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TRANSLATION AND ADAPTATION OF TERROR: TWO BOOKS FOR CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS ON 9/11 15TH ANNIVERSARY

*TRADUCIR Y ADAPTAR EL TERROR 15 AÑOS
DESPUÉS: DOS EJEMPLOS DE LA FICCIÓN SOBRE
EL 11/S EN LA LITERATURA INFANTIL Y JUVENIL
ESTADOUNIDENSE*

Abstract

After the 9/11 attacks to the Twin Towers, the literary world witnessed the publication of a huge and varied quantity of books for children and teenagers, from picture books to more traditional texts, all of them illustrating an event which would become a turning point in world's history and set its course towards a new world order. Fifteen years on, there is a young generation quite unaware of the events, even questioning that they really happened and were not part of a Hollywood disaster movie. Authors themselves wonder if the memories they hold have not already become but blurred images of that day. It is the aim of this paper to show how literature translates and adapts the events of that September morning to those who were not yet born or too young to understand the abrupt end of the past century.

Keywords: Children and young adults' literature, terrorism, 9/11

Resumen

La literatura destinada a un público infantil y juvenil tras los atentados del 11-S fue muy numerosa y diversa. Tanto los más pequeños, a través del álbum ilustrado, como los adolescentes de la primera década del siglo XXI, tuvieron acceso directo a multitud de textos que plasmaban uno de los acontecimientos que marcaría un antes y un después y señalaría el comienzo de un nuevo orden mundial. Quince años más tarde, nos encontramos ante una generación que no fue testigo directo de la caída de las torres y todo lo que con ellas desapareció, e incluso se cuestiona la *realidad* del suceso debido a la distancia temporal y puede llegar a asimilarlo a una de esas grandes producciones cinematográficas sobre catástrofes. Los propios autores se preguntan si aquellos recuerdos que un día fueron tan vívidos no estarán perdiendo nitidez en sus mentes. Es el propósito de este artículo mostrar cómo la literatura trata de traducir y adaptar el terror de una mañana de septiembre a los jóvenes que no presenciaron el abrupto final del siglo XX.

Palabras clave: literatura infantil y juvenil, terrorismo, 11-S.

Introduction

In 2016, 15 years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks to the Twin Towers, the New York Times published an article on the literature produced about those dreadful events and addressed to children and teenagers. It did not focus on the massive release of books that followed those terrible actions but on the readings for those who were too young to have access to those pages, to understand that horror, or even not yet born on that date. Authors such as Caitlyn Dlouhy, Wendy Mills, Jewell Parker Rhodes, Gae Polisner, or Nora Raleigh Baskin talk about a worry for their own recollections blurring too fast, and also a desire to show what happened that day not as a Hollywood blockbuster.

Taking this in mind, it could be said that the primary aim of these books is somehow *translate* and *adapt* what terror meant and still means nowadays for that audience, meaning by translation the conversion of something from one form or medium into another and by adaptation a modification or adjustment.

And it could be also argued that these works have a double addressee, not in the sense Barbara Wall's book (1991) dealt with the term, but in a new one: those witness to 9/11 and able to understand then and those witness or not to 9/11 and able to understand now.

Wendy Mills's book, *All We Have Left* (2016), illustrates perfectly her author's words in the NY times article already mentioned:

"I wanted to write a story that made our shared history accessible to them," Ms. Mills said. "Here's a whole generation of kids who weren't alive and don't know what it was like that day, and they're not going to know the world before 9/11. It wasn't a perfect world, but it felt like a safer world." Alter, A. (9/11/2016) "A Wave of 9/11 Novels Seeks a New Audience: the Young Reader". Retrieved Dec, 10th from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/10/books/9-11-novels-for-young-readers.html>

Perfection and safety are two terms that appear in all the books covered in the above article. They can also be found as objects of study in the scarce bibliography about literature on 9/11 and a young audience by authors such as Lampert (2009), Whyte & O'Sullivan (2014) or Kieran (2015).

