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Post-9/11 Rhetoric and The Split of Safety in Amy Waldman's *The Submission*

*For memory is not only a renegotiation
between past and present, it is also an
ongoing negotiation among all the groups
of people whose lives were affected.*

(James Young, "The Stages of Memory at Ground Zero")

"Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists."

A couple of days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush addressed the nation at a Joint Session of Congress and the American People and, on this occasion, he elaborated on the historical and political significance of 9/11 as a national tragedy, thus officially inaugurating his post-9/11 discourse. In this speech, Bush introduced a number of concepts that would become hallmarks of the post-9/11 rhetoric he indulged in and re-enforced in the following months and years. By employing terms belonging to the same semantic domain but revealing different shades of meaning, such as "American," "citizen" and "patriot," Bush outlined an ideal spectrum of social and political identity; "American" may be considered an adjective that could loosely refer both to people and things, while "citizen" and "patriot" have a more precise connotation: though close, the former defines the legal status of a subject, while the latter hints at a subject's convinced loyalty to and support of his or her country. Each term refers to a degree of inclusion in the post-9/11 US national identity, attributed to an individual.

This essay intends to investigate the significance of these terms in the post-9/11 socio-political discourse. In particular, I will assume Bush's rhetoric as the political genesis of the subsequent, ideological construction of 9/11 that would eventually go mainstream and turn into a cultural presupposition,¹ and I will subsequently focus my attention on the post-9/11 positionality of Americans, citizens and patriots across a wide social spectrum, spanning from the inclusion within the formula of "our people" to the exclusion from it. I argue that Amy Waldman's 2011 novel *The Submission* justifiably questions the downright discrimination between the three groups that has increased in the aftermath of September 11, by depicting a fictional backdrop against which US social cohesion – nominally encouraged but, in fact, undermined by the post-9/11 rhetoric of "us vs. them" and "the media hype, and the subsequent media patriotism" (Jameson 55) – is torn apart, leading to a split in the comprehension of the notion of safety itself.

The argumentative structure of the speech Bush delivered on 20 September 2001 relies on the repetition of the phrase: "Americans are asking," followed by a question, such as: "Americans are asking: 'Why do they hate us?'" or "Americans are asking: 'What is expected of us?'" Addressing the latter issue, Bush shifts his focus from "Americans" to "citizens":

I ask you to live your lives and hug your children. I know many citizens have fears tonight, and I ask you to be calm and resolute, even in the face of a continuing threat.

I ask you to uphold the values of America and remember why so many have come here. (Bush n. pag.)

In his speech, Bush seems to equate "Americans" and "citizens," thus circumscribing the identity of his addressees on the basis of their legal status and, as a consequence, potentially excluding undocumented immigrants living in the US from his understanding of "our nation [...], our people and our future" (Bush n. pag.). This statement seems to be especially problematic when applied to US demographics; according to the Migration Policy Institute, approximately 11.3 million unauthorized immigrants live in the United States (as of November 2018): of them,

sixty-two percent had lived in the country for at least ten years, and as many as twenty-one percent for twenty years or more (Gelatt and Zong 3). About eight million form part of the labor force, accounting for about five percent of all American workers, as a Pew Research Center report has shown (see Krogstad, Passel and Cohn), and thus contribute economically to American society by paying taxes (see Yee, Davis and Patel).

Unauthorized immigration has always been a source of political debate over issues such as legal status and social benefits and in August 2001 (only a couple of weeks before Bush's address) the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act was introduced in the Senate as a prospective solution to finally come to terms with the problem and provide a legal path to permanent residency. In 2011, this socio-political and economic issue made the headlines when Jose Antonio Vargas, a *New York Times* journalist, wrote an essay in *The New York Times Magazine* revealing himself to be an undocumented American, a status that he later defined in these terms: "I'm an American, I just don't have the right papers" (Berenstein Rojas n. pag.).² The peculiar condition of self-identifying as American but lacking the legal qualification for being an American citizen has since been explicitly addressed by Vargas, who founded Define American, a non-profit organization aiming at helping to "humanize the conversation around immigrants, citizenship and identity" (*Define American* n. pag.).

