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Evening Edition: Trauma, Journalism and the Post-9/11 Novel

In December 2001, Don DeLillo offered an early *cri de coeur* for the role of the novelist in making sense of the trauma of 9/11. “In its desertion of every basis for comparison, the event asserts its singularity. There is something empty in the sky,” he wrote. “The writer tries to give memory, tenderness, and meaning to all that howling space” (39). And in the years following the attacks, a slew of novelists have attempted to confront 9/11 through writing. These novels—DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, McEwan’s *Saturday*, Shreve’s *A Wedding in December*, O’Neill’s *Netherland*, Messud’s *The Emperor’s Children*, etc.—have all been preliminary attempts to work out the trauma of the attacks and their aftermath, and many have argued for literature’s privileged role in confronting this emptiness.

But the days for confronting the hole left by 9/11 are at their end, and the insistence of the post-9/11 novels to conjure up the horror of the day itself has become so ubiquitous that even reviewers in the popular press have started to tire of the banality of the form. In her review of *The Submission*, Kamila Shamsie pointed out that the “fiction writers” seemed “to claim for themselves the individual tales of trauma around the day itself (signatories include Jonathan Safran Foer, Don DeLillo, Claire Messud) while the non-fiction writers held on to History and Politics leading up to and on from 9/11.” In this, she derides the extent to which novelists have rejected the geopolitical implications of 9/11 in favor of recreating the rawness of the terrorist attacks.

But if the trauma novel has been exhausted and there remains nothing interesting to say about the way in which 9/11 now manifests itself in the novel, there is still a significant hole to be mined in exploring the boundaries between journalism and the 9/11 novel. This study will help shape our understanding of the boundaries between journalism and the novel, the ways in which the journalist problematizes our understanding of 9/11 and subverts the traditional trauma narrative associated with the 9/11 novel, and the extent to which the topicality of novels affects their longevity or ability to confront more immutable problems. This study will primarily center around Adams' *Harbor* and Waldman's *The Submission*.

Although Richard Gray and others have rightly criticized the early 9/11 novels for being too pre-occupied with the psychic impact of the terrorist attacks themselves—of essentially reliving the trauma *ad infinitum*—the post-9/11 novels by Adams and Waldman subvert the pre-digested narratives that the trauma novels feed us. Rather than attempting to give “meaning to all that howling space,” as DeLillo called for, these novels elide the trauma of the day entirely, and instead of working with the narrative that has been handed down, they directly confront the process of narrative building. For Adams, the impetus is to challenge the pre-established narratives with journalistic facts and to erode the reductionist narratives that have stymied the way the public, the press, and national security forces discuss terrorism. In the same vein, Waldman seeks to call into question narrative building altogether through her emphasis on the media. In this, she challenges the way in which narratives are formed and attacks their pervasiveness in American public life.

Adams' 2004 novel *Harbor* was one of the earliest attempts to confront the 9/11 attacks through fiction, and Adams holds the distinction of being the first journalist to write a 9/11 novel. Because she was a staff writer for the *Washington Post*, many early critics seized upon the

novel's topicality in their reviews of *Harbor*. The novel centers around the life of an Algerian man who illegally immigrated to the United States just before the 9/11 attacks. As he attempts to fashion a life for himself in America, a chain of events sets him and his friends in the sights of national security agencies. In *Harbor*, Adams radically interrogates the question of what makes one a terrorist and the porous definition of a terrorist cell. In many ways, the narrative was influenced by Adams' work in reporting on the arrest of Abdelghani Meskini for his role in the foiled plot to blow up Los Angeles International Airport. Adams' novel, however, moves beyond the history of the case she reported on to mine more ambiguous ground that the journalism in the post-9/11 era couldn't adequately grapple with.

Similarly, Waldman's *The Submission* takes as its starting point recent history and centers around a fictionalization of what has now been termed the "Ground Zero mosque" debate. Waldman's novel centers around a blind competition to select a memorial for the victims of the 9/11 attacks, but after the jury has selected the winner, they discover that he is a Muslim-American, which sets off a firestorm of criticism in the press. This novel posits the question of what it means to be an American, the connection between Islam and terrorism, and the ways in which the discourse of anti-terrorism has permeated the public culture. Before writing the novel, Waldman was a bureau chief for the *New York Times*, and she said in an interview that after she had written the novel, she substantially changed portions of it to be more reflective of the debate over whether an Islamic community center could be built near the former site of the World Trade Center. This connection, both biographical and in the genesis of the novel, suggests a strong connection between journalism and the fiction that has been created as a response to the fact-driven details in a news-daily.

The relationship between nonfiction and the novel has been worthy of exploration since a journalist penned one of the first novels, *Robinson Crusoe*, which was roughly based on real-life events, and the symbiotic relationship has carried through New Journalism (Wolfe, Didion, Adler, *et al.*) and the fiction of these 9/11 novelists. But in considering *Harbor* and *The Submission* and graphing the relationship between the post-9/11 novel and journalism, we can more clearly limn the relationship between fiction and nonfiction and the way that both contribute to contemporary historiography.