Rhodes's *Towers Falling* (2016) is aimed yet at a much younger audience, middle-graders, and her task thus much more difficult. As she states in the very same NY article: "The hardest part was not to patronize them, not to pretend that they live in an innocent world, because they know more than we think they know." (id.). Home, family and education are key concepts in Rhodes's book, and by understanding the meaning of those words, that is, by acquiring knowledge, the main character of the book, Dèja, will be able to come to terms with her history/story.

It will be thus my objective in the following pages to analyze Mills's and Rhodes's texts, from my point of view the best representatives of the literature for children and teenagers published on 9/11 15th anniversary, taking into account plot and people, and see how the authors build through their characters those notions of perfection and safety, home, family and education, and whether they withstand the confrontation with uncomfortable truths.

Alia Susanto (2001), the survivor

The first character that appears in Mills's book, *All We Have Left*, as a first-person narrator, is Alia Susanto. Alia is a young 16-year-old Muslim girl who wants to be a graphic novelist. But in the

first scene of the book that does not really matter. The World Trade Center is about to collapse after the impact of two planes, one in each tower. So, the question is, what on earth is going on? What was Alia doing that particular day in that particular place at that particular time?

Alia is not a New Yorker, but a Californian girl. Her parents moved to New York some years ago for working reasons: mom is an immigration lawyer and dad is a computer whiz. The rest of the family, but for her elder brother, Ridwan, are still in California – her beloved grandma Nenek –, although their roots lie in Indonesia. That is the country her grandparents left when her mother was a child in order to escape violence and search for a better life. She is an American girl, lacking her mother's charming accent, a fact that makes her somehow envious and unhappy as she admits: "...I wish I had her accent. I speak English just like everyone else, and no one smiles when I talk." (Mills, 2016: 40).

And she also belongs to a Muslim family and is trying to adjust herself to the requirements of the Muslim faith, seriously trying to achieve a balance between cultures even if that is not the impression the reader gets in the first pages of the narrative: "If nothing else, wearing the hijab would save me from bad-hair days for the rest of my life" (28).

It is through flashbacks that we know Alia better: her former friendship with Carla Sánchez, a Latin girl who betrayed her in the past and gets her in trouble in the present, and her superheroine Lia are both important clues to discover why Alia behaves as she does. Carla encouraged her to date Mike, a classmate, but Alia's parents forbade that relationship and so Alia fled from home for two days to Carla's. When Mike tried to seduce her and she did not consent because of her faith, her so-called friend described her as "a stupid girl who doesn't know what to do with a guy like you." (Mills, 2016: 96). Utterly in despair for that reaction, Alia acknowledges that "I inked Lia, my new Muslim superhero, in panel after panel of frenzied world-saving activity" (97).

At present, Carla tries to get her friend back, but the place and method – girls' bathroom, smoking marijuana – are not going to work. Moreover, things are going to get worse for Alia and her desire of following a NYU program for talented high school artists she has been accepted into. Her parents refuse to give her permission to attend the course in view of the last events and, having the deadline approaching, she takes quite a controversial step as her mother tells her: "Today? This is the day you choose to wear the scarf?" (39).

This particular action could be understood as Alia's desire to evade herself from the difficult situation she has to face. Actually, she is hiding herself and also emulating her creation, a superheroine camouflaged under a burqa, who "goes to the mosque to recharge her superhero energy when she starts to run low, and always comes out stronger and braver after she prays" (212).

It cannot be said that a girl under a burqa is something original. Before the publication of this book, in 2013, the Pakistani animated TV series *Burka Avenger* was released, and had as main character Jiya, a teacher at an all-girls' school in the morning, a heroine at night, fighting villains with the throw of books and pens, but here the emphasis was on the importance of girls' education all over the world. Alia's confusion about the significance of wearing the hijab is crystal-clear, as she even says that "I really don't know what to believe. But I think wearing it will make me a better person, and that's what I want desperately right now" (73).

Thus, that 9/11 Alia leaves her home and sets for the Twin Towers in a last hopeless attempt to convince her Ayah of her innocence and good disposition to make amends. But, as it always happens, reality will outdo fiction. In her way to his father's workplace, Alia encounters and even talks to people professing other faiths: Jehovah witnesses (68), Mr. Morowitz, one of her father's workmates, and a Jew, since, as she admits, "My parents don't believe in sheltering me from other religions, and I've

been to synagogue with Mr. Morowitz's family, and church services with our Christian friends" (112).

