

Matthias Dickert

9/11 and the Muslim presentation as the
"Other" in American and Canadian Fiction

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9/11 and the Muslim presentation as the *Other* in
American and Canadian Fiction

Matthias Dickert 2017

This book is in memory of all victims of the terror attacks of 9/11. It is, however, in special memory of N. Janis Lasen (who died on American Airline Flight) and Joseph Gerard Leavey, Paul Lisson, Chet Louie, John Peter Lozowsky and Daniel Lugo who all found their deaths in the World Trade Center. You will be remembered like all other victims of that day. My thoughts are with them and the ones they left behind. They are my age and showed me how precious life is and how lucky I have been in all my life.

This text is also in memory of the terrorists who killed thousands on that day while being misled by a false kind of Islam.

May Allah show mercy on their lost souls, too!

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Abstract

It has now been sixteen years when America and the world were hit by a terror attack of a new and unknown quality. The Muslim terrorists belonging to Bin Laden's terror network Al-Quaeda who hijacked several planes to use them as lethal weapons against America and her symbolic role as the country of freedom and democracy started a new era of political, social and religious uproar and chaos inexperienced so far.

This chaos expressed itself not only in the Gulf Wars that were to follow or the ongoing wars in Lybia, Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan and the migration waves to Europe as a result from all this it also paved the way for a literary embodiment of 9/11 which has found a fixed place within migrant writing in the widest sense and Muslim writing in particular as well as in new types of novels, the 9/11 novel, the post-9/11 novel and Ground Zero Fiction.

The fact that writers from East (and West) incorporated this key date into their novels threw light on the fact that 9/11 did not only function as a global, national, religious, collective or individual trauma it also showed its widespread application for plot, character constellations, speech and reception. This introduction and employment of 9/11 into contemporary English speaking literature thus slowly but steadily proved its ongoing importance for contemporary writing.

In 2007 the newspaper *USA Today* declared on a headline that 'Novels about 9/11 can't stack up to non-fiction' thus throwing light at the multiple use of it as a narrative element. In 2015 an editor for *The New York Times Book Review* suited that the necessity for a 9/11 novel goes on because it reflects 'a new age of terror'.

The fact that 9/11 by now has become a widely used element of Muslim writing shows that it is this group of contemporary novelists who are aware of its manifold use for fiction.

Literature is, however, always a reflection of social, political and religious conditions and it is exactly this link which is of special interest here.

The last 30 years have not only brought tremendous changes in the world originating from many reasons which have found one of their realizations in English speaking literature part of which are American and Canadian literature. This also goes for the keywords of this book which lie in the terms 'Other' and 'Otherness'.

From the political, economical, cultural and literary point of view America has first witnessed the disintegration of its sinister 'Other' the Soviet Union and the downfall of Communism as such. The collapse of Communism was soon followed by the triumph of global capitalism which brought about globalization and a re-emergence of religious fundamentalism.¹

The terror attacks of September 11, 2001 did not only change the world they also changed the whole concept of the American way of life be it in America or the Western world. Since 9/11 the United States of America have been haunted with fear, a fear of its own possible impotence and decline (be they political, military, economical, religious or cultural).

It was suddenly other words such as coke, Ford or the concept of the American Dream that were attached to what it means to be American. Now terms such as 9/11 itself, crusade, 'This war on Islam', Al-Quaeda, Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay represented what America stood for.

It is against this political background that novelists had the task to write their books and the new types of novels in relation to the terror attacks of 2001 also have to be seen against this development.

9/11 novels, post-9/11 novels and Ground Zero Fiction which have a literary closeness of this day suddenly picked up the former colonial concepts of 'Other' and 'Otherness' or 'Center and Periphery' and set them in a context of a shifting, multicultural American population with the task to suddenly re-imagine this 'Other', a task which has hardly been dealt with and if so only on the surface. To do so is a difficult task since this has to be done from a Western perspective and in the light that this 'Other' here is attached to Islam or Muslims.

The literary presentation of the 'Other' as a Muslim remains a painful step since it also has to examine the ways in which knowledge is manipulated by dominant Western and Muslim discourses but it helps to bring in new energy into the postcolonial discourse being shaped by critics such as Said, Spivak or Foucault.

Thus fiction related to 9/11 must not only stay on the level of shock or individual or collective trauma it can also be seen as a starting point for new cultural and critical

¹ The term fundamentalism must not (strictly speaking) be only attached to the religious. It basically describes a cultural and religious uprootedness which goes astray from an established religion. It has often a close connection to apocalyptic elements or influences which explains its central intention to destroy or kill all enemies.

debates how to deal and write about the terror attacks of that day and how to see the Muslim as the 'Other' in a more objective light.

How this can be done will be one central part of this book which starts with a general remark of Muslim writing before and after 9/11 and a short reflection of different types of novels dealing with it.

A next step lies in the task to critically reflect the presentation of Muslims in 9/11 fiction in the USA and Canada. This will be followed by an analysis of parameters typical for Muslim existence. A closer analysis will then be followed by three novels dealing with matters of 'Otherness', *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), *Cockroach* (2008) and *Atta* (2011). The final step then will be to give an outlook of the matter discussed here.

The choice of the three novels analyzed here followed one basic principle namely that all selected authors are male and dispose of a different cultural and religious background with Islam as the common glue.

Rawi Hage's family originates in Lebanon and belongs to a Christian minority which throws a specific light on Islamic *otherness*.² This *otherness* is completely different in Jarett Kobek's novel *Atta* since Kobek (whose family is Turkish / American) focuses on the presentation of a radical fundamentalist turning into a terrorist and murderer in the name of Islam.

The only author of a - let me call it authentic- Islamic background is Mohsin Hamid who originates in Pakistan.

Despite these various backgrounds all three approaches help to throw a different light on Muslims as the others and therefore help to understand the literary presentation of Muslims in contemporary English speaking literature which ranges from immigrant, scapegoat, fundamentalist to terrorist.

There are, of course, manifold other approaches to present Muslim *otherness* in the West. Some of the most important examples are John Udiwe's *Terrorist* (2006), Niroz

² It is important to point out that Rawi Hage strictly speaking is not a Muslim. He in fact belongs to the Christian minority in Lebanon. The author of this essay does, however, include *Cockroach* as a novel because it describes Muslim existence in the West. Basically speaking the autobiography is an attempt to explore the past of a person or character through the re- construction of mental images preserved in memory. It is therefore a way to discuss identity matters in the form of a quest how a person is. The diasporic background of Canada for writers of ethnic or religious minorities thus is the perfect background to do so. In an interview with Forget / Freure (2014) Hage states that this is typical for minority writers. Hage here says that he thinks that 'there is this whole' seek the autobiographical 'attitude, at the expense of work. But that is almost a given when it comes to this group of writers'.

Malek's *Der Spaziergänger von Aleppo* (2015) which originated in French with the title *Le Promeneur d'Alep*, Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission* (2015) or Amy Waldman's novel *The Submission* (2011).

The balance between male and female novelists dealing with Muslim *otherness* at the moment still seems to be in the hands of male authors but the increasing number of female authors working in this field shows the importance of this matter for all types of writer.

Other books dealing with the Muslim other are Martin Amis' novel *The Last Days of Mohammad Atta* (2006) later collected in the hodgepodge *The Second Plane*. This novel has a completely different ending to Kobek's novel since the character of Atta in the end here knows that he has done something wrong and he also suffers the burden of living. In the end he dies of great grief. Two more books to mention are Don DeLillo's figure of Hammad in *Falling Man* (2007), or Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008).