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Angeliki Tseti

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- 1 [Susana Araújo, \*Transatlantic Fictions of 9/11 and the War on Terror: Images of Insecurity, Narratives of Captivity\*.](#)
- 2 [London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi and Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2015. 217pp. ISBN: HB: 9781472508768 / ePDF: 9781472507556 / ePub: 9781472506047.](#)
- 3 [Angeliki Tseti](#)
- 4 [National and Kapodistrian University of Athens](#)

Susana Araújo's profound and meticulous study of novels produced in the aftermath of 9/11 and the War on Terror offers an insightful and original analysis of the so-called "post 9/11 literature" that is centered around three premises: the first, and perhaps most important, is that the novels falling under this category may be read above and beyond the framework of trauma theory, commonly used for the analysis of 9/11 works. It is possible, Araújo argues, that, notwithstanding the ensuing grief and outrage, "discourses about trauma, fueled by the media, have not been too readily applied to literary responses to this event" (2) but merely—and perhaps too simplistically—employed so as to account for the challenges raised by the representation of the attacks, and as a result of the need to discover an appropriate framework that might help "amplify the horror" (3). What is more, the now canonized "9/11 literature" does not only seek to address the specific event, but also attempts to capture the zeitgeist of its aftermath, "the disproportionate amount of destruction, violence and despair created by the War on Terror" (4). Within this context, Araújo

claims, these novels are linked to iconographic and verbal discourses that have existed for centuries, and are best placed in the category of “captivity narratives,” wartime narratives that recount experiences of conflict, anxiety, insecurity and, eventually, national vulnerability. The types of anxiety expressed in these narratives of crisis, related to fear of physical danger and cultural self-doubt or questioning, among others, as well as the necessarily political questions they raise, are, according to Araújo, common ground in the literary production that followed the WTC attacks; and so are specific thematic or stylistic elements, such as the depiction of masculinity in crisis, the presence of children or the development of the narrative through silences and voids. Thus, having convincingly structured her argument about reading “9/11 literature” under the prism of captivity narratives, the writer embarks on an exploration of the specific characteristics and themes permeating these works.

The second premise pervading this book is that this category may be broadened so as to include works of literature produced outside the US and to acknowledge international and transnational perspectives. To this end, Araújo offers an intriguing analysis of novels written not only by Anglo-American, but also by Spanish, Portuguese and French authors, to which she juxtaposes voices from countries such as Pakistan and India, suggesting that “by examining their relationship between colonialism and contemporary global politics, their fiction offers a privileged standpoint on the roles played by Europe and the United States in several contexts of terror” (12). Interestingly, Araújo’s readings—which extend beyond the corpus of this book and are succinctly outlined in its beautiful introduction—allow her to draw a well-argued conclusion concerning the image of the US, as reflected in national and international literature, that ranges from an early identification to a later renouncing of its foreign policy, and eventually a detachment and a focus on the historical perspective of the period. Furthermore, the comparative approach she adopts enables Araújo to detect common traits permeating 9/11 fiction transnationally, specifically its heightened visuality and overt political tone; in the writer’s own words, the third premise lying at the heart of this book is that: “since 9/11 and the War on Terror have been constructed as highly visual mass-media narratives, the study of their literary impact should be attentive to the relations between fictionality, visuality and politicization” (1).

The chapters that follow this powerful, introductory first, structured around the themes and issues that Araújo considers dominant in the post 9/11 narratives of captivity, constitute eloquent examples of the writer’s arguments, which are offered through attentive close readings and inspired analyses, supported by appropriate theoretical formulations but also, more importantly, often defended through references to works that do not make part of this book’s main corpus. Hence, chapter one, titled “The New ‘New York Novel’: The Epicenter and its Reverberations,” draws on Michel de Certeau’s foundational work on readings of the city as a reflection of “both relations of power and individual agency” (19), as well as Richard Gray and Michael Rothberg’s discussions of domestication and deterritorialization in the context of 9/11, to investigate architecturally-oriented depictions of the tragedy. Navigating through a wealth of material that readily delineate an in-depth knowledge of her field, Araújo traces these novels’ treatment of urban life as a movement from the domestic and the private to the public and “a wider and socially heterogeneous reality, personified by the city at large” (27). And, while correctly pinpointing the “reductive visions” (24) of these writings’ focusing predominantly on white middle- or upper-middle classes, she discusses how the earlier works focus on images of a tamed, anxiety-ridden city,

