Jetstream

American Identity at Home and Abroad Post-9/11

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Abstract

This creative and critical body of research together consider the role of American identity post-9/11 through travel narratives. The critical analysis studies three novels as they present American identity post-9/11 in relation to the American Dream. The American Dream promises success via physical and social mobility, but this promise is compromised post-9/11 as increased national security and xenophobic fear impede this mobility, challenging the ideals that define American identity. Travel narratives in post-9/11 novels are a critical medium to present this crisis of nationhood. In travel narratives, the American traveler learns about themselves and their Americanness through the experience of identifying with the Other while away from home. The accompanying creative work, a novel titled *Jetstream*, is a response to the existing body of 9/11 fiction discussed in the critical research. While existing 9/11 fiction uses the family as metaphor for country to depict brokenness amidst tragedy, *Jetstream* instead suggests that the political divisiveness after the 2016 presidential election created an even deeper sense of fracture for Americans. *Jetstream* tells the story of one family from the suburbs of Washington, DC during three distinct eras: 9/11, 2016-2021, and 2051. In *Jetstream* the travel narratives show family members moving away from one another to understand themselves and their country in a time of national crisis. Their attempted reunion in 2051 is thwarted by a bizarre natural disaster which signifies the next great threat to national and global safety: the oncoming climate crisis. Together these bodies of work study the contradictions that inform the American mythos and how literature depicts those challenges in the globalized twenty-first century.

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Introduction to the Thesis

On the evening of September 11, 2001, my parents were going to attend a barbecue on the White House Lawn. I was eight years old and very excited at this prospect. We were hardly the only family in the neighborhood with such an opportunity: Vice President Dick Cheney's personal physician had twins in my little brother's year at school, a neighbor was on Secret Service detail for the Bush daughters, and my dad was a staff member on Capitol Hill for the United States Senate. This proximity to power was normalized. On 9/11, my community's experience was abnormal to the rest of the country.

I discovered how unique my circumstances were as a freshman in college in 2011 when we honored the ten-year anniversary of the attacks. This was my first time discussing that day with people my age who had been in other parts of the country. I was shocked to learn that many had watched the falling Twin Towers on televisions at school. My own teachers were not allowed to tell us what had happened and my parents shielded me from the news. Later in my undergraduate studies I read Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, a canonical work of 9/11 fiction that, like much 9/11 fiction, focused on the feeling that the world was paralyzed by grief.[1] This narrative was in complete contrast to my childhood memories. We didn't stop, we sped up. The fathers in town raced back to work on Capitol Hill, at the White House, or on Fort Meade military base while the mothers distracted us until the schools reopened. In the aftermath, our town was patriotic and supported the troops. Criticism of the nation or government was unimaginable during my youth.

Continuing into the 2010s I realized how my memories of 9/11 deeply informed my view of the world. I don't consider myself to be particularly pro-government, but as discourse around Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden, and the murky "swamp" of federal government grew during this decade, I became aware of how my proximity to DC impacted my positions. To me, the

[1] Tim Gauthier**,** *9/11 Fiction, Empathy, and Otherness* (Lexington Books, 2015), 13.

government was not some impervious unknown; it was my dad, my best friend's mom, my neighbors, my swim coach.

This decade was also when I began to travel more extensively. In the Obama years I felt welcomed as an American but after 2016, I was met with skepticism. There was no way to defend the misogyny, racism, and vitriol that President Trump stood for, so I was open about the fact that he did not have my support. This administration was not the government I had grown up with; rather, it was something unfamiliar and threatening.

As Trump's power wore on into the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the polarization he caused became debilitating. At the time I was a graduate student in South Carolina, where lockdown precautions were slow to be enacted and often ignored. This was a noticeable contrast to friends and family living in parts of the country that had implemented mask mandates weeks earlier. Watching these disparities, I started to connect the shared rhetorics of 9/11 and lockdown including a "new normal," restricted travel, xenophobic fearmongering, and global anxiety. As each state responded separately, I was reminded of the conversations I had with fellow undergraduates about 9/11. Someday, college freshmen will share their widely varying memories of lockdown. I have no doubt that this childhood experience of COVID-19 will inform the next generation's political attitudes relating to public safety and government oversight.

The divisiveness increased until it reached a climax at the January 6, 2021 insurrection. As I watched the footage on television, I recalled the relief my mother had expressed on 9/11 that the Capitol, and my father, had been spared. Twenty years later, our own fellow Americans displayed a level of violence that was completely foreign. After January 6th, it became clear that the throughline from 9/11 patriotism to "Make America Great Again" nationalism needed to be discussed.

With these ideas in mind, I also wanted my novel to look ahead: what will be the next "new normal?" In my estimation, the next global challenge will be a result of the climate crisis. Like 9/11 and COVID-19, increased natural

disasters will disrupt our sense of safety, impact how we can travel, and ask us to consider our relationship to those we perceive as Other in the face of a unifying challenge. For millions around the world, these climate events have already changed their lives and the scope of destruction is projected to continue.[2] The title comes from the meteorological term. "Jetstream" is defined as a high-speed wind that generally blows west to east through the upper limits of the troposphere and is a frequent cause of airplane turbulence.[3] I chose to include elements of speculative fiction and climate fiction in the novel to anticipate how these new challenges might take place in the future with the national responses to 9/11, COVID-19, and January 6th informing the future sections. As I connected two different eras of American crisis with 9/11 and January 6th, it was appropriate to consider the unforeseen outcomes of the present based on the lessons learned from our recent past.

Jetstream is my response to this question. The novel begins in 2051 and looks back to 2001 and 2016–2021. Placing these moments in conversation together asks the reader to consider how past informs present and muddles our sense of history. After Trump's reelection this November, the inevitability of history repeating itself is as great a concern as ever.

Jetstream is intrinsically tied to my critical research as my novel is a response to the existing body of 9/11 fiction. The most notable difference between my novel and other 9/11 fiction is the focus on the DC setting. Most 9/11 fiction takes place in New York City, where the destruction of the Twin Towers was played repeatedly on news stations around the world in the days following the attacks. The death and destruction at the Pentagon were lesser in scale and largely exist in fiction in the genre of thrillers, spy narratives, or political drama. As a DC-based family drama, *Jetstream* subverts the trope of the broken family as metaphor for the broken nation post-9/11 that was so common in New York-based stories and instead unites the family until the divisive 2016 election. Much

[2] Jeff Masters, "The Jet Stream Is Getting Weird," *Scientific American* (December 2014): 73.
[3] Masters, "The Jet Stream Is Getting Weird," 68-70.

like New York City, DC is a place inhabited by those who come from elsewhere in search of a dream forging change in government and politics. As cities filled with people in positions of power, the difference in how they are represented in 9/11 fiction, specifically the lack of representation of Washington, DC, is notable. *Jetstream* depicts the culture of DC and the ways that the city had its own experience of national crisis on 9/11, and again on January 6, 2021.

With this view of 9/11 in the context of the first Trump administration, *Jetstream* looks at the changing dynamics between generations that did not yet exist in 2001. The character of Josh represents the generation that was born after the attacks and the strain this can place on him and other members of this family. This distance within the family in the 2016–2021 years and in 2051 draws from existing 9/11 fiction and the tenuous parent-child relationships represented in the novels I analyze in my critical study. These familial ties can represent generational trauma and memory as the past informs both present and future. In post-9/11 fiction, the roles of trauma and memory often relate to the "never forget" rhetoric that was repeated after the attacks and the need to memorialize the lives lost. As a contrast, Americans were encouraged to move on quickly from both the COVID-19 crisis and January 6th insurrection. By placing these events together in *Jetstream* I attempt to show how characters' relationships to the future are informed by the past; mistrust of government leads one child to expatriation while a desire for what used to be inhibits another from building a stable life for himself.

In researching existing work, I routinely found an emphasis on the issue of the contradictions in American identity. These contradictions came to the forefront after 9/11, when a nation whose identity is built on the mobility defined in the American Dream became fearful of travel and immigration. In the novels analyzed in my critical research, characters face a crisis of understanding the American consciousness as they are presented with the contradictions of their country post-9/11.

I chose to study *The Zero* by Jess Walter (2006), *The Submission* by Amy Waldman (2011), and *Homeland Elegies* by Ayad Akhtar (2020) because each represents the American traveling after 9/11 for reasons that are expressly linked to the attacks. It is significant that this movement takes place after 9/11 because travel is so inherent in the attacks themselves. First, because commercial air travel was weaponized to carry out the attacks. Additionally, security measures imposed after the attacks kept planes grounded for days and led to increased security measures, many of which are still upheld more than two decades later. Finally, movement by force became a critical reaction of the United States (US) government post-9/11 in terms of the deportation of Muslims, detainment of Muslim Americans, Arab Americans, and immigrants from Muslim or Arab nations under suspicion of terrorism, and the deployment of American troops to the Middle East in the burgeoning wars in Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq.

This critical research informed the representations of travel in *Jetstream* as characters move within and outside of the US after 2016. Much like post-9/11 travel, all of the movement of these characters is directly linked to their lives after the 2016 election of an unnamed, controversial, conservative president and the decision of the family patriarch to take a job in the White House. Travel narratives are used in my work to show the characters transformed through their movement as a connection to the values of the American Dream. Though the initial inspiration for this novel came from my own childhood experience of 9/11, I do not consider this to be a work of autofiction, like Akhtar's *Homeland Elegies*. I chose to fictionalize this memory through a created family in order to include narratives beyond my own limited experiences without the suggestion that some aspects of the core family's story could be read as factual. Key details from my own family are changed to suit the later sections taking place from 2016–2021 and in 2051.

Together, the components of the thesis study how travel narratives **function** to represent American identity. The critical research focuses on post-9/11 narratives with a glimpse into post-2016, while the creative work carries

Where To Next?
American Identity Explored Through Travel Narratives in Post-9/11 Fiction

Introduction: The American Travel Novel Arrives in the 21st Century

The American identity has always been defined by the relationship between its citizens and movement. US history began with explorers, religious asylum seekers, and colonists who arrived from abroad then in turn forced movement upon indigenous Native Americans and enslaved persons from Africa and the Caribbean. Later periods of immigration saw masses of millions enter the US from every corner of the earth.[4] In this sense, travel is inherent to the American identity as individuals became citizens through migration, had movement forced upon them, or were descendants born in the US as American citizens. Movement has been a defining feature of the American identity across multiple eras in history into the twenty-first century when the September 11, 2001 terror attacks vastly altered Americans' relationship with travel.

Throughout every iteration of the American traveler in the nation's short history, there has been writing by a traveler or about the traveler's experience. As a genre, travel writing predates the founding of the US as a nation, existing as far back as Homer's *Odyssey*, which Casey Blanton regards as one of the earliest forms of travel narrative, and continuing with explorations into political or financial writings, such as those of explorer Marco Polo.[5] For Americans, travel writing began in the eighteenth century with explorers' journals, trade records, and the writings of religious missionaries in the American west.[6] The genre continues throughout subsequent eras: American travelers moved

[4] Alfred Benidixen and Judith Hamera, "Introduction: New Worlds and Old Lands – the Travel Book and Construction of American Identity," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.

[5] Casey Blanton, "Chapter One: Narrating Self and Other: A Historical Overview," in *Travel Writing: The Self and The World,* 1st ed. (Routledge, 1995), 3.

[6] William Merrill Decker, "Americans in Europe from Henry James to the Present," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 127.

westward during expansion under the Manifest Destiny and during the Gold Rush; the Great Migration saw formerly enslaved southerners move north after the Civil War and emancipation; wealthy Americans traveled abroad on European tours; and new Americans arrived in the US in search of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

William Merrill Decker summarizes the first half of the twentieth century of American travel writing, noting that post-World War One, during the interwar period, books and stories from the "lost generation" of American expatriates provided a stark deviation from previous narratives of Americans abroad represented as wealthy tourists or traumatized soldiers during battle.[7] The interwar and post-World War Two periods also provided an opportunity for the first travel writing by Black Americans, who were afforded greater civil liberties in Europe than in their home country.[8] The writings of expatriates and Black Americans speak to the progression towards globalization as it would be realized in the twenty-first century. Globalization as it is relevant to this period can be defined by Aliki Varvogli in a description of early twenty-first century American novels as "the mass movement of people, money and ideas."[9] Further, globalization proliferates during this era as technology has opened the world and allows for freer movement across borders, making the world more accessible than at any other time in history.[10]

These are examples of writing by and about the American as traveler, which can be defined for the purposes of this research as someone who has chosen to explore someplace beyond home. Casey Blanton categorizes the elective traveler who "travels for the sake of travel itself" as making "a conscious commitment to represent the strange and exotic in ways that both familiarize and distance the foreign," highlighting elective travel as specifically an endeavor for

[7] Merrill Decker, "Americans in Europe from Henry James to the Present," 127-33.

[8] Merrill Decker, "Americans in Europe from Henry James to the Present," 137-8.

[9] Aliki Varvogli, *Travel and Dislocation in Contemporary American Fiction* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 53.

[10] Varvogli, *Travel and Dislocation in Contemporary American Fiction*, xv.

the traveler to experience the familiar and the unfamiliar.[11] A broader definition, such as Varvogli's, of travel as "one of the main processes by which one becomes dislocated," notes that "Trauma and memory, family ties and family rifts can also dislocate individuals," which would more comprehensively include representations of movement, including displacement.[12] For the purposes of the present research, travel will be specifically defined as movement by choice. As the novels included in this analysis will show, choices may be made under differing levels of duress; however, the aspect of choice is specifically relevant to depicting movement in the post-9/11 era when movement by force was a major political issue. Specifically, this era saw the deportation of Arab American and Muslim American immigrants, detention of Muslims and those of Arab, Middle Eastern, and North African heritage under suspicion of terrorism, and deployment of American troops to the Middle East as the invasions of Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq began.[13] For the characters in these texts to be able to move by choice prior to external force reflects their most American value of freedom of movement, even for those who are exercising this right for the last time.