September 11 and the Novel

There was little question after 9/11 that the terrorist attacks of that day would factor prominently into subsequent fiction in the 2000s. If the journalists wrote the day-by-day accounts of what happened before and after the Twin Towers fell and assembled a catalogue of the terrorist attacks in piece-meal fashion, it was assumed that novelists would give meaning and resonance to what the attacks themselves meant. More than anything, DeLillo's *Harper's* essay is a testament to the urgency of the belief that novelists would be able to transmute the daily reports into something imbued with the terror and trauma of 9/11.

In March 2005, the *New York Times* inaugurated the appearance of the first 9/11 novels by "literary" writers. In the piece, the *Times* pointed to Beigbeder's *Windows on the World*, McEwan's *Saturday*, and Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* as some of the nearly "half-dozen novels that use 9/11 and its aftermath as central elements of their plot or setting, from some of the most acclaimed literary novelists and the most respected publishing houses, [that] are being released later this year" (Wyatt). Of course, these novels were among the first wave of novels that address 9/11 either directly or indirectly. In more than a decade that has

elapsed since the 9/11 attacks, a range of novels have been published that attempt to confront the trauma of the day and project the ways in which the attack has changed America.

Both Kristiaan Versluys and Michael Rothberg argue that literature is the proper vehicle through which the public and private dimensions of 9/11 can be fused and that the American literary imagination privileges the novel's ability to confront the terrorist attacks in public discourse. In "Seeing Terror, Feeling Art: Public and Private in Post-9/11 Literature," Rothberg argues for the novel's unique ability to fuse public events with private lives. Meanwhile Versluys, in *Out of the Blue*, argues that literature has a preeminent role in attempting to make sense of the trauma. In the final chapter of Versluys' study, he suggests that as novels become increasingly chronologically removed from 9/11, the attacks will become little more than a place marker, a cultural vestige that is part of our collective consciousness. This is what he terms the spectralization of 9/11. Versluys presciently argued that "9/11 will continue to crop up as a vestige, as a trace that marks the cultural landscape" in subsequent literature after the rawness of the events begins to lessen (148). To a great extent, we have seen what Versluys termed the spectralization of 9/11 unfold over recent years, and in many ways, 9/11 has become little more than the historical placeholder for works that attempt to negotiate our zeitgeist. For an example of this, look no further than Elizabeth Strout's *The Burgess Boys* wherein 9/11 is nothing more than social context—a line in the sand to demarcate the novels whose main narrative action takes place after the terrorist attacks but before the global economic crisis. In Strout's novel, 9/11 plays only an explanatory function for the subsurface anti-Islamic sentiments expressed by some of the peripheral characters in the novel. This is just one example of the ways in which the trauma narrative has effectively been co-opted. Instead of filling the hole, as DeLillo prescribed, literature now uses 9/11 as a signpost.

However, some critics have challenged the early 9/11 novels on the basis of their inability to truly capture the trauma of 9/11. In “Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis,” Richard Gray argues that many of the works that attempt to address the reality of that Tuesday morning domesticate the crisis, and thus, are not effectively able to convey the reality of the event. Many of the novels of 9/11, such as *The Good Life*, *The Falling Man*, and *The Emperor’s Children*, Gray argues, “simply assimilate the unfamiliar into familiar structures. The crisis is, in every sense of the word, domesticated” (134). These works, Gray argues, are limited in their ability to represent the strangeness of an America whose inhabitants “are living between cultures” (146). Furthermore, Gray contends that the domestication of trauma undermines the fact that by its very nature, trauma is ineffable. Gray’s arguments, though, hinge on a belief that the novelistic response to 9/11 is an attempt to show how the attacks on the World Trade Center changed the world and that the only proper response to the destruction of the World Trade Center is to create a portrait of a new America between cultures. As Gray would later argue in *After the Fall*, the narratives that are absorbed in the trauma of 9/11 fail, and their failure “is not just a formal but also a political one” (16). For Gray, the proper role of the use of 9/11 in fiction is found in its ability to deterritorialize America, and he asserts that the most successful of the post-9/11 novels beg us to explore “an America situated *between* cultures” and provide a forum in which the trauma and crisis “may provide an intercultural connection” (17).

Although Gray was one of the first to decry the domestication of the trauma of 9/11, this inquiry has been extended in notable ways in recent years. In “Organic Shrapnel: Affect and Aesthetics in September 11 Fiction,” Rachel Greenwald Smith takes exception with many of the ways that the 9/11 novel tends to metaphorically rewind the frame of the attacks, divorcing the

event “from any larger geopolitical frame” (157). She takes Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* as illustrative of this trend, when his protagonist Oskar uses a series of pictures of the falling man to reverse the man’s fall from the Twin Towers and, presumably, the attack itself. “And if I had more pictures,” Oskar says, “he would’ve flown through a window, back into the building, and the smoke would’ve poured in the hole that the plane was about to come out of” (325). Smith argues that scenes like this are essentially reductionist because “despite what appears to be an unleashing of the possibilities of literature in the face of trauma, this device ultimately leads to a reading of the event that is compatible only with a highly limited historical outlook” (157).