scourged with fear and insecurity, or apocalyptic and “highly dystopian” renditions of an urban landscape that is subdued to alienation. Subsequently, the outward movement performed by these novelists, Araújo notes, was marked by a renewal of the novel of manners, a narrative passage to suburban settings, a more critical approach of the American dream and the relations between capitalism and terrorism, as well as a shift from the rhetoric of patriotism to a wider historical perspective. At the centre of this discussion lies what the writer calls “architecture of memory and grief,” specifically the memorial, which, by way of Amy Waldman’s novel *The Submission*, is presented not only as an urban site of public memory, but also, in consonance to the book’s premises, as a heterotopia that provides an impetus for the novel to “engage with memory from a place where different urban histories, apparently distinct in their grief, are interwoven” (43).

Chapter three, “Early Transatlantic Projections: Frédéric Beigbeder and Ian McEwan,” introduces the transnational bridging of fictions on 9/11 by reading *Windows on the World* and *Saturday* as captivity narratives that reiterate the general feeling of insecurity and social haunting instilled in the aftermath of the attacks, while at the same time addressing the projection of the United States in Europe. Even though Araújo’s analysis may sometimes seem far stretched—particularly her reading of *Saturday* and the parallels drawn between Baxter and the “falling man,” or Daisy’s pregnant body and that of Lynndie England—the expounding of the novels’ prevalent themes and strategies convincingly shows the ways in which “references to ‘western’ mythology have been recently recuperated by European novelists” (51) and a new “transatlantic historiography” (47) is drawn. This notion of return and re-appropriation and the sense of narrative continuation that subtly yet distinctly permeates this book persist in chapter four as well, where Michael Cunningham’s *Specimen Days* is presented through his allusions to Walt Whitman. Araújo reads the three interconnected novellas comprising this work, as corresponding to Whitman’s concept of “renewed life or cyclic energy” (65); more than this, however, she uses this (captivity) narrative, where violence is depicted metastasizing through time, to reinforce her argument on the War on Terror echoing practices of the past and, in effect, reiterating colonialism and expansion well into the future. Significantly, both chapters abound with illustrative examples of elements that Araújo considers characteristic of this body of literature: images of otherness or deviation, acts of invasion, depictions of wounded nations “shaped by a culture of preemptive action and surveillance” (55) as they experience “a time of internal fracture” (69), expressive silences and increased visibility, rendered through references to the mass media or other types of images. The writer’s consistent highlighting of these elements connects these chapters not only to each other, but to the other chapters of the book as well, and truly confers the sense of a compact category of literary production that spans across continents.

Chapter five reads Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* under the title “Cosmopolitan Attempts.” Despite the writer’s contention that these novels are brought together on the grounds that “shaped by a privileged type of mobility, the Euro-American cosmopolitanism of the business class, the backgrounds of both authors compel them to reflect on the place of ‘America’ in the world after the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq” (89), the juxtaposition of these works is, arguably, rather problematic; and the suggestion that both novels “examine the relationship between private and public ‘businesses’ and their international

configurations during the War on Terror” (89) is also undermined by her analysis. Nevertheless, this chapter offers as beautiful and attentive an elaboration as all others, exploring the themes of traumatic apathy and unease, the prolongation of disorientation ensuing from the weight of history and the sense of insecurity and distrust. Significantly, this chapter also introduces the “need to examine recent globalization processes in light of economical and financial concerns” (104) and addresses the geopolitical importance of US corporate activities abroad. Araújo frames the depiction of nostalgia in these novels as ensuing from the loss of power and status, rather than just mirroring a longing for the (disappeared) homeland; and, when she tackles Hamid’s notion of the “new,” corporate janissary, she convincingly maintains that global capitalism reflects transnational terrorism.