And she also meets Travis for the first time, long and lean, with too long straight blond hair, and apparently a buster, although things are not what they seem as we will see later on. Thinking that the boy is trying to steal something from another guy, the first thing that comes to her mind is a quick sketch starring Lia: "Lia dragging him out of the building by his collar, her dialogue bubble reading, "Why don't you steal from someone your own age, Hip-Hop Boy!" and all the while, tiny hearts are coming from his head because he can't keep his eyes off Lia" (Mills, 2016:111). She is clearly identifying herself with her paper friend but she is not yet conscious of that.

Unable to find her father, Alia takes an elevator to leave the place and there she meets again Travis and is about to question him about the former episode when everything happens. Imagine yourself trapped in an elevator free falling with someone you believe a criminal. Not the best scene for a 16-year-old girl. But Alia has Lia, and thinks about Lia's behavior in that particular situation: "Lia wouldn't be just sitting still, afraid to move" (130). However, she is not a perfect superheroine and she does not feel safe. And crying is the only way to vent her feelings, a safety valve. And after all that, the seeming delinquent will turn into the only ally. Unsubstantial chat about TV series – "Which is your favorite, Rachel or Monica?" (140) – gives way to a more serious conversation where Travis tells Alia about the '93 terrorist attack to the towers as his grandfather had told him before. Totally ignorant of that event, Alia is left to wonder "Why hadn't someone told me that my father worked in a place that people liked to bomb?" (130).

Travis also tells Alia that it was Muslims who attacked the towers in 1993, what seems to create a void between them because they hold very different views about Islam:

"It was Muslims who planted the bomb the last time, you know," he says suddenly, and it's like a chasm opens up between us.

"So?" I say right back at him. "It was white Christians who used to burn crosses on people's lawns and owned slaves. Does that make all of you bad?"

"I'm just saying, my religion doesn't tell me to go out and kill people just because they don't believe what I believe," he says.

"Neither does mine," I say tightly. (155)

But the situation they are going through leaves the debate on hold and Travis goes on to talk about his grandfather's helping build the towers back from Vietnam and his death five days ago, an event leading to explain many things as this part of the narrative approaches its end.

Meanwhile, Lia the superheroine keeps going in and out of Alia's mind with each minute step both take towards survival, as it happens when they succeed in escaping from the elevator and get to a bathroom: "For a moment, I am in Lia's world, and I can see the scene: *Girl in charcoal gray shadows, the white glow of her scarf the only contrast, her foot in the process of hitting the wall as large chunks of tile fly into the bathroom beyond and explode onto the floor.*" (188). However, this is no comic and harsh reality appears before their eyes, "pale writhing things coming through the cracked elevator doors [...] fingers of the people trapped inside" (Mills, 2016: 223-224).

In their endeavor to make it out alive, Alia discloses herself and so does Travis. If Alia is the first one to say that she should not be there, Travis confesses that he should be somewhere else as well. This is a time of revelation, understood both as a discovery of unknown facts and pointing out the remarkable quality of human beings.

It is then that Alia remembers her grandmother's words when she gave her the scarf she is wearing: "The lotus lives in the deep mud, but eventually it grows to meet the sun and blooms into a beautiful flower. It is a message of hope, that the potential we hold deep inside us will triumph" (246). And, for the first time, she understands the meaning of those words and, uncovering her head, gives Travis the scarf to protect him from the ashes: "I don't need the scarf to be strong, to be Lia. Today, despite all the fear and chaos, I was Lia. She's always been there inside me. Faith and strength aren't something you wear like some sort of costume; they come from inside you" (329). Travis's secret reasons to be in the tower are more painful. He tells Alia he dropped college a year ago. But that is not all: "I was a coward," he says in a flat voice. "And my grandfather died for it" (274). A couple of punks attacked his grandfather and he ran for help instead of staying and facing them. The man never recovered from the coma and died, and Travis became a monster to his father's eyes. Apparently looking for self-forgiveness and self-reconciliation, Travis went to the towers that day to spread his grandfather's ashes from the top of the building. But he lost them, and it is Alia's words which allow him to achieve what she was craving for: "He was here when they built the towers," I say. "He'll be here when they die [...] All of it is becoming ashes now" (329). It is 9/11, 10:28 a.m. and the north tower collapses and becomes nothing.

