

Race, Risk, and Fiction in the War on Terror: Laila Halaby, Gayle Brandeis, and Michael Cunningham

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Ever since the publication of William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* in 2003, North American fiction has repeatedly dealt with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Most of the early American novels centered on these events do not, however, address the long aftermath of the attacks: the war on terror at home and abroad, as well as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Despite his long-standing interest in terrorism, since September 11 even Don DeLillo has remained, in the words of Pankaj Mishra, "strangely incurious about . . . the origins and appeal of political violence" (22). In an influential essay published in 2008, Richard Gray deplores the tendency of post-9/11 literature to "simply assimilate the unfamiliar into familiar structures," concluding that "the crisis is, in every sense of the word, domesticated" (134). A chief limitation of post-9/11 fictions by DeLillo, Jay McInerney, and Ken Kalfus, Gray convincingly demonstrates, resides in their "encounters with strangeness." The challenge for writers after September 11 is "facing the other, in all its difference and danger . . . , not just because of obscene acts of terrorism committed by a small group of people, but because the US has become, more than ever, a border territory in which different cultures meet, collide, and in some instances collude with each other" (135). Yet to project a narcissistic worldview onto post-9/11 fiction as a whole would be to overlook what may be called "the second wave" of post-9/11 novels, which clearly attempts to deal with the liminal condition of post-9/11 America, its position between historical borders and cultures. Specifically, these novels are more intently focused on the racial fear and anxiety sparked by the attacks and by the official response to them in the lives and minds of people previously inured to the effects of distant international affairs.

This article examines the ways in which racial perceptions manifest themselves across a range of post-9/11 fictions that not only openly address

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racial fear, but can also lead to a more nuanced understanding of literature's response to the erosion of human rights and civil liberties in the current war on terror. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, a national rhetoric fuelled by misconstrued patriotism rushed to vilify and marginalize persons of an allegedly suspicious racial makeup. I will call this strategy moral racialization, and it is this strategy that informs the first narrative I will examine here, Laila Halaby's novel *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). I will argue that American literature after 9/11 has sought to alleviate the pressure of racial discrimination by replacing a moral discourse based on race with a more ambiguous ethical approach which emphasizes risk as the key to the cultural animosities of late modernity. Importantly, this concept of risk tacitly includes (without foregrounding) racial formation. My approach assumes a difference between morality (referring to the set of values prescribed by a particular community or situation) and ethics (the moral philosophy that investigates the principles behind moral judgment), a distinction that defines the moral as a subset of the ethical (Williams 6). I want to use this partial distinction between morality and ethics to define the problematic overlap between racial profiling and discourses of risk.

While Halaby's novel only obliquely invokes accident and coincidence to mitigate racial determinism, the novels I will discuss in the second part of this article—Gayle Brandeis's *Self Storage* (2007) and Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days* (2005)—more clearly stage the transition from racial formation to risk as a way of harnessing and defusing post-9/11 social tensions. In linking the two sections I turn to Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), in which I discern a form of reverse racial profiling that adulterates the threat emanating from race and helpfully flags corporate policy as a model or grid for the kinds of risk management mobilized in the war on terror. As a narrative strategy that functions similarly to Halaby's use of myth and folklore in her novel, both Brandeis and Cunningham extensively invoke Walt Whitman, whose words cluster into an American Bible, the axis around which a national (and occasionally nationalist) discourse rotates. Brandeis's and Cunningham's fictions abound in pointed references to the dangers that average Americans encounter in their daily lives, outlining a post-9/11 riskscape that complicates what German sociologist Ulrich Beck referred to as the "risk society" of late modernity (9). These two writers' interest in generalized risk is at the same time part of a denial strategy that ignores the specific dangers associated with the use and abuse of racial profiling. This lends support to my claim that post-9/11 fiction is not simply cognizant of the racialization of the war on terror, but to some extent also complicit with its strategies, reinforcing the importance of race in counterterrorist practices through a paradoxical, tacit neglect of it. It is this complicity with the workings of contemporary culture that advances our understanding of post-9/11 literature, incites us to revisit its genealogy, and singles these novels out from among other racially informed fictions making up the "second wave" of the 9/11 genre.

