"Encounters with Strangeness" in the Post- 9/11 Novel

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Ever since September 11, 2001, and the so-called war on terror consequently declared by the U.S. government, *terrorism* and *fundamentalism* have probably been two of the most discussed terms in the media and academy worldwide. Many recent studies have focused on the sociopolitical dimensions of 9/11 in relation to terrorism and Middle Eastern politics, but very few have ventured to analyze its cultural and aesthetic representation. Not surprisingly, several novels have also recently appeared that thematize directly the causes and effects of the 9/11 events on individuals and the image of the perpetrators as America's other. Studies of the literary and cultural image of the cataclysmic events of 9/11 and their aftermath still lack a comprehensive theory that can accommodate all the major approaches to the questions of *how* and *what*, or (e)valuation and representation, of the disaster and its assumed perpetrators. This research project proposes to analyze the content and representational modes of the traumatic events of 9/11 in relation to otherness as reflected in most recent American fiction. Updike and DeLillo's two novels are explored as narratives that are basically consecrated to encounters with otherness and strangeness.

Many works of fiction that deal with 9/11 engage with the traumatic nature of terrorism and the war on terror in its confined domestic context.[1] They are concerned with merely the traumatic affects of the disaster and the apocalyptic obsessions with dystopian end times. Richard Gray asserts that "a further measure of the limitations of these texts is their encounters with strangeness" (135). John Updike's *Terrorist* (*T*) (2006) and Don DeLillo's

Falling Man (*FM*) (2007), however, manage to portray terror in regard to otherness in its global as well as domestic contexts. Not only do the two novels shed light on the intricate nature of otherness in relation to capitalist utopia, but they also attempt to reconstruct the missing link between aesthetics and politics and audaciously point out the potential intimacy between the victim and the victimizer. Although both novels draw heavily on popular Orientalism and stereotypes, they venture to analyze and intermesh the quiescent parameters of Islamic radicalism and Western autoimmunity as dramatically reflected in the personal lives of the perpetrators and their victims. Further, they supersede the shallow image of the uncanny Middle Eastern villains dismissed as "the bad guys" in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (92) with a passionate analytical portrait of a terrorist prone to emergent individual and social frailties rather than to inherent debilitating cultural and intellectual models or value systems. These narrative works are thus an expression of the cultural ambivalence toward the other, a step toward beginning a new kind of writing that does not easily conform to Orientalist conventions and simply perpetuate existing traditions. It is a writing that challenges these conventions and traditions that are informed by the familiar oppositions between "them" and "us," East and West, and the premodern and modern.

One striking similarity between the two works is that what initially appear to be three disparate experiential territories (the modern, the sacred, and the feminine) at some point merge into one another and are seen to be multiple facets of the same structures of strangeness and strategies of reconstruction. The encounter with strangeness has varied almost infinitely from one writer to another. However, there are recurrent themes in the post-9/11 novel: a disenchantment with, and at times a rejection of, Western modernity and consumerist capitalism; a quest for redefining the relationship between the human and the sacred; and the view of strangeness as problematically engaged with gender and sexuality. For Updike, the exploration of the postcolonial relation between the United States and its Arab others reflects his fundamental concern with middle, white America in relation to his construction of race, ethnicity, sexuality and religion, while for DeLillo, the engagement with strangeness and terrorism is in line with his suspicions, disappointments, and anger regarding Madison Avenue's dream of American corporate capitalism. Given the significance of cultural criticism in the context of a postnational global system, Updike's and DeLillo's novels are viewed and analyzed as cultural texts that are critical of home as found. With regard to the relation between terror and cultural critique, this article

adopts a postcolonial perspective, according to which, in Elleke Boehmer's words, an "alternative reading of terror allows us to examine its occurrence in the reciprocally violent historical contexts of colonialism and global neo-colonialism rather than of the ahistorical 'war on terror' in which terror is viewed simply as savage and irrational, an irruption of the primitive" (147). By adopting a postcolonial stance concerning terror, the article attempts to readdress the problematic relationship between the histories of colonial and postcolonial terror. Far from justifying state or nonstate terrorism and national or international terrorism, such critical reading would attempt to deconstruct the equivocal and hence politically charged concept of terror-ism against the grain of American public and official political discourse. Western media and the U.S. State Department use the term *terrorism* as a self-evident concept of the non-Western other or enemy. According to post-9/11 public discourse, terrorism is inextricably bound up with the con-cept of the enemy, a vague abstraction that is amorphous and pervasive in different and unrelated political contexts. For instance, in a discussion of the 'war on terror' in 2005, George W. Bush drew a similarity between Islam and communism, despite their political, historical, and cultural differences: "The murderous ideology of the Islamic radicals is the great challenge of our new century. Yet in many ways, this fight resembles the struggle against communism in the last century" (5). Similarly, in regard to the recent antig-overnment protests and revolutions in Arab countries, American public and media discourse is still generally haunted by the threat of al-Qaeda, Islamist radicalism, Islamic states, and religious directions.[2]