This focus on elective travel also excludes the history of those who were forcibly moved within the US, such as Native Americans placed on reservations in the American West or enslaved people forcibly brought into the US against their will. The distinction is crucial to the historical identity of the American traveler as someone with freedom—in reference to the line in the National Anthem celebrating America as the "land of the free and home of the brave"—and with the choice to move in the pursuit of the American Dream. The term "the American Dream" was defined by James Truslow Adams in 1931 as the dream "of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank which is the greatest contribution we have as yet made to the thought and welfare of

[11] Blanton, "Narrating Self and Other: A Historical Overview," 5.
[12] Varvogli, *Travel and Dislocation in Contemporary American Fiction*, xvi.
[13] Peter Morey, "Islamophobia: The Word and the World," in *Islamophobia and the Novel* (Columbia University Press, 2018), 144.

the world."[14] Often the American Dream ideal is applied to immigrants who move to the US for economic and political freedoms that allow upward mobility which is unattainable under the social and political structures of their birth nations. The term also applies to individuals born into lower socioeconomic groups or underserved populations within the US who go on to achieve economic and social mobility. It is, however, worth noting that since the 1970s, the widening wage gap in the US has resulted in the American Dream becoming "anachronistic" according to Lawrence Buell in his text *The Dream of the Great American Novel*.[15] The American Dream may be understood objectively as nothing more than a "dream" for its pursuers, though the Dream's status in the American mythos continues today.

Regardless of its achievability, the ideas of both the American Dream and the American traveler are intertwined in fiction. Early American fiction, specifically the novel, became defined by the "transformational life sagas" of a character achieving the American Dream, evolving into later iterations that show the convention of the self-made man as a myth or cautionary tale.[16] One example of the "transformational" narratives often depicted in literature is the American Road Trip, as it evokes the American Dream with physical mobility, imagery of open roads, and the promise of a distant horizon.[17]

While the aforementioned examples of the American traveler offer historical representations, in contemporary fiction the twenty-first century environment must be considered. One of the most impactful recent events to inform this environment was the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on New York City and the US Pentagon, in which nearly three thousand people were killed in a single day. The attacks will heretofore be designated as "9/11."

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[14] James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Routledge, 1931), xix-xx.

[15] Lawrence Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Harvard University Press, 2016), 208.

[16] Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, 111.

[17] Nancy Leong, "The Open Road and the Traffic Stop: Narratives and Counter-Narratives of the American Dream," *Florida Law Review* 64, no. 2 (October 17, 2012): 306.

To explore this relationship between American identity and travel post-9/11, I will analyze three novels: *The Zero* by Jess Walter (2006), *The Submission* by Amy Waldman (2011), and *Homeland Elegies* by Ayad Akhtar (2020). These texts were chosen because each involves characters who travel as a direct consequence of the 9/11 attacks. Through this movement they exhibit an aspect of their Americanness under the definition of the American Dream, while also developing a complicated relationship with their idea of "home" during these travels, which suggests this idealistic version of America no longer exists post-9/11. There are a few reasons why I chose these three novels. First, each represents the American traveling after 9/11 for reasons that are expressly linked to the attacks. In *The Zero*, Brian Remy is on the move as part of an investigation for the opaque government agency that has hired him, and later to evade these duties. Mo, Asma, and Inam all travel in *The Submission* under various levels of duress as their Muslim American identity becomes difficult to maintain in post-9/11 America. Ayad and his father both travel in *Homeland Elegies*, Ayad late in the day of the attacks and his father after Trump-era xenophobia, linked to Trump's participation in the 9/11 Islamophobia-fueled "birther movement" against President Obama[18]. It is significant that all of this movement takes place after 9/11 because travel is so inherent in the attacks themselves; primarily because commercial air travel was weaponized to carry out the attack, and because security measures imposed after the attacks kept planes grounded for days and led to increased security measures, many of which are still upheld more than two decades later[19].

It is also notable that these three specific novels allow distance from 9/11 to be observed. Homi K. Bhabha writes of the national narrative that to "write the story of the nation demands that we articulate that archaic ambivalence that

[18] Michael Tesler, "President Obama and the Emergence of Islamophobia in Mass Partisan Preferences," *Political Research Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2022): 405.
[19] John N. Duvall, "Homeland Security and the State of (American) Exception(Alism): Jess Walter's 'The Zero' and the Ethical Possibilities of Postmodern Irony," *Studies in the Novel* 45 no. 2 (Summer 2013): 279–80.

informs the time of modernity."[20] Under this theory of writing the nation, novels published five, ten, and nineteen years after a national trauma such as 9/11 will reflect the context of the passage of time since the attacks. The understanding of how 9/11 has impacted American identity will therefore evolve in each text.

The Zero was published only five years after the attacks, during the Bush administration when the rhetoric around 9/11 was focused on a "never forget" mentality of honoring those who lost their lives. Travel is represented as a means to an end in an effort to better secure the nation, but is portrayed through ambiguity, reflective of the uncertain times immediately after the 9/11 attacks in which the sense of "home" was disrupted. In *The Submission*, the focus on a 9/11 memorial moves past the rhetoric of "never forget" and instead asks how Americans will remember this time. The novel was published in 2011 during the first Obama administration, which offered a more optimistic promise for the nation that had elected its first African American president, in spite of misinformation that suggested he was Muslim and subsequent xenophobic attacks in the media.[21] Finally, *Homeland Elegies* was published in 2020, nearly twenty years after 9/11 and during the first Trump administration.

With this distance from the attacks, *Homeland Elegies* draws a connection for readers between the racism experienced by Muslim Americans after 9/11 and the nationalist "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) movement that elected Trump in 2016.

As these texts will show, in the post-9/11 years the American traveler faced new challenges, primarily the relationship to the Other and what defines an American. After 9/11, there was widespread xenophobia against Muslim Americans, Americans of Middle Eastern heritage, and Arab or Middle Eastern immigrants,

[20] Homi K. Bhabha, "The Location of Culture," in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900–2000*, ed. Dorothy Hale (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2005), 719, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uea/detail.action?docID=239862.
[21] Tesler, "President Obama and the Emergence of Islamophobia in Mass Partisan Preferences," 395.

who were placed under suspicion of connections to al-Qaeda or other terrorist organizations. This new era of racialized and religiously informed fear became a major component of post-9/11 fiction. Succinctly summarized by Richard Gray:

> Facing the other, in all its difference and danger, is surely one of the challenges now for writers, not just because of obscene acts of terrorism committed by a small group of people, but because the US has become, more than ever, a border territory in which different cultures meet, collide, and in some instances collude with each other. There is the threat of the terrorist, but there is also the fact of a world that is liminal, a proliferating chain of borders, where familiar oppositions—civilized and savage, town and wilderness, "them" and "us"—are continually being challenged, dissolved, and reconfigured.[22]

The legacy of the US as a place built by immigrants from afar is now challenged by a new population of immigrants perceived to present a previously unimaginable threat. Gray continues that for writers this presents an "obligation" to parse through these contradictions and fears, then represent them in fiction to grapple with what is happening in the US.[23] One approach to Gray's challenge could be seen in Gauthier's *9/11 Fiction, Empathy, and Otherness* in which he suggests that the author's role at this time is to use imagined narratives to develop an understanding of both oneself and the Other within the new world of post-9/11 America.[24] Travel narratives specifically address the traveler's experience with the Other and of being othered, allowing a space for this understanding.

To further understand Gray's call to action, it is also necessary to establish why the novel specifically is an essential medium for representing these ideas. Under Patrick O'Donnell's definition, the novel is "perennially oriented toward the future, even as it assimilates the past" as it builds on the tradition of

[22] Richard Gray, "Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis," *American Literary History* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 135.
[23] Gray, "Open Doors, Closed Minds," 147.
[24] Tim Gauthier, *9/11 Fiction, Empathy, and Otherness* (Lexington Books, 2015), 6.

storytelling, history, and genre to create innovative stories and ideas.[25] Similarly, Buell states that American literature has long included a "future-oriented cast of thinking" both to Americans and global readers as it represents the US as a continuing experiment in democracy.[26] This idea of the novel as symbolizing the nation is well established as Timothy Brennan writes:

> Nations, then, are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural functions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role…It was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the "one, yet many" of national life, and by mimicking the structure of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles…Its manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that was the nation.[27]

Synthesizing these three arguments, the novel as a form allows for variety in characters, settings, conflicts, and ideas that can capture the multitudes of a nation in a contained, cohesive narrative that represents the dominion of the nation itself. Brennan continues his argument, noting that in the post-war period after World War Two, the novel was especially relevant to the insurgence of post-colonial nationalism under the new era of globalism established during this conflict.[28] This relevance of the novel in a time of globalization is meaningful for post-9/11 fiction as the attacks themselves were indicative of a new era of a connected world that presented unexpected threats alongside new opportunities.

This future orientation of American literature and the ability of the novel to capture a national identity make it an effective medium for authors in their attempts to understand the implications of 9/11. Also specific to 9/11 fiction is the representation of catastrophe as a moment of transformation in history. Catastrophe is represented through protagonists who gain insights or a new knowledge about the world from this event, which is then passed on to

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[25] Patrick O'Donnell, "Epilogue," in *The American Novel Now: Reading Contemporary American Fiction Since 1980* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010), 213.

[26] Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, 108.

[27] Timothy Brennan, "The National Longing for Form," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (Taylor & Francis Group, 1990), 49.

[28] Brennan, "The National Longing for Form," 62.

audiences.[29] A connection can be made between the transformational experience of enduring catastrophe and the transformational experience of travel. Using Buell's previously cited theory of travel as transformation, the novel in turn is an effective medium for expressing such a transformation. Specifically, both narratives provide an arc in which a protagonist experiences the unfamiliar in such a way that their understanding of themselves and their place in the world is altered. While travel is not inherently linked to catastrophe, the two are inextricably linked in the 9/11 attacks. It is therefore critical to study the novel as a representation of post-9/11 America because it is a medium that allows for this depiction of transformation.

In the case of post-9/11 fiction, the catastrophe is a cause for characters to travel as they try to assimilate to the new post-9/11 world. In this way, travel functions as a narrative tool to aid characters, and in turn readers, in their search for understanding. By placing fictional characters in transit, authors displace the reader alongside the character as they discover themselves and their relationship to home at this particular moment. Broadly, 9/11 fiction published immediately after the attacks focuses on the trauma experienced on that day as authors navigated a delicate balance of describing the horror without relying on, as Dolores Resano puts it, "voyeurism [or] aesthetic escapism."[30] Conversely, post-9/11 fiction, for the purposes of this argument, takes place in the fictive present after September 11, 2001. In these stories both the reader and characters exist in a post-9/11 world and recall the attacks as memories. This vantage point allows for hindsight on the attacks, the subsequent national trauma, and the US government's response. The distinction between 9/11 fiction and post-9/11 fiction is significant as both readers and writers have a greater distance from the attacks with each passing year, allowing them to consider what 9/11 meant for individuals and the nation both on the day and afterwards. This psychic distance

[29] Patrick O'Donnell, "Catastrophe: The Ends of History," in *The American Novel Now: Reading Contemporary American Fiction Since 1980* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010), 162—63.

[30] Dolores Resano, "Under the Radar: Jess Walter's *The Zero* and the State of Irony and Satire after 9/11," *Atlantis* 39, no. 1 (June 2017): 135.

for the reader is mirrored in the physical distance traversed by characters as they undertake the transformational experience of travel in response to the transformational impact of 9/11.

Furthering the role of catastrophe in the novel, John Duvall and Robert Marzec highlight that literature addresses the rhetoric in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 that there were "no words" to describe this tragedy.[31] Most Americans and the global community at large experienced 9/11 via television and photographs in newspapers that permeated the news cycle for weeks. Even though a collective memory of these events through image was established early in the immediate aftermath, to put words to this event was an unimaginable undertaking.[32] Judith Butler wrote of this need to put the tragedy into text in the post-9/11 theory, *A Precarious Life*, writing:

> The public sphere is constituted in part by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, and what will not. It is also a way of establishing whose lives can be marked as lives, and whose deaths will count as deaths. Our capacity to feel and to apprehend hangs in the balance. But so, too, does the fate of the reality of certain lives and deaths as well as the ability to think critically and publicly about the effects of war.[33]

Novels record what appeared through screens during the attacks to mediate the events into reality for characters and subsequently readers. Amidst the discussions of American identity surrounding post-9/11 xenophobia, this question of "whose lives can be marked as lives, and whose deaths will count as deaths" is of particular urgency. Through the novel, this idea can enter into the public sphere separately from first-hand accounts of the attacks or continuous newsreels; rather, as a way for audiences to face this new reality critically. In contrast to news media, which televised the attacks in real time and replayed footage in the following days, the novel as a form provides an opportunity for

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[31] John N. Duvall and Robert P. Marzec, "Narrating 9/11," *Modern Fiction Studies, Fiction After 9/11*, 57, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 382.

[32] Matthew Leggatt, "Deflecting Absence: 9/11 Fiction and the Memorialization of Change," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 18, no. 2 (2016): 210.