Jesse McLaurin (2016), the leftover in Mills's *All We Have Left*

Nothing. That very same word "comes from that place squashed down at the very core of me, where all the unsayable things are written in invisible ink on a crumpled sheet of my heart" (6). Jesse McLaurin does not seem a good girl at the beginning of her part of the narrative. Hers is a story of loss, "hurt and anger spilling out of me onto the wall" (7). If Alia used ink and paper to express herself, Jesse will go bombing (62), that is, marking buildings with graffiti, and NOTHING is the name of the mob she has joined attracted by Nick Roberts, the leader.

Jesse is a 16-year-old American girl whose brother died in the Twin Towers. Her father owns a climbing shop and her mother is a teacher, and she also has another brother who lives in Africa. She was just a baby when everything happened and she is unable to understand her parents' behavior, devastated by their son's death. As she says at the beginning of her story, "Of the three children my parents brought into this world, one is dead, the second is in Africa, and then there is me. The unwanted, invisible kid they still have to act like they give a damn about" (Mills, 2016: 33).

Jesse's world is not a fairy tale or fantasy land, and yet there was a time when superheroes were there, as in the story of how her father met her mother, behaving himself as "a freaking superhero [...] Mom's hero" (34). But those were just recollections from early childhood, replaced now by bitterness and hate. That is the reason why she feels such an attraction for the bad guy, Nick.

Interestingly enough, Jesse and Nick begin their relationship from the moment he somehow helps her to escape the imaginary box she has been trapped in by a group of mimes from the drama school club. His instructions – "*Blow up the box*" (24) –, as the suffocating atmosphere of a seemingly shrinking box is exasperating her, can be seen as a metaphor of her family life, where nobody talks to her, explains things to her. Thus, Nick becomes a sort of savior for her, even if far from being a gentleman, as her father is portrayed in her mother's tale, turns out to be quite possessive and disrespectful: "Every once in a while, he pulls my head back and leans down to give me a kiss, as if saying, *See, she's mine*" (114). Together with Hailey Brinson and Dave Tucker, whose brother "came home from Afghanistan with only one leg" (60), they begin their particular free fall into vandalism, a fact that will have many effects.

In the meantime, another important character in Jesse's narrative takes the stage. Apart from her attraction to problematic people, Jesse's greatest hobby is climbing. And it is in one of her outings that she meets Adam, a mysterious boy, with whom she talks about superheroes: "I'm guessing when you were a kid you thought you were going to grow up to be Superman." I know I need to cut this, whatever it is, short because Nick will be here any minute. "Naw. Spidey all the way. Have you seen that boy climb?" (101).

It is not the first time Spiderman appears as the doppelganger of a young character in a book about terrorism, though. Jamie's T-shirt in *My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece* (Pitcher, 2011) is a clear example of the desire of the main character to cope with his sister's death envisioning himself as a Marvel superhero. And the choice of Spiderman in Mills's text is not a serendipity as well. It is quite obvious that the author is trying to establish a duel of binaries with the falling and climbing of the characters in both narratives.

In *Alia's*, the main characters try to climb stairs in search of Alia's father while everything is falling apart around them, even people (Mills, 2016: 308). Jesse's climbing becomes her only way out in a world torn into pieces not just by her brother's death and her parents' apathy towards her, but also by her detention and conviction to community service for vandalism (134). However, her bad actions and subsequent repentance will get her somehow a most precious reward.

As a way to mark the time before and after the day the world changed, as 9/11 has come to be termed, there are two important elements in Jesse's narrative: a photo album and an answering machine. Jesse finds the photo album in the shed and the answering machine in his other brother's bedroom.