This study adopts a counter-Orientalist approach in dealing with the post-9/11 novel and its representation of Islamic culture and Muslims. Although many American politicians, including ex-presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, have claimed that the real antiterror battle is between the West and Islamic fundamentalism and radicalism, many neoliberal phi-losophers of the global state, such as Fukuyama, Lewis, and Huntington, understand globalization as an evangelical civilizing project that must dis-miss oriental despotism, Muslim fundamentalism, and Islam in general. In Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*, Islam is represented as the West's main other and is "seen as a source of nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and, in Europe, unwanted migrants" (215). Although several critical studies of terror and religious fundamentalism provide some evidence of potential causes of terrorism in general, no comparable studies have examined the literary representation of the dormant drives toward 9/11 disasters in terms of the Orientalist tradition in particular. This research takes Orientalist

notions of Islam and the Orient as a point of departure for exploring the political image of 9/11 events and their perpetrators. This stance is predicated on Edward Said's notable studies of Orientalism, in which Islam has always been regarded as belonging to the non-West or Orient, and hence has been looked at "as if it were one monolithic thing, and then with a very special hostility and fear" (4). The close affinity between the 9/11 discourses and modern Orientalism is taken into consideration as far as the dominant stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims are concerned. John Esposito has noted, "For many in the West it is axiomatic that Arabs are nomads or oil shaykhs, denizens of the desert and harems, an emotional, combative, and irrational people. Islam is equated with holy war and hatred, fanaticism and violence, intolerance and the oppression of women" (5).

STRANGENESS AND THE MODERN

Terrorism is in many ways a sort of an implicit resistance to imposed modernity and global imperialism. In other words, it is not just the "rejection of the kind of modernity and secularization that in the philosophical tradition is associated with the concept of Enlightenment" (Borradori 14) as much as it is a new prism through which the Western project of modernity can be neutrally appraised and critiqued for remedy. Rather than endorsing the monolithic Orientalist view that Islam is inherently anti-Western and antimodern, many Western philosophers and cultural critics verify that September 11 marks an apocalyptic zero point for the global capitalist system rather than a mere clash of civilizations and cultures. According to Jean Baudrillard, "There is, indeed, a fundamental antagonism here, but one which points past the spectre of America (which is, perhaps, the epicenter, but in no sense the sole embodiment, of globalization) and the spectre of Islam (which is not the embodiment of terrorism either), to *triumphant globalization battling against itself*" (11). Slavoj Žižek, however, delivers a more detailed description of the cultural malaise of Western consumerist society in relation to 9/11: "The ultimate threat does not come from out there, from the fundamentalist Other, but from within, from our lassitude and moral weakness, loss of clear values and firm commitments, of the spirit of dedication and sacrifice" (*Welcome* 154). Such diagnostic critique exposes the ills of modern Western society and the intellectual paradigms that underlie their insurgence. It does not blame native culture as a negative form of xenophobic anti-imperialism and self-defeating sense of wrong.

Terroristic acts are accordingly represented in Updike's *Terrorist* and DeLillo's *Falling Man* as parallel to the global terror of the modern imperium. Narrative structure, action, characters, and space reflect the analogy of global force and terroristic counterforce. In place of the ideological antithesis between capitalism and communism in the Cold War, globalization and terrorism are aesthetically portrayed as contending within a singular dynamic for a deterritorialized, transnational power. *Terrorist* is the story of a cultural outcast, according to the post-9/11 political discourse: a young Egyptian American, Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, who is persuaded by his local imam to commit a terrorist attack against infidels, that is, Americans. The parameters of cultural and political seclusion are highlighted in the enclosed space in which Ahmad performs his rituals of transcendence and builds up psychological walls and phobias between himself and American society. American society snubs him in return for his assumed difference; he is mistreated by both his schoolmates and his Irish American mother for his seemingly affected chastity and piety. What finally supervenes with Ahmad's suicide bombing—he drives his explosive-laden truck into the Lincoln Tunnel—and the subliminal obliteration of self and other is an unexpected epiphany gained through self-revision at the conclusion of the novel. Ahmad's culturally enclosed world is thus kept intact throughout the novel until the very end, when a potential reconstruction of conviviality between an Arab American and his others is inscribed as plausible. Analogously, *Falling Man* is subdivided into two worlds and story lines, which never meet until the very end, on 9/11. The world of Hammad and other terrorists stretches prospectively from the past to the future and spatially from Marienstrasse in Hamburg to Nokomis in Florida and finally to the Hudson corridor up to the crash of a Boeing 767 into the World Trade Center. The world of terrorism unfolds from Hammad's secluded room or cell, whereas the world of post-9/11 trauma correspondingly develops retrospectively from Lianne's mother's New York apartment. The pre-9/11 world of plotting terror is kept marginalized and apart from the other narrative sections that deal with the shattered post-9/11 lives of New Yorkers, represented by Keith Neudecker's immersion in the world of poker and Lianne's deep engagement with Alzheimer's patients and their different emotional responses to 9/11. DeLillo attempts to negotiate both possibilities and their potential convergence by alternating chapters that provide a fairly straightforward description of the terrorist plot with chapters focusing on the daily traumatic lives and experiences of various New Yorkers. The emotional numbness and psychological paralysis of the New Yorkers are thus made

to correspond to the intellectual rigidity and stasis of the terrorists. The possibility of convergence is not accomplished until the collision of the plane and tower at the very end, and the final encounter between terrorists and victims is accordingly stressed as an assumed reconciliation through the shift from Hammad's narrative perspective to Keith's in the final climax of the novel. The striking similarity drawn between Hammad and Keith rests more on their common sensation of pain and horror, as the aircraft crashes into the tower. DeLillo therefore installs the premise of "the clash of civilizations" and then subverts it by constructing a counternarrative of convergence.

