatus, and not an ISA)—who are running the mission, through Chehab, of identifying and eliminating post-9/11 terrorist networks. Updike’s naïve hope in the state being able to control everything, and in the state being able to prevent terrorism through mass surveillance of Muslims shows in this incredibly neat triangular creation of ideological interplay.

My reading of Terrorist supports the understanding of American culture as a religious entity within the novel, one that is perhaps ideologically pushed by the post-9/11 pursuit, re-definition, and re-orientation of the Great American Novel tradition, and most certainly by the notion and execution of American exceptionalism. Levy’s thwarting of Mulloy’s plans is a quasi-Judeo-Christian repelling of Muslim attacks on the homeland and the conversion of the Muslim to first prisoner with the promise of later rehabilitation to full citizen. Updike seems to suggest that, by the time 9/11 has been sublimated into the cultural consciousness of the United States, the American novel itself becomes a work of secular religious preaching, with infusions of the default Judeo-Christian faith.
Conclusion: Secularization as Failed Levelling

While Levy does succeed at converting Mulloy away from terrorism, and he stops the teenager from believing in the kind of violent and vengeful God his terrorist recruiters led him to, Mulloy does not begin at once at the novel’s end to believe in the American-ness that Levy proselytizes to him. Instead, Mulloy is left with a void and blankness as his “God” is “taken away” from him (310). However, Levy’s converting of Mulloy becomes that significant move to convert the other to become part of the self—in other words, in Levy’s belief system it is Americans who are a “good” horde, but a horde, a mob, nonetheless. Furthermore, there are implications of Levy not understanding the religious nature of American-ness—which consequently creates misunderstandings about his own ideology and his position as its perpetrator and preacher. In *Falling Man*, Lianne fails to understand the Muslim other, even though she attempts (anti-intellectually) to do so; in *Terrorist*, Levy does not even understand his own belief system when he attempts to draft Mulloy to it. By attempting to create a coping mechanism for mitigating the trauma of 9/11 and preventing its possible future iterations, Levy is not only projecting a false ideology of the United States but also distorting the ideology to suit his needs. In the binary that Levy creates between American-ness and everything else, he echoes the fundamentalist idea that Mulloy believes in while reversing its hierarchy: for Mulloy, Islam is superior to, and against, every other ideology than itself, whereas for Levy American-ness works in the same way—it is the only ideology by which life is worth living, and it is hostile to all other belief systems. The implication of this “Americanist fundamentalism” is as dire as that of Islamic fundamentalism—that all other ideologies must be uprooted, if not with overt violence, then with radical mental re-alignment of individuals who espouse any other ideology.
A critical reading of ideological conversions in *Terrorist* enables an understanding of the novel’s representation of American culture as a religious entity, a representation perhaps pushed also by Updike’s constant pursuit of the so-called Great American Novel, and most certainly by the notion and execution of American exceptionalism. In a true secular society, believing in no religion would be equaling and levelling; but American identity is infused with whiteness and Judeo-Christianity; an ex-Muslim cannot become white or be trusted to be Christian, nor can he invoke a heritage of ambiguous Judeo-Christianity.

The naïve hope of converting Islamist terrorists to a neutral pseudo-secularism is shattered by the knowledge that the mastermind of the terror is still out there at the end of *Terrorist*, but Updike’s hopefulness extends into the inevitability that Rashid too will be captured (300). Though Rashid may be “too far gone” to be converted, Updike only offers this hope of capture as a solution to neutralizing the origin of the violent threat in *Terrorist*. But the notion extends outwards as well; Levy’s desperation to convert Mulloy thus far implies that if any unconverted, believing Muslim remains alive in the United States, the country remains in danger of being attacked by someone who will become radicalized by Islamist rhetoric as proliferated by teachers such as Rashid “out there”. With millions of Muslims resident in the real-world United States in the years after 9/11, this is a dire implication for both Muslims and white Americans who continue to have latent trauma associated with 9/11. The terrorist attack unleashed a trauma that keeps feeding Anglo-American fear of Muslims with fresh spectres, and since all attempts in these novels at occluding Muslims and mitigating the trauma either fail or are too naïve to be considered worth implementing, the question then arises: what if all these methods fail? Will the “Muslim Question” of these post-9/11 nation-building novels be addressed with more mechanisms of occlusion by white Americans, or will there be a genuine intellectual, ethical,
Levinasian encounter and interaction in some future intervention or play within the Great American Novel concept—one that opens up the possibilities of the concept as well as offering a genuine answer to the important question for America?
Conclusion:
The Ultimate End, and the Limits of the Post-9/11 Great American Novel