The album is full of articles about his dead brother in the newspapers, nothing else. And, surprisingly, it does not belong to her mother, but to her father, the one who never talks or lets people talk about that lost brother, "a void that screams louder than any words" (122). And the image of her father with that photo album in his chest makes her angry and determined to go bombing with Nick and his mob.

The second element is much more significant for Jesse's narrative and understanding of that last day in her brother's life. When she presses the play button she can hear her dead brother's voice, scared and broken, and also a girl's voice (191-192). Indeed, images and words have made Jesse react and try to look for the information she needs in order to go on with her life. If nobody wants to help her, she will do it herself. But, is there any other trigger for this change? Of course there is.

Before going bombing with Nick and the mob, Dave, one of the members of the group, shouts to a Muslim girl, Sabeen, and tells her to go back to her country, notwithstanding that she is American born, and adding "*You are not like me. You will never be like me*" (119). Thereupon, Nick grabs her scarf and uncovers her head. That same girl turns out to be Adam's sister and only then she understands that Adam is a Muslim too.

It is important to highlight though that the attack to Sabeen happens before the bombing night, and her discovery of Sabeen and Adam's sibling relationship, after that, while she is doing community service at the Islam Peace Center, the building she decorated with graffiti. It is also significant the fact that it is Jesse who gives the scarf back to Sabeen, as she recognizes when they meet again together with Adam: "You picked up my scarf, when that jerk boyfriend of yours yanked it off. I appreciate that. I *don't* appreciate a lot of other things about you, but that was nice. Maybe you are redeemable" (162).

From that moment onwards, she begins her particular search for the truth about her brother, with the help of different people. One of them is Anne Jonna, a 9/11 survivor, who speaks her mind at the Peace Center:

It is one of those rare days in history that is etched into our collective souls. That day could be defined as a day of fear and hate, but I saw something else. Inside the towers, I saw incredible acts of bravery from people of all walks of life. I saw people just like you and me doing what they could to help others in a desperate situation. To me, the bravery and basic human kindness shown by ordinary citizens that day is a shining example of what it means to be human." (Mills, 2016: 177-178)

Anne tells Jesse to contact Julia, another survivor who remembers a young man who could be her brother. And she also gives her information about missing people at the 9/11 museum. Her friends Emi and Teeny will also help her in the quest after she apologizes for her behavior. Apart from putting them aside while she was hanging out with Nick and his friends, they feel somehow attacked as well. The only reason to bomb the Islam Peace center was xenophobia, and that has affected them: Emi's Japanese American great-grandparents were sent to concentration camps during World War II, and her grandmother had to stand being called a Jap as a child. "If you don't like Muslims so much, how do you feel about the Japanese?" (203). And Teeny reminds her that now and then there are people who tell her to go back to Mexico, although she is American born and her mother is actually from Guatemala.

The two friends are able to clear the recording message in the answering machine and this is what they get: "*That's Alia with me*" (207). Asked about the identity of the girl, she is unable to answer, since as she admits, "I don't even know why Travis was in the towers" (207). But we, as readers, know.

The intertwining of the two narrative lines, Alia's, in 2001, and Jesse's, in 2016, comes to the fore quite vividly at this point of the text. Travis, the lean and long, straight blond-haired boy Alia meets in the towers is Jesse's brother. And Jesse also discovers that Alia did not die in the attacks. Hank, Jesse's brother, tries to shed some light on Jesse's discoveries too. He tells her that nobody listened to Travis's message in the answering machine because the shop was closed as they were all at the cemetery for their grandfather's memorial service. Only it was too late when their mother did. And he also remembers a girl's scarf among Travis's belongings, "with red and green flowers on it. We never knew why he had it" (244).

Another character who is going to help Jesse in the process to understand is Mr. Laramore, her teacher. He is the one who discloses the reason why Travis was in the towers, a fact the reader already knows, but not Jesse: "That's where your grandfather worked, [...] Travis said it was the place your grandfather liked best in the entire world" (Mills, 2016: 284). So Travis went there to spread his ashes. And there he also remained.

