Ain Shams University

Reconstructing the Post-9/11 American War Narrative in Anthony Lappé's *Shooting War* (2007), Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012), and Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012)

A PhD Dissertation

by:

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Abstract

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The unexpected destruction of the World Trade Center twin towers has taken the world by surprise and assumed an air of unreality. It is not only the unpredictability of the attacks that has made them seem unreal, but also their ability to shatter long established myths such as American exceptionalism and the untouchable state. Also, for Americans, the attacks have brought the media-driven narrative of terror to their own homeland. By virtue of those shock effects, the media have immediately risen up to compensate for the unrepresentable absence of reality following the attacks which have acquired a mystical aura of importance and reverence unquestionably allowing all sorts of narratives to be built around them. Hence, 9/11 has resulted in greying the area between the private memory and the public history, the virtual and the real, the trope and the image, the symbolic and the literal.

Moreover, since 9/11 was closely related to all forms of art – film, music, literature… etc. – most artistic representations have become an extremely useful, yet challenging, political tool stressing the sense of loss and grief while subtly harnessing the public opinion towards a violent retaliation which finally paved the way for the notorious War on Terror. This explains why most 9/11 fiction has been criticized for its failure to adequately respond to the literary and ethical demands of the era and to address the events as a contextualized whole, not as traumatizing disintegrated parts,

in addition to being emotional in nature, drowning in self-lamentation, and sentimentally retreating inward.

The present dissertation tackles war fiction produced after 9/11, which is widely mistaken as a continuation of 9/11 fiction, and how it may represent a break from the narratives employed by the literature written in the wake of the event. The principal objective of the dissertation is to examine this break and its thematic and stylistic manifestations in American post-9/11 literature through its approach to three of the most important aspects related to any crisis discourse in general and the war discourse in particular. First, the dissertation reformulates the role memory plays in constructing personal and public histories in recent times of crisis. Second, it proposes a new understanding of the trauma narrative as opposed to the propagated notions of this widespread cultural and psychological phenomenon. Third, it questions the traditional hegemonic narratives of Empire and how they can be used as a tool of self-criticism.

In order to properly engage with those aspects and concerns and to reach a plausibly valid conclusion, the dissertation analyzes three American literary works of art written during or directly after the War on Terror. Despite sharing the same subject matter, the three works in question – Anthony Lappe's and Dan Goldman's graphic novel *Shooting War* (2007), Ben Fountain's satirical novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012), and Kevin Powers' semi-autobiographical novel *The Yellow Birds* (2012) – have been chosen carefully to cover diverse ideologies and represent a wide range of stylistic differences.

Keywords: post-9/11 fiction – war narrative – war on terror – history – memory – trauma – empire

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Introduction:
In the Ruins

Seventeen years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks the world is still reeling under an unstoppable wave of political and religious extremism proving that 9/11 has fundamentally shaped the first few years of the twenty first century and will continue to shape many years ahead. Arguably, 9/11 may not be directly responsible for the rise of conservative right-wing politics in the United States (and recently in Europe), but it still haunts the present as the undeniable rupture between the twentieth and the twenty first centuries. The spectral presence of the World Trade Center attack and its detrimental chain-reaction repercussions have led to an internationally far-flung tenet of protectionism seeping into the collective thinking of the dominant political parties and the unpoliticized masses alike.

9/11 was enormous in every possible sense and on every possible level. However, this enormity should never be mistaken for decontextualized singularity. The terrorist attacks might have been too grand to grasp, but they are not, in any way, "an experience outside of culture" as author and essayist William Gibson describes them (137). Perceiving 9/11 as an incomprehensible monstrosity takes causality out of the equation and entirely divorces the event from its temporal and spatial connections. The void that the twin towers left behind, thus, becomes inexplicable, undismissible and unrepresentable. Slavoj Žižek in his book *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002) warns of a wrongful appropriation of the event, which will eventually obstruct the process of political and personal healing. He maintains that "[t]he worst thing to do apropos of the events of September 11 is to elevate them to a point of Absolute Evil, a vacuum which cannot be explained and/or dialecticized" (136). Not only does Žižek refer to a faulty perception leading to unfavorable consequences, he also contemplates the philosophical paradox

which 9/11 has given rise to: Although the trademark of our current era is ardent rejection of absolutism, 9/11 for some reason has been unquestionably regarded as the "Absolute Evil." Why then?

The terrorist attacks on September 11 brought about the tragic deaths of approximately three thousand innocent victims in the World Trade Center, its surrounding area, and the Pentagon. Despite the staggering number, this does not account for the unrepresentability of the event given that other modern history atrocities had taken the lives of greater numbers of victims, to mention a few: the Nazi concentration camps, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Sabra and Shatila massacre. This is by no means an attempt to devalue the lives lost in the 9/11 attacks; all life per se is precious. The point here is to undermine claims using death toll to elucidate the placement of the events outside history.

When the terrorists attacked the WTC twin towers using hijacked American aircrafts, the incalculable human and material losses were not the only intended harm. Unlike most acts of war that aim at destroying the enemy's logistical and human supply to undermine its power, terrorist acts are highly symbolic in nature; the target is not to strip the enemy of its physical power but to accentuate the vulnerability that lies at the core of that assumed power. The actual target of 9/11 was not the buildings of the WTC, but what they stood for: the pinnacle of a globalized world controlled by military capitalism and neoliberal politics. The two towers were standing tall, untouchable, undefiable – a true representation of American exceptionalism. The two planes crashed into the towers and brought them to the ground but failed to destroy the myth which had found a way out from underneath the rubble. What 9/11 did was that it shifted the weight of American

exceptionalism from politico-economic domination to exclusive large-scale self-lamentation that lent itself to undisputed political polarization and forced alignment. Instead of being the only nation that is truly free, the US has also become the only nation that has truly suffered.