The terrorist in both novels is presented as psychologically "normal" and undisturbed. Rather than being psychotic, both Ahmad in *Terrorist* and Hammad in *Falling Man* are young men who come from middle-class families and study at high school or at technical institutes in majors such as architecture, urban planning, and engineering. They are fictionally formed after the example of Mohammed Atta, the ringleader of al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks, who was thirty-three years old and taking a graduate degree at the Technological Institute in Hamburg. In accordance with recent social and ethnographic research on the social and psychological causes of terrorism, any clear pattern in the connection between terrorism and poverty or concern for the impoverished is reprobated in favor of the presupposed cultural threat posed to the Muslim world by the United States and the West. Addressing the conclusions of the Pew Global Attitudes Survey of forty-four countries from summer 2002, Jitka Maleckova notes, "The fear of a perceived Western threat to Islam, expressed by the respondents in the Pew poll, deserves serious consideration. The U.S. occupation of Iraq, combined with the memory of the past Western domination of the majority of the Muslim world, persuaded many Muslims that the (Christian) West is (still) fighting Islam" (160). Thus, both *Terrorist* and *Falling Man* seem to verify the hypothesis of such recent qualitative and quantitative research into the root causes of terrorism. Terrorists are hence portrayed as members of an educated elite set to fight against coercive Western modernity and global capitalism. Fundamentalist terrorists are represented as people who reject merely certain aspects of modernization and globalization, as most of them are delineated as efficient masters of technology and communications in the mass media. Central to al-Qaeda's success in inspiring its followers is a modern feature of the organization: its use of the Internet and the media in general and what is called "E-jihad" or "cyber-jihad" in particular. In *Falling Man* Hammad and his fellow terrorists are fully cognizant of the danger of

state photo reconnaissance, microwave sites, ground stations, and floating satellites, and that is why they prefer to talk in person. Terrorists in both texts are concerned with how their terroristic acts will make headlines all over the world.

However, what these terrorist-fundamentalists reject is the core ethical and intellectual imperatives of modernity. As the editors of the University of Chicago Fundamentalism Project explain, "'Modern' is a code word for the set of forces which fundamentalists perceive as the threat which inspires their reaction. Modern cultures include at least three dimensions uncongenial to fundamentalists: a preference for secular rationality; the adoption of religious tolerance with accompanying tendencies toward relativism; and individualism" (Marty and Appleby vii). Those religious radicals feel challenged by pluralistic creeds and norms, the most significant of which is the secular rationality of modernity. Thus, in *Terrorist* Ahmad Ashmawy feels hostile to Western philosophy and literature, for they are "Godless" and secular. He is tremendously agitated by the "Godless" sciences of biology, chemistry, and physics; to him, the criteria of physical verification required in science abrogate the metaphysical ones of religion. He disdains his American teachers, as they "say that all comes out of merciless blind atoms, which cause the cold weight of iron, the transparency of glass, the stillness of clay, the agitation of flesh. . . . Only what we can measure and deduce from measurement is true. The rest is the passing dream that we call our selves" (*T* 4). That is why he tells Jack Levy, his school guidance counselor, that Sheikh Rashid has advised him against going to college and set him on the right track so that he can learn to be a truck driver. Generally speaking, a sense of antagonism is further perceived to exist between the metaphysical and the physical or between Islam and the worldly pleasures of individualistic and consumerist capitalism and modernization. For instance, the secretary of homeland security quotes a verse from the Qur'an that reads "*The Unbelievers love this fleeting life too well*" to stress that "the enemy cannot believe that democracy and consumerism are fevers in the blood of Everyman, an outgrowth of each individual's instinctive optimism and desire for freedom" (*T* 47–48).

By comparison, Hammad deprecates Americans' attachment to life in *Falling Man*. In Florida, he scrutinizes Americans, young and old, seeing them as entirely absorbed in their MacWorld interests of jogging, watering lawns, and eating fast food. For Hammad, whose vocabulary is markedly punctuated by references to God and jihad, what this pervasive American lifestyle represents is just "world domination" (*FM* 173). Both the homeland

security secretary in Updike's novel and Hammad in DeLillo's seem to reiterate neo-Orientalist scholarship and what Mohammed Arkoun calls the "populist brand of theological axiology" that misconceives modernity itself as the problem challenging fundamentalism and according to which "the Islamic fact has practically imposed its priority as a platform of resistance against the 'cultural aggression' (*ghazw fikri*) of the West or 'Westoxication'" (266). The reawakening of a desire for life in Ahmad Ashmawy at the end of *Terrorist* and the convergence of the victim and victimizer in *Falling Man* destabilize such a monolithic view.

The same sense of cultural loss associated with the emergence of Western modernity and colonialism is highlighted with regard to the loss of historical grandeur. The decline of Muslim economic and political power in the modern era is partly and apologetically ascribed to modern Western interventionism. Major modern Arab radical thinkers such as Mahmud al-Sharqawi, Sayyid Qutb, and Anwar al-Jundi adopt a repentant response to the decline of Muslim civilization in modern history; they assert that "it is not Islam that is cause of the Muslim's retardation, but rather the Muslims themselves as well as the imperialist states who have exploited them" (Haddad, *Contemporary Islam* 84). In *Falling Man* the discourse of histori-cal loss is inextricably linked to foreign policies and ideologies through the terrorists' focalization: "There was the feeling of lost history. They were too long in isolation. This is what they talked about, being crowded out by other cultures, other futures, the all-enfolding will of capital markets and foreign policies" (*FM* 80). The terrorists are hence associated with the aya-tollah's shouting boy soldiers who ran to their death during the Iran-Iraq war to purge their own contaminated history of defeat; according to the old man's story, which is told to Hammad, "the boys were sounding the cry of history, the story of ancient Shia defeat and the allegiance of the living to those who were dead and defeated" (*FM* 78). By the same token, Osama bin Laden is pictured in public discourse as frequently making references to the experience of loss in regard to the devastating impact of Western colonization on modern Islamic history. In his videotape of October 7, 2001, he made a reference to the disgrace suffered by Islam for "more than eighty years." According to Bernard Lewis, this reference alludes to the defeat of the Ottoman sultanate in 1918, after which Constantinople was occupied and much of its territory was partitioned between the British and French Empires (xvi).