But these critics are fundamentally absorbed in one strand of the 9/11 novel, and although the trauma narrative has been the most pervasive model for the fiction about 9/11, this narrow range of criticism fails to account for novels that address the 9/11 attacks from a more divergent position, particularly the 9/11 novels by journalists. There’s no doubt that there’s an integral relationship between 9/11 fiction and the early reporting on the attacks. But there’s a deeper relationship between the reporting and the literature in the works of writers such as Amy Waldman and Lorraine Adams. For Waldman, the media and the journalism are essentially characters in the novel, and the plot centers around the real-life events transmuted into fictional reality. For Adams, the fiction is borne out of reporting by taking the techniques of information gathering traditionally practiced by journalists and using that to inform her novel.

In this, Waldman and Adams are attacking the narratives that have come to surround 9/11 and answering two imperatives: Gray’s call for a transnational literature and Tom Wolfe’s desire for a new social realism. Both authors seem to be engaged with the problem that the literary journalists of the 1960s identified, and in many ways, they are the inheritors of the legacy of

New Journalism and the questions that their literary antecedents attempted to confront. In 1989, Tom Wolfe, one of the pioneers of New Journalism, published a seminal essay in *Harper's*, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast." In this essay, Wolfe attacks the literary establishment for its rejection of social realism. "By the mid-1960s the conviction was not merely that the realist novel was no longer possible but that American life itself no longer deserved the term *real*," Wolfe writes. "If fiction writers do not start facing the obvious, the literary history of the second half of the twentieth century will record that journalists not only took over the richness of American life as their domain but also seized the high ground of literature itself." Seen through this prism, Waldman and Adams have reclaimed the 9/11 novel as a site for social realism. Although both novels are divergent, both in form and in the questions they raise, *Harbor* and *The Submission* both reject the trappings of the trauma literature that has become so pervasive in the literary landscape of 9/11.

The Journalist and the Terrorist: *Harbor's* Interrogation of Terrorism

If many of the post-9/11 novels "retreat into the old sureties," as Gray argues in *After the Fall*, *Harbor* seeks to fundamentally undermine the sureties upon which we relied after September 11 and the narratives that we have built (16). Appearing a year before the *Times* heralded the rise of the literary 9/11 novel, *Harbor* by Lorraine Adams isn't so much one of the first 9/11 novels as it is the earliest post-9/11 novel. The attacks are never directly mentioned, but the impact of the impacts is a shadow projected over the entire narrative. More than anything, Adams' novel is a reflection on the loose definitions of terrorism and terms like a terrorist cell that became so ubiquitous in news reporting after the 9/11 attacks. *Harbor* opens with a 24-year-old Algerian man, Aziz Arkoun, jumping off a boat into Boston Harbor to begin a new life in

America. Aziz, a former combatant in the Algerian Civil War, had twice failed at hiding on a boat to find freedom in America before finally succeeding but is severely weakened from the physical torments of hiding away on the ship. As he enters America with trepidation and injuries from his trip, he first attempts to seek help from men he hears speaking Arabic. As he calls out to them, he looks at them and sees fear spelled on their face:

Their faces were made entirely of fear, nothing else. He began to feel their fright welling up inside him and the urge to run was enormous, bigger than he could counter, and as he started, he fell, hard, on the pavement, scraping his bare palms, his elbow reopening the thing scabs from wringing his ship's uniform. (7)

This first encounter serves as an overture for the many themes Adams is toying with in this dense novel. Aziz encounters a land of unlikeness, and he struggles to find help, but to many of the people in America, he will always be an object that will inspire fear and mistrust. Aziz arrives almost a year before the 9/11 attacks are carried out, and the effects of the attacks on the experience that he and the Algerian immigrants encounter is a backdrop that's never explicitly stated, only projected in the tense cultural landscape that the immigrants negotiate.

As an illegal immigrant, Aziz's place in the social fabric of America is almost invisible, and the early part of the narrative is mostly devoted to Aziz's attempts to negotiate a space for himself in America. "He saw that he was unseen. Days—no, weeks—went by without a person speaking to him, and longer still, without someone's eyes meeting his own" (65). His feelings of dislocation and impermanence mirror his status within the United States. Legally he has no recognition and doesn't exist at all "in the order of things was not a place" (65). He stays with his cousin Rafik, another Algerian who immigrated illegally, and his live-in girlfriend, Heather. But still, this isn't enough to tether him to American society, and he believes that, "if he were to die

or to quit or not be there for some reason, another, not like him but adequate to his function, would be fitted in and, like the tab in his cereal box, would keep it neat and closed” (65).