Other recent novels than the ones discussed here address racial issues in twenty-first-century America, while not explicitly foregrounding the ways post-9/11 fiction is entangled with the discourse of the war of terror. Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008) celebrates a multiracial post-9/11 New York "overrun with South Asians" (78) where the idea of a Cricket Club promises to "start a whole new chapter in U.S. history" (211). In his response to Richard Gray's assessment of post-9/11 literature, Michael Rothberg in fact proposes *Netherland* as precisely the kind of fiction Gray would like to see more of, one that "places earlier stories of American self-invention . . . in a fully globalized terrain" (156). Yet even in this world astir with dreams and possibilities, where persistence equals success, the 9/11 attacks instill in the protagonist "an awful enfeebling fatalism, a sense that the great outcomes were but randomly connected to our endeavors" (30), which strongly resembles the kind of risk perception and powerlessness described by Brandeis and Cunningham. In Lorrie Moore's *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009), a novel more broadly concerned with race in America, the issue of post-9/11 racial fear that cuts both ways (Americans fear Muslims and the other way around) looms beneath the narrative in subterranean fashion as a sort of narrative sleeper cell. The novel unspectacularly exposes the suspicious "Brazilian" whom the protagonist has been dating as an Islamofascist whose repetitive anti-American diatribes sound like "Gertrude Stein speaking from inside a burka" (210): "Do you believe an entire country could embark on a spiritual mistake? . . . Do you believe an entire country could *be* a spiritual mistake?" (191, emphasis in original). Hardly has this revelation taken place when the plot moves on to the challenges of biracial adoption in America. Post-9/11 paranoia and racial stigmatization are treated here as a local flare-up on the larger map of American racism. A similar argument is proposed by John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), which sees the "dozing giant of American racism, lulled by decades of official liberal singsong" (43) stir anew as "people want to go back to simple—black and white, right and wrong, when things aren't simple" (202). In other words, rather than mark a milestone in the history of racial formation in America, in Moore and Updike the post-9/11 war on terror merely crystallizes deeply entrenched regimes of political differentiation based on moral binarisms of the simplest kind, the kind that the three novels I will discuss here seek to debunk.

By examining these novels I aim to show how they oscillate between a morally simplistic understanding of post-9/11 racial fear on the one hand and a complex ethics of risk—supported by narratives of contingency—which obscures a more easily condemnable moral racialization. I will start by examining moral discourses in the war on terror and their racial component, suggesting ways in which Laila Halaby at once denounces and internalizes racial profiling in her novel *Once in a Promised Land*. The second section lays out my understanding of an ethics of risk in more detail, a concept that

I regard in the context of counterterrorism more generally, as well as in its narrative implementation. Brandeis and Cunningham clearly (if perhaps unwittingly) politicize the overlaps and divergences between risk and morality, showing how perceptions of safety and danger both in fiction and in contemporary culture at large often repress their reliance on a moralization of race. A more general feature of the ways post-9/11 fiction addresses race can be discerned here, a feature that characterizes most of the texts discussed in this essay and inevitably inflects the tenor of my analysis. The authors of these novels tend to display an inchoate awareness of race as a major component of the war on terror; their fictions are not in full control of their subject, occasionally obfuscating or marginalizing it. Yet these failings are significant for what they imply about the nature of the war on terror itself: hesitant, operating with what Lorrie Moore would call “energetic adhocery” (184). Moore uses the term to describe her protagonist’s sex life with her surreptitiously Muslim boyfriend, yet she may just as well be channeling Stanley Fish (65), whose moral relativism seemed innocuous enough prior to 9/11 (*The Trouble with Principle* was published in 1999), but sounds increasingly troubling today, as the war on terror confects its standards on a case-by-case basis. When classic forms of racism are reworked into less clearly defined plausibility principles, risk rather than race becomes the currency of suspicion, and the themes of the fictions discussed here appropriately lean in this direction. The purpose of my analysis is to delineate this development and articulate some concerns about its *modus operandi* on a fictional and cultural level.

MORAL RACIALIZATION AND THE WAR ON TERROR

In 2007, after several years in which Arab Americans and Arab-looking individuals were indiscriminately rounded up and detained, often without evidence or due process, international security scholar David Mutimer trenchantly concluded: “the discourse of the war on terror . . . is extensively racialized. It has articulated its enemy as people identifiable not just by their religion, as important as that obviously is to their representation, but more particularly by their (racial) appearance” (173). The division of the world into good and evil as proposed by the Bush administration in the days leading up to the invasion of Afghanistan and the start of the war on terror culminated in what may be called moral racialization, that is, the articulation of a racially suspicious enemy figure propagated through the visual media and intended to imbibe and redirect as much public resentment as possible.¹ Moral racialization as I understand it here relies on the group dynamics of moral panic, supplemented with already entrenched patterns of racial intolerance. According to sociologist Stanley Cohen, moral panic occurs when “a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as

a threat to societal values and interest; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media and politicians” (9). In reading narratives that center on the ersatz villains reified in post-9/11 counterterrorist discourse, I want to understand both the mechanism of racial scapegoating especially in its narrative underpinnings and the perception of racial profiling among the targeted communities themselves.