In addition to Western modernization and colonization, the experience of historical demise is analogously attributed to the sociopolitical hegemony exercised by national dictatorships backed by the imperialist West. In other

words, the social aspirations of the bourgeois nationalists are construed by fundamentalists as geared toward neocolonial class consolidation and oppression. In an interview with Giovanna Borradori, Jürgen Habermas identifies "disappointment over nationalistic authoritarian regimes" as one of the main factors that contributed to the politicization of religious fanaticism in the contemporary Third World and the drawing of secular nationalists into the snare of the "holy war" (Borradori 33). In *Terrorist* Ahmad condemns all Arab leaders, including Hosni Mubarak, the Saudi princes, and Muammar Gaddafi, as tools of America. The problem of U.S. foreign policy double standards in its complicity with corrupt despots is nonetheless raised in a more sophisticated manner in *Falling Man*, where there are two different explanations for Third World underdevelopment. The first rests on dependency theory, which views the failure of modernity in terms of foreign intervention, failed states, empire, oil, and the narcissistic heart of the West. In contrast to Martin's comforting attitude of blaming the Other, Nina Bartos's stance rests on the oppositional status of the inward-looking theory that focuses on national cultural values and attitudes as the main cause of development and underdevelopment. Nina explains this cultural paradigm as follows: "It's not the history of Western interference that pulls down these societies. It's their own history, their mentality. They live in a closed world, of choice, of necessity. They haven't advanced because they haven't wanted to or tried to" (*FM* 47). Lianne's neutral stance between the two opposite directions and her keen interest in the mysterious stillness of the *natura morta* painting with which she associates the towers might suggest restructuring latent meanings and freeing them from any authoritative comment by either side.

The other's experience of loss in Updike's *Terrorist* and DeLillo's *Falling Man*, it may well be argued, is not merely historical, as it engages the modern development of alienation and anomie resulting from the migration from developing to developed countries as well. The removal of the cultural props of family, religion, and social identity left a gaping void that was not historically filled by either Western capitalism or indigenous nationalism. Thus, the personal makeup of fundamentalists contributes to their sense of cultural malaise and estrangement. The need of the alienated for a substitute belief system, together with their social need for affiliation, presents fundamentalists with a major challenge. Updike's novel shows the social and cultural divide between Ahmad's Egyptian father and his Irish American mother, and that is why he is shown as not totally disturbed by the knowledge of his mother's sleeping with others. He is fully aware of the close affinity between Arab belonging and ethnic identity that he appears

to undermine as simplistic; he rather feels particularly isolated, for he is the only Muslim believer of mixed parentage at Central High School in New Jersey. He is ostensibly disturbed by religious containment, as he is affected with uneasiness, when he beholds mosques that are created in the towns of northern New Jersey by means of substituting the Muslim crescent for the cross on Protestant churches. Ahmad might represent the third wave of Arab American immigrants, for whom "the mosque became a center for creating an Islamic ethnicity based not only on a shared faith, but also on a shred worldview that envisioned a Muslim community engaged with American society, taking its place in the American religious mosaic" (Haddad, *Not Quite American* 28). Moreover, Ahmad takes interest less in diluted Middle Eastern or Arab neighborhoods than in American urban reality and feels extremely repelled by linguistic barriers and incomprehension: "He does not like to linger and chat, as Charlie does, making his way in whatever dialect of Arabic is offered, with laughter and gestures to bridge gaps in comprehension" (*T* 177). In *Falling Man* Hammad is similarly enclosed in the isolated sociocultural space of his room. He is too immersed in the enclosing space of his religious identity even to remember the name of the town where he lives in Florida. For him all exteriority is dust and all people "invisible." Outside Hammad's room, the whole world is conceived as a mere struggle against the enemy, while any other social or political affiliation is negated. All Hammad and other terrorists need is a space of their own that represents their segregated authentic identity; this might be found in the mosque, in the portable prayer room at the university, or in the apartment on Marienstrasse. The only sense of unity left to identify with is universal brotherhood and identity politics; in the apartment, Hammad and other terrorists feel as though they are "becoming total brothers" in "the house of the followers," or what they call *dar-ansar* (*FM* 83).

For many Western intellectuals, 9/11 exposed the imbalances of the global capitalist system from within. The West's dehumanized technoscientific culture, tremendous accumulation of wealth, and explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions are all regarded as factors contributing to the fall of the towers and the globalized system itself. The potential victimization of both the terrorists and their targets by globalization functions to disrupt political Manichaeaism and polarizing distinctions between self and other. In *Terrorist*, Ahmad's disenchantment with American liberal freedom and consumerism corresponds to the desolate lives of his mother, Jack Levy, and Beth Fogel, Jack's obese and agonized wife. A social and political satire of American postmodernity is hence legitimized by Ahmad and other

characters' outrage at American materialism and laxity. Levy, for instance, condemns American drug companies that "have turned doctors into crooks" and denounces American leniency toward race and sex (*T* 304). However, Ahmad unexpectedly and progressively becomes aware that annihilating others is against the will of God, who wills life and "does not want us to desecrate His creation by willing death" (*T* 306). When Levy, Ahmad's Jewish school guidance counselor, joins Ahmad in his final trip toward death in the Lincoln Tunnel, it is Levy who proves more ready to die because of his disgust with the American status quo. Ahmad, by contrast, first ignores and then warmly responds to two little black children in a family car ahead of his explosive-laden truck. He recognizes their gorgeous human beauty and decides to assume full ethical responsibility by rejecting the killing and erasing of the other. As Kristiaan Versluys writes, "He recognizes their irreducible uniqueness and their undeniable appeal as fellow human beings, which no ideology or religion can gainsay. The face of the Other implies the absolute injunction—stranger and stronger than any indoctrination—not to take the Other's life" (180). At the last moment, Ahmad becomes able to reestablish mutual interactive religious and ethnic communication with Jewish Americans and African Americans.