But as the novel progresses, the shadow of the 9/11 attacks becomes omnipresent, though never stated. In many ways, Aziz and the other Algerian immigrants who join them have their identity fashioned as a function of the attacks when the American government begins investigating them. The pattern, then, that the immigrants encounter is that until the attacks they are more or less invisible, not truly part of America, until the increased attention to illegal immigrants from the Arab world casts the government’s eye upon them. They have been defined and a place has been carved out for them in the American fabric, but they are ultimately defined in the negative—as not one of us. They are defined as terrorists. Because of the credit card fraud that many of his associates are embroiled in, Aziz is set in the sights of a joint task force in counter-terrorism that is headed by the FBI. As an FBI agent in charge of the investigation maps out the distended relationships and shades of associations that connect Aziz to the other Algerians he has encountered, she reflects on “this Arkoun’s mug shot, taken from his passport” (253). “He looked shifty,” she thinks to herself. “He was in a multicolored shaded box with lines going to Kamal Gamal and Dhakir Yahyouai. There was a Heather Montrose in the same box. What was a Heather doing with Abduls and Mohammeds?” (254). In this, Adams indicts the way in which the national security forces have waged the war on terrorism and questions the easy labeling that the media has come to rely upon. Although Aziz’s only crime is entering the country illegally, he is assumed to be guilty by association due to his ethnicity. By contrast, the FBI assumes that a woman named Heather couldn’t be a terrorist. She is essentially blameless because guilt by association could never be transmuted across ethnic lines in their eyes.

The way in which Adams scrutinizes the relationship between these artificial labels and the post-9/11 paranoia is integrally related to Adams' history as a journalist. Reviewers, in first assessing Lorraine Adams' *Harbor*, tended to rely on a patterned formula, one that pointed out the novelty about the fact that a journalist was writing a novel and used it as an explanatory mechanism for the meticulous details of the novel. Take, for example, Neil Gordon's review of *Harbor* upon its 2004 release:

It's easy to explain how Lorraine Adams knows so much about the illegal Algerian community in America, about credit card fraud, about terrorism and F.B.I. investigations. "Harbor," her meticulously constructed first novel, is based on her reporting for The Washington Post...What's harder to explain is how Adams is able to draw us so convincingly into the lived reality of her ensemble cast, a skill that derives less from the craft of journalism than from the art of fiction. These characters are the product of a virtuoso act of the imagination, one that reminds us of fiction's deepest ambition—to understand the other.

In his lead, Gordon points out how dichotomously critics have understood the work of the journalist and the work of the novelist. He suggests that there is a much more porous distinction between the two than we would like to imagine. Joseph Finder, in his review of *Harbor* for the *Washington Post*, also points out that Adams is "a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter who has covered the FBI for this newspaper." But integral to understanding this novel is that the work incorporates elements of both fiction and journalism to explore the American conception of what a terrorist is and the way in which 9/11 has fundamentally changed the American landscape in the way we approach Arab-Americans.

Harbor, though, contains ample elements of both journalism and literature. In fact, the novel was, in many ways, constructed using the techniques of journalism and through reporting. In the acknowledgements page, Adams notes that *Harbor* “would not have been possible without the generosity and faith of Algerians. Portions of the novel are based on government records Algerians provided to me” (293). To this end, Adams is pointing out that *Harbor* is not solely an imaginative work; rather, it is one that is based on a historical record and shades Adams’ experiences as a reporter. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Adams attributed her turn to writing novels as a way of encapsulating the nuance and foibles that print journalism wasn’t adequate for encapsulating. “I was seeing more grey than I was seeing the clear black and white of wrongdoing, and my job was to find wrongdoing,” she said (Alter). *Harbor*, then, is way to transcend the black-and-white distinctions that journalism had forced her to rely upon.

The real impetus for *Harbor* came from Adams’ reporting on the millennium plot, a foiled attempt to bomb the Los Angeles International Airport in January 2000. According to the *New York Times* reporting at the time of the plot, an Algerian man named Abdel Ghani Meskini pled guilty to helping others smuggle explosives into the U.S. for a terrorist attack meant to coincide with the millennium celebrations. At the time of his arrest, Meskini told investigators, “I have nothing (to) do with terrorism” but eventually turned state’s witness in 2001 (Feuer). At the time, Adams did much of the reporting on Meskini and the failed bombing attempt for the *Washington Post*, and in 2007, Adams assimilated much of her reporting on the Millennium Plot and Meskini in a long feature in the *Washington Post Magazine*, where she explored some of the problems with the government’s allegations against Meskini. “For months law enforcement officials portrayed him in court filings and interviews as...a fundamentalist Muslim seeking jihad who had trained in camps in Afghanistan,” Adams wrote. “But some of the darkest

allegations the government made about Meskini turned out to be untrue. He was not Afghan-trained, he had never been to a terrorist camp, and if he was an Islamic fundamentalist he was one who drank Michelob, loved Hollywood movies and dated women found in dance clubs.” The incongruous portrayal of Meskini became the basis for much of Adams’ work in *Harbor*, and in the same way that the charges against Meskini were “marred by flawed translations and outright invention,” so too do Adams’ characters encounter a prejudicial rush to judgment based solely upon the government’s invention.