[33] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso Books, 2004), XX–XXI.

both reader and writer to engage with the events in an imagined space beyond the immediate aftermath as represented on television. As it pertains to the novel, over other art forms, this space can be experienced first privately by the reader, then in the public space. The novel has long existed in the US as a means to, as Brennan states, "imagine the special community that was the nation."[34] In the post-9/11 setting, when the nation was disrupted, this capacity for readers to engage with the imagined community of the nation in a novel meets a need to see the nation through the travel narrative, as it similarly functions to present the imagined community of the US in post-9/11 America.[35]

While Butler wrote *A Precarious Life* shortly after 9/11, Duvall and Marzec offer insight into the ways 9/11 fiction represented the attacks in the subsequent decade. In the introduction to their special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* titled "Fiction After 9/11," published in 2011, they outline recurring themes of 9/11 fiction. One key focus is the representation of domestic situations in 9/11 fiction with the disturbed family unit as metaphor for the broken nation.[36] The role of the domestic in fiction is central to the rhetoric of domestic security as the unity of the nation was presented as akin to a family in public discourse post-9/11. Under Bush's new Department of Homeland Security, created after the attacks to increase national security, the idea of protecting the nation as a home could be perceived as a means to make these issues personal to Americans.[37]

Additionally, Duvall and Marzec note that depictions of Islamophobia as a response to the imagined Other is featured in much 9/11 fiction.[38] Representations of race, national identity, and religion are often discussed in ways that grapple with the American need, post-9/11, to understand the identity of the perceived threat to their homeland. Immigrant narratives similarly respond to the challenge of identifying home, specifically, what it means to call the US

[34] Brennan, "The National Longing for Form," 49.
[35] Benidixen and Hamera, "Introduction," 5.
[36] Duvall and Marzec, "Narrating 9/11," 386.
[37] Duvall, "Homeland Security and the State of (American) Exception(Alism)," 281.
[38] Duvall and Marzec, "Narrating 9/11," 393.

home when another nation might call to a character. The immigrant's feeling of home is precarious after 9/11 as many non-white immigrants following the path of the American Dream became victims of prejudice due to their ethnicity.[39] Amidst this internal conflict for Muslim Americans and Americans of Middle Eastern, Arab, or North African heritage is a broader discourse, as Americans confront their relationship to freedom of religion after extremist attacks.[40]

In each novel the protagonists search to understand their place in the new, confusing post-9/11 America through movement. These travels function as a response to the tradition in travel narratives that the traveler always discovers something about themselves and the greater world via a journey.[41] These traditional travel narratives seek a greater truth away from home, so, when the idea of "home" is inherently altered, as it was for Americans post-9/11, the question arises of what the traveler discovers through the unfamiliar when home itself becomes foreign. While the attacks took place in the northeast, the World Trade Center attacks in New York City became emblematic of the entire nation as they represented the US under threat. Duvall and Marzec write of this phenomenon that "out of all these coordinated events, the attacks on New York alone have become iconic in the American imagination. That is, in part, because the twin towers themselves were iconic."[42] In each of the novels discussed in this analysis, New York City is home, providing an even closer vantage point for the attacks and a subsequent desire for characters to understand their new lives post-9/11.

This question of how to understand home after it becomes unrecognizable is explored in post-9/11 fiction as a reflection of the challenges to the country at this time. Butler concisely explains this contradiction in *A Precarious Life* writing:

> Consider that the struggle for recognition in the Hegelian sense requires that each partner in the exchange recognize not only that the other needs

[39] Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, 214.

[40] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 90–91.

[41] Blanton, "Chapter One: Narrating Self and Other: A Historical Overview," 18.

[42] Duvall and Marzec, "Narrating 9/11," 381.

> and deserves recognition, but also that each, in a different way, is compelled by the same need, the same requirement.[43]

This "lost" self accurately describes post-9/11 America, in which the nation faced the loss of lives in the attacks, a loss of innocence, and a loss of security. The nation's attempt to see itself the way it was prior to being attacked resulted in looking outwards to the Other as a threat to this identity. Specifically, Americans grappled with their own closely held values of the freedom of religion, as guaranteed in the Constitution, and the American Dream, as immigration is a part of many Americans' family heritage, in contrast to new xenophobic fears towards Muslim Americans and Muslim or Arab immigrants. This disturbance of a defined nationhood results in the nation looking inwards to see the divisions within itself that are perceived as Other, creating a crisis of national identity that is distinct to being defined outwardly in relation to other nations.[44]

The experience of Muslim American characters who fall victim to this othering can be understood through W.E.B. DuBois's theory of double consciousness, as it relates to recognizing the self, which Butler depicts as a struggle. DuBois defined the term in an 1897 article titled "Strivings of the Negro People," writing of the experience of Black Americans dealing with racial segregation at the turn of the century for a new, post-slavery generation. He wrote, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."[45]

The theory of double consciousness has since been applied to the Muslim American experience as well, specifically in the post-9/11 era of xenophobia. Inaash Islam writes:

> As for conceptualizing Muslim American self-formation, double consciousness helps to account for how Muslims are embroiled in post-9/11 era politics and how they experience dualities in facing

[43] Butler, *Precarious Life,* 43–44.
[44] Bhabha, "The Location of Culture," 724.
[45] W.E.B. DuBois, "Strivings of the Negro People," *The Atlantic*, August 1897, 194.

> racialization, othering, hostility, and contempt on the one hand, and having their full civic status and identity as Muslim American recognized on the other.[46]

It is important here to note that double consciousness is used to depict a specific experience of othering done to minority groups by a majority, which may apply to groups other than Black Americans, but relies on one group racializing another. For Muslim Americans this double consciousness can be ignited by perception of their race, nationality or immigrant heritage, and faith by majority Americans.[47]

For all of the characters discussed in these arguments, Muslim American or not, the lost essence of the American identity is explored as the traveler better sees their home country through movement outside of their home. They must face these contradictions through their own complicated journeys to understand post-9/11 America. Each traveler portrays their Americanness through mobility and movement, only to find themselves in the role of Other which, in turn, provides a clearer view of their country. Whether this view is preferable to the traveler is a personal choice that culminates in the question posed in all travel narratives: will they return as the same person who left?

Chapter One: Domestic Challenges with Domestic Travel in Jess Walter's *The Zero*

To begin the discussion of travel as it is represented in post-9/11 contemporary fiction I will first analyze Jess Walter's satiric novel, *The Zero*. Published in 2005, the novel includes many of the genre tropes: domestic challenges, response to trauma, and representation of confusion and anxiety in the aftermath of the attacks.

[46] Inaash Islam, "Muslim American Double Consciousness," *Du Bois Review* 17, no. 2 (2020): 429–48. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X20000235.
[47] Islam, "Muslim American Double Consciousness," 436.

The novel opens with its protagonist, New York Police Department (NYPD) officer Brian Remy (referred to in the novel as Remy) on the floor of his apartment. He has just shot himself in the head, but does not recall if it was an accident while cleaning his police-issued weapon or an attempt to end his own life:

> He looked back at the table and could see it all laid out before him, like the set of a student play. A kitchen chair was tipped over, and on the small table where he had been sitting, a self-determinate still life: rag, shot glass, gun oil, wire brush, note.
>
> Okay. This was the problem. These gaps in his memory, or perhaps his life, a series of skips—long shredded tears, empty spaces where the explanations for the most basic things used to be.[48]

Remy's confusion sets the tone for the rest of the novel as he faces additional "gaps in his memory" that take him from one place to the next without any awareness of how he arrived in these places or what his purpose is there.[49] These "skips" prevent Remy from gaining full awareness of his movement, preventing him from achieving the insights of the traditional Hero's Journey in travel narratives. Walter depicts Remy's constant confusion in which "empty spaces" replace explanations to invoke the unease of many Americans after 9/11, as they were unable to make sense of the attacks which left a literal "empty space" at Ground Zero, which the title references. Additionally, Remy's view of his home as "like the set of a student play" presents a feeling of unreality in a place that should be familiar, much like his experience of his city becoming unfamiliar after the attacks. For Remy to literally not know what is happening in New York City, his job, or any other aspect of his life mirrors the mass confusion experienced across the country.

In the aftermath of the attacks, Remy finds himself working for a secretive group with the absurd task of tracing all of the papers that flew from the Towers during the attack. His primary task is to search for an unaccounted-

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[49] Kristine A. Miller, "Reading and Writing the Post-9/11 Cop: Trauma, Personal Testimony, and Jess Walter's *The Zero*," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 70, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 29–52, https://doi.org/10.1353/arq.2014.0005.

for woman, March Selios. During Remy's search he experiences more black outs and returning to consciousness in strange places, speaking with unknown people, specifically, Muslim Americans who are under interrogation by the US government. Without a full understanding of what he is doing, Remy questions if he is working for the right people or if he has involved himself in a sinister organization.

It is worth noting that some critics have speculated if this aspect of the satiric novel, addressing the covert operations of the government in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, was perhaps represented in fiction too soon after the attacks for publication in 2006.[50] Walter was working as a ghostwriter for the Police Commissioner of the NYPD for his memoirs prior to and after 9/11, allowing for a close view of the inner workings of the government reaction to 9/11.[51] Walter blurs the lines between acts of terror and increased government surveillance, challenging the post-9/11 patriotism and America-first policies enacted at that time.[52] In this new era of "patriotic correctness," Remy questions the value of his work for the government in a way that he did not prior to 9/11.[53]

Satire is used in *The Zero* to address the grim realities of how the nation attempted to defend itself from threats of terror through literal and figurative ambiguity, as seen by Remy's worsening issues with his eyesight. Over the course of the novel Remy develops macular degeneration, making him physically unable to see his surroundings, as a metaphor for the obliviousness of average Americans and their inability to understand the inner workings of the new Department of Homeland Security, particularly the violations of human rights carried out against Arab and Muslim Americans.[54] The obfuscation of reality, fiction, security, and threat will later be examined in discussion of Akhtar's 2020 *Homeland Elegies*, suggesting that, nineteen years later, this issue is still front of mind for Americans in a post-9/11 world.

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[50] Resano, "Under the Radar," 136.
[51] Miller, "Reading and Writing the Post-9/11 Cop," 37.
[52] Resano, "Under the Radar," 141.
[53] Duvall, "Homeland Security and the State of (American) Exception(Alism)," 282, 285.
[54] Duvall and Marzec, "Narrating 9/11," 381.

As the nation reckoned with the new emphasis on domestic safety, we see this theme of the disturbed domestic portrayed in various situations throughout *The Zero*. As previously established, the role of domestic relationships in 9/11 fiction is often employed to present a parallel to the distressed homeland after the attacks.[55] The first instance in *The Zero* involves Remy's relationship with his ex-wife and their teenage son Edgar, who has let his classmates and teachers at school believe that his father was killed during the events of 9/11. In a moment of pure satire, Edgar tries to explain to his parents why he led his classmates to believe this lie. He says, "'Real grief weighs on you like you can't imagine. The death of a father…[sic][56] is the most profound thing I've ever experienced…The only way to comprehend something like this is to go through it. Otherwise, it's just a number.'"[57] The ruse continues later in the novel when Edgar memorializes his father at a school event, saying of Remy:

> …he'd always wanted to see the West Coast, but the farthest he'd ever made it was Chicago. I remember thinking, if that's your dream, how hard could that be, to go to the West Coast? It's not like he wanted to go to Tibet, right?…that's all I could see for a long time—the unfinished half of his life.[58]

This moment shows both Edgar's lack of confidence in his father's abilities and the physical limitations of Remy's life to a domestic space, as he only dreams of going as far as the American West Coast. The use of the absurd in Edgar's insistence that he be allowed to grieve a father who is alive contributes to the idea of disorientation and unreality that was felt across the country at this time. Varvogli notes in her discussion of dislocation in contemporary American travel narratives that "The ways in which we speak of home link the domestic space to national space, and emphasize ideas of stasis,

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[55] Catherine Morley, "'How Do We Write About This?' The Domestic and the Global in the Post-9/11 Novel," *Journal of American Studies* 45, no. 4 (November 2011): 717.

[56] Much of Walter's text relies on ellipses to show lapses in Remy's memory. In this analysis, ellipses that are original to the text will be identified as [sic] while other ellipses are my own to indicate a jump forward to another moment of text that is relevant to the analysis.

[57] Walter, *The Zero*, 34.

[58] Walter, *The Zero*, 108.

of dwelling, or abiding, of staying put."[59] Edgar chooses to focus on his father's own stasis as a failure to realize a dream, a literal connection to the American Dream as well as an admonishment. As dislocation can be linked to disorientation, Edgar's embracing of his grief over his father who is not dead exemplifies how Remy's domestic life is undergoing a level of unrest that parallels the national landscape. This scene offers more of Walter's satire, calling attention to the incongruity of the nation's call to both move forward from 9/11 while also promising to "never forget."[60] Remy is now displaced within his own family and within his country as he blindly pursues an obscure mission.

During the course of his search for March Selios, Remy navigates another interpersonal relationship when he falls in love with March's sister, April, who lost both her sister and husband in the attacks. Remy's relationship with April is directly linked to the role of travel and representation of immigrant narratives in the novel, as evidenced by Remy's meeting with her family. This meeting is the first of three key moments of travel within *The Zero* when both readers and Remy himself know that he is outside of New York. Domestic travel functions to show Remy's desperate chase to understand what is happening in this new, post-9/11 country. By including moments of domestic travel, Walter shows us Remy's personal attempts to understand himself and his position in this new America through movement.

Remy first travels from New York City to Kansas City to meet March and April's parents, who own a Greek restaurant. In their meeting, March and April's father, Mr. Selios, tells Remy about his dreams for his daughters:

> I suppose I was a rash and difficult father to them, Mr. Remy…Both girls believed that I was…[sic] disapproving. Old fashioned. And I suppose that I was. I wanted for them…[sic] what women have wanted for centuries. That's all. Marriage and children…[sic] I wanted for them to work in the family restaurant, to stay here in Kansas City. Where I could protect them.[61]

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[59] Varvogli, *Travel and Dislocation in Contemporary American Fiction*, xx.

[60] Resano, "Under the Radar," 136.

[61] Walter, *The Zero,* 124.

Mr. Selios's grief for his deceased daughter and a daughter who has cut ties to the family presents a devastated domestic scene. Mr. Selios sought to achieve the American Dream as a Greek immigrant with his own business and goals for his daughters but admits that his traditional views caused a rift with his children. This generational divide symbolizes the divergence between the old world and the new world at the beginning of the twenty-first century that was punctuated by the events of 9/11.[62]

The Kansas City setting is also significant in that it takes Remy to the Midwest, also considered to be the "Heartland." Selios succeeded in the American Dream with his business but failed in the sense that his two daughters did not make an effort to keep in touch nor take over the family business. Here we see another depiction of the US as a fundamentally broken domestic space in the aftermath of the attacks, as illustrated by disrupted family structures.[63] In their own way, Mr. Selios' daughters continued his vision and sought out their own version of the American Dream with upward mobility as they live and work in New York City. However, March's death on 9/11 is a tragic end to her attempt at the American Dream.