Analogously, in both *Falling Man* and his essay "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September," Don DeLillo compares al-Qaeda to America; both are presented as investing in hypermediatized reality and injecting fuel into violence, both subjective and objective. The two kinds of violence are opposite but complementary; Slavoj Žižek classifies excessive violence as both the objective, "systematic violence that is inherent in the social conditions of global capitalism" and the subjective violence "of newly emerging ethnic and/or religious, in short racist, 'fundamentalisms'" (*Violence* 12). The major malfunction of such structural, global violence results from the abstraction of the future and the elimination of memory. DeLillo writes: "In the past decade the surge of capital markets has dominated discourse and shaped global consciousness. Multinational corporations have come to seem more vital and influential than governments. The dramatic climb of the Dow and the speed of the internet summoned us all to live permanently in the future, in the utopian glow of cyber-capital, because there is no memory there and this is where markets are uncontrolled and investment potential has no limit. All this changed on September 11. Today, again, the world narrative belongs to terrorists." ("Ruins" 34)

In *Falling Man* the two Manhattan towers are simultaneously projected as icons of both global power and vulnerability. Martin asks Nina

rhetorically, "Weren't the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction? You build a thing like that so you can see it come down. What other reason would there be to go so high and then to double it, do it twice?" (*FM* 116). Jean Baudrillard comparatively conceives of the doubling as symbolic of a totalitarian superpower that is inherently and universally vulnerable: "Allergy to any definitive order, to any definitive power, is—happily—universal, and the two towers of the World Trade Center were perfect embodiments, in their very twinness, of that definitive order" (6). All the New Yorkers in *Falling Man* are comparatively delineated as dystopian characters submerged by their bourgeois individualism. According to Linda Kauffman, all the characters "are obsessed with disintegration: psychic, spatial, temporal, national, and marital" (31). The inevitable reproductions of the dehumanizing nature of liberal society are felt mostly in regard to their view of art and love. Traditionally associated with the sublime, art is turned into an object of capital value. Two still lifes by Giorgio Morandi are represented in Martin's conversation with Nina and Lianne in terms of commercial value and art market stagnation. Love, in addition, is equated with mechanical sex. The passion between Keith Neudecker and his alienated wife, Lianne, is utterly weakened, though they are sexually united. Both are ready to sink into their little lives of poker games and Alzheimer patients instead. Marital relations are further debilitated by Keith's adulterous relationship with Florence, a black woman who survived the 9/11 attacks. What keeps Keith and Florence together is their common trauma experience, rather than love; after 9/11 Florence needs "her feelings to register, officially, and needed to say the actual words, if not necessarily to him" (*FM* 91). Although they are psychologically intimate, they are driven apart by a sense of delirium and unreality; Keith thinks that his affair with Florence "was sex, yes, but not romance" (*FM* 166).

The two story lines of New Yorkers and terrorists are kept apart throughout; however, they converge in thematic and structural analogies. The convergence of the two subnarratives is a sort of counternarrative to the binarism of cultural violence and clash between two opposed groups. All three narrative sections dealing with the New Yorkers ironically bear the names of three characters that are associated with the 9/11 acts of terror on all sides, Middle Eastern, European, and American. The first section is titled "Bill Lawton," or "bin Laden," as mispronounced by Justin, the young son of Keith and Lianne. The second section is titled "Ernst Hechinger," which is the original name of Martin Ridnour, Lianne's mother's lover, who was a member of the Kommune One radicals, setting off bombs against the

German state in the late 1960s. In Berlin, he has preserved a famous most wanted poster of the nineteen Baader-Meinhof radicals, which DeLillo juxtaposes with the famous newspaper image of the nineteen September 11 terrorists. Despite the difference in scope and nature between Islamic global radicalism and the urban guerrillas of the Rote Armee Fraktion in Western Germany, they share the same objective of considering the United States their number one enemy.[3] The potential convergence of the two worlds of Islamic fundamentalism and the West is furthermore suggested through the similarities drawn between the jihadists and the German urban guerrillas, as pointed out by Nina Bartos: "He thinks they're all part of the same classical pattern. They have their theorists. They have their visions of world brotherhood" (*FM* 147). Finally, the third section features David Janiak, who is the falling man of the title and the same as the performance artist who appears at various venues across New York in the years after 9/11. The iconic image of the falling man that recurs throughout the novel summons the collective figure of the victims of 9/11 jumping and falling from the towers and links the present trauma to the past. The last narrative section functions to slow down the global narrative spin beyond the 9/11 events and to endorse the fictional and ethical stillness needed for reconstruction of the present. Aesthetic stillness is thematized by the photograph of the suspended state of the falling man and its possible correspondence to "a particular man who was photographed falling from the north tower of the World Trade Center, headfirst, arms at his sides, one leg bent, a man set forever in free fall against the looming background of the column panels in the towers" (*FM* 221). The stillness motif is further denoted through the Morandi paintings that hang in Nina's apartment. For Martin and Lianne, Morandi's *natura morta*, with its dark objects and smoky marks and smudges, is evocative of the towers standing and falling. Marie-Christine Leps observes that "by publicly performing what will not be seen, the falling man in *Falling Man* not only questions but reframes what is recognized as true or inevitable; by remembering and repeating a trauma, it calls for a different form of relation to the other, born of ethical responsibility rather than reason alone" (197–98).