But *Harbor* ignores the explicit details from Adams’ reporting on the bombing plot, and in doing this, Adams is able to more universally confront the shades of gray and loose associations that reporting on the war on terrorism didn’t allow her to do. The only mention of the millennium plot comes in a scene in which the FBI investigators are discussing preliminary attempts to hone in on Aziz and his friends, an assistant U.S. attorney mentions, “After the millennium bombing plot...which was foiled at the Canadian border thanks to Customs—and which was an Algerian operation that the Seattle task force and Washington handled—Justice and the FISA court have been more willing to provide assistance to field offices” (206). Herein, the investigators are pointing to their own willingness to converge on a single point of interest, Algerians and other Arab-Americans, and they are willing to use FISA and surreptitious means to support a pre-conceived narrative. However, even the investigators themselves admit to the problems of their investigative techniques. “I know your affection for database analysis,” one of them tells another, “but as this is my third counterterrorism case, I can assure you that these entries are riddled with errors” (233). Essentially, this FBI agent is pointing to the problems of analysis and the tendentious nature of trying to quantify many of the claims that they have already pre-established in pinpointing a group of Algerian immigrants. Of course, the Algerians

themselves know how crude the American attempts to dichotomize everyone as either a terrorist or not can be. In an early scene, a member of Aziz's cohort named Ghazi is being investigated by a Treasury agent, and points out how the Americans have attempted to conflate his targets under a single label, one that is not even native to the Algerian dialect of Arabic. Ghazi tells Aziz, "He does not use the Algerian word *khandji*, or even *irhabi*. Always *mujahideen*. Always *jihadists*." But both Ghazi and Aziz "knew they were not they same" (107). The agent, in his narrow-minded focus, was generalizing everyone, and essentially all Arab-Americans, as a *jihadist*.

But *Harbor* has more profound ambitions than only reflecting on the meaning of U.S. attempts to define terrorism dichotomously, and Adams is equally interested in attempting to problematize the origins of terrorism and create a complex portrait of the geopolitical relations that have led to terrorism. As the novel progresses, the narrative begins to feature more flashbacks to Aziz's time in the military during the Algerian Civil War, and in these scenes, Adams is exploring the complexity of geopolitics and the Western role in the Middle East that has led to a rise in fundamentalism. In Boston, Aziz reads "uncensored papers from Cairo" that describe the war back home and the intervention in it. "A fairly elected Islamic government had been overthrown by a corrupt military backed by France. The GIA (Groupe Islamique Armé) was armed resistance to tyranny: tyranny that tortured defenseless women for information on their brothers and sons." Scenes that reflect on the geopolitical interventions that have created the modern Middle East are certainly much more reflective of some of the contemporary history that's been written on the origins of terrorism than the early reporting after 9/11 was able to represent. One of the men that Aziz had lived with early on in Boston had become radicalized, and as he explains it to Ghazi, it's a result of Western imperialism and American intervention. "Can I tell you something?" Dhakir says. "They are afraid of Islam. They are afraid. That is why

they are boiling. Do you know what the Americans are doing now? They are behind everything, everything in the home country” (266). Dhakir explains his radicalization not in terms of *jihad* but in terms that ascribe terrorism to a reaction against Western imperialism in the Middle East.

This argument can be tied to a larger narrative that has emerged in the wake of 9/11. Where many have framed the attacks as unwarranted or “out of the blue,” the counter-narrative suggests that the American cultural amnesia regarding terrorism’s relation to historical political interventions compounds the problem of honestly confronting the attacks. Rashid Khalidi, a Columbia University historian, put forth one of the earliest arguments for understanding the relationship between geopolitics and terrorism. Released the same year as *Harbor, Resurrecting Empire* traces the history of American and Western intervention in the Mashriq and Maghreb, and proffers that the inability of the United States to establish rule of law in Iraq is largely tied to a hegemonic amnesia to the history of the region and earlier attempts to interfere in the popular governance of the Middle East. In essence, Khalidi, argues that from French intervention in Algeria to American intervention in Iraq, Western nations have stoked anger and resentment in the Middle East. The anger that is reflected against France and the United States by different characters in Adams’ *Harbor* is certainly reflective of the anger that Khalidi describes, and as Aziz sees from the uncensored newspaper reports, the Western imperialism in Algerian affairs was continuing through the 1990s. In doing this, Adams is couching her novel in a broader historical argument, one that questions the simplistic narrative surrounding the 9/11 attacks in favor of a much more nuanced way of understanding the geopolitical origins of terrorism.

Ultimately, Adams’ novel challenges both the historiography of 9/11 and the discourse that surrounds terrorism in the early news reporting. Adams is attempting to show that our understanding of what a terrorist and what a terrorist cell are is much more complex than

newspaper reporters and government agencies are loathe to admit. Likewise, she is attempting to expose a much more broad historical arc than most Americans see when they think of the 9/11 attacks and the rise of fundamentalism in the 1990s culminating in the terrorist attacks of the 2000s. Adams wants us to expand the bandwidth of the way we talk about terrorism and terrorists. *Harbor* is a way of doing so that takes us beyond the headlines of the day and the newspaper reporting that can only capture so much.