Remy's next trip outside of New York City takes him south to Miami for an entirely different sort of mission related to his work. There he joins a colleague from the secret organization on a boat ride into the middle of the ocean. "'That's it!'" the colleague announces, "'International waters, my friends!'"[64] They then board a barge where Remy is faced with a harrowing sight:

> There, on the bar, a man was perched like a trophy, hanging forward, his arms tied behind his back and slung on the bar so that it held him by the armpits, his feet against the wall dangling a few inches from the floor. The man was wearing nothing but a pair of tight red briefs and one white sock. It was cold and clammy in the room and his thick chest hair was wet and matted.[65]

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[62] Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, 208.
[63] Morley, "'How Do We Write About This?'" 720.
[64] Walter, *The Zero*, 131.
[65] Walter, *The Zero*, 131.

This scene offers a devastating image. The description of the man (who we later learn is named Assan) as "perched like a trophy" with "his thick chest hair…wet and matted" call to mind the image of a hunted animal stuffed and placed on display. This othering treats him as an inhuman being that does not require humane treatment from his captors. The very fact of his name being withheld from Remy further prevents him from being seen as a whole person. His position "hanging forward" suggests that he has been hanged like a criminal whose trial, conviction, and sentence are complete. Assan represents the thousands of Muslim Americans and Arab Americans whose own civil liberties were bypassed under the allowances of the Patriot Act.[66] That Assan is "dangling a few inches from the floor," suggests that there is an added level of torture in how close he is to a safe landing, yet he is left to the whims of Remy and his colleagues. Ultimately, the details of this scene implore the reader to ask who in this situation is inhuman.

Remy tries to speak out against this violence by telling his colleagues that their actions are breaking the law. He goes so far as to take Assan off the barge to bring him back to the shores of Miami, but in a twist of cruel irony, the colleagues think that Remy has orchestrated an escape as a tactic to get more information from Assan with the false promise of freedom and commend him for his ingenuity.

The location off the coast of Miami offers an additional layer of meaning to this scene. Miami is located on the southeast coast of Florida, positioned at the edge of the peninsula into the ocean between the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico. Geographically this is a precarious location without the secure borders that surround other states. Additionally, Miami is a global city known for its immigrant cultures, including Cuban and other Latin American communities. In the early 2000s, an influx of immigrants crossing the southern border into the

[66] Duvall, "Homeland Security and the State of (American) Exception (Alism)," 294.

US was presented to Americans as a threat to national security.[67] Ironically, in the novel we see the white Americans cross borders in order to exert the sort of violence that Americans have been told to fear from immigrants.

Walter has been publicly critical of the US response post-9/11, specifically as it relates to the controversial detainment of individuals suspected of having connections to terrorism at the Guantanamo Bay detention center in Cuba, less than five hundred miles south of the US border off the coast of Florida. He has stated, "Our complicity begins with our country's reaction…the abuse of detainees, electronic eavesdropping, Guantanamo Bay—these things were all done on our behalf and they may turn out in the end to have created more terrorists."[68] The mistreatment of detainees has been well documented, but in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, was largely kept secret from the public. This encounter outside the boundaries of the US unsettles Remy as it contradicts his assurances about the reality of American efforts under the new goals of Homeland Security. The barge's location within international waters offers a literal "no-man's-land" that is not bound to the laws of the US and places both Remy and Assan on unstable ground. It is necessary that Remy leaves the official confines of the US for the choppy ocean in order to see the reality of what his government, which has established itself as the apex of law and order, is willing to do in the name of security.[69]

After Remy's time in Miami, he returns to New York City and attempts to help April through her grief. She suffers a breakdown after which Remy offers a solution: "'Let's go somewhere.'"[70] In the third moment of Remy's conscious travel the two escape New York for San Francisco, a meaningful choice that references the earlier scene with Remy's son Edgar as Remy now finally makes

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[67] Daniel Lanza Rivers, "Dangerous Playgrounds: Hemispheric Imaginaries and Domestic Insecurity in Contemporary US Tourism Narratives," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 8, no. 1 (2017), https://doi.org/10.5070/T881029240, 3.

[68] Duvall, "Homeland Security and the State of (American) Exception(Alism)," 279.

[69] Peter Morey, "Migrant Cartographies: Islamophobia and the Politics of the City Space in Amy Waldman and H.M. Naqvi," in *Islamophobia and the Novel* (Columbia University Press, 2018), 127.

[70] Walter, *The Zero*, 228.

it to the West Coast. Once they arrive in San Francisco, Remy and April buy new clothes, stay in their hotel rooms for hours at a time, and live like tourists. In one hotel lobby they see a Japanese tour group and April suggests they join the group, saying to Remy, "'Pretend we don't speak English. Take pictures of everything. Buy postcards and snow globes.'"[71] In a later scene they make up a story that they are Canadian and eat Greek gyros because they remind April of her father's restaurant back in Kansas City.[72] By acting like foreign tourists, they find comfort through cheap purchases and seeking out the unfamiliar. This illustrates what Liam Connell describes as the post-9/11 rhetoric from the government encouraging Americans to continue to travel and take vacations in defiance of the threat of terrorism.[73]

Despite this excursion outside of his normal life, Remy cannot escape the potential danger of travel. He continues to have blind spots in his vision and memory lapses, culminating in a confusing scene when he wakes up in a San Francisco hospital room having had surgery on his eyes. The doctor makes it clear that Remy should not fly, just as a doctor in New York previously advised him, as it could cause irreparable harm to his eyes.[74] The danger Remy now faces while traveling parallels the threat and anxiety that Americans perceived about air travel after 9/11. His travel is indicative of the twenty-first century setting in that he doesn't travel around the US on a traditional road trip; rather, he experiences the country at a great distance on commercial flights, the very mode of travel weaponized by the 9/11 attackers. Even domestic travel within the confines of the continental US poses a threat to Remy's health and safety.

Walter ends the narrative with Remy chasing down April before she leaves New York for another trip. In a meta travel narrative moment, he finds her at the train terminal that will take her to Newark airport, depicting travel that

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[71] Walter, *The Zero*, 236.

[72] Walter, *The Zero*, 244.

[73] Liam Connell, "Anxious Reading: The Precarity Novel and the Affective Class," in *Precarity in Contemporary Literature and Culture*, edited by Emily J. Hogg and Peter Simonsen, 27–42 (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 28.

[74] Walter, *The Zero*, 266–67.

requires prior transit. At the station he sees a Muslim American man who his organization has suspected of colluding with al-Qaeda. The man decides to operate as a rogue individual and brings a bomb to the train terminal.[75] The ensuing explosion sends Remy to yet another hospital where he awakes in the final pages, unsure of whether or not he has lost his vision for good. In this conclusion, readers are left with the same ambiguity as in the opening.

Walter never provides a definitive image of what America will look like post-9/11 but embraces the confusion that the nation faced. As Remy moves closer to realizing the truths of the government's actions post-9/11, his loss of vision speaks to the broader obfuscation of the views of the American people to understand the ramifications of the Patriot Act and the presence of American troops in the Middle East. His role as an NYPD cop, whose home is New York, further complicates this confusion as the attacks were not just on his home country, but his hometown. Miller notes that the reverence of New York City after the attacks included members of the NYPD, creating a complicated experience of heroism and trauma thrust onto Remy amidst navigating the physical chaos of Ground Zero.[76]

The Zero ultimately exemplifies two ways in which the domestic, as home and homeland, were disrupted after 9/11. Remy's travels showcase how this post-9/11 landscape contradicts the values of the American Dream and American identity in ways that are disturbing to him. This awakening to the state of his country and subsequent loss of vision suggest that his attempt at awareness is futile; the American Dream and American identity are forever changed, and his survival depends on not seeing these truths. Walter uses satire to depict this literal blind faith as a means to bridge the gap between what Americans in 2006 were ready to acknowledge and their enduring trauma post-9/11. In his final attempt to escape with April, Remy is met with the unfortunate reality that, after much speculation, the suspect chooses violence after all, and Remy may have lost his ability to ever see the world as it truly exists.

[75] Walter, *The Zero*, 322–23.
[76] Miller, "Reading and Writing the Post-9/11 Cop," 32.

The contradictions Remy encounters in his travels—the Selios family betrayed by the American Dream, Assan a victim of the American government, and comfort that can only be achieved far from home—are indicative of the disruption in post-9/11 America. With further hindsight, as writers contemplated the attacks, it became more apparent how the aftermath further altered American identity. Amy Waldman's 2011 novel *The Submission*, published ten years after the attacks, is one such example of an author looking to the past to consider how the incongruence of the post-9/11 era challenged Americans' sense of identity, in particular for Muslim Americans and white Americans, who were divided by fear.[77]

Chapter Two: Waking Up from the American Dream in Amy Waldman's *The Submission*

The Submission opens in 2003 with a fictional jury that has been chosen to select a design for a 9/11 memorial. The designs have been submitted anonymously, so it is a shock to the group when they discover that the memorial garden design they have chosen was created by a Muslim American named Mohammed Khan, known as Mo. Though Mo's parents emigrated from India in the 1970s and he was born in the US, his background and name immediately distress the selection committee. Once the news of the selection is made public, there is an outcry in response from those who feel it is inappropriate or even offensive to have a memorial designed by someone of Islamic heritage. In contrast, others argue that Mo is as American as anyone else born in the nation and has every right to have his design honor those who lost their lives, despite his religious background. The ensuing narrative grapples with these two sides that are unable to reconcile. Amidst racist tabloid headlines about Mo's faith, a string of attacks on Muslim American women, and aggressive protests against the memorial garden,

[77] Aysem Seval, "(Un)Tolerated Neighbor: Encounters with the Tolerated Other in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Submission*," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 48, no. 2 (2017): 101–25, https://doi.org/10.1353/ari.2017.0016, 103.

questions arise of who is allowed to claim an American identity in a post-9/11 setting. Waldman presents this contradiction to ask who Americans are, if not the descendants of immigrants aspiring to achieve the American Dream.

Waldman addresses this question from multiple angles, most pointedly through the movement and travel of three Muslim characters: Mo, the architect; Asma, a Bangladeshi immigrant who resides in New York City without proper legal status; and her son Abdul, who was born in the US after his father died in the attack on the Twin Towers. Their mobility speaks to an inherent American identity as it is defined by movement, but their right to be American is challenged because in each case the movement is explicitly linked to xenophobia in the post-9/11 setting.

The first character I will address is Asma, as her arc represents the most traditional attempt at the American Dream narrative in the text. Asma is a Bangladeshi immigrant who is a "9/11 widow" after her husband, Inam, dies in the Twin Towers while at work as a custodian. Asma's physical movement to the US in search of social and economic mobility echoes the history of immigrants arriving to the US via New York City across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Her identity as an immigrant in New York City is best explored through a memory of early days in the US before becoming a mother and a widow. Waldman writes:

> Flipping television channels one night, Asma came upon a news story about a boat trip for the families of the dead…The Circle Line she knew, too, because it was one of the few splurges she and Inam had made in their two years together…Six months after her arrival in America, on a Sunday, Inam's only day off, they had set out. The other passengers—Americans and Swedes, Japanese and Italians—were drinking, even at that morning hour; some leaned against the rails and kissed. She and Inam had not drunk, had not kissed. They held hands and looked down at the water and studied the city, as if from this distance they could finally understand it…Inam took her picture with a disposable camera and asked a Swede to take their picture together, then a Japanese man asked Inam to take a picture of him and his wife, and so easily they became a part of everything, New Yorkers.[78]

[78] Amy Waldman, *The Submission* (Picador, 2011), 163.

This selected scene is rich with details that define Asma's status as both an immigrant and a 9/11 widow as these two identities inform her character. The imagery of the Circle Line invokes a particular memory of American history. For over a century, millions of immigrants arrived in the US via ship through New York City at Ellis Island, beginning in 1892.[79] Waldman's imagery of two immigrants on a boat looking onto New York City surrounded by other foreigners deliberately replicates this history as Asma recollects the other passengers as "Swedes, Japanese and Italians." The specific mention of the Japanese is notable for the history of Japanese Americans and Japanese immigrants. In the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attacks in 1941, thousands of Japanese Americans were subject to imprisonment in internment camps under suspicion of espionage or involvement with the Japanese government.[80] The racism faced by Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor is strikingly similar to that of Muslim Americans after 9/11.[81] The interaction between the Japanese tourists and Asma and Inam foreshadows what is to come for Asma as she faces prejudices post-9/11.

Asma's sentiment is summed up in the final sentence: they "became a part of everything, New Yorkers." Though they had been residents in New York City for six months, only in the context of a boat trip is Asma able to experience a full transition to feeling like a New Yorker. Through Asma's transition in this scene from tourist to New Yorker while on a boat, it is made clear that her relationship to the US is cemented by an experience of movement that is inherent to the American Dream.

In the fictive present, this moment speaks to Asma's identity as a 9/11 widow. Though Asma lost her husband and even received remuneration for

[79] Alan M. Kraut, "Bodies From Abroad: Immigration, Health, and Disease," in *A Companion to American Immigration*, edited by Reed Ueda, 106–32 (Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 113.
[80] Erika Lee, "A Nation of Immigrants and Gatekeeping a Nation," in *A Companion to American Immigration*, edited by Reed Ueda, 5–35 (Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 16–17.
[81] Lee, "A Nation of Immigrants and Gatekeeping a Nation," 26.

Inam's death, critically, she is excluded from public recognition due to Inam's undocumented work status in the US, and only learns about the Circle Line cruise event via television. Just as Asma viewed 9/11 via television, like most Americans, she now witnesses the public grieving process from a distance via a screen. Asma faces her grief alone while other bereaved families and the American public can grieve as a community. Here, Waldman illustrates the ways in which the post-9/11 environment served the interests of a specific kind of 9/11 victim that does not include Muslim Americans.[82] This distance reflects Asma's greater experience of post-9/11 America; while she experienced the attacks similarly to most Americans, she is excluded from grieving alongside the rest of the country because of her immigration status and Islamophobia.