In the light of the political urgency of the issue of undocumented immigration, Bush's controversial equation Americans=citizens raises important questions, for example when he refers to "defensive measures against terrorism to protect Americans" (Bush n. pag.). Who does he consider worthy of protection? Who are the Americans he is speaking to? Who is he including and excluding when he employs the deictic "us"? Indeed, for the pronoun "us" to be relevant there must be a "them" to counterbalance it, and the antagonism between these two potentially all-encompassing and vague terms seems to ground and define the "War on Terror" and its oratorical translation in Bush's speeches. Terrorists are the most obvious referral to "them"; however, the deictic nature of the pronouns "us" and "them" in themselves does not allow for a more extensive and

unstable sense: “us” is also counterposed by those who do not share the same position or condition (be it social or political).

As the address unfolds, in one of the most climatic moments Bush announces the creation of the Office of Homeland Security: “And tonight, I also announce a distinguished American to lead this effort, to strengthen American security; a military veteran, an effective governor, a true patriot, a trusted friend, Pennsylvania’s Tom Ridge” (Bush n. pag.). The head of the Office of Homeland Security is not only an American, but also a “distinguished” one as a “true patriot,” a subject whose authority and fitness for the position are related to his absolute devotion to the national cause. Significantly, the Act of the US Congress that was passed on 26 October 2001 in order to strengthen US national security, the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001, became infamous under the acronym “PATRIOT Act.” In other words, being American (no matter the comprehension of the term, be it strictly referred to citizens or more broadly to the population who has been living in the US without papers but taking an active part in society) is not sufficient to be taken in charge of homeland security; it takes a more biased adhesion to the national cause that determines yet another split between those who are “true patriots,” i.e. “us,” and those who are not, i.e. “them,” and should be henceforth considered as threats to national safety. Although “Enhancing Domestic Security against Terrorism” is the first point of the Patriot Act, this very notion is at stake when policies alienating a part of the American people are enforced, thus transposing security itself into its opposite. In the light of the official narrative of the War on Terror as “us vs. them” and its policies, what does President Bush mean when he states: “either you are with us or you are with the terrorists”? (Bush n. pag.). What does being “with us” as opposed to being “with the terrorists” imply?

The split of safety

The discourse that allows “one to *comprehend* and to explain precisely something like ‘September 11’” is, according to Jacques Derrida,

“legitimated by the prevailing system (a combination of public opinion, the media, the rhetoric of politicians and the presumed authority of all those who, through various mechanisms, speak or are allowed to speak in the public sphere)” (Derrida 93). In the aftermath of 9/11, those who are allowed to speak adopt and reiterate the logic of the (un)securitization politics³ to the extent that the adversative voices are restrained and dismissed as un-patriotic, in a political and cultural environment that calls for “a transcendent ethical perspective” (Rothstein, “Defining Evil” n. pag.). The frictions intrinsic to the post-9/11 grand narrative of “us vs. them” lie at the core of Waldman’s 9/11 novel and engender from it a profound reflection on the notion of safety in a time when, in order to warrant public assent for national security measures, dissenting individuals or, more generally, those who do not belong in the official narrative are defined as outsiders: people who, being out of the standardized representation, are also excluded from the construct of safety that it legitimates. “Us” is hence fractured into “Americans” who are neither “citizens” nor “patriots” – those who do not benefit from citizenship rights, be it because they have always been undocumented aliens, or because they have been stripped of their citizenship privileges in the wake of the Patriot Act.

As a result, some Americans will eventually be alienated from the “us” group, becoming part of “them.” While during his address to the nation on 20 September 2001 Bush proclaimed that no one “should be singled out for unfair treatment or unkind words because of their ethnic background or religious faith,” in 2003 he issued a federal ban on racial profiling containing some exceptions: “The racial profiling guidance, therefore, recognizes that race and ethnicity may be used in terrorist identification, but only to the extent permitted by the nation’s laws and the Constitution” (US Department of Justice n. pag.). This schizophrenic perspective on racial and ethnic profiling serves as a paradigm for the alienation of a number of citizens, considered by policy makers and enforcers as “exceptions.”