The Novel and Discourse: *The Submission*'s Relationship with the Headlines

While Adams is ultimately interested in the complexities of terms like a terrorist cell and uses her novel as an attempt to undermine the public discourse that surrounds the way the War on Terror is being waged, Waldman is equally absorbed in how the legacy of 9/11 has shaped discourse in the way we respond to Islam. The novel is an indictment of the way in which media narratives are built. *The Submission* begins with a simple premise: a jury has been convened to select which submission will be adopted as a memorial to the victims of 9/11. After the jury finally selects "The Garden," the chairman of the committee opens the envelope to reveal the name of the winner:

What better measure of how high Paul Joseph Rubin, grandson of a Russian Jewish peasant, had climbed? And yet reading the name brought no pleasure, only a painful tightening in his jaw. A Dark horse indeed...The piece of paper containing the winner's name was passed from palm to palm like a fragile folio. There were a few gasps and "hmmms," and "interesting," an "oh my." Then: "Jesus fucking Christ! It's a goddamn Muslim!" (15-16)

The members of the committee each, in turn, realize that the winner is a young architect named Mohammad Khan, and the punctuating exclamation of the sole member of the committee foreshadows the long public debate about the nature of Islam and the seemliness of allowing a Muslim to design a public memorial to the 9/11 victims. The Structure of *The Submission* moves quickly from private to public, as the name of the designer becomes public.

Unlike Aziz in *Harbor*, Mo is fully assimilated into the cultural life of America; he is an architect who was raised in America, attended the best schools and was never a devout adherent of Islam. While Aziz is an immigrant, an other, from the outset of his time in America, Mo has never been made to feel culturally different until the 9/11 attacks, after which he is detained at an airport because his name and ethnicity draw attention to him. But even this feels like a fleeting moment for Mo. He divorces his own existence from the geopolitical machinations at the time and is much more interested in establishing his identity as an architect than he is in the War on Terror or the 9/11 attacks: “A year after the attacks, news about Muslims arrested or suspected, the constant parsing of Islam’s ‘true’ nature, had become background noise for Mo. Foreground was work, behind which geopolitics, serious romance, even a second chair and a bed frame for his echoing loft receded” (38). Paramount to Mo is his autonomy as an artist and his ability to transcend any cultural attachments for sake of becoming a known architect. But as his name is released as the designer of “The Garden,” Mo’s identity becomes tied to Islam in the public’s mind. Mo no longer has autonomy to define himself through his work. Rather, the public has assumed the rights to interpret Mo’s origins and the meaning of his submission in relation to Islam.

Here, Waldman is clearly setting the story up as a response to two related historical circumstances, and *The Submission* is a novel that was substantially ripped from the headlines as

a way of mining the meaning of America's response to 9/11 and Islam. In Chris Cleave's review of *The Submission* for the *Washington Post*, he begins by framing the novel in its first point of historical origin: the debate over the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the inheritance of the this public debate when the 9/11 memorial was chosen:

In 1981, Maya Lin, a 21-year-old architecture student at Yale, won the competition to design the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The starkness of her design, as well as her ethnicity as an Asian American, fueled controversy over her victory. Politicians, art critics and veterans excoriated her, and she was forced to defend her work before the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts....[F]or the 9/11 Memorial, Lin's presence on the panel served as a reminder of the difficulties of aligning public art, private grief and main street opinion in the wake of a national tragedy...In January 2004, the jury announced its winner: a design called "Reflecting Absence," by Israeli American architect Michael Arad. Like Lin's victory, Arad's was challenged, and several compromises had to be made before his winning design was accepted.

Cleave understands the novel as a reaction in part to America's difficult legacy with memorialization and interprets Waldman as commenting upon the inheritance of our collective rush to judgment of both Lin and Arad. But the second point of departure that many reviewers pointed out was the public debate over whether Park51, a community center with a Islamic prayer room, could be built two blocks away from the site of the World Trade Center that was first reported in the *Times* in 2009 and became increasingly contentious in 2010. In an interview with the *New York Observer*, Waldman discussed how the novel was in large part a response to much of the vitriol she encountered during the debate over whether the so-called Ground Zero

mosque should be built. “People were so angry and I kind of couldn’t believe it. There were people who were genuinely opposed, who were very sympathetic, and then there was some real ugliness there that was pretty shocking to me” (Witt). The scenes featuring this antipathy and malevolence toward Islam are mirror images of the public outcry that was amplified across the nation by Fox News.