Islamophobia is central to her experience in a way that is specific to this moment in time. Prior to 9/11, Asma would be viewed as representative of shifting immigration patterns at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first when white European immigrants were no longer the majority, rather, African, Central American, Arab, and Southeast Asian immigrants became the majority.[83] These immigrants were excluded by nationhood and language, as had been the case for previous generations of white European immigrants, and by two additional factors: race and religion. In advance of the new millennium, these non-white immigrant groups were perceived in the US as foretelling the threat of globalism.[84] Aysem Seval notes that this engrained, systemic racism informed America's reaction to the new challenges in the post-9/11 world, specifically impacting attempts at preserving national security, as referenced in the chapter on *The Zero* in relation to the Department of Homeland

[82] Sonia Baelo-Allué, "From the Traumatic to the Political: Cultural Trauma, 9/11 and Amy Waldman's *The Submission*," *Atlantis: Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies* 38, no. 1 (June 2016): 171; Morley, "How Do We Write About This?", 719.

[83] Gray, "Open Doors, Closed Minds," 135.

[84] Dennis Conway and Thomas J. Cooke, "New York City: Caribbean Immigration and Residential Segregation in a Restructured Global City," in *Social Polarization in Post Industrial Metropolises*, edited by John O'Loughlin and Jürgen Friedrichs, 235–59 (De Gruyter, 1996), 238–39.

Security and the Patriot Act.[85] This experience for Asma is notable in that it takes place in New York City which, as Morey describes, is "the prime site of multicultural conviviality" in the US, and so a new wave of discriminatory behavior is unexpected.[86] The changing attitudes post-9/11 in a city that has historically been an entry point for immigrants and a symbol of the American Dream are evidence of the changing ideals in this era.

As the novel progresses, Asma finds herself speaking out at a Town Hall meeting in favor of Mo's design. This public appearance marks her as a target and she becomes a victim of post-9/11 xenophobia in the public sphere and is outed as an undocumented immigrant.[87] Consequently, Asma decides to leave New York with Abdul before she is deported. As Waldman writes it, "It was her choice to go, and yet not."[88] The scene of her departure continues:

> She carried Abdul, and behind her Nasruddin and Mr. Mahmoud came laden with her bags and boxes; and behind them Laila Fathi, holding Asma's travel documents; and behind her Mrs. Mahmoud and Mrs. Ahmed, crying and holding each other. As soon as Asma came out of her building a crowd surrounded her...At Asma's appearance the press pushed forward, shoving through the Bangladeshis to get close to her...[89]

And the scene concludes with Asma being stabbed to death before she is even able to leave her street.

Waldman creates a chaotic scene full of movement to portray this tragedy. Not only is Asma met with a crowd outside, but she begins in a crowd herself with her neighbors Nasruddin, Mr. Mahmoud, Mrs. Mahmoud, and Mrs. Ahmed. Waldman specifically notes that her lawyer Laila Fathi has Asma's travel documents. Rather than Asma carrying the documents, this detail draws the reader's attention to the fact that her status as "undocumented" was weaponized to deport her, as it was used against thousands of Muslim Americans

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[85] Seval, "(Un)Tolerated Neighbor," 102.

[86] Morey, "Islamophobia: The Word and the World," 129.

[87] Morey, "Migrant Cartographies," 142.

[88] Waldman, *The Submission*, 283.

[89] Waldman, *The Submission*, 286–87.

after 9/11.[90] The irony for Asma is that it is due to her efforts to continue her mobility and work within the American system that she meets her tragic end. These systemic challenges that are specific to non-white immigrants in America are an important part of the immigrant narrative in literature as a means of highlighting how the odds are stacked against Asma, and other characters in her situation, in ways that cannot be resolved with individual choices.[91]

Asma's death illustrates the contradiction of the American Dream in its post-9/11 iteration in that an Islamic immigrant is unable to continue this pursuit; in seeking out the freedoms and opportunities guaranteed by the American mythos, she is instead constrained by her identity as Other despite the religious freedom promised to all Americans. This is distinct from the journey of Mo Khan, who is a first-generation American and whose parents have already achieved the American Dream as they built a successful life and family in the US after immigrating in the 1970s. In contrast to Asma's experience, Mo shows how the American Dream became impossible even for those Muslim Americans who had already established themselves.

We meet Mo in a flashback when he returns to New York City from a work trip to Los Angeles with the scene, "His name was what got him pulled from a security line at LAX as he prepared to fly home to New York. The attack was a week past…"[92] At this moment in the novel, he has already been identified as the architect whose design was chosen for the memorial under his full name, Mohammed, rather than his chosen nickname. The timing of this trip, one week after the 9/11 terror attacks, becomes significant when Mo clarifies he was in Los Angeles at the time of the attacks. The security officers question his whereabouts, his affiliation with Islam, if he has ever been to Afghanistan, and his own status as a citizen, all because of his name. Here Waldman brings

[90] Gauthier, *9/11 Fiction, Empathy, and Otherness*, 192.
[91] Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, 214.
[92] Waldman, *The Submission*, 26.

awareness to Mo's status as Other due to his name and being a man of Muslim heritage, despite the fact that he does not practice Islam in any meaningful way.[93]

This scene is a significant introduction for a few reasons. Crucially, we first see Mo in transit. With an introduction to Mo at an airport, Waldman directs the reader to a few key components of how travel will inform his experiences in the rest of the novel. This introduction also highlights the contradiction of the American Dream post-9/11: Mo's parents emigrated to the US in search of economic and social mobility for themselves and their future son, so, for his movement as a successful architect—a product of the American Dream—to be interrupted because of his Islamic-sounding name means that the very Otherness that is inherent in his second-generation American identity is now inhibiting his mobility.[94] In another scene, Mo's father discusses why they chose to name him Mohammad, saying,

> …your name was a statement of faith in this country. We could have given you some solid American name. But as much as we turned our backs on religion, we never shied from being Muslim. We believed so strongly in America that we never thought for a moment that your name would hold you back in any way.[95]

In reality, it is the very issue of religion and the Islamophobia against Muslim Americans post-9/11 that prevents Mo's own mobility and eventually "pushes" Mo to move abroad and, as Gauthier writes, Mo "frees" himself from the intolerance that was pervasive at the time.[96] Despite the freedoms that gave his parents such confidence in Mo's ability to succeed in America, post-9/11 religious identity is used to persecute him in defiance of the right to freedom of religion on which the nation was built.

This experience further informs Mo's experience of Otherness as it is based on ignorance and misunderstanding by the greater American populace. Gauthier writes of Mo's status as Other, stating that:

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[93] Seval, "(Un)Tolerated Neighbor," 112.

[94] Seval, "(Un)Tolerated Neighbor," 112.

[95] Waldman, *The Submission*, 219.

[96] Gauthier, *9/11 Fiction, Empathy, and Otherness*, 211.

> It is of no consequence whether Mohammad Khan is a practicing Muslim…or whether he is an American citizen...The population's lack of knowledge about Islam short-circuits their capacity to contemplate any other scenario. In their minds, all Arabs are Muslims, all Muslims are Islamists, and all Islamists seek the destruction of the Western world.[97]

This statement is significant for the realities of the post-9/11 setting that Waldman is recreating for the reader. Mo is first introduced by his memorial design, then as a victim of xenophobia, situating his position in the novel as it is informed by the post-9/11 setting, rather than who he is as an individual.

This initial introduction to Mo at an airport has a greater implication later in the text when he is sent on a foreign assignment by his boss, Emmanuel Roi, to represent the firm for the opportunity to design an American Embassy in Afghanistan. Mo considers why he has been chosen for this specific job in the months shortly after 9/11:

> Roi was compensating for not promoting Mo by sending him on an international junket…Roi was punishing Mo by sending him to Kabul; Roi was trying to enhance the firm's odds of getting to design an embassy in a Muslim country by sending a Muslim, or trying to ensure they wouldn't get the commission by sending a Muslim…Mo decided to take the assignment…because he wanted to see, up close, the kind of Muslim he had been treated as at LAX; the pious, primitive, violent kind.[98]

Unlike the initial scene of Mo at the airport, in which Waldman shows how the outside world viewed Mo as an Other, now the reader sees Mo internalize this Otherness and question his status through the prospect of travel. This revelation speaks to DuBois's theory of double consciousness defined as seeing oneself through the revelation of Other.[99] It is noteworthy that Waldman presents this debate through free indirect discourse to close the psychic distance between Mo's conclusions and the reader, rather than have the debate presented

[97] Gauthier, *9/11 Fiction, Empathy, and Otherness*, 199.

[98] Waldman, *The Submission*, 49.

[99] Islam, "Muslim American Double Consciousness," 194.

to Mo from an outside source. The extreme language used to describe the Muslims of Afghanistan points to a more visceral emotion that Mo himself may not be prepared to address directly as he grapples with the xenophobia of his home country.

Like the interaction with airport security, Mo's confusion around his selection by his boss to go to Afghanistan requires him to confront his identity as a Muslim American as it is forced upon him by others. The question of whether he is sent to "enhance the firm's odds…in a Muslim country by sending a Muslim" suggests that Mo is aware his identity as a Muslim will supersede any talents he has as an architect. The alternative, that the firm is sending him to "ensure they wouldn't get the commission by sending a Muslim," confirms this idea that his religion will be his primary attribute. Though he is an American citizen working for an American-based architecture firm seeking to design an American Embassy, and he does not practice Islam, his perceived identity will negate his national identity in this situation.

Finally, the strongest indication of Mo's self-awareness as a Muslim American in this moment is evident through his description of the Afghanis he will encounter in his trip, specifically, "the kind of Muslim he had been treated as at LAX; the pious, primitive, violent kind." There's a tension here: if he was treated as that kind of Muslim, then he is "the kind of Muslim" he perceives others to be by fact of their place in the greater post-9/11 world. But his own stereotyped view of these Afghani Muslims as Others places him on the side of the white Americans who surround him at home.[100] Mo is stuck between his knowledge of how everyone else views him—"pious, primitive, violent"—and his inability to identify with his Muslim heritage as he doesn't consider himself to be "the kind of Muslim" other people are. For Mo, he is no longer being sent on a business trip; rather, he is going to travel as a symbol of a Muslim American

[100] Uzma Jamil, "Reading Power: Muslims in the War on Terror Discourse," *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 32.

for the benefit of his business in this new era of Islamophobia and the War on Terror.[101] He sees Afghani Muslims as Other from the vantage point of an American, despite the American majority insisting that it is in fact Mo who is the Other.

When he arrives in Kabul, we get a glimpse into Mo's experience of this foreign land: "Shielding his eyes from the sun, he saw American helicopters, American planes, and American soldiers bestriding the runway."[102] It is not the Afghanis who are represented as violent in this moment, but rather the American presence, which signifies wartime. As with Walter's depiction of Remy in the international waters outside of Miami, we see a representation of the US as an agent of enforcement in a way that the protagonists do not fully realize until they move outside the physical limits of their home country. This realization shows travel in post-9/11 fiction as it functions to defamiliarize the once familiar to achieve awareness. In moments of contrast, the ideal of America can be recognized by Americans as it exists, or rather, no longer exists, in this new era.

This contradiction of Mo's competing identities post-9/11 culminates at the novel's conclusion through Mo's decision to expatriate to Mumbai. In the epilogue, which takes place in 2023, readers learn that Mo has lived in India for about two decades, where he has continued to grow his architecture career. Here Waldman writes:

> He was better-known internationally than he had ever dreamed, and wealthy, too. And yet his gloss—that he had been pulled abroad by opportunity—was a false one. He had been pushed. America had offered his immigrant parents the freedom to reinvent themselves. Mo had found himself reinvented by others, so distorted he couldn't recognize himself. His imagination was made suspect. And so he had traced his parents' journey in reverse: back to India, which seemed a more promising land.[103]

The language used to describe Mo's expatriation to the home country of his parents confronts the failure of American ideals in the post-9/11 US. To begin

[101] Jamil, "Reading Power," 33.

[102] Waldman, *The Submission*, 49–50.

[103] Waldman, *The Submission*, 330.

with, Waldman describes his success in terms of better "than he had ever dreamed, and wealthy, too." This reads as a direct reference to the ideal of the American Dream as a goal of physical, social, and economic mobility for immigrants alongside her pointed use of the word "dreamed." Here, Mo has found such success and surpassed his own expectations in the very country his parents left in search of the American Dream.

His parents' journey is described in terms of offering "freedom" in a "more promising land." Freedom is of course one of the key values of the US, known as "land of the free and home of the brave," but it is outside of the US that Mo achieves such freedom post-9/11. Within the context of Mo's introduction in the security holding room at the airport, this discussion of "freedom" is especially relevant. Mo cannot move within his own country freely post-9/11; rather, he achieves this American ideal in another country. This contradiction subverts a long-established construct of travel narratives; that the American who goes abroad eventually realizes that they were always meant to return to their home country.[104] Mo does not feel any pull back to the US; he has found a life that could only be achieved in another country.

Herein lies the nuance between "travel," as we were initially introduced to Mo at the airport for a work trip, and pressurized migration, which is also represented by Asma's attempted departure back to Bangladesh.

Not only does Mo find a new life for himself abroad, but so does his garden design. The garden in 2023 is introduced by Molly, a young American documentary filmmaker who has gone to meet Mo to discuss the twenty-year anniversary of his winning memorial submission. She describes the garden as "'the private pleasure garden of some rich Muslim—a sultan or emir or something…He commissioned it after Khan withdrew from the memorial competition.'"[105] This brief description is weighted with meaning. First is the significance of Molly referring to the owner of the home with the garden as "a

[104] Terry Caesar, "To Make This Place Another: Fiction in the Text of Twentieth-Century American Travel Writing," *The Centennial Review* 35, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 97.
[105] Waldman, *The Submission*, 334.

sultan or emir or something." In Waldman's vision of twenty years beyond the debate of Mo's garden, there has been more acceptance of Muslim Americans, yet not enough progress for Molly to know exactly who the owner is or to even differentiate between an emir and a sultan.[106] Gauthier analyzes this moment by pointing to the fact of the relocation itself as something readers can and should question: "Is this an act of reconciliation, an exhibition of the tolerance Americans lacked, or does the garden actually speak to Muslims in some of the ways Khan's critics initially suspected?"[107] The relocation suggests that the design does fit the idea of a traditional Islamic garden more than even Mo had realized, if it was such a desirable design for an influential, wealthy Muslim.