The split in the notion of safety portrayed in *The Submission* is a chasm that is already present in the auto-antonymic nature of the adjective “safe” that, according to the *Oxford Living Dictionary*, means on the one hand “[p]rotected from or not exposed to danger or risk; not likely to be harmed or lost,”⁴ and, on the other, “[n]ot likely to cause or lead to harm or injury;

not involving danger or risk.” The novel, set in New York, portrays the fictional controversy ignited by the accidental selection of a Muslim American architect in the anonymous competition for the design of the 9/11 Memorial – a plot device that serves as the indicator of public sentiment on matters such as national security, civil rights and racial profiling in the wake of 9/11. Within this framework, the dynamics of inclusion in and exclusion from “safety” shape the existence of the characters who become outsiders every time they try to state their individuality as opposed to the identity they are assigned by the normative discourse. The narrative unfolds as the dispute over this unexpected and thorny selection becomes more and more intense and violent, eventually leading to the project being thrown out.

Waldman’s novel implies that post-9/11 America, in order to become safe in the first, passive sense of not being in danger, has renounced to be safe in the second, active sense of not being dangerous, by means of targeting and denying some civil liberties not only to racially and ethnically profiled subjects (i.e. Muslim and Arab Americans), but also to the counter-voices which dispute its grand narrative. In other words, those who have been discriminated in the name of “safety” have come to live in a secluded, unsafe state parallel to the securitized one. This oxymoronic condition is depicted in *The Submission* as a continuum whose ends are the *safety of inclusion* of those who conform to the national rhetoric, and the *safety of exclusion* of those who, borrowing John Fiske’s words, “have been othered into ‘abnormal’” by norms that exercise the power to “define what is in or out of place” (Fiske 81).

The multi-perspective narrative adopted by Waldman allows for the depiction of different positions on the safety continuum, and I will dwell on the three main characters whose actions exemplify the abortive attempts to establish a counter-narrative to the official one. Each of these counter-narratives⁵ will be eventually silenced by “the dominant power” seeking cultural uniformity and political consent – a mechanism that spurs the reader to reason on what, in a securitized nation, is the role of remembrance, of art, and of civil resistance. These three protagonists are all Americans, in the sense that they all participate in American society (they all live in New York, even though one of them is undocumented); however, failing to

behave as “patriots” and resisting the dicta of post-9/11 rhetoric, they get degraded from citizens to aliens, from human beings to live threats.

The first character, Claire Burwell, the wealthy widow of a broker who died in the 9/11 attacks, voices the *counter-narrative of remembrance*. She is a member of the jury appointed to select the design for the 9/11 memorial, and at the beginning she supports the Muslim architect's project, thus upholding her belief that remembrance cannot be a political battlefield. This stand will cause her temporary estrangement from inclusive safety and will expose her to concrete dangers until her eventual dismissal of the memorial design she previously backed. In this way she returns, as in the parable of the lost sheep, into the realm of safety.

Placed further down on the safety continuum, and thus closer to the safety of exclusion, is Mohammad “Mo” Khan, the Muslim American architect whose project, simply named “The Garden,” is selected for the memorial. His is the *counter-narrative of art* that rejects clear-cut definitions, assertive interpretations and rhetorical appropriations. When urged to discuss his memorial design in order to dispel lingering doubts and opposition, he refuses to do so because, as an artist, he believes that he cannot clarify his intentions and give grounding for the most politically appropriate reading of his work. His refusal of any arbitrary view on himself or his art prevents him from playing a definite part in the totalizing narrative, and this will condemn him to be not just an outsider (as in Claire's case), but an exiled citizen as well.

The pole of the safety of exclusion is embodied by Asma Anwar, a Bangladeshi immigrant without papers whose husband got killed in the attacks on the World Trade Center, where he worked illegally. She expresses the *counter-narrative of civil resistance*, representing those who cannot get excluded from the official discourse because, due to their status as aliens – from the Latin *alius*, meaning “other” – unlike citizens, they have never been included in this type of safety even though they are, at least in practice, Americans. When, by taking a political stance, Asma tries to challenge her condition of invisibility and hence to force the boundaries of the inclusive safety in order to be let in, she is fiercely silenced by a system for which she will remain forever outside of the inclusion of safety. She will eventually be denied not only the status of citizen, but also that of human being.