STRANGENESS AND THE SACRED

The West encounters the religious and sacred ethos of oriental cultures as a form of strangeness. Founded on secular rationality and scientific relativism, Western postindustrial society understands the assimilation of the

life-world by religion as a drastic aberration. Adopting the secular-liberal stance of the West, Jürgen Habermas remarks, "What does strike us as alien in other cultures is primarily the distinctive character of the religions at their core. We see their religion as the source of inspiration of the other culture" (157–58). The most profound characteristic of the postmodern worldview has been its putting humankind rather than God at its center. It is this particular feature of both the modern and postmodern worldviews that radical fundamentalists challenge most. In the fictional worlds of *Terrorist* and *Falling Man*, the terrorist is obsessed more with his relation to God and the sacred in general than with anything that is secular. In *Falling Man* Nina comments on this obsession with the sacred: "They invoke God constantly. This is their oldest source, their oldest word" (*FM* 112). The same internal consistency within radical fundamentalist belief lies behind the adoption of the notion of jihad as the divine struggle and violence against the modern West and the choice of other religious groups or sects as their enemies. Bassam Tibi writes, "The emergence of jihadism did not take place outside of the context of Islam's predicament with modernity" (234). The key to comprehending the particular choice of opponent is presented as pertinent to the fundamentalists' selective emphasis on certain parts of the holy book or their intratextuality. Thus, they are necessarily particularists; that is, they believe that there is only one true version of faith, namely, their own.

The sacred is the center of the fundamentalist's universe. However, the relationship between the human and the sacred in both *Terrorist* and *Falling Man* is dialectical rather than monolithic. It is a relationship that is replete with proximity and distance, verification and questioning. Ahmad and Hammad are determinists who kill in the name of God, believing that they were chosen to fulfill the holy task of exterminating the other. Before setting off on his final trip to the Lincoln Tunnel, Ahmad thinks of himself "as God's instrument, cool and hard and definite and thoughtless, as an instrument must be" (*T* 285). In *Falling Man*, Hammad and Mohammed Atta similarly consider the fall of America and the West as divinely preordained and think of themselves and jihadists as merely instrumental. Atta quotes from the Qur'an to consolidate this view: "*Never have we destroyed a nation whose term of life was not ordained beforehand*" (*FM* 173). The struggle against infidels is thus premised on crystal-clear normative principles of purgation and edification. Moreover, jihadists are greatly selective in their reading of the sacred text; they read only "the sword verses of the Koran" (*FM* 83) and seem, for instance, to eschew those of conviviality, tolerance, and dialogue. In *Terrorist* Ahmad believes that jihad is the "struggle to become holy and

closer to God" (*T* 108). He even quotes Sayyid Qutb's concept of *jahiliyya* to justify the jihad ideology and the assassination of enemies, whether they are the domestic exploiters in secular Muslim states or the foreign ones in America and its allies.[4] In Qutb's theoretical framework, the focus of jihad is shifted from a local or national scope to a global one. Thus, the universal parameters of *jahiliyya* are particularly highlighted in Qutb's historical analysis; put simply, *jahiliyya* is explained as "rebellion against God and results in oppression and the exploitation of humanity" at large (Voll 371).

Further, the entire terroristic operation is framed within the ritual of sacrifice and martyrdom. Martyrs are presented as those who voluntarily resign their lives to join God by making "blood flow, their blood and that of others" (*FM* 173). Death and martyrdom thus permeate *Terrorist* and *Falling Man* and haunt all their characters. In the final moments before the suicide bombing or the plane hijacking on 9/11, narrative focalization centers on how Ahmad and Hammad experience a great euphoria in feeling very close to God. While sensing the military-drab metal box as he drives the truck, Ahmad thinks that when he pushes its well with his thumb, "he will join God. God will be less terribly alone. *He will greet you as His son*" (*T* 305). In the same manner, Hammad remembers the little boys who were used as cannon fodder, massacred in the 1986 Iran-Iraq war and thinks, "There was no feeling like this ever in his life. He wore a bomb vest and knew he was a man now, finally, ready to close the distance to God" (*FM* 172). The two novels thus adopt the jihadist's perspective by portraying his or her obsession with death as religiously motivated. The jihadists are represented as keen on committing suicide for the sake of ritually purifying themselves, in a stark challenge to the moral decay of the infidels.

However, the concept of jihad or the relation between the human and the sacred as based on armed struggle is challenged by both *Terrorist* and *Falling Man*. In contrast to the American media, which has demonized the concept of jihad, Updike and DeLillo attempt to deconstruct it by questioning its totality and inscribing an alternative, positive reconstruction. Many contemporary Orientalists, such as Bernard Lewis and Laurent Murawiec, either overassert the military terms of jihad ideology in the Qur'an, the commentaries, and the traditions of the Prophet[5] or spotlight jihad as a cult of violence and power that is basically characterized by bloodlust. Murawiec, for example, explains the fundamentalists' lust for slaying the enemy as an act of human sacrifice and as a source of unalloyed joy: "Death is not an instrumentality—like the death of the enemy on the battlefield—it has become an end in itself" (12). Orientalist interpretations such as this