To provide additional context as to why the final location of the garden is significant, there also needs to be an examination of the garden's design. The controversy is presented in a newspaper article read by the character of Claire, the wealthy widow of a businessman who lost his life on 9/11 and a jury member for the memorial design:

> According to the paper's architecture critic, the elements of Khan's garden she loved—the geometry, the walls, the four quadrants, the water, even the pavilion—paralleled gardens that had been built across the Islamic world, from Spain to Iran to India to Afghanistan, over a dozen or more centuries. There were pictures of the Alhambra in Spain, Humayun's tomb in India, and a diagram of Khan's design from the press packet. They were remarkably similar.[108]

Critically, in a flashback Mo recounts his memories of the earlier trip to Afghanistan in which he encountered a traditional Islamic garden. This scene asks the reader to answer the question: if it is inspired by an Islamic garden, does that fact still disqualify the garden from its suitability as a memorial?

The description of the garden brings a new level of concern to Claire, who had previously supported the design. For this eclectic design with global inspiration to be presented by an American-born Muslim of Indian heritage

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[106] Leggatt, "Deflecting Absence," 217.

[107] Gauthier, *9/11 Fiction, Empathy, and Otherness*, 211–12.

[108] Waldman, *The Submission*, 129.

could, under other circumstances, be seen as an achievement of globalism and collaborative aesthetics. However, in the context of a 9/11 memorial, the elements that are reminiscent of Islam and foreign countries are a cause for skepticism as the nation struggles with its fear of the Other, which Mo represents with his name, race, and design.[109] In this globalized era in which people and ideas move fast and far, a convergence of culture such as an Islamic-style garden existing in downtown Manhattan becomes as likely as a terror attack by foreigners, stoking the fears of a traumatized nation.[110]

In this imagined future, Waldman presents an opportunity for improvement in how Mo exists as a Muslim American. At one time there is a message of hope for the future that the crisis and anxiety of the post-9/11 world will be resolved; however, his movement away from the US in this section suggests that a distance is still required for Mo to exist as an individual, a fate that also awaits Asma's son, Abdul.[111]

At the first introduction to Abdul, his character is akin to Mo, as the child of Muslim immigrants to the US. His role in the US is discussed when Asma speaks out at the Town Hall meeting on behalf of her late husband. She expresses her pleas for the garden to be considered through translation by her landlord, saying, "'We have all tried to give back to America. But also, I want to know, my son—he is Muslim, but he is also American. Or isn't he? You tell me: what should I tell my son?'"[112]

This speech illustrates the crux of Waldman's question in *The Submission*: who gets to be American in the post-9/11 world? Asma is speaking not only to her son's identity, but to the collective memory of all who have lost someone in the attacks.[113] This loss is now a part of the national trauma of her

[109] Baelo-Allué, "From the Traumatic to the Political," 172.

[110] Gray, "Open Doors, Closed Minds," 147.

[111] Margarita Estévez-Saá and Noemí Pereira-Ares, "Trauma and Transculturalism in Contemporary Fictional Memories of 9/11," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 57, no. 3 (2016): 276.

[112] Waldman, *The Submission*, 261.

[113] Seval, "(Un)Tolerated Neighbor," 115.

chosen home, and yet, she and Abdul are deliberately excluded because of her religion.[114] After Asma's death, Abdul is sent to Bangladesh to live with the relatives of his deceased parents.

In the epilogue, Molly shows Mo the clips of her meeting with Abdul, who is now a young man. For the documentary footage, Abdul speaks about his parents, saying:

> I don't remember New York…I was two when I left. I came home with my mother's body…My parents idealized America. I know this from my relatives. I grew up hearing, over and over, how my mother had refused to come home after my father's death. If she had, she would still be alive— I heard this all the time.[115]

There are a few significant moments in this speech from Abdul. We hear him refer to Bangladesh as "home" twice, which suggests that he does not feel any sort of sentimental connection to the country of his birth. America exists as a place of loss and the hopeless idealism of his mother, who dared to dream of a better future for her son and whose allegiance only ended in her death, as Abdul's relatives often remind him. America is a place of hope but is also villainized for Abdul by his relatives, who saw Asma lose her life to Islamophobia and nationalist extremism. This burden of memory parallels the inability of the US in the post-9/11 years to come together for a more promising future beyond the anxieties and fears of globalism after 2001.[116]

As the documentary continues, the connection between Mo and Abdul is fully realized:

> Abdul had applied to and been accepted at colleges in the United States, but under pressure from his relatives decided to stay in Bangladesh. America tempted him and scared him. Both of his parents had died there. This was reason to go, reason not to. Mo remembered his own decision not to go home had curled him in bed. How many nights had Abdul spent in the same position? "I sometimes feel each place is the wrong place," the young man on the screen said softly.[117]

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[114] Baelo-Allué, "From the Traumatic to the Political," 171.

[115] Waldman, *The Submission*, 328.

[116] Gray, "Open Doors, Closed Minds," 135.

[117] Waldman, *The Submission*, 328.

In this way, both Mo and Abdul experience a feeling of belonging to two cultures and yet none. While the fully realized American Dream would allow for individuals to exist as American while recognizing, perhaps even celebrating, their heritage of immigration, Abdul is stripped of the history that ties him to this American ideal while Mo is unable to have any sense of future in the US, as he feels compelled to move himself and his work.

That all these characters experience international movement in pursuit of a more secure future binds them with generations of Americans who immigrated with a similar goal; the fact of their moving outside of the US is a striking condemnation of the state of Islamophobia in post-9/11 American culture. The contradictions of the pursuit of the American Dream in *The Submission* represent the beginning of twenty-first century challenges to this tradition within the American mythos.

With present hindsight, Waldman's predictions in the 2023 ending are too optimistic as the rhetoric of xenophobia under the real-world wave of MAGA extremism during the 2016 US presidential election would have provided no more opportunities for Abdul or Mo. *The Submission* functions as a literary artifact representing the post-9/11 era as a national and global moment of reckoning with divisiveness that would soon be superseded by a troubling new era of tension.

Chapter Three: The Power of Staying in Ayad Akhtar's *Homeland Elegies*

In contrast to the pure fiction of Walter's satire and Waldman's imagined future, Ayad Akhtar's *Homeland Elegies* brings fact to fiction as he writes of a character with the same name, profession, and background as himself. The novel follows the character of Ayad as he grows up in the American Midwest as the son of Pakistani immigrants. He becomes a playwright, experiences 9/11 as a resident in New York City, and faces the challenges of Trump-era America with his immigrant father who, significantly, served as Trump's cardiologist for a short

period in the 1990s. For the purpose of this discussion, the name "Ayad" will refer to the character in the book, and "Akhtar" denotes the author.

To situate *Homeland Elegies* as post-9/11 fiction and a travel narrative, it is necessary to first discuss the text as a piece of autofiction. Autofiction is defined by Bran Nicol as "the combination of autobiography and fiction."[118] As distinct from autobiography, memoir, or autobiographical fiction, autofiction, according to Nicol, does not rely on the "autobiographical pact," defined by Philippe Lejeune, which hinges on the reader's trust that the author is telling the truth and the assumption that narrator and protagonist are one and the same.[119] Akhtar himself is careful to call it a novel, explaining his decision in an interview with Amy Gall:

> It does seem that the label "memoir" carries a certain moral connotation. If you are going to write a memoir, you are going to attempt to tell the facts in some way. Even if those facts are subjective experiences, you're not going to collapse the subjective and the objective, because if you do that then you have manufactured a concocted reality.[120]

Akhtar challenges the reader to make their own conclusions about what is reality and what is fiction. Akhtar's use of the novel form, as opposed to a play or memoir, is significant to how the reader engages with the story itself for the reasons previously described in the introduction; the novel acts as an imagined space for both character and reader to journey through the narrative in an attempt to achieve insights that they did not previously have.

Nicol further asserts that in American literature the genre is specifically linked to postmodernism; it destabilizes standard conventions of literature as it is often linked to moments of public scandal and the conditions of the author writing about a particular moment.[121] The "disfiguration" is especially relevant to *Homeland Elegies* as the novel does not take place in chronological order,

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[118] Bran Nicol, "Eye to I: American Autofiction and Its Contexts from Jerzy Kosinski to Dave Eggers," in *Autofiction in English*, edited by Hywel Dix, 255–74 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 255.
[119] Nicol, "Eye to I," 257
[120] Amy Gall, "Truth: A Q&A With Ayad Akhtar," *Poets & Writers*, October 2020, 53.
[121] Nicol, "Eye to I," 255, 257.

allowing Akhtar to present the events in the order that suits his narrative. In regard to American autofiction, Nicol specifies that the role of public scandal and the conditions of the authorship are of particular importance as the author "commits to a sincere exploration, through fiction, of a personal, i.e. autobiographical, truth."[122] The condition of Akhtar's writing as a Muslim American in a post-9/11 world is specifically informed by his writing in the Trump era with the hindsight granted in the 2010s. The confusion between reality and fiction creates a sense of psychological distance between the reader and the author. In an interview with Akhtar, Gall succinctly describes the experience of this psychological distance to find truth, saying, "For the reader this creates a potent tension that mirrors the uncertainty many of us are reckoning with on a daily basis, especially in this era of 'fake news.'"[123]

The reference by Gall to "mirroring" uncertainty echoes an assertion by Hywel Dix, paraphrased by Nicol, that "autofiction's self-reflexive preoccupation with the workings of memory shape and disfigure narrativization."[124] Mirroring and self-reflexivity both relate to Du Bois's theory of double consciousness as an interaction between experiencing the self and the perception of oneself by others. Nasar Meer writes of this process of experiencing double consciousness as "the movement from a self-consciousness *in itself* to the transformative potential of a self-consciousness *for itself*, or from one's historically ascribed identity to one's politically self-constructed identity (italics in original)."[125] Akhtar creates a space for this self-constructed identity by writing autofiction rather than writing of his own double consciousness in itself through a non-fiction form such as memoir. In addition to contributing to the form of this novel, Du Bois's theory is also relevant to Ayad's journey within the text, to be discussed further.

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[122] Nicol, "Eye to I," 257.

[123] Gall, "Truth: A Q&A With Ayad Akhtar," 52.

[124] Nicol, "Eye to I," 257.

[125] Nasar Meer, "W.E.B. Du Bois, Double Consciousness, and the 'Spirit' of Recognition," *The Sociological Review* 67, no. 1 (2019): 47–62, https://doDi.oOrIg:/10.1177/0038026118765370, 57.

Despite this deviation from traditional fiction, *Homeland Elegies* still fits within the subgenre of the post-9/11 novel. Ayad recalls his memories of the day of 9/11 and how it impacted his view of himself as a Muslim American, which in turn alters his experiences of the US until the Trump era. Because of the specific experiences Ayad and his father have in relation to their national, racial, and religious identities after 9/11, much like Mo and Asma in *The Submission*, Akhtar's story falls into the category of post-9/11 fiction the narrative is complicated by growing temporal distance from the attacks.

In addition to its classification as autofiction and post-9/11 fiction, *Homeland Elegies* also exists within the context of Pakistani American fiction. Akhtar both abides by and subverts conventions of Pakistani American writing in the novel. Muhammad Azeem speaks to Pakistani identity in fiction as a representation of the post-colonial experience, writing, "…the empire's subjects now are marked with mobility, evasiveness, and frequent crossing of national, geographical, cultural, imaginary, and racial borders."[126] By extension, mobility is therefore inherent to immigrant narratives, as it challenges the reader's ability to be in either space with borders acting as a literal or figurative barrier to their sense of belonging. As it relates specifically to Pakistani American fiction post-9/11, transnational movement has replaced colonialism in the globalized twenty-first century, creating delocalized settings that are key to representing the exceptional space of the immigrant existence.[127]

Expanding from this well-established representation, Akhtar also subverts expectations of a sentimental representation of minority characters. Morey notes in a discussion of Muslim American literature that one key criticism is the idea that Muslim authors be "representative" of their culture, ultimately dictating what types of Muslim American stories are told.[128] Akhtar focuses on

[126] Muhammad Waqar Azeem, "From Post-Colonial to Post-9/11: A Study of the Contemporary Pakistani-American Fiction," *South Asian Review* 37, no. 3 (2016): 75–88, https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2016.11978320, 76–7.
[127] Azeem, "From Post-Colonial to Post-9/11," 77.
[128] Morey, "Islamophobia: The Word and the World," 6.

realistic depictions of events, which demands that his characters be complex, with sometimes unflattering depictions.

To understand the significance of how this movement relates to identity, it is also necessary to establish how Akhtar creates psychological distance between Ayad and his Muslim American identity as it is directly informed by the events of 9/11, so that this identity can be further explored through travel narratives in the text. The psychological distance is created through the form of the text itself as autofiction, Ayad's character as a playwright like the author Akhtar himself, and Ayad's experiences of double consciousness.