Jassim and Salwa Haddad, the protagonists of Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land*, are an Arab American couple not quite at home in either their Jordanian or their American contexts, and who struggle to find a place for themselves, but for much of the novel they remain confused and stymied by their mixed identity. Their confusion is further compounded by the “patriotic breathing of those around them” and by what Salwa in particular comes to resent as “those red, white, and blue fingers flapping at her, flicking her away” (184–85). He a hydrologist, she a banker and trainee real estate broker: this is a couple of upwardly mobile over-achievers living the American Dream who are suddenly branded as outcasts and thus advisedly selected by Halaby to suffer a long and spectacular downfall. Halaby prefaces *Once in a Promised Land* with the statement, “Salwa and Jassim are both Arabs. Both Muslims. But of course they have nothing to do with what happened to the World Trade Center. Nothing and everything” (viii), and the novel gradually reveals that the truth lies somewhere between these extremes. Certainly the attacks have a powerful impact on the couple’s lives. Because their appearance invites mistrust, a friend of Salwa’s offers them both American flag decals to announce their patriotic inclinations to any American sufficiently rattled by the terrorist attacks to attempt an act of vengeance (57). In the end both Jassim and Salwa come under personal scrutiny by citizens galvanized by Bush’s call to act as the eyes and ears of the government—or what Judith Butler would call “petty sovereigns” (56)—a responsibility initially reserved for members of bureaucratic institutions but now extended to the entire nation. Salwa is verbally assaulted by a bank client, “a native Tucsonan, American born and raised,” who prefers to discuss her bank account with someone she can “understand better” (114). With astounding presence of spirit, Salwa offers her the option of a Mexican man, an American lesbian, or their Chinese director. Yet the point Halaby makes is that after September 11, Arab Americans have fallen one step behind other social outsiders, being branded not only as second-rate citizens but also as social hazards—“Mahzlims who are just waiting to attack us” (56) and whose goals must be foiled at any price.

This anti-Arab backlash triggered by September 11 “attempted to urge Arab Americans, before 9/11 generally anti-assimilationist and radical, into total assimilation” (Salaita 78), a strategy that Salaita sees reinforced by the discourse of what he terms “imperative patriotism.” “Drawn from a long-standing sensibility that nonconformity to whatever at the time is considered

to be ‘the national interest’ is unpatriotic,” this repression tactic “generates its strength most consistently at the level of morality” (Salaita 82–83). It is easy to see how this most crucial and discomfiting feature of imperative patriotism—the negotiation of morality—is played out in Halaby’s novel: Salwa becomes involved in an affair with Jake, a younger co-worker; her husband comes perilously close to having an affair with a waitress; by emigrating to the U.S. and marrying there, both appear guilty of having dashed the innocent hopes of Hassan, Salwa’s childhood sweetheart, for a modest future away from the alluring yet destructive riches of America. The isolation and condemnation of this couple as foreign and immoral in fact form the gist and main engine of the narrative, which describes a whole string of catastrophes culminating with Jassim’s termination from his job despite his excellent record with the firm. Of course, Jassim’s termination is purportedly based on something other than his racial profile; after all, as Salaita has stated, “imperative patriotism relies on a perceived pragmatism in order to command moral legitimacy” (90). In this case, the pragmatism consists in the boss’s concern that the suspicion evoked by Jassim in his clients, coupled with Jassim’s neglect of his duties as a result of personal troubles, would greatly endanger the position and profitability of his business. These personal troubles consist in Salwa’s secret pregnancy and miscarriage, as well as an accident in which Jassim runs over and kills a young boy on a skateboard. As a result of these misfortunes, both of which Jassim could have done nothing to prevent, he begins to neglect his professional duties, thus endangering his position and making it easier for his employer, and even for the FBI, to single him out as a potential danger to the community.