Turning inward may seem like a natural reaction to such aggressive attacks, and Americans' turn to aggrandizement of suffering is "to compensate for the enormous narcissistic wound opened by the public display of their physical vulnerability" (Guisan 566). 9/11 presented the US with an unprecedented dilemma: how can a state assert its weakness and power both at the same time? America needed to affirm its weakness and vulnerability to garner the world's sympathetic sentiments and, consequently, its political and/or military support while upholding its position as an intimidating righteous superpower that stands at the other end of the spectrum from evil. Such a contradictory display of absolute weakness/strength requires a great deal of aggravated polarization and premeditated decontextualization.

Hence, the need to absolutize the evil of the attacks was non-negotiable. Naturally, when there is an absolute evil, there must be an absolute good which the United States has de facto taken up the responsibility to represent and defend forcing upon the world a 'you are either with us or against us' doctrine. The then US president George W. Bush in his address to the Congress on September 20, 2001 roughly used the same words: "Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." With this tyrannically exclusive 'We versus Terrorists' dichotomy, a neutral, distant understanding of the situation was made practically impossible. Žižek reveals the blatant hypocrisy and the emotional blackmail of that forced

dichotomy by conducting a mental experiment in which he compares the world's response to a seven-year-old American girl proudly accepting her father's death who was fighting for freedom in Afghanistan (an actual incident in which Bush read the girl's letter in one of his speeches to stress the spirit of American patriotism) with the world's response to a hypothetical Muslim girl of the same age who could have said the same things about her Afghani father (*Welcome* 43). The comparison abolishes any hint of innocence underlying the post-9/11 calls for reclaiming American patriotism and nationalist pride.

After 9/11, the US deliberately failed to recognize the space between and around the two poles it created because it is a lot more convenient to essentialize the enemy as the symbol of absolute evil than to try to make sense of one's role in the conflict. Noam Chomsky believes that Americans are comfortable with thinking that the evil enemy is always motivated by an intrinsic hatred of the West. Any attempt to understand this so-called hatred is redeemed irrelevant because it might pose questions about the origins of the terrorist groups and the imperialistic practices that lead to bitterness and desperation (77-78). The discourse of absolute evil intrinsically leaves no room for ambivalence nor in-betweenness because one step closer to the enemy means one step farther from one's self-constructed idealistic image, i.e. in order for the US to tolerate the idea that its enemy is not that 'evil,' it will instantaneously have to deal with the fact that the US itself is not that 'good.'

This explains why the media's early responses to the attacks worked in two directions simultaneously: promoting a limited, self-contained version of the events and harping on an exaggerated sense of victimhood. The media-propagated 9/11 'story' extended

only vertically within the enclosed boarders of the American nation (ironically to substitute for the recently missing vertical edifices maybe?). Reporting on 9/11 was to always provide the masses with new information that lacked outward insight but only increased in emotional intensity, and the scale kept on going up to the point of national hysteria engulfed in narratives of patriotism and homeland security. A 2005 study reveals how the media headlines in the aftermath of 9/11 escalated quickly from "Attack on New York" to "Attack on America." However, this is understandable since the WTC in New York was not the only site that the terrorists targeted. The vertical surge clearly manifested itself in the use of discursive terminology to describe the terrorist act that was initially referred to as "a murderous act" then "an evil act" then "a barbaric act" then "acts of terror" to finally become "acts of war" (Montgomery 156). The whole country was driven into a fervent state of war hysteria when all television networks adopted the "War on America" slogan. Normally, nations do not slide into a state of war that easily, but provided that the criminal nature of the assaults could not be identified or explained, it did not take long until the terrorist attacks turned into acts of war.

Not only did the media-instigated war hysteria pave the way for unjustifiable military actions to be carried out in Afghanistan and Iraq but also served a simplified distracting narrative to hide the government's willing failure to provide a rationally coherent account of the attacks. The media's insistence on the event and its atrocious nature precluded any kind of horizontal understanding and hindered its integration into a wider political and cultural context, leading to a moment of historical stagnation.

Politics of victimization has to work hand in hand with any emotionally escalating patriotic discourse to undermine the role of

individual agency and allow a more powerful authority (the US government) to take control and avenge the helpless wounded masses. Alexander Dunst writes: “Instead of constructing its own political power, the subject of injury invests its agency in existing authority. As a consequence, this subject becomes dependent on a history of suffering it adopts as its identity” (3). In order for the US government to wage a mindless war against terrorism while being supported by American citizens, it had to limit those citizens to their role as victims by disconnecting them from the world outside their nation. This was achieved through trapping them in an exceptional ahistorical moment of suffering where the object of blame always lies without the boundaries of the victims’ identity. Investing in victimization as political identity is an ideological, geo-historical process because it “always depends on this short-circuit: the divorce of one’s own injury from the injury suffered by others; the severance of a violent event from its historical context” (3). This does not mean that identifying oneself as a victim is an externally imposed doctrine; it is a two-way process that needs both inner individual agency and outside forces to keep it in effect for the longest time possible.

In the aftermath of any catastrophic event that inflicts a sense of danger and interrupts one’s course of life, human beings tend to resort to a state of psychological inertia where there is a promise that their personal happiness and integrity could still be maintained. In other words, victimhood offers human beings the luxury to comfortably deny their active agency in an undesirable event. After 9/11, most Americans preferred to indulge in the self-contained state narrative rather than sacrifice their self-righteousness by zooming out on the bigger politico-historical context. In his Theodor Adorno Award acceptance speech on September 22, 2001, Jacques Derrida asserts: “My unconditional compassion, addressed