Ayad's distance from his American identity can be best understood through the lens of double consciousness as the self becomes aware of his position as Other. Akhtar specifically draws attention to this revelation for Ayad on 9/11 during a moment of movement, which ties together the experience of physical and psychological terrain being crossed to come to this understanding. Ayad reluctantly recounts his memories of that day to a woman he's dating. He recalls, after seeing footage of the attacks on television:

> I stood there and watched. Soon enough, the second tower just disintegrated. Right there. Right before my eyes…I left his place and went out into the street. From where I was, you could see smoke and smell the faintest traces of it in the wind…I started walking. I walked down Broadway, through the Upper West Side, through midtown—people were pouring out into the streets, stopping to talk, people who clearly didn't know one another huddled in groups, corner after corner. In Times Square, the scene was eerie. Traffic was at a standstill. Thousands of people were standing and staring up at the huge screens everywhere, watching it all like it was a scene in a movie.[129]

The visuals here are notable. First, we have Ayad learning of the attacks by watching television, then transitioning outside where he is faced with the physical impact of the attacks. As Ayad is a playwright, this is also a pointed moment in which his experience is mediated by screens, emphasizing both his psychological and literal distance from the events themselves. Lopamudra Basu writes of this distinction during an interview with Akhtar, saying:

[129] Ayad Akhtar, *Homeland Elegies* (Tinder Press, 2020), 198–200.

> This space unmediated by technology can, Akhtar believes, transport us to a primordial era when theater performed the function of ritual: "the act of gathering to witness the myths of our alleged origins enacted—this is the root of the theater's timeless magic."[130]

Basu continues by drawing on Butler's *A Precarious Life*, specifically, the call to return to the human during a time of suffering and grief, which is directly linked to the role of theater as a medium to portray trauma.[131] This reference to experiencing the world via television versus in person is a common refrain in 9/11 fiction, as earlier evidenced in the descriptions of scenes in *The Zero*, when Remy describes his home as looking like a student play, and *The Submission*, when Asma sees both 9/11 and a memorial event from the distance of a television screen. Therefore, the choice to have Ayad view the attacks first through television is especially poignant; rather than experience 9/11 through a raw, first-hand view, like the audiences of his plays, Ayad is one of the masses. This may be the very reason he is eager to go out into the city and experience this moment for himself.

The second part of the excerpt emphasizes Ayad's experience of walking out into the city. He is confronted by the physical elements of the attack, such as the smoke and scent carried by the wind in their own rapid movement, and is compelled to walk in the direction of the attacks. While Ayad walks he notes people "pouring" into the streets only to then stop and talk to others. As Ayad continues, he is surrounded by stillness. The description of Times Square and the stalled traffic as "eerie" makes it explicit that this stillness is antithetical to Ayad's understanding of his home. This scene foreshadows the years ahead in which Ayad and his family will begin to experience a sense of unfamiliarity within their home country as Muslim Americans**.** This is not the New York City that he has come to view as his home, full of movement; rather, the unfamiliar

[130] Lopamudra Basu, *Ayad Akhtar, the American Nation, and Its Others after 9/11*, (Lexington Books, 2018), 166.

[131] Basu, *Ayad Akhtar, the American Nation, and Its Others after 9/11*, 172.

environment mirrors the psychic distance felt by Ayad and other onlookers as they watch the footage of the attacks.

Again, Akhtar highlights the role of screens in this moment. Though he and other onlookers are present in New York City, they experience the news of the attacks "like it was a scene in a movie." This detail calls attention to a familiar trope of characters experiencing 9/11 via screens to create distance between themselves and the reality of the events where they are safely protected.[132] Reconsidering Akhtar's own comment regarding theater as an "act of gathering," this moment has an additional significance in that the bystanders have felt compelled to go out and seek a communal experience; yet their encounter of 9/11 remains confined to the screen. This can be read as an early forewarning of the contradictions of Ayad's experiences as an American of Pakistani and Muslim heritage post-9/11.

The first such instance begins on the very next page. As he continues his walk, Ayad is confronted by a white man standing in line for a blood bank donation. "'Where are you from?' he asked, making no effort to hide his aggression." Akhtar continues, "'Uptown?' I said. I knew what he was asking. By that point, I knew word was spreading that Muslims were behind the mayhem."[133]

In that short sentence, "I knew what he was asking," Ayad recognizes that he is being viewed as a Muslim rather than a fellow New Yorker. He immediately draws the connection to this realization by adding, "I knew word was spreading that Muslims were behind the mayhem."

This interaction is evidence of Ayad experiencing Du Bois's own definition of double consciousness.[134] Ayad references this moment earlier in the text, saying:

> …as much as I worried about my place in America and as a Muslim—and, yes, I had good reason to; all American Muslims did; that terrible day in September foreclosed our futures in this country for at least

[132] Azeem, "From Post-Colonial to Post-9/11," 79.

[133] Akhtar, *Homeland Elegies*, 201.

[134] Meer, "Double Consciousness and the 'Spirit' of Recognition," 51–52.

> another generation—as much as it bothered me, as much as I felt a victim of what this nation has become for us, I, too, had participated in my own exclusion, willingly, still choosing, half a lifetime into my American life, to see myself as other.[135]

Here, Ayad illustrates exactly what it means for him to experience his American life as "other," using the exact wording of Du Bois. The phrase "victim of what this nation has become for us" draws attention to the anti-Islamic xenophobia that became mainstream after 9/11 alongside more formal instances of government overreach after the Patriot Act, as has been explored earlier in the discussion of Jess Walter's *The Zero*. Had Ayad remained within the safety of his neighbor's apartment, watching the footage on television, he would not have been confronted with this harassment. His journey out into the streets of New York is reminiscent of the American tradition of stepping into an unknown frontier; but he is quickly met with racist aggression, suggesting that his American ideologies are already being challenged due to his race even as the attacks are still unfolding.

Now that I have established the role of psychological distance as it informs Akhtar's characters, I will analyze the ways in which representations of physical distance through travel in the novel illustrate American identity before and after 9/11. *Homeland Elegies* addresses the issue of American identity for Ayad and his father through moments of travel in three distinct narratives: Ayad's family as tourists within the US, crossing borders as Ayad returns to his parents' home country of Pakistan, and finally through repatriation as his father returns to Pakistan at the end of the novel. The instances will be presented chronologically in terms of the timeline of events as they occurred in Ayad's life, rather than the order in which they are presented in the text, in order to build a cohesive representation of how Ayad's Pakistani American identity is challenged over time pre-9/11, post-9/11, and finally post-2016.

[135] Ayad Akhtar, *Homeland Elegies*, 112.

The first depictions of travel are presented through Ayad's father's love of touring the US. In the opening pages of the novel, Ayad looks back on his childhood in the 1980s, detailing:

> Of course, my father was a great fan of America back then. To him, there was no greater place in the world, nowhere you could do more, have more, be more. He couldn't get enough of it: camping in the Tetons, driving through Death Valley, riding to the top of the arch in St. Louis before hopping a riverboat down to Louisiana to fish for bass in the bayou. He loved visiting the historic sites. We had framed our photos of trips to Monticello and Saratoga and to the house on Beals Street in Brookline where the Kennedy brothers were born.[136]

The opening of this section is specific in detailing how his father viewed his adopted home of the US. In simply saying, "there was no place in the world, nowhere you could do more, have more, be more," Ayad references the quintessential ideals of the American Dream. The repetition of "more" highlights the promise of the American Dream to advance financially and socially through hard work in a manner that was not possible in his father's birth country.[137]

The framed photos also carry significance as they illustrate his father's version of the US. Monticello is the private home of Thomas Jefferson, the third American president and writer of the Declaration of Independence, who famously used the phrase "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" to define equal rights to all men. It is notable that at Monticello, Jefferson owned hundreds of enslaved men, women, and children who did not receive any of these freedoms after the signing of the Declaration of Independence or the end of the American Revolution.[138] Monticello represents one of the most glaring and unconscionable contradictions of the early American ideals of "freedom," and so its presence in the opening of *Homeland Elegies* can be read as a signifier of the contradictions of the American mythos versus its reality. Saratoga, New York was the site of a famous battle in the American Revolution, referencing the early

[136] Akhtar, *Homeland Elegies*, xii–xiii.

[137] Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, 110.

[138] Peter S. Onuf and Annette Gordon-Reed, "Introduction," in *Those Who Labor for My Happiness: Slavery at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello* (University of Virginia Press, 2012), vii.

history of the US.[139] This reference to a time when the US was a British colony, like Ayad's parents' home country of Pakistan, draws a link between the two nations, which Ayad draws on later in the text when he goes to Pakistan as an adult. Finally, the inclusion of Beals Street as the birthplace of President John F. Kennedy and Senator Robert Kennedy highlights one of America's most famous and powerful families.[140] Kennedy was the first Catholic president, and his faith was a major point of discourse during his candidacy.[141] By choosing his birthplace to include in this list, versus the historic home of another president, Akhtar directs the reader to the history of religious othering in the US, despite the first amendment, right to freedom of religion. These locations have a significance in American history that reads similarly to Waldman's inclusion of Asma's trip on the Circle Line boat around New York City to see the Statue of Liberty. In both instances, American icons are used to tie the immigrant to their new home country through positive memories.

This introduction positions Ayad's father as both immigrant and tourist, which are two very different experiences of being the Other in an unfamiliar place. The role of the immigrant in literature allows for a representation of identity outside of territorial limits in which the character is deprived of their community and their familiar home, leaving them without an established sense of belonging in their new country.[142] As an immigrant, Ayad's father's identity is rooted in movement from one nation to another, while Ayad himself as a first-generation American is defined by the movement between home country and familial country as two different places with vastly different cultures. Therefore, the choice to introduce his father through an anecdote about travel as a tourist is significant for representing the nuances of movement in the novel. Xavier Guillaume notes that travel literature has often functioned as a way to show

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[139] Kevin J. Weddle, "Introduction," in *The Compleat Victory: Saratoga and the American Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 5, https://doiorg.uea.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/oso/9780195331400.001.0001.

[140] Christine Arato, "Review: John Fitzgerald Kennedy National Historic Site," *The Journal of American History* 101, no. 3 (December 2014): 867.

[141] Arato, "Review: John Fitzgerald Kennedy National Historic Site," 871.

[142] Azeem, "From Post-Colonial to Post-9/11," 77.

difference to the character themselves via an encounter with and experience of being Other.[143] Akhtar describes the character of the father through love of travel within the US as a way to show that his father has enjoyed this experience as Other, as he consequently developed a deep appreciation for his adoptive nation. Their family's domestic travel is presented in stark contrast to Remy of *The Zero* whose domestic travel is disoriented and spent in search of answers or escape from New York. The only times that we see joyful travel within the US in post-9/11 fiction is through memories of the before times.

This is an expressly positive view of travel, with Ayad describing his father as "a great fan of America." Conversely, after 9/11, he and his father experience his familial home country of Pakistan, approaching the nation with an entirely different outlook that similarly positions them as Other. Early in the text Ayad establishes his father's feelings towards his home country by saying, "With me, Father disparaged his native country often and without reservation," making it clear that his father does not seem to miss his homeland or care to preserve a positive impression of it for his American son.[144] Ayad describes his own impressions of his parental nation on this trip, saying:

> My father and I were in Abbottabad visiting [a cousin] in October of 2008…It was my first time back in Pakistan since 9/11, and I found a country very different from the one I remembered. Any love or admiration for America was gone. In its place was an irrational paranoia that passed for savvy political consciousness. Looking back on that trip, I see now the broad outlines of the same dilemmas that would lead America into the era of Trump: seething anger; open hostility to strangers and those with views opposing one's own; a contempt for news delivered by allegedly reputable sources; an embrace of reactionary moral posturing; civic and governmental corruption that no longer needed hiding…[145]

By specifying that this is Ayad's first visit back since 9/11, the reader is compelled to make the connection between 9/11 anti-Islamic rhetoric in the US

[143] Xavier Guillaume, "Travelogues of Difference: International Relations Theory and Travel Literature," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 36, no. 2 (May 2011): 140.
[144] Akhtar, *Homeland Elegies*, 30.
[145] Akhtar, *Homeland Elegies*, 70.

and this moment seven years later. When readers encounter "irrational paranoia that passed for savvy political consciousness," they might recall the xenophobia that was put forth post-9/11 to shape these views. Also, this visit in October 2008 is just one month ahead of the election of President Obama, the first Black president. Rather than making the connection to the impending progress experienced in the US, Akhtar directs the reader to a time of intolerance to introduce the finding that "any love or admiration for America was gone." It is worth noting that during his election campaign, Obama's role as Other became media fodder for speculation about his faith by his opposition.[146] Despite the fact that he is not Muslim nor has ever practiced Islam, the suggestion was enough to alienate potential voters. This disregard for fact versus fiction leading up to Obama's election offers relevant context for the "fake news" epidemic in which Akhtar chose to write a novel that blends truth and fiction.

Further, his depiction of Pakistanis in 2008 as similar to Americans in 2016 jolts the reader to the fictive present. In an interview in 2016 days ahead of Trump's election, Akhtar spoke of the similarities in rhetoric between the two nations, saying, "One sees Islamism that is not all that different from what is happening in this country with Trump. The lines of force are drawn in similar ways where people feel that they are fundamentally disenfranchised, and violence is their only recourse."[147] I would argue that by comparing this depiction of the US under Trump to his impression of Pakistan, Akhtar is attempting to close the psychological distance between the reader and the Pakistanis Ayad encounters, as a means of making the unfamiliar familiar.

Ayad is uniquely positioned to present this voyeuristic impression of both Pakistanis and Americans, as he has claim to both nations. His insights are offered in direct contrast to the rampant Islamophobia in Western societies post-9/11 in which discourse surrounding a "Muslim problem" led to increased scrutiny of Muslims and their relationship to "citizenship, loyalty, and liberal

[146] Tesler, "President Obama and the Emergence of Islamophobia in Mass Partisan Preferences," 395.

[147] Basu, *Ayad Akhtar, the American Nation, and Its Others after 9/11*, 158.

values."[148] Through his specific lens, Ayad's recognition of this behavior in the US during the Trump era suggests a troubling experience for the American as a traveler, in an incongruence that Azeem would describe through the lens of the "deterritorialization" of the narrator in the post-9/11 War on Terror.[149] As Ayad experiences this incongruence, he is not presenting a sympathetic version of Pakistan; he is honest about his struggles to recognize this as his parental homeland. Akhtar's choice not to present an idealized version of Pakistan can offer a more humanized version of Pakistanis as "complex and flawed" rather than pandering to an audience seeking a moralistic presentation.[150] This unflattering truth then lends weight to his comparison to the US under Trump. The foreshadowing of experiencing home as an unfamiliar place becomes a reality for Ayad and his father as they face another era of xenophobia that eventually ends with his father's expatriation.