“We haven't moved far in time from 9/11; the younger generation of American writers has yet to reckon with it… The present conservative stasis in America has its dangers. But it is unlikely to last. And, as happened after the first world war, uncertainty and confusion in the public sphere may quicken the sense of aesthetic possibility - or, at least, release literary novelists from the dominant American mood of 9/11 commemoration” —Pankaj Mishra

The Great American Novel has not been a stable or stabilizing concept; it does not enable easy definitions or categorizations—and its very fluidity and slippery nature has allowed it to escape being a recipient of sustained critique. However, I am indebted to the dedicated scholars of this tradition, especially Lawrence Buell for his observation that the Great American Novel is driven by the “the long-embedded assumption of the United States as a project in the making, forever grasping after—and fighting about—the elusive promise of freedom, equal rights, equal respect for all” (*Dream* 463). Tyler Malone, too, sees in the Great American Novel a parallel, a “mirror” to the “process of creating an ever more perfect union” (11). And while traditionally the concept has addressed the other and the American Dream that the other entertains when they participate in American culture, a specific concern regarding Muslims or Islamist terror was never within the range of the oeuvre. I have argued that the schism of 9/11 has not only derailed the nation-in-progress narrative of the pluriverse of so-called Great American Novels, but it has also rattled writers like DeLillo to radically turn away (at least momentarily) from their focus on critiquing American culture and its excesses to tackle the “Muslim Question” head on. Perhaps
there is another middle ground, beyond even the one Waldman has offered in *The Submission* by yoking Mohammad Khan’s “American Dream” to his detractors’ confrontation with the “Muslim Question”. Perhaps the development of the Great American Novel is still within the realm of the American Dream, but the Dream itself has become centered on the one idea that Muslims must be occluded, removed, blocked off, and expunged from America. That the so-called American Dream is no longer focused on freedoms but is more about removing or cordonning off a disparate and spread-out community is a betrayal of the foundational mythos of the national union. Of course, the myth was a mirage to begin with—what with the genocide of Indigenous peoples and the prolific and widespread practice of slavery and the racist structures that followed the abolition of that practice—and the Great American Novels do critique even as they represent the myth. But my worries about the proliferation of Islamophobic content in popular culture—even content that critiques the Islamophobia while presenting it—are well-founded because of how much DeLillo’s post-9/11 call centers so directly on “dealing” with the “Muslim Question”, and how much that concern mirrors later Bush-era policies against Muslims within and outside the United States (Randall 31). My aim here has been to provide critical interventions at the intersection of white American trauma, post-9/11 Islamophobia, and the “burden” of nation-building put upon texts; the aim is not to mark resolutions in the tensions between the slipperiness of the so-called Great American Novel and the more concrete “Muslim Question”, but to illustrate the facets and nuances of the tension as they exist.

In the four chapters of this dissertation, I have excavated the thread that binds four novels representing the Bush-era hyper-conservative ethos among even liberal white Americans. I have described Oskar and his family’s repression in Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, and the failure of that mechanism because of what Kristeva calls the shattering (15). In Chapter 2, I
examined DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, and focused especially on the move past repression into appropriation; I attempted to disambiguate DeLillo, the narrator, and the Neudeckers’ re-purposing of Islamic texts to expose Islam-fearing (but not actively Islamophobic in the sense of a movement) agendas, and examined that seizure of the other’s identity through the lens of appropriation theory. In Chapter 3, the mechanisms shifted from repression and appropriation to adversarial othering and ostracism of the Muslim and Islam; I demonstrated the detrimental effects of ostracism by citing Said and Bhabha, and I examined the resultant power structures through the theories of sovereign power, as put forth by Foucault and Agamben. In the fourth and last chapter before this conclusion, I examined Levy’s successful “secularization” of the would-be terrorist Mulloy as a “complete solution” naively tied to the American Spirit, and examined the processes and effects of that conversion through Althusser’s and Žižek’s theories on ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.