Salwa similarly strays from what may be considered decent, professional conduct, yet her transgressions carry much more symbolic weight than Jassim’s. In her profession as a real estate agent, Salwa seems complicit in the image of the United States as an agent of territorial infringement and occupation. As Salaita contentiously argues, rather than regard anti-Arab racism as a function of the geopolitical interaction between the Arab and the American worlds, “we are better served looking at that racism as being on a continuum with America’s roots in settler colonialism. A correlative settler colonialism in the West Bank, after all, accounts for much of the tension among the United States and Arab nations—and, by extension, Arab Americans” (87). As soon as Salwa exceeds the limits allowed by her position—she sleeps with her young American lover in the pristine bedroom of one of the properties she has been assigned to sell—the metaphor is reversed: the Palestinian woman has entered territory she had been excluded from and betrayed her status as tolerated guest, both in her native Jordan and in the U.S. Tragically for Salwa, her lover feels rebuffed when she fails to abandon her marriage to be with him (opting instead for a provisional return to Jordan), so in a drugged stupor he hurls invectives at her, even attacking

her physically, seeing in her home trip a return to the “pigsty” (320) she came from. Coincidentally, at the moment these words are spoken, Jake’s own apartment looks and feels much more like a pigsty than any location Salwa may have come from; but in Jake’s mind at this point in the narrative, race, femininity, and moral power are knotted together. After taunting his desire, Salwa awakens in him only disgust by being unfamiliarly despicable—as an Arab, a woman, a portent of his own demise—in ways that Jake cannot begin to separate.²

Appropriately in this general atmosphere of squalor, Jassim arrives at his local gym for his daily swim, “a morning ritual as close to prayer as he could allow” (3), only to have the receptionist inform him that “someone pooped in the pool” (101). Although at this point Jassim hasn’t yet attracted the attention of federal authorities, the contamination of the pool seems related to his suspicious presence at the gym, where he is under constant surveillance by a former U.S. marine (with a personal grudge against Jordanians) who seeks to make himself useful to his country again through hyper-vigilance and racial profiling (173). In fact, as one among several features of the war on terror, criminal justice scholar Michael Welch invokes “the need for purification that goes beyond ridding the world of terrorists deemed not only dangerous but also morally tainted” (42). So although Jassim himself is not responsible for the defilement of the pool, symbolically the stigma attached to that defilement also applies to him. Nor is such a connection between fecal impurity and the war on terror unusual or far-fetched in public discourse. On September 17, 2001, U.S. Representative John Cooksey explained to a network of Louisiana radio stations that anyone “wearing a diaper on his head” should expect to be interrogated as a possible suspect in the investigations of the 9/11 attacks (qtd. in Puar/Rai 137).

Jassim undergoes precisely such an interrogation by two FBI agents who blow things out of proportion and create scenarios whose only merit is the unequivocal attribution of guilt. Jassim’s interrogation by these two agents takes place in a restaurant, a tightly circumscribed yet public space. The conversation is dominated by the white FBI couple confronting a racially and sexually ambiguous figure (the FBI knows more about Jassim’s family situation than even Jassim does) who is simultaneously a possible terrorist and an ordinary traffic delinquent. The ritual of interrogation is thus acted out with a subject who must both behave normally and effectively defend himself. By imposing a “plot” on Jassim’s “story”—teeming with random accidents and unlikely coincidences—the FBI effectively reverses the normality/deviance opposition, seeing causality in inexplicable events and failing to find an explanation for occurrences that Jassim considers logical and related. “The FBI is trying to get information on every Arab in the country right now. Our government is at a loss, so they’re grasping at straws. Jassim is a straw” (269), Jassim’s employer observes with what

strongly resembles common sense. His ability to view the situation so reasonably does not prevent him, however, from firing the Arab scientist and feeling that he has received confirmation of his suspicion when an article entitled “Engineering Mistakes in the Building of the Twin Towers” (298), of the kind millions of Americans would have read after the attacks, is found on Jassim’s desk.