The counter-narrative of remembrance

The novel begins with Claire's counter-narrative. By choosing Mo Khan's design – The Garden, “a walled, rectangular garden guided by rigorous geometry” with a pavilion for contemplation at the center, “two broad, perpendicular canals,” a white perimeter wall with the victims' names listed on its interior (Waldman 10) – she triggers the whole controversy at the core of the novel. From her very first statements, she represents the spokesperson for remembrance, determined to clear the ground of memorialization from any political statement and advocating the right of remembrance to weave its own narrative, independent of the standards established by national rhetoric. She expresses this counter-narrative on two levels: the public and the private one.

At the beginning she supports Mohammad Khan's design and defends his project in front of the other, more dubious, jurors, who make a series of objections:

“I'm not sure I want it with the name Mohammad attached to it. [...] They'll feel like they've won.”

“If this guy is Muslim, it's going to be much, much more sensitive.”

“This Mohammad hasn't technically won the competition yet. I mean, there are safeguards built in, right, against criminals. Or terrorists.”

“If Charles Manson submitted a design from prison, we would [not] let him build it.”

“To some it might be [comparable to Charles Manson].”

(40-42)

To them Claire assertively replies: “Tolerance isn't stupid [...] Prejudice is” (40). When the news of a Muslim architect selected for the 9/11 Memorial is leaked by the media, Claire supports his rightful victory against the loud protests over his religion, voiced by a consistent part of public opinion. At a public hearing, confronting an angry crowd demanding the rejection of The Garden, she states: “I know almost nothing about the designer [...]. What I do know is the beauty, the power of this design, the way it evokes all of our loved ones, and the buildings, too, so I hope you'll keep an open mind” (127).

Despite her initial, social position being firmly rooted in the safety of inclusion, her stance against the presumption according to which Muslim and Arab Americans are terrorists will push her towards the realm of unsafety, and she will be singled out by the media. A newspaper column reads: "If, metaphorically speaking, she's sleeping with the enemy, whose side is she on?" (240) – a statement clearly reminiscent of Bush's rhetoric that exemplifies the subsequent threats she will receive for having exercised her right to speak her mind. And the reader may wonder: is it really securitization that is pursued when people are denied their right to speak their mind? Is not insecurity what is really achieved instead?

In the middle of the memorial controversy, in a passage signaling the transition from the public to the private sphere, Claire takes her children to build cairns around the city to commemorate their father's death. As she herself explains, a cairn is "a heap of stones piled up as a memorial or a landmark" (118), and in the novel it symbolizes the resilience of remembrance to the totalizing rhetoric that managed to appropriate the official memorial, despite Claire's resistance. While the 9/11 Memorial comes to represent "a national symbol, an historic signifier" (11-12), the cairns, micro-memorializing narratives opposing the macro-memorial statement, seem to point the way to particular and personal expressions of memory, emancipated from the political agenda. Their smallness and fragility are the antithesis of the grandeur and solidity of the canonized forms of national memorialization that, with their stone blocks, are intended to block out the passage of time and to square off external, alien interventions. On the contrary, in the spontaneity of the cairns lies their remembrance value: "the hapless pile did not look meager – disappointing – against the city's vertical thrust. So did the three of them, for that matter, in making these tiny, easily missed interventions in the city" (120). However, this dissident act will be subdued too. During a violent protest in front of Claire's house, a man accusing her of betraying the 9/11 victims by supporting a Muslim design destroys the cairn that her children built by the doorway. When the protesters drive off, Claire goes outside to rebuild the cairn, but she finds out this is impossible because "the stones were gone" (159).

These scenes represent the apex of Claire's trajectory towards the safety

of exclusion, and in the narrative economy of the novel they function as turning points in the evolution of her character: frightened by the threats to her and her children's safety, she will turn from being Khan's first supporter into the person responsible for his final retreat. Media play a crucial role in Claire's shift from safety to un-safety and then back to safety again, and these dynamics seem to echo, especially but not exclusively, the real socio-political atmosphere of post-9/11 US society where – as noted by Frederic Jameson – “media orchestration and amplification [...] interpose a stereotype between ourselves and our thoughts and feelings; or, if you prefer [...] what we feel are no longer our own feelings anymore but someone else's, and indeed, if we are to believe the media, everybody else's” (Jameson 56). Claire adopts the media perspective on Mohammad Khan as hers – an almost unconscious mechanism that dialogically refers to a reflection on which Claire dwelled in the first pages of the novel:

she also had been scavenging her memory for tidbits from law school: the science of juries. The Asch experiments, what did Asch show? How easily people were influenced by other people's perceptions. Conformity. Group polarization. Normative pressures. Reputational cascades: how the desire for social approval influences the way people think and act. (Waldman 20)

Interestingly, she eventually succumbs to the very conformity and normative pressures she was aware of. Like in an Asch experiment, she aligns her decision to that of the majority – where for majority, thanks to the media amplification, a much wider group than that of the jurors is intended: American society at large. It is as if the media made everyone a juror.