While the various mechanisms for occluding Muslims seems to have exhausted themselves in my selected texts, that closure-producing resolution to the “Muslim Question” is in fact not the *ultimate* end to the “Muslim Question” proposed by the post-9/11 “renewal” of the Great American Novel. The “ultimate solution” goes far beyond the “complete solution” proposed within Updike’s *Terrorist*, but it happens ambiguously within “a future” depicted in a novel by another Great American Novelist. Cormac McCarthy, in *The Road* (2006), creates a stark apocalyptic United States, in which an unnamed father and son are traversing the barren, ashen landscape, aiming only to survive being attacked by post-apocalyptic groups of marauders. The novel was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and has been lauded as one of the greatest works of American literature in the twenty-first century. I wish to propose a specific, perhaps less popular reason for the novel being so universally acclaimed in American culture. First, it stands out as a
post-9/11 Great American Novel because it does not talk about 9/11 at all, but instead extends its disaster into a future all-encompassing annihilation within the United States; the novel creates a landscape that is a warning of nuclear holocaust as well as ecological breakdown from climate change acceleration. However, McCarthy infuses the text with hope in the form of the father’s protection going beyond an ordinary father’s, because there is something otherworldly about his son’s innocence and goodness. The father calls his son the “Word of God” (McCarthy 5), “God’s own firedrake” (31), “a god” (172), “a tabernacle” (273), and also “the best guy” (279); at one point he also calls his son’s blond hair a “Golden chalice, good to house a god” (75). The narrator also refers to an ashen snowflake as “the last host of Christendom” (17). Marcel DeCoste notes how the “framework of a Christian sensibility and iconography...hold a central position in McCarthy's tale precisely as they serve as the enabling lexicon for the ethical, not just physical, survival [the] father and son represent” (71). While the novel features the protagonists dealing with secular dilemmas in the absence of any science-fiction or fantasy elements, it nonetheless exhibits this ambiguous strain of Christianity, especially associated with the boy and his eventual survival into narrative that continues beyond the end of the novel. I argue that the novel is successful in popular culture not only because it provides comfort and hope through the re-infusion of Christianity into the Great American Novel’s vision of the country after the United States has been destroyed by an apocalypse, but also because it offers the post-9/11 comfort of an ultimate resolution to the “Muslim Question” that the terrorist attack brought up. *The Road* dramatizes not the failed mechanisms of repression or appropriation, or even the successful but incredibly naïve one of secularization, which cannot work on a mass scale if it requires individual attention to each Muslim by a counselor. No—the solution offered within *The Road* is a complete searing of the American landscape and a radical culling of the American people. This
is the only way to re-infuse the country, from scratch, with a quasi-religious, quasi-Christian narrative for the survivors. In McCarthy’s imagined future world, there are obviously no Muslims, but there are also no Asian-Americans, no queer Americans, no African Americans, no Democrats or Republicans, no university professors, no computer IT people, no fast food workers, etc. This complete razing is what it will take to remove Muslims from the country. This “ultimate solution” is the novel’s most potent contribution to the mechanisms of occlusion, and also the greatest critique of the desire by white Americans to occlude Muslims within and from the United States—it will take burning the country to the ground to do that completely, and so the question implied within the critique the novel provides is: will such a drastic means of truly resolving the “Muslim Question” be worth what it would do to the rest of the country?

There are other detrimental effects of the Great American Novel tradition of nation-building narratives coming together to address the “Muslim Question”, and some of them have to do with how novels can influence politics and culture in the real world. In popular American television shows and films featuring Muslims as terrorists, if even the more intellectually-sophisticated narrative vehicles feature scrutiny, marginalization, disenfranchisement, and surveillance of Muslims as justified, that becomes the dominant, even condoned set of white American behaviours towards Arab-looking Muslims. The American novel is a powerful tool for disseminating American culture, and the novels that work in the Great American Novel tradition influence greatly the way Islam is viewed as another ideology.

Differences in ideology play a central role in these post-9/11 American novels as white Americans in them believe that the biblical religions remain sacrosanct at best, or obsolete at worst, while the Quran is only considered a radicalization manual. It is as though the only way for Mulloy in Terrorist to have faith in Islam and the Quran is if he commits the suicide
bombing, which depicts Islam as the very dangerous ideology that the protesting Judeo-Christian believers of *The Submission* assume it to be. Lianne in *Falling Man*, the Islamophobic relatives of 9/11 victims in *The Submission*, and Levy in *Terrorist* exhibit a pattern of revulsion toward the Islamic scripture they encounter from the outside, while the few Muslim characters who engage with the Quran are shown to use it in menacing ways: Hammad in *Falling Man* and Mulloy in *Terrorist* use it to bolster their resolve just prior to heading out on their suicide missions, Rashid in *Terrorist* uses it to fuel Mulloy’s hatred for American culture, and Khan in *The Submission* is depicted as using unidentified Quranic verses to haunt Burwell. The post-9/11 question arises whether the Quran is inherently dangerous or dangerous only in the hands of those who want to commit terrorism for political reasons, and these novels through their selection processes solidify the idea that the text itself is problematic.