override the positive connotation of jihad as moral and spiritual striving against one's selfish desires. *Jihad* connotes striving to serve justice, pursue knowledge, aid the less fortunate—in short, to serve God's purpose on earth. It entails rigorous discipline and striving to cleanse oneself of vanity and pettiness.[6] Updike's *Terrorist* contests the popular image of military jihad by subverting the mythologized certainty and barbarity of the jihadists. Cast as a modern relativist instead of an adamant determinist, Ahmad in Updike's novel transmogrifies into an adversary of the radical fundamentalists' belief system that presumably demeans his natural prerogatives: "Something pre-occupied and bossy in Charlie's approach," Ahmad observes on the occa-sion of Charlie praising Ahmad's compelling devotion to jihad, "casts doubt on the absolute nature of *istishhad* and the exalted, dread-filled condition of the *istishhadi*" (*T* 250). Ahmad is fearless enough to question his own faith and that of his sheikh; he wonders whether his own faith is just a sort of an adolescent vanity that might distinguish him from his schoolmates in New Jersey. Ahmad is, moreover, pictured as typically human in his cherishing the contradictory feelings of terror and exaltation before his assumed final, suicidal trip. Little wonder, perhaps, that he expresses pity for those vic-tims of 9/11 who jumped. In the last hours before the assault, he studies the Qur'anic sura that stresses that God willed the transition from nonbeing to being. Surveying the bright lights of Manhattan and reviewing the Qur'anic sura "The Event," Ahmad realizes that God applauds creation and prosper-ity rather than destruction and adversity. "God asks," Ahmad ruminates, "*We created you: will you not credit us? Behold the semen you discharge: did you create it, or We*? God does not want to destroy: it was He who made the world" (*T* 306). In this particular instance Ahmad applies individual critical reasoning to recapture the constructive potential of the sacred text, rewrite religious scriptualism, and hence promote universal thinking that precludes any kind of blind affinity to *al-asala* (authentic tradition) and cultural particularism. With his focus on the open texture of the sacred text, Ahmad addresses the principle of *ijtihad* (free reasoning) to coun-teract the jihadists' particularistic interpretation of the Qur'anic verses. Through this sympathetic depiction, the author insightfully relocates the potential origins of strangeness not in political polemic but in the kind of ethical humanism that attempts to bridge the gap between the human and the sacred in new terms.

    In *Falling Man* Hammad similarly fluctuates between two versions of jihad and the potential link to the sacred. Like Ahmad, Hammad har-bors skepticism toward military jihad. Whereas Hammad tries to feel one

with other jihadists, he is repelled by their gruesome distortion of facts; the result is his feeling that "everything here was twisted, hypocrite, the West corrupt of mind and body, determined to shiver Islam down to bread crumbs for birds" (*FM* 79). He feels sorry for the Iranian boy soldiers who fell dead in war and is appalled by the sardonic remarks of his fellow jihadists: "They stared him down, they talked him down. That was a long time ago and those were only boys, they said, not worth the time it would take to be sorry for a single one" (*FM* 80). In the last days before 9/11, Hammad is resolved to perform the "unwritten" duty of martyrdom, but he persists in interrogating the ultimate validity of killing himself: "But does a man have to kill himself in order to count for something, be someone, find the way?" (*FM* 175) Absolutism is further challenged by the analogous, interrogative skepticism of the New Yorkers. Lianne, for example, understands God's presence as absence; for her, God remains available and active, immanent and omnipresent, but not recognized. She keeps such distance from God to be able to explore her human freedom; she thinks that "she was free to think and doubt and believe simultaneously" (*FM* 65). Lianne also comprehends the close link between theology and domesticity, as her thoughts on faith and God extend beyond the merely religious. A case in point is when she sits in a small, poor parish church meditating on the domestic nature of faith and hope: "But isn't it the world itself that brings you to God? Beauty, grief, terror, the empty desert, the Bach cantatas" (*FM* 234). Both Hammad and Lianne thus enjoy a closer affinity with the sacred, as they believe in the unavoidable Sacred Presence of God and yet are aware to a certain extent of their particular human relativism. The alternative to absolutist religious and cultural relativism, demonstrated in an overemphasis on "the return of the sacred,"[7] "political Islam," and identity politics, is thus presented in the form of the depoliticization of religion and the reconstruction of rationalist, reflexive relativism. Habermas observes that "modern faith becomes reflexive. For it can only stabilize itself through self-critical awareness of the status it assumes within a universe of discourse restricted by secular knowledge and shared with other religions" (152).

STRANGENESS AND THE FEMININE

In accordance with the popular view that Islam is illiberal, misogynistic, and violent, the relation between terrorists and the feminine world is represented as ambivalent in both *Terrorist* and *Falling Man*. In the two

works, women represent the threat of distraction for the jihadist from his holy mission of jihad, and references to women in terms of contamination or distraction abound in all sections of the book. Mohammed Atta is pictured in public discourse as being repelled by the feminine; he is reported to have done the following: walked out of the room as a teenager when belly dancing was shown on television, been offended by his landlady's bare arms in Hamburg, asked for a nude by Degas to be taken off the wall of his student lodgings, withdrawn from help with his thesis because it involved close physical contact with his female helper, and refused to shake hands with the female examiner of his thesis.[8] However, the female characters in *Terrorist* and *Falling Man* are also portrayed as agents of edification and naturalization.