The counter-narrative of art

The filter of the stereotype intervenes in the media, and consequently in the people, as a vision of reality that shapes the events prompting the vicissitudes of the second counter-narrative as well. It starts off against the background of Mo's (that is, the artist's) discrimination because of

his religion and ethnic background: after the selection of his design, his cultural identity becomes “a national security issue” (54), and almost every branch of “the dominant power” tries to normalize him by framing his individuality, perceived as potentially dangerous, within reassuring definitions. Mo is an American citizen, born and raised in Virginia, educated at the Yale School of Art and Architecture and based in New York. However, Mo is also an artist and, as such, refuses to explain his art, to formalize his choices, to provide a definite interpretation of his style, even though this resolution makes him “unsuitable by definition” (30) for the polarized rhetoric of the “us vs. them” and, hence, ineligible for the safety of inclusion. He values the sovereignty of art higher than his own interest in having his design selected for the 9/11 Memorial: “he would not give in to pressure to withdraw, nor would he reassure anyone that he was ‘moderate,’ or ‘safe’ or Sufi, whatever adjective would allow Americans to sleep without worrying that he had placed a bomb under their pillow” (111). He is an artist; he does not “traffic in labels” (91).

This artistic stance that denies any definite and partial reading of the works of art resonates with Umberto Eco’s ruminations on art as “open work.” Indeed, in *Opera aperta* (1962) Eco defines artworks as open works, in the sense that their essence is a fundamentally ambiguous message, characterized by a plurality of meanings that coexist in the same signifier. As Clare has it when she selects Mo’s project: “the Garden was an allegory” (Waldman 20). This ambiguity is not only one of the explicit objectives of the work of art, a quality to be fulfilled, but it is the very core, the significance of art itself (Eco 16). When one of the jurors in the novel says that the Garden “is too soft. Designed to please the same Americans who love Impressionism” (Waldman 13), the narrator seems to project on to the Garden the same fluctuant shades, indistinct forms and indeed ambiguous – in the sense of not immediately recognizable – figures as those of Impressionist paintings. These traits are also praised by Eco, who sees in Impressionism a sign that becomes imprecise and ambiguous, thus disputing the boundaries, the rigid distinctions between forms, forms and light, forms and the background (Eco 154-55). The crucial question which Mo firmly refuses to answer regards the supposed meaning of his design:

“So what were you quoting? Gardens you saw in Afghanistan?”

“I did see a garden there, yes.”

“And what was it for – what’s its purpose? I mean – Afghanistan must be full of martyrs.” Clumsily, but she had to know.

“So that’s why we’re here,” he said. He looked strangely sad.

“You’ve never answered that question,” she said, “about whether it’s a martyrs’ paradise, or a paradise at all. Since the question was raised by the *Times*. You’ve never said.” [...]

“It’s now been raised. And left hanging out there.”

“Where it will hang forever,” he said.

“What?”

“Why should I be responsible for assuaging fears I didn’t create? [...] your questions – the suspicions they contain – make [the terrorists] count more. You assume we all must think like them unless we prove otherwise.”

(Waldman 584-85)

In the above exchange with Claire, Mo defends his right not to categorize his creation because, he maintains, the significance (“the purpose”) lies in the eyes of those who interpret the artwork, not in the artwork itself. The dialogue continues:

He drew two intersecting lines and asked, “What’s this?”

Claire studied it. “A cross?”

He turned it diagonally. “And this?”

“An X.”

He drew a square around the cross and turned it back to her. “And now?”

“Not sure – a window maybe?”

More lines. “A checkerboard?” she said. “Or maybe Manhattan – it looks like a grid.”

“It’s all of those things, or maybe none of them. It’s lines on a plane, just like the Garden.”