Mainstream American culture’s revulsion for Islamic ideology is also represented in depictions of Muslims participating in the labor force. Khan’s labor of proposing a Ground Zero memorial in *The Submission*, because it is in the public eye, is acceptable so long as it has no religious associations; however, Mulloy’s labor is acceptable even though he is working for a Muslim company because it is not in the public domain. A crucial difference lies in their respective enactments of citizenship. Khan’s insists that he is an American, while Mulloy insists on judging American culture as if he is on the outside of it. In comparison to other characters in *The Submission* who obviously recognize Khan’s intelligence, Mulloy’s one-track mind is symbolic of the Muslim masses’ gullibility in both their simplistic reasoning and their blind adherence to Islamic ideology. Mulloy is depicted as a member of the enemy horde, and the solution that the white American Levy attempts (which does not work when Burwell tries it on Khan in *The Submission*) is to convert Mulloy into a member of the “good” horde of benign
Americans who supposedly embody the liberal ideals of the country. In *The Submission*, Khan is stale-mated into a withdrawal from post-9/11 America because he does not “convert”; in *Terrorist*, Mulloy becomes the posterchild for Muslims who can be rehabilitated to serve the dominant ideology by playing their part in the economic structure of society. This differentiation of treatment for the dull-witted, would-be terrorist, religiously-inclined Muslim, and the articulate, non-terrorist, secularly-inclined Muslim shows that Anglo Americans’ treatment of diverse Muslims they encounter in post-9/11 novels remains constant: convert them to the American ideology or bar them from public economic participation in the United States. While Oskar in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and Lianne in *Falling Man* come to the realization that the United States would never be safe again because Islamist terror has penetrated the country, Levy believes he has not only cured an American-born citizen from the curse of Islamic ideology, but he has also protected the United States and rendered it safe again. The occlusive mechanism of secularization thus becomes the most successful in the variety of solutions proposed for the “Muslim Question” within the post-9/11 novels, one that turns out to be as simple and naïve as Oskar’s repression, though much more successful in the United States created in Updike’s novel.

There is some hope that constrictions of the so-called Great American Novels being focused on the “Muslim Question” might not last within post-9/11 American novels because the next colossal, unassimilable disaster, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, is already here, and it might take precedence because of its scale—but I am not confident about this. Covid-19, because of its universality and because of its nearly abstract nature did not seem something that American identity could be constructed against, but masking-or-not, vaccinations-or-not have become polarizing options as well. Future iterations of novels playing into the Great American Novel
ethos might have to take global considerations into its scope to enable a vision of what is wrong with the nation, and that is not the kind of reckoning that the tradition has generally allowed because of the exceptionalist strands within the concept. More hopeful than myself, Maxine Hong Kingston proposes that “The dream of the great American novel is past” and that the demand now is for “the global novel” (qtd. in Irr 660). A global novel will also make “global conditions newly legible to American readers” (660). Michael Rothberg presents the idea of creating within 9/11 novels “cognitive maps that imagine how US citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nations-state, both for Americans and for others” (158). But what he proposes as his “political and aesthetic project” (158) is already underway in the post-9/11 Great American Novel’s quest tradition to address the “Muslim Question”, and it has not yet shaken loose of the solipsistic constrictions I have found. If anything, nuances within the examination may begin to emerge, but I fear the “Muslim Question” will remain an active avenue for writers working in this tradition. In thinking this way, I do agree with Richard Gray’s ideas about near-future post-9/11 novels: “The degree to which writers do meet the challenge of allowing their work to be a site of struggle between cultures—and a free play of idioms and genres—will surely help to determine where American writing is 10 or 20 years from now” (“Open Doors” 147). The need to develop inter-cultural understanding was a central point of contention in Waldman’s The Submission, as it depicts white Americans not only abandoning their liberal values but completely reversing them; and because their responses are so tied to the question of values that can be sacrificed in order to return safety to the nation, the near-future iterations of so-called Great American Novels addressing the trauma of anything other than the “Muslim Question” seems uncertain.
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