To this end, the media landscape is an integral part of Waldman’s novel, and journalists are portrayed as antagonists in a search for understanding the true meaning of Khan’s submission. The actions of a tabloid reporter, Alyssa Spier, are significant in moving the plot forward; she is the first to unveil the news that a Muslim had been chosen as the winner of the contest. But Waldman, in this portrayal of the reporter, condemns the lack of context, the easy labeling of Khan as a Muslim. Rubin, the committee chair, first discovers that the news had been leaked from a 6 a.m. phone call, and when he goes down to the newsstand to pick up a copy of the *New York Post*: “He reached the newsstand. There it was and going fast—the paper the *Post*, the author Alyssa Spier, and the photo of an unidentifiable man in a baklava, scary as a terrorist. The headline: MYSTERY MUSLIM MEMORIAL MESS” (51-52). The insistence of treating the reporters and headlines as an integral part of the story of how the public reacts to Khan’s submission indicates that Waldman’s form of social realism acknowledges that the opinion makers and those involved in reporting the news are just as substantial, if not more substantial, than the private citizens involved in the story—the widow whose husband was killed during 9/11, Claire Burwell, and the man whose design the jury chose. Once the story enters the news cycle, it becomes embroiled in the talk of public opinion, the commentators on the blogosphere and on the radio. “Alyssa watched, transfixed, as her Mystery Muslim scoop entered the news cycle and rolled forward, crushing every other minor story before it. By noon she was booked on

three television news programs and had done four radio interviews” (58). The news has constructed the reality, rather than reality being depicted in the news.

It’s certainly striking that Waldman’s take on social realism privileges the role of the people who package the message and the news and much as the people the news depicts. In her *New York Times* review of *The Submission*, Michiko Kakutani was quick to anoint Waldman as Tom Wolfe’s inheritor:

A decade after 9/11, Amy Waldman’s nervy and absorbing new novel, “The Submission,” tackles the aftermath of such a terrorist attack head-on. The result reads as if the author had embraced Tom Wolfe’s famous call for a new social realism — for fiction writers to use their reporting skills to depict “this wild, bizarre, unpredictable, Hog-stomping baroque country of ours” — and in doing so, has come up with a story that has more verisimilitude, more political resonance and way more heart than Mr. Wolfe’s own 1987 best seller, “The Bonfire of Vanities.”

But what’s equally striking is the extent to which the social realism of Waldman’s novel is permeated by the omnipresence of the media. Claire, the only relative of the victims on the jury, turns on the TV just to figure out what the “shouting classes would make of” the selection, and turning to Fox News, she discovers that the media has already started to declare Khan’s design a “martyrs’ paradise. “As we all know by now,” she hears a member of a Fox News panel say, “the terrorists who carried this out believed their act would get them to paradise” (116). In the minds of Americans with no relationship to the 9/11 attacks, the jury’s selection has already been deemed an Islamic garden.

But as the media storm takes over the story, the characters in *The Submission* struggle to come to terms with the way they are being portrayed. Mo begins to put a barrier between himself and the “Mohammad Khan who was written and talked about, as if that were another man altogether” (126). In the impending media storm, the characters realize, “Facts were not found but made, and once made, alive, defying anyone to tell them from truth. Strangers analyzed, judged, and invented him. (126) Even twenty years after the public debate over “The Garden,” Mo still can not separate himself from the way in which reality was manufactured at the time. As he is being interviewed for a documentary on the memorial, he looks “suspiciously at the camera, which had been removed from its case. So far it had brought only grief” (292).

For Waldman, the nexus between the media landscape that has treated the role of Islam in 9/11 is an integral part of our zeitgeist, and in her move to the novel to encapsulate this relationship, she is able to more fully capture the complexity of the way the media informs cultural life and our relationship to 9/11.

The Lifespan of a Novel

Waldman’s novel is one of the most recent novels that takes into account the ramifications of 9/11 and the way in which it has informed the public zeitgeist, but it certainly won’t be the last. In Michael Prodger’s review of *The Submission* for the *Financial Times*, he was quick to anoint Waldman’s novel as the most successful yet in capturing the 9/11 media environment. In this review, he once again plays on the dichotomous understanding of reporting and literature.

It is a quirk of human nature that some events are of such epic proportions that it seems only fiction can make sense of them. The only rationale for this belief is

our faith that fiction can humanise the incomprehensible and uncover the deeper truths that mere reportage cannot. And so, almost before the dust had settled, there was an expectation that it would be novelists who would best make sense of September 11, 2001.

Prodger, though, is playing upon a dichotomous understanding of journalism and literature, one that ignores the way in which the post-9/11 novels of journalists have undermined the traditional media assumptions, yet capture a reality more closely akin to social realism than any of the other 9/11 novels to date.

So here we have two novels that are certainly highly engaged with the legacy and inheritance of 9/11, but what is so striking about these novels is the way in which they have forsaken the trauma narrative in favor of a more acute form of social realism. These novels aren't so much a bloodletting and retelling of the day itself or how sharp the pain of the day felt—not so interested in ripping of the scab on a wound still fresh to reexamine the trauma. Rather, they are an expiation of sorts for all that followed the 9/11 attacks. For Waldman, the critique lies in the way that we, as a nation have become shepherded by the media's shoddy attempts at providing resolution. For Adams, the imperative is in showing that so much of the American way of understanding terrorism and the genesis of 9/11 is made to be black and white, when it is in reality much more complex than we would like to imagine.