(585)

Other characters share Mo’s view and support his stance. One explains to Claire: “a garden’s just a garden until *you* decide to plant suspicion there” (441; italics in the original). Another clarifies: “You, with this rhetoric, you’re putting up walls of suspicion” (454).

The preservation of the ambiguous nature of art is what grounds Mo's refusal of labels and the consequent split of safety in his story; by eluding characterizations, the only role he can play in the official narrative is that of the outsider not only in social but also in geographical terms: after his forced withdrawal – following riots and aggressive assaults – he leaves the United States forever. It is impossible for him to be admitted again into the sphere of inclusive safety because, unlike Claire's, his beliefs cannot be negotiated and thus the split he creates is radical and definite; his citizenship privileges are forever lost because of the prejudices against his identity. When his life is endangered, his citizen status denied, his memorial dismissed, his counter-narrative silenced, his character can only make sense and function away from the securitized state.

The escape of the artist triggers a reflection on post-9/11 art: is it really "barbaric" (after Theodor Adorno's famous statement) to write poetry after a traumatic event and, by extension, in the wake of 9/11? Is it as profane as what the narrator describes, in the first pages of the novel, as "the gingerbread reconstruction of the vanished towers" (11)? And – more to the point – should post-9/11 societies consider art unsafe because of its intrinsic ambiguity, that cannot be restrained? Or, conversely, are "beauty and safety not incompatible" (62), as Mo claims?

The counter-narrative of civil resistance

With the final counter-narrative, that of the Bangladeshi immigrant, the ideal trajectory towards the safety of exclusion reaches its apex. The story of Asma Anwar (widowed, like Claire, by the terrorist attacks) stages the narrative occasion for a compelling meditation on the significance of the split of safety for those who are not just excluded, but ignored by inclusive safety, because they are not citizens, but illegal aliens. Asma's American experience is typified by alienation, invisibility, and denied rights, but she does not allow this condition to blur her individuality. On the contrary, she is determined to state her and her family's Americanness against the prejudices of the post-9/11 discourse and, in this light, she demands the safety and justice promised to the American people. Her condition is

doubly in jeopardy: not only she is undocumented, but she is also Muslim; this double alienation from the safety of inclusion construes her person as an “exception to the human condition” (Pease 176), and this will in turn produce a dramatic short circuit between her media representation and her life, when she gets killed by a crowd protesting her illegal status. At a public gathering with the families of the 9/11 victims, she decides to speak up, her words translated into English by a male relative, in order to voice her frustrations and challenge her family’s representation, in the national rhetoric and the media, as a threat:

“My husband was from Bangladesh. I am from Bangladesh. My son [...], he is two years old, born three weeks after the attack. He is one hundred percent American. [...] My husband was a man of peace because he was a Muslim. That is our tradition. [...] You have mixed up these bad Muslims, these bad people, and Islam. [...] You talk about paradise as a place for bad people. But that is not what we believe. That is not what the garden is for. The gardens of paradise are for men like my husband, who never hurt anyone.” (Waldman 502)

Hers is the counter-narrative of civil resistance because, despite her weak political status and her limited means, she questions the “dominant power” by trying to get recognition for her community and to get it accepted into the boundaries of safety, understood also as secured rights. She is fully aware of the radical denial of her condition as a human being (apart from the denial of her status as a citizen), as it is made clear when she reflects upon her husband’s fate: “How could you be dead if you did not exist?” (99). And a few pages later, the narrator states: “The prospect of her husband’s exclusion [from the memorial] gnawed at [her]. It would be the final repudiation of his existence – as if he had lived only in her imagination. He had to be named, for in that name was a life [even though] history had only narrowly made room for him” (109-110). In this sense, Asma’s husband’s condition of invisibility may be assimilated to that of Jorge Antonio Vargas and all the other illegal immigrants identifying themselves as undocumented Americans but whom America does not consider “as one of its own” (Vargas n. pag.).

However, her fervor and her rhetorical fluency will not help her to attain her goal but will, in fact, expose her to the radicalization of her un-safety.