The critique to current notions of evil and terror is also prevalent in the sixth chapter of the book, alongside the motifs of estrangement, precarity, and the tropes of vision, in the form of mediatic images replacing facts with spectacle. Here, Araújo turns to what she calls “the European periphery”—an interesting choice of term—to investigate Ricardo Menéndez Salmón’s *El corrector* and José Saramago’s *Seeing*, set on 11M (March 11, 2003, the day of the Madrid bombings) and in 2004 (a year of great political turmoil for Portugal) respectively. Any initial surprise or reservation as to the inclusion of these novels in the category of post- 9/11 fiction is withheld by the writer’s claim that these texts “stage(s) national and global pressures, by reemploying contemporary discourses about terrorism, exacerbated after 9/11, 7/7, and 11M” (127), and dispelled with the unraveling of her close reading. Following a comprehensive account of the historical context of these works, and while placing special emphasis on the role of international relations—specifically these countries’ response to George W. Bush and the War on Terror—Araújo draws parallels to the novels’ aforementioned American, British and French counterparts and highlights their common ground. The preoccupation with the impact of terrorism on individual agency and social life, the cartographic mappings of the city, the sense of urgency, disconnectedness and disbelief, the narrative approach to chronological time, the “hijacking” and distortion of language “by political powers” (118), as well as the reign of mourning and nostalgia exhibited by these works are resoundingly comparable to the themes and techniques used by post-9/11 novels, and, thus, construct a most powerful argument for the need to examine these narratives transnationally.

The book’s penultimate chapter traces the same preoccupations and motifs “Beyond the Transatlantic Nexus,” through Salman Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* and J. M. Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year*. Araújo suggests that, departing from “very different geopolitical positions” these authors “revise the roles of western politics worldwide when examining key moments in the history of the Indian subcontinent and South Africa” (137). Engaging with ideas of “state terror,” Rushdie’s work calls for a re-examination of Islamic insurgency and military terror in the light of the geopolitical forces that “fuelled them both” (143) and performs a historicization of the present that underlines the significance of the US political, financial and cultural intervention. At the same time, Coetzee’s reflections on barbarism and torture, specifically the terrorizing techniques used for the latter’s execution and the fear lying at its core, bear striking similarities to the contemporary War on Terror and vividly recall the Patriot Act, Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. Again, while highlighting the renewal of authoritarian practices, underlining their relation to colonial and imperial configurations of the past, and arguing for the role played “not only by the United

States but also (of) Europe and the West at large” (162) in the emergence of different manifestations of terror, Araújo weaves her reading of these novels’ structural and thematic elements with those presented in the previous chapters and foregrounds their affinities. Thus, “by extending the study of post-9/11 fiction to include international and transnational perspectives” (164), as she states in the concluding chapter of her book, she manages to paint an impressive picture of the spatiotemporal correlates permeating these narratives of captivity and the ways in which “the hegemonic grip of security discourses, exacerbated by the War on Terror, penetrates urban imaginaries from different geographical coordinates” (164).

While the organization of the chapters in *Transatlantic Fictions* might at times seem a bit puzzling, and even though this insightful endeavor fails to recognize and address 9/11 literature’s predilection for experimentation, all in all, this is truly an enchanting book. Apart from the strength that Araújo’s well-formulated and well-argued working hypothesis presents, what is, perhaps, most striking in this work is that its writer manages to put her contention that “such discursive constructions depend upon the intersection and cross-fertilisation of local and global fictions” (130) into practice, and truly weave a complex nexus of literary mapping where the novels in and outside her corpus consistently interplay in fruitful dialogue. When reaching the end, the (imaginary) topographic shifts she performs—albeit sometimes unnecessary—and the connections she establishes, between the writers themselves but also with the literary production across time, validate her claim that 9/11 fiction is part of a larger tradition that is not limited to trauma literature. What is more, her erudite analyses are complemented with theoretical, political and/or historical backgrounds and contexts, which make the book not only a fascinating, but also an informative read. Last, but not least, there is a lot to be said about this carefully prepared edition that includes fifteen pages of thorough notes, which are not only explanatory but also provide the reader with further information, and a comprehensive index, including both names and terms.

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