Adam's help is invaluable for Jesse. First, he forgives her for her behavior. Second, he tells her about his father's life and the difficult situation he went through after 9/11. Adam's father is a Syrian, forced to leave his country and apply for political asylum in the US. He married Adam's mother, an American girl from Louisiana, formed a family, got a job, and suddenly everything came to nothing after that September morning. He was taken to jail because his citizenship had not been yet approved, what made him an illegal resident. But he made a stand of it, "... it made him a better Muslim, because he saw how important it was for him to show Americans that all Muslims weren't like the ones who

hijacked those planes" (268). Third, after her father's rejection for dating a Muslim boy, he offers her comfort and safety, and also accompanies her to the 9/11 Memorial Museum, a place she had been forbidden to visit.

Actually, this is not an easy task for Jesse, who even wonders "How twisted is the world when your shoe could become part of a museum exhibit?" (326). And sadly enough, she is not talking about a glamorous stiletto, but the footwear of a dead one. Last but not least, it is Adam who makes her put things right with her father after their dispute, what leads to a progressive rapprochement of all the members of the family.

Hope: Alia and Jesse's meeting point

"You can forgive, but it's impossible to forget, and the trick is how to live with that" (341). Wounds are beginning their healing process in Jesse's world, but still there is a missing piece: Alia. And she comes to the front unexpectedly, in a news article with the title "Muslim Graphic Novelist Tackles the Difficult Subject of 9/11 as 15th Anniversary Approaches" (342). Alia, the survivor, the one who could achieve her dream, the comic drawing girl, is alive, and Jesse wants answers. She still wants to know. And so, when they meet, Alia's voice takes us again to the first sentence of the first chapter of the book: "*I wake that morning thinking about what to wear, the taste of candied dreams lingering even after I open my eyes...*" (345). As she says, that is the point to start to really understand.

All in all, Alia explains Jesse how her brother became a superhero for many people that day and how her drawings helped her to overcome depression and the guilt she sometimes felt for being one of the lucky survivors. She is now a new woman, full of hope, her daughter's name, but never forgetting the boy who kept her alive.

As I flip through the pages, I see Alia has drawn my brother with eloquent, sure strokes: the strong edge of his clenched jaw, his slightly mismatched eyes. I see my brother in the elevator, with his shaggy hair and eyes wide with pain. I see him climbing through a hole in the wall into a bathroom, and helping Julia down the stairs. I see him dragging Alia away from the windows as the south tower fell.

I'm crying as I finish (Mills, 2016: 356-357).

The last scene of the narrative shows a Jesse able to understand at last, ready to say good bye to her brother under "the blue forever of the September sky" (358).

To conclude, I would like to draw the attention to a sentence Jesse pronounces immediately after her mother listens to Travis's recording from the towers: "I wonder what the world would be like if 9/11 never happened" (316). Perhaps our understanding of perfection and safety would be different; our world, as well. Or not. Many things fell apart that day. But still, many people decided to go on climbing.

Dèja, the unbelonging

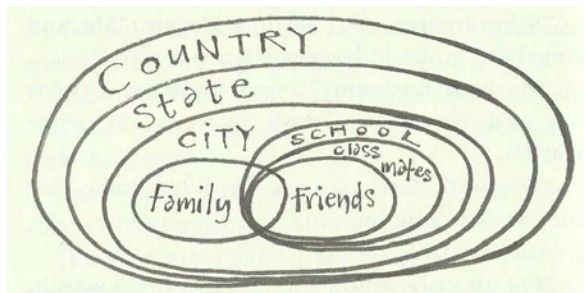
"When do kids get old enough?" (Rhodes, 2016: 139). Dèja Barnes, the main character in Rhodes's *Towers Falling*, is not a teenager, but a 10-year-old child with a difficult life. She lives in a family residence, a shelter for homeless people after facing eviction, in Brooklyn. Not a true home, but better than spending night and day in a car with other four people: Ma, Pop, and her siblings, Ray

and Leda. Funny -or sad- enough, the name of the place is Avalon, but neither fortune nor heroes are to be found there. Ma is always working and Pop, her father, is unable to take care of the children, so she is the one in charge of everything.