By speaking out, she is targeted by the media that found out about her illegal status, and is killed in a riot organized by picketers who gathered outside her house to insult her the day she was supposed to be deported. Asma's tragic epilogue casts more than one shadow on the effective safety of a securitized state and decidedly validates the understanding of its deployment as a split, because her murder is the total negation of an existence that was struggling for political recognition. Considering this episode, is a nation that places national safety on a higher plane than civil liberties (cf. Patriot Act) really safe? And if so, for whom? What does Asma's murder mean and imply for such a society? A question, undermining the very idea of American democracy, is raised by Asma herself: "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?" (Waldman 504).

Conclusion

In a society where intellectual and moral conformism are advocated in the name of safety, what is the place for counter-narratives that, with their plurality of perspectives, aim to challenge the master narrative? The analysis of this issue, as depicted in *The Submission* reveals that in post-9/11 US subversive voices are censored in order to eradicate any dissent, and othered into the "them" of those excluded from the very safety which is predicated. The counter-narratives of remembrance, art and civil resistance are all recounted by Americans who fail to behave like patriots and, in so doing, are alienated from their status as citizens or even as human beings. Hence, the safety of exclusion prevails over that of inclusion, at once generating and generated by a dichotomic logic of "us vs. them." In her novel, Waldman challenges this rhetorical strategy by adopting a more complex, multi-layered narrative that effectively exposes the perverse mechanisms of the totalizing, post-9/11 discourse and deconstructs the "us vs. them" interpretation of the aftermath. When Claire is confronted by the angry brother of another 9/11 victim, she reaffirms the relevance and the urgency of her own position. However, her being in the middle, on both

sides, not with “us” and not with “them,” is what eventually condemns her to alienation.

“Step aside, Claire. Let people who know their own minds fight this out.”

“No, people like me, who can see both sides, are needed. It’s called empathy.” Her tone had turned patronizing, superior.

“Cowardice is what it’s called! You can see all the sides you want, but you can only be on one. One! You have to choose, Claire. Choose!”

(510)

“Us vs. them,” empathy versus cowardice, picking a side versus comprehending both. What Claire would like to do – but eventually is unable to – is rejecting the necessity of the opposition itself, a total negation of the *raison d’être* of post-9/11 rhetorical claims. In conclusion, this seems to be the aim of all the three counter-narratives. Furthermore, the split of safety that separates Americans, citizens and patriots seems to be the ultimate opposition that radicalizes the debate over these notions in the wake of the terrorist attacks, causing an “autoimmune”⁶ reaction in the US political and social system.

Notes

¹ Some of the most prominent examples of newspaper articles voicing Bush’s post-9/11 rhetoric are Julia Keller’s “After the Attack, Postmodernism Loses Its Grip,” Roger Rosenblatt’s “The Age of Irony Comes to an End,” and Edward Rothstein’s “Attacks on US Challenge Postmodern True Believers.”

² In his piece, Vargas claims: “I grew up here. This is my home. Yet even though I think of myself as an American and consider America my country, my country doesn’t think of me as one of its own” (Vargas n. pag.).

³ Here I adopt the term “securitization” as employed in Security Studies, a field in which it has been translated from its original meaning into a formulation referring to security as “a speech act [...] not wholly self-referential.” As Thierry Balzacq notices indeed, “securitization is a pragmatic act, i.e. a sustained argumentative practice aimed at convincing a target audience to accept, *based on what it knows about the world*, the claim that a specific development is threatening enough to deserve an immediate policy to curb it” (Balzacq 59-60; emphasis in the original).

⁴ “Safe.” First Definition. *Oxford Living Dictionary*. <<http://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/safe>>.

⁵ I employ the operative category of counter-narrative in order to situate the three subplots I have identified as narratives that “counter unquestioned narratives or ‘official stories’ [...] or unquestioned conventional wisdom – that state ‘truths’ about people, situations, or places”; in particular, “an example of a contemporary official narrative is that which conflates Islam with extremism and terrorism, and [in] this second form counter-narrative highlights the ‘little stories’ of groups and/or individuals that are produced at the margins of the telling of ‘official stories’” (Mutua 132).

⁶ The term “autoimmune” is borrowed from Derrida’s reflections on post-9/11 US, where he defines the governmental and political logic of America in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks as “autoimmunity.” “An autoimmunitary process is that strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-*suicidal* fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its ‘own’ immunity” (Derrida 94).

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