As previously stated, Ayad's father had a deep appreciation of his adopted country which continued through the 2016 election, when he supported President Trump. Ayad describes his father's devotion despite Trump's policies, including "Trump's proposal for a Muslim database, for which, oddly, Father didn't believe he would have to register. 'I don't pray; I don't fast; I'm basically not Muslim; you're the same; he's not talking about us. And anyway, I was his doctor.'"[151] In this scene, Ayad's father does not appear to have experienced the same double consciousness that made his son so aware of his identity as a Muslim American during the post-9/11 years. Another notable omission is Trump's role as a vocal "birther movement" conspiracy theorist during Obama's election campaigns, in which he and other public figures exploited the misinformation about Obama's identity as a Muslim to call into question whether he was actually born in the US.[152] Trump's excessive othering of Obama

[148] Morey, "Islamophobia: The Word and the World," 1–2.

[149] Azeem, "From Post-Colonial to Post-9/11," 85.

[150] Basu, *Ayad Akhtar, the American Nation, and Its Others after 9/11*, 2.

[151] Akhtar, *Homeland Elegies*, 15.

[152] Tesler, "President Obama and the Emergence of Islamophobia in Mass Partisan Preferences," 405.

prior to his own presidential campaign suggests racism and nationalism have always been at the core of his belief system, yet Ayad's father does not perceive himself as being at risk of similar mistreatment.

His inability to see himself as the Other—the way in which white Americans view him—informs his own identity as an American immigrant. In the existing canon of post-9/11 Pakistani American fiction, Azeem states, "the characters represented in the relevant novels respond to the post 9/11 sovereign-law in the US through an act of self-narration and a *deliberate exclusion* from the dominant narrative of American exceptionalism."[153] I highlight his phrasing "deliberate exclusion" because Ayad's father appears to believe himself to be very much a part of the "exceptionalism" that will be required to survive Trump's America as a Muslim, whether he practices his faith or not. Conversely, Ayad's father expresses a belief in exceptionalism for himself that is evidence of the American individualism he has achieved in his decades as an immigrant. He is, unfortunately, forced to contend with how he is viewed in an incident at the end of the novel.

When Ayad's father is facing a malpractice lawsuit, Ayad joins him at court and drives him home with a stop at a gas station convenience store along the way. The gas station setting is immediately significant as a gas station recalls the trope of the traditional American road trip, itself a symbol of Americanness.[154] Further, their presence as two Muslim, South Asian American men at a gas station elicits two areas of conflict specific to the post-9/11 period. First, a major strike by the large population of Arab and South Asian cab drivers in protest of the city's anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant rhetoric in the immediate aftermath of the attacks; second, increased discourse around the US dependence on oil from the Middle East as it informed the response to the 9/11 attacks.[155] These two issues, recalled by the setting of a gas station, represent an

[153] Azeem, "From Post-Colonial to Post-9/11," 75. Emphasis mine.
[154] Leong, "The Open Road and the Traffic Stop," 307.
[155] Suhaan Kiran Mehta, "Driving While Brown: The American Road Trip in H.M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*," *Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 65, no. 3 (August 7, 2024): 3,

uncomfortable reality of American reliance on immigrant labor and imported resources in the post-9/11 isolationist era. This discomfort is replicated during the nationalist ideology of post-Trump's MAGA politics, as evidenced by the rest of the scene.

An altercation begins when Ayad enters the store. "I noticed a narrow, clean-cut man in the store now…he was watching Father and me. I heard him speaking, but I wasn't sure to whom. 'Fucking rule of law. There's laws for a reason,' I thought I heard him say."[156] The stranger then berates Ayad and his father for an "admittedly blithe parking job," saying, "I [will] leave it alone when they fucking learn how to drive in this country." In response, "'What country? Hmm—?' Father snapped. 'What country is that?'"[157] Father's direct question of what America the instigator is talking about echoes Asma's plea in *The Submission* to know if her son is American. Both instances show the immigrant character's literal questioning of the country that they have chosen as a home, but which has become hostile to their immigrant status in a turbulent political climate.

Tension builds as the two yell back and forth with the white man calling Ayad and his father "monkeys," reaching a crescendo when Ayad recalls, "He saw me notice his gun, and he smiled. 'Can't wait when we build that wall to keep you critters out.'"[158] This reference to a "wall" clearly aligns the speaker with the Trump refrain of "Build that wall!" often chanted during his campaign rallies. This is specifically in reference to building a wall along the Mexican border, which suggests the speaker does not know where Ayad and his father are from, just that they are not white and his father has an accent, which are reason enough for the speaker to use racist language and harass them. Azeem says of the post-9/11 era, "Many of the critical perspectives on post-9/11 Pakistani

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https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2024.2386103; John H. Perkins, "Editorial: Oil and the 9/11 Commission's Report," *Environmental Practice 6 (4)*: 269, 2004, doi:10.1017/S1466046604000420.

[156] Akhtar, *Homeland Elegies*, 305.

[157] Akhtar, *Homeland Elegies*, 306.

[158] Akhtar, *Homeland Elegies*, 307.

diaspora fiction connect these works to postcolonial fiction which, presumably, represents Pakistanis' colonized conditions in the US, and the subjection of the diaspora to imperial violence aggravated by the War on Terror."[159] In this scene, Akhtar shows Pakistani Americans as being subject to the same vitriol during the Trump presidency nearly two decades after 9/11. In this moment, Ayad and his father continue to be subjected to "imperial violence" that sees his father transition from his role as an immigrant of the diaspora back to his home country.

For Ayad and his family, like Mo and Asma of *The Submission*, their identity as Muslim Americans and immigrants offered a specific challenge different to that of Brian in *The Zero*, or Claire, the other 9/11 widow in *The Submission*—who are white Americans and labeled as victims—which is rooted in their racial and religious identity. Ayad's father, like Mo, eventually repatriates to his home country once they feel their pursuits of the American Dream are no longer feasible; Mo expressly due to xenophobia and Ayad's father after professional ruin.

The novel concludes with another journey to Pakistan when Ayad learns of his father's repatriation, the final act of travel in the text. With these tragedies in his father's life, his attempt at the American Dream culminates as a failure. Ayad describes the move, saying, "I don't know if, when he boarded that plane for Pakistan the next morning, Father knew he wouldn't be coming back. Some part of me thinks he did."[160] The attitude in this statement is resigned. He cannot commit to any certainty about his father, as he starts with "I don't know" and ends with "some part" that only "thinks" his father knew he would not return. His uncertainty is in stark contrast to his father's confidence about his status in relation to the US in 2016. Ayad's father is unfortunately one of thousands who are unable to achieve the original version of the American Dream promised in

[159] Azeem, "From Post-Colonial to Post-9/11," 76.

[160] Akhtar, *Homeland Elegies*, unnumbered final pages.

the first half of the twentieth century, as issues of economic and racial inequality have widened the gap between socioeconomic classes.[161]

Ayad is critical of his home country and his parental homeland in equal measure throughout the text. He addresses this directly at the end of the novel when speaking at a university lecture about the state of both American and Pakistani politics. An audience member asks, "'I'm just saying, I don't get why you're here if you think it's so darn hard.'"[162] Ayad responds with an "unsteady" voice, "'This is where I've lived my whole life. For better, for worse—and it's always a bit of both—I don't want to be anywhere else. I've never even thought about it. America is my home.'" Though his father repatriates, Ayad's insistence on remaining in the US is an intentional choice to suggest a more promising future for Ayad, a successful outcome of the pursuit of the American Dream. While he has mobility around the US and around the world through his profession as a playwright, he ends the novel declaring "America is my home." With this conclusion, Akhtar solidifies Ayad's identity as an American despite, and perhaps because of, the tribulations that he has faced in feeling most at home in the US.

Conclusion: The 9/11 Novel Forges Onward

As evidenced by the three novels discussed in this analysis, travel functions as a distinct narrative tool in American fiction through which to explore nationality, security, race, and globalism in the post-9/11 world. The travel narrative inherently shows the traveler undergo a series of self-reflections through which the character, and by extension the reader, questions whether or not the traveler should have left home initially.[163] In regard to the role of the American Dream in these texts, it is suggested that this is an idealistic fantasy that no longer has any basis in the reality of American society. Readers can question what these

[161] Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, 110, 208.

[162] Ayad Akhtar, *Homeland Elegies,* 343.

[163] Caesar, "To Make This Place Another," 97.

characters, be they April's family in *The Zero*, Mo's parents and Asma from *The Submission*, or Ayad's parents in *Homeland Elegies*, were able to achieve by journeying to America. Each of these examples shows the characters having the transformational experience of travel that is, in its own way, a fulfillment of the American Dream; however, these travels push them to reconsider their relationship to their homeland.

Just as the traveling protagonists reconsider the US, so too should readers as they consider why it matters if the American Dream continues to exist post-9/11. The feasibility of the American Dream has been criticized in previous eras and so it follows that the validity of this ideal would also be scrutinized in the post-9/11 era. If, as stated in the introduction, American fiction can function as a representation of the forward-oriented mentality of the US, there would be reason to believe that a rejection of the American Dream could just be the next progression of the national identity. This, however, is not the case. The American Dream functions as more than a concept; it is an essential narrative by which the nation defines itself. Bhabha writes of the relationship between nation and narrative:

> The nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor. Metaphor, as the etymology of the word suggests, transfers the meaning of home and belonging across the 'middle passage,'…across those distances, and cultural differences, that span the imagined community of the nation-people.[164]

Given the tradition of mobility and movement that is crucial to the US, the American Dream functions as a metaphor that unites "the imagined community of the nation-people" as Americans. 9/11 left a "void" in the nation in terms of literal physical destruction and death as well as an emotional void from a loss of security as victims of a foreign threat.

The metaphor of the American Dream offers optimism and a promise of a better future inspired by those who achieved the dream in the past, offering a comforting ideal during this time. *The Zero's* Remy most clearly illustrates this

[164] Bhabha, "The Location of Culture," 717.

desperation to reclaim a sense of hope after 9/11 when he fulfills a dream to travel to the Pacific Ocean by visiting San Francisco. Conversely, Mo in *The Submission* and Ayad's father in *Homeland Elegies* are pushed out of the US because of their religious identity in the face of Islamophobic extremism. It is further evidence of the great contradictions that make up the US that Mo, the child of American Dreamers, and Ayad's father, a Dreamer himself, are the ones who are most rejected by the US despite their connection to this revered ideal.

One critical function of the novel according to Dorothy Hale is to defamiliarize the reader from the familiar by presenting a new, imagined reality.[165] As both the novel and travel narratives serve this goal, travel therefore offers a symbolic framework through which to understand a character's narrative arc, as with Remy, Mo, or Ayad's father. In contrast, the decision to contend with "home" and stay in place is a moment of resignation, evidenced by Abdul, or a powerful political statement, seen through Ayad. As Buell suggested, the movement in a travel narrative can provide a meaningful frame for the character's experience which can parallel the form of a Bildungsroman that leaves them to question if home is what they thought, and whether they should return.[166] For the reader, their ideas of home are defamiliarized through the practice of reading the novel to engage with this imagined space, and learning through the characters' experience of the unfamiliar. The novel therefore remains an essential mechanism for conveying these ideas in the post-9/11 setting and will continue to serve this purpose for future stories.

Looking forward, the novel will not only need to continue to capture the ideals that created the national identity, but will also need to portray the fear that has become a preeminent driver of post-9/11 American politics. As it is relevant to travel narratives specifically, it seems impossible not to consider the implications of travel in the representation of a post-9/11 world, as the terrorists weaponized commercial air travel to carry out their attacks, thereby creating a

[165] Dorothy Hale, "Introduction," in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900–2000* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2005), 21, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uea/detail.action?docID=239862.
[166] Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, 106, 111.

sense of unease around movement itself. The fear around travel ignited a crucial anxiety for post-9/11 Americans; without freedom of movement and the promise of mobility, what is America?

Today, these concerns continue past 9/11 towards the rhetoric of MAGA, which looks squarely to the past for inspiration even as it ignores the tenets of America's founding. MAGA's anti-immigration views restrict the sort of migration to the US on which the nation was founded, while the promotion of Christian Nationalism defies the right to religious freedom. As the country attempts to grapple with these contradictions, post-9/11 novels are effective in portraying a moment of heightened fear and concern within the nation. Bhabha continues writing on narrative and nationhood, saying, "The language of culture and community is poised on the fissures of the present becoming the rhetorical figures of the national past."[167] The temporality of the post-9/11 novel is directly informed by this approach of past informing present, as the moment of fissure, 9/11, is then placed in discourse with "rhetorical figures" of the national past; namely, the American Dream. To capture the community of the American nation in novels, it is essential to regard those past moments as they happened, with all of the contradiction, fear, anxiety, and misunderstanding that impacts the present. The novel provides a contained imagined space within which to depict past, present, and future, in a cohesive narrative that the reader can engage with to "defamiliarize" themselves, to reference the earlier Hale quote, via the transformative experience of reading the novel. Through fiction, authors attempt to improve readers' understanding of how America can face the globalized twenty-first century with its many opportunities and threats.

As it has historically, the mobility inherent to the American mythos and its ideals will continue to reveal the precarity of this national identity in a changing world. Literature attempts to make sense of these ongoing discussions as history moves further away from 9/11 and its impacts, towards new challenges. Whether driving on meandering roadways, from the height of an

[167] Bhabha, "The Location of Culture," 719.

airplane's window seat, or lost in open waters, the insights offered by travelers in fiction allow for an understanding of America across its many eras and the nation's continued hope for what lies ahead.

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this idea forward to 2021 and projects ahead to 2051 to speculate what aspects of this identity will be relevant in the future.