At the same time, the novels answer Gray's call for a new transnational literature, one that complicates and undermines the old sureties rather than bolstering them. In *After the Fall*, Gray argues that an imperative of new American fiction after 9/11 should be to subvert "the oppositional language of mainstream commentary – us and them, West and East, Christian and Muslim" (17). The novels that truly undermine these dichotomous understandings "respond to

the heterogeneous character of the United States, as well as its necessary positioning in a transnational context” (17). In many ways, Adams and Waldman both answer Gray’s call to deterritorialize America by suggesting ways in which the historiography surrounding 9/11 and the ways in which 9/11 is portrayed in cultural representations can continue to problematize the effects of the terrorist attacks. These novels move beyond trauma, raising questions about the way in which the discourse of terrorism continues to be problematic for Americans and the agencies charged with stopping future attacks, the way the public zeitgeist has created a delimited view of what it means to be an American and an other, and the way in which our continued fear of future attacks has led to an reductionist view and mythology of 9/11. More than other 9/11 novels, the fiction by journalists after 9/11 have reinvigorated writing about the terrorist attacks in a way that transcends the trauma narrative.

Of course, Waldman and Adams aren’t the only journalists who have turned to the novel as an attempt to problematize our understanding of media phenomenon. In fact, they aren’t the only journalists writing post-9/11 novels, and this line of inquiry can certainly be extended to Ken Kalfus’s *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* and Zoë Heller’s *The Believers*. These novels, as opposed to the works by DeLillo, McEwan, and Foer, aren’t so interested in exploring the trauma and the gaping hole that 9/11 let as they are in carving out a niche where we can better understand the public zeitgeist in the wake of 9/11.

But, surely, the fact that these novels are so set on exploring a zeitgeist that is, in and of itself, a historical contingency raises separate and much more complex problems for both novels’ relative shelf life. The question of whether *The Submission* and *Harbor*, or for that matter any of the post-9/11 novels that take as their starting point historiography and a re-interpretation of the transnational aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, will attain any sort of posterity is certainly pressing.

The dilemma is this: How can these novels speak to us and to our zeitgeist when they are so rooted in the present? Will anyone care about *Harbor*'s relationship with the reductionist way that our national security forces and the press have framed questions of what makes one a terrorist in a few years when so much of the discourse surrounding terrorism is rooted in the historical present and when new ways of framing discussions of national security are still being introduced? For instance, when Adams' novel was first released, terms like enhanced interrogation methods and enemy combatant were still on the horizon and hadn't yet become part of the everyday discourse of terrorism. Likewise, why should we care about the debates over Park51 and the memorialization of 9/11 when these matters will eventually be relegated to a footnote in history, just like the fact that there was much consternation over Maya Lin designing the Vietnam War Memorial. We certainly hope that this essay presents a compelling reason to believe that the latent content of these books isn't nearly as important as the way they address historiography and the way narratives are established and discussed in America. But if the latent content of the novels are no longer topical for readers, then the more fundamental themes that the novels are exploring not only are in danger of becoming incompressible to the reader—they're also in danger of no longer being read.

This already seems to be the case with *Harbor*. Notwithstanding Gray's brief discussion of the novel in *After the Fall*, *Harbor* has generally been ignored in current discussions of post-9/11 literature and has received scant attention from the press and critics alike. Though still in print, the Vintage edition of the novel hovers right around 900,000 on the Amazon best-sellers listing. For comparison, most editions of O'Neill's *Netherland*, McEwan's *Saturday*, and Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* are still within the top 50,000 best-selling books. Even DeLillo's *The Falling Man* still crests 200,000 in sales. If one were to judge *Harbor* based solely

on its influence and readership, the novel has already become a footnote. *The Submission*, in contrast, is still outselling all of the other post-9/11 novels this spring. But that is not to say that *The Submission* will be immune to the same general decline in readership and critical influence that has marked Adams' novel. We're two years out from the novel's release, and surely its topicality has already started to wane for many readers. It's certainly possible that its engagement with the debate over Park51 will soon to be a lost reference to many of the readers who approach the novel in coming years. Given these concerns, it might well be the case that *Harbor* and *The Submission* will soon be relegated to the dustbin of history.

But there is an alternate narrative that makes us more hopeful for the potential of these novels to live on. *The Submission* speaks to a question of memorialization that was poignant to Americans in both 1981 and 2011, and there is no telling what events Waldman's novel will continue to shed a fresh perspective on. In the same way Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out that there are certain characteristics in the American public ethos that are immutable and in the same way that *Democracy in America* continues to feel like an apt diagnosis of many of the ills in contemporary American life, Waldman may well have written a novel that will continue to feel poignant whenever a question arises about the role of Islam in the fabric of American public life. This novel certainly speaks to a transhistorical problem and can give resonance to our collective consciousness whenever a new public debate launches over memorialization and whenever it is necessary to question the way in which the press ultimately reduces the messy and complex into an easy narrative.

By the same token, until a month, terrorism was at the backburner of our collective consciousness. Today, a novel that explores the loose and complex relationships that define what we are so apt to call a terrorist network—a novel that surrounds an investigation of an alleged

terrorist plot in Boston itself—feels much more poignant. The America it describes and tries to make sense of feels as vivid today as it did in 2004.

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