In *Terrorist* American girls are generally described through Ahmad's perspective as devils. Ahmad assures Jack Levy in his interview that even his mother cannot escape such moral condemnation; for him, she is "trashy and immoral" and the only reason his father married her was for his father to gain American citizenship (*T* 35). Patriarchal dominance, in contrast to female degradation, is thus spotlighted; according to Ahmad's fundamentalist codes, the mosque is a domain of men, whereas the church is a site of feminine domination. The will to mythologize women in terms of feminine otherness arises, according to the text, from an arguably perverse insistence on their contaminating impact on men. Ahmad quotes the Qur'an to endorse the fundamentalist's view of female physical uncleanness. For him, the Qur'an "talked of uncleanness but only in regard to women, their menstruation, their suckling of infants" (*T* 156). Although Ahmad is apparently repulsed by sexual attraction, he is fascinated, albeit in an inert manner, by Joryleen Grant, an African American classmate. He is hence partly pleased that she notices and likes him. Updike's realist portrayal of the accord between an Arab American young man and an African American young woman addresses and subverts the polarized racial discourse of American literature and culture. "Inside a racial unconscious," Jay Prosser writes, "Updike has replicated otherness but also fictionalized solidarity. His works show the divide but also create surprising, generative encounters" (76). Ahmad hates the songs Joryleen sings of Jesus and sexual longing in assembly programs, but he accepts her invitation to hear her sing in the choir of her African American church. Contrary to his expectations, he is impressed by the "kafir friendliness" (*T* 51) of the little black pigtailed girls beside him and is excited along with the rest of the congregation by the preacher's story about Moses and Aaron. The encounter

with Joryleen in the church marks the beginning of Ahmad's growing attachment to the other. The second time Ahmad meets Joryleen, he is struck by the fact that she became a sex worker to please her boyfriend and bring him money. He treats her with tolerance and reminds her of the occasion when he saw her dressed decently, in choir robes. Ahmad nominates Joryleen to receive a sum of money as compensation for his final sacrifice to help her free herself from white men who manipulate her sexuality. He even has esteem for her as "the only bride he will enjoy on Earth" (*T* 238). Ahmad's relationship with Joryleen unfolds along the development he achieves in his self-education and the reconsideration he has of gender roles and relations. Thus, the transformation of the jihadist's image of the feminine destabilizes the dialectic between masculine and feminine and the religious and the secular.

Similarly, in *Falling Man* Hammad is emotionally engaged with a woman called Leyla whose ethnicity is German, Syrian, and Turkish. He wants to marry her and have babies. He is attracted to her, for she is curious about his studies and friends. Mohammed Atta, however, rebukes Hammad for allowing this intimate relation with the feminine to drag him away from solidarity with his fellow jihadists. The demands of self-consciousness take precedence over self-forgetfulness, and guilt forms an indispensable component of the protagonist. Hammad knows that he "had to fight against the need to be normal. He had to struggle against himself, first, and then against the injustice that haunted their lives" (*FM* 83). For Hammad, the world at large, including Leyla, is dismissed as irrelevant, because he knows, with regret, that "soon she would begin to exist as an unreliable memory, then finally not at all" (*FM* 83). Both Updike and DeLillo expose the jihadist's love myth, then, as doomed to disappoint, yet the several occasions of conviviality and understanding between the jihadist and female characters testify also to the incontrovertible excitement of the imperfect encounter.

CONCLUSION

Like Lianne, both Updike and DeLillo feel "all the bitter truth that stereotypes contain" (*FM* 185), especially in regard to Arab jihadists. The terrorists' goal is thus presented as, not to replace the ideology of the West with one more firmly rooted in the universal ethics of human rights and liberty, but to substitute one totalitarian and dehumanizing system

for another. Unlike cultural-relativist postmodernists or radical Islamists, Updike and DeLillo hold a balanced view that acknowledges the twin evils of Islamophobia and anti-Westernism. On the one hand, in the two novels the models of Huntington's "clash of civilizations" and Qutb's *jahiliyya* are rebuffed as instigating intercivilizational conflict. On the other hand, Updike focuses on the rich alternative of multiculturalism in post-9/11 American society, whereas DeLillo spotlights the significance of an ethical universalism that acknowledges pluralism and diversity in a global context. In DeLillo's work, terrorism is projected as particularly "the most absolute *conditio inhumana*" (Agamben 50–51) rather than as basically Islamic or Western. In *Terrorist* and *Falling Man*, modernity is both threat and fascination for the jihadist. Western modernity and globalization are generally condemned for their naïveté, consumerist culture, and abrogation of the traditional beliefs of society, and they are simultaneously reconciled to the jihadist's obsession with technology and the technoeconomic power of the media. Both texts attempt to rewrite the conceptualization of the sacred as a universal category of belief, that is, as the essential condition of the possibility of religious feeling and value and thus a meaningful experience in itself, regardless of the jihadists' individual interpretations.

The configuration of the jihadists' ambivalence toward the modern, the sacred, and the feminine in the texts seeks to exploit and undercut the public discourse negative constructions of Islam and jihad. Both Ahmad and Hammad are portrayed as evoking fellow feelings, for they are denied the possibility of normal life. The final intimate encounter between the victim and the victimizer in *Terrorist* and the convergence of the world of New Yorkers and that of terrorists in *Falling Man* vividly bring this home. Encounters with strangeness are rewritten to enact the potential reconstruction of the impaired relation between the self and the other.

NOTES

 1. Among the many novels are Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). See Eaglestone 361–69.

2. See, for example, the statement of the Yemeni radical cleric Abdul Majid al-Zindani that "an Islamic state is coming," referred to in the headlines of the *New York Times*, March 2, 2011.

3. See Taheri 13.

4. *Jahiliyya* is a classical Islamic term for the period of paganism that prevailed in Arabia before Islam. The concept of *jahiliyya* is demonized in Western media discourse as one of the basic foundations of radical Islamists who reject any dealings or intellectual openness with the West. See Lewis 79–80.

5. See Lewis 29–46.

6. See Abou El Fadl 220–21.

7. See Tibi 238.

8. *Observer*, September 23, 2001.

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