Her story begins in September 2016, as well as a new academic year at Brooklyn Collective Elementary. She is not the only new student there. Ben, a boy from Arizona joins her and they are both welcome by Sabeen, a Muslim girl. It is interesting to see how these three characters feel themselves displaced and misplaced. Apart from the facts we already know about Dèja, her mother is from Jamaica, and her ancestors from Africa; Ben comes from Arizona, but his roots are in Mexico; and Sabeen's family comes from Turkey. Somehow they struggle to identify themselves with their country of residence but are constantly wondering whose this country is.

The answer to this question will be a homework task. As Miss Garcia, their teacher, exposes the first day at school, and in order to commemorate 9/11 15th anniversary, the children are going to do some project work on this topic. The first reaction to this announcement could be described as apathy: "Who cares? 9/11 was before I was born ... ancient history" (Rhodes, 2016: 34).

However, the first step is going to attract the children's attention, since they will have to write about home, "...our starting point for connecting to the past" (39). But what is home? Is it just a place? Something else? Not everybody understands the same by the term *home*. Sabeen's home is "divine. Blessed by Allah." (50). Ben's home is not in New York, but back in Arizona, "where I wish I was. It's where my dad is." (51). And Dèja's home is not a place, but people, her family, "I lift the cutout and the paper people unravel-one, two, three, four. Five." (51). Not only that. Dèja's Homeroom 5 is also *home*, because there she can find people who care for her and are cared for by her, her friends and her teacher. As Miss Garcia states, "Spaces, buildings are important but never as important as the people inside." (59). The diagram below illustrates perfectly the concept:



(Rhodes, 2016: 72)

The following step in the task is to write about the differences between America's far past and its recent past. But, in a smart twist, Dèja turns the question around and tries to look for similarities, arriving at an abstract concept which could encircle the rest of the lines in the above image: American ideals.

Interestingly enough, it is at this point of the narrative where Dèja begins a journey of discovery and understanding thanks to her friends. Ben and Sabeen do know what happened on 9/11, but as Ben says to Dèja, "Wow, you really don't know." (95).

Dèja watches the images in Ben's laptop, listens to the people, hears the cries. Everything is within reach, within sight, but "our teachers are taking baby steps. Teaching pieces. Treating us like we're five instead of ten." (96). Are they patronizing the children or "maybe they're just too afraid to tell it like it was?" (110).

The truth is that not only Miss Garcia but also Pop, Dèja's father, is still too scared to talk about that day. Miss Garcia was 10 years old when everything happened and she saw the planes crashing and the towers collapsing through the windows of the school. Pop has his memories in a suitcase, and only after talking to Miss Garcia, after Dèja goes to the Freedom Tower to see for herself, is he able to face his own fears, his own history, his own story.

"I don't know how yet-but the towers falling is my history, too... History is about feelings, too... But sometimes American history isn't happy" (Rhodes, 2016: 128). Dèja needs to know everything, the whole story, for it to come alive, to mean anything to her. It is not enough to have a history book full of facts if nobody explains to her the meaning of the void, the water and the names she sees at Ground Zero.

The epilogue of the book unites the three concepts explored in the text, that is, home, family and education. It is at her so-called home, Avalon, where her family, Pop, teaches her his/story. First of all, he shows her a picture of his co-workers, his family. They all died on 9/11. All but him, and "ever since that day, I feel stupid. Helpless. Angry. These were my friends and I couldn't save them." (207).

But, as Dèja has learnt at school, they all are part of the diagram, and share the same values, which are part of the past, the present and the future of the country. As the girl writes in her final essay, "I love my American home. We are a family - not perfect, not all the same... (222), but a family after all.

Conclusion

As I have stated at the beginning of this article, it was my aim to study different terms appearing in the two texts considered to be key concepts in the narratives of both Mills and Rhodes. On the one hand, perfection and safety; on the other hand, home, family and education. The truth is that all these words and the meanings attached to them are inextricably intertwined.

All the characters end up finding *safety at home*, with their *families*; each one with a different idea of what is to be *perfect*, to *teach* or *educate*, but they all finding in the recent American history a healing for their wounds and an explanation for their lack of knowledge at the beginning of their stories. And that is the reason why everybody should care.

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