As a result of his unjust marginalization, Jassim begins to regard his surroundings with renewed candor and interest. Suddenly feeling “like a ghost who might vanish at any time without being noticed . . . a visitor to this country, to this woman, to this life” (153), Jassim perceives the world from an increasingly detached perspective, one that grants him insight into aspects of American life to which he had previously given little thought. In contrast to his wife, who can expertly hide her identity—“Palestinian, Muslim, recent mother of buckets of blood” (160)—partly by virtue of her deft deployment of sexual exoticism coupled with a strong dose of American-trained professional charm, Jassim feels exposed, as if an eager surveillant eye opened right in front of him, with no possibility of circumvention. If prior to the terrorist attacks he could live his American life “bulldozer style, an Arab in a Mercedes, oblivious of the sizzling around him, the words tossed his way, the puddles of fear and loathing he skirted and stepped through,” after September 11, “his diorama sufficiently shaken, he began to see, slowed down, and looked at those looking back. And for the first time he felt unsettled in his beloved America” (165). The massacre of thousands of Americans in the Twin Towers and the Pentagon not only peeled “the safety film from people’s eyeballs, allowing in what is really there rather than the filtered view through the comfort of routine” (217), but encouraged Jassim to return the fearful, loathing gaze of anti-Arab racism and respond not necessarily in kind but in the same style: in looking at himself through a hate-tinted lens, he internalizes the racist profiling to which he is outwardly subjected. His work standards slacken, his sense of morality declines at a steep clip, his hitherto balanced and empathetic vision of America suddenly degenerates into a damning view that diagnoses a (largely nomenclatural) social apartheid with “unwelcoming” neighborhoods on one side and “more liberal streets where fear and hatred were disguised” (201) on the other.

This metaphor of the surveilled and racially profiled subject partly internalizing the suspicion, partly gazing back into the oppressive eyeball, also structures the perspective taken by Changez, the narrator of Mohsin Hamid’s novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, which follows a young Princeton-educated Pakistani from his privileged position as a member of the New York business elite to his transformation into a radical anti-American protester in his native Lahore. The novel can be read as a study of racial profiling and of the ways it can boomerang back to those who perpetuate it. After

September 11, whose symbolism he perceives with secret glee (73), Changez suddenly elicits looks of concern from Americans and feels “uncomfortable in [his] own face” (74), which corresponds to “the CNN version of what a terrorist looks like” (Naber, “Look, Mohammed” 296). He thus suddenly becomes visible, though not in the meritocratic sense to which he would have aspired, so he refuses to embrace this visibility, instead fearing, deploring, and using it as a tool in his struggle for retaliation. Even more, he turns the strategy of racial profiling against those who force it on him, which suddenly prompts him to regard the “fair hair and light eyes” of one of his colleagues as “foreign” (67). Significantly, Changez’s impression that post-9/11 New York has regressed into a backward-looking community—“I, a foreigner, found myself staring out at a set that ought to be viewed not in Technicolor but in grainy black and white” (115)—carries a barely concealed racial subtext. Yet beyond serving as a tool in attaching a moral stigma to one color or another, the novel suggests, racial profiling is, above all, an instrument whose use depends primarily on the intent of whoever happens to apply it. Whether in the hand of the “white” or of the “black,” it will ultimately achieve nothing more than a moral opposition whose importance lies less in its content than in its contrast. “I resolved to look about me,” Changez remarks, “with . . . the analytical eyes of a product of Princeton and Underwood Samson . . . Seen in this fashion I was struck by how traditional your empire appeared. Armed sentries manned the check post at which I sought entry; being of a suspect race I was quarantined and subjected to additional inspection” (157). The result of such scrutiny remains constant (moral quarantine), irrespective of who the scrutinizer may be. Back in Lahore, finding himself under the circumspect eye of an American who may or may not be following him, Changez warns his pursuer: “It seems an obvious thing to say, but you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover assassins” (183). Put differently, suspicion can be turned on Americans just as easily as it is directed toward dangerous-looking foreigners, as it resides primarily in the eye of the beholder. Race, then, does not decisively inflect the discourse of suspicion, since guilt may be assigned to both camps. What matters is the awareness and management of risk, irrespective of its color.

RACE AND THE ETHICS OF RISK

The distinction between moral panic—which singles out and vilifies specific scapegoats from among the general population—and more general risk factors is particularly germane to the study of post-9/11 American society as consumed by paranoia and insecurity. Risk as a site of social anxiety, Michael Welch has argued, entails worries that “are side effects of industrialization

and modernization,” contributing “to the perception of a catastrophic society taken hold by a disaster mentality” (22). The ambivalence and malleability of racial profiling as suggested by Hamid’s approach also seem in line with the concept of risk as a “way of seeing” the world rather than a demonstrable moral paradigm rooted in reality. In insurance parlance, risk does not designate an event but “a specific mode of treatment of certain events capable of happening to a group of individuals . . . Nothing is a risk in itself; there is no risk in reality. But on the other hand, anything can be a risk; it all depends on how one analyzes the danger, considers the event” (Ewald 199). Similarly, in their study of risk management in the war on terror, Louise Amoore and Marieke de Goede refer to risk as “performative” in the sense that “it produces the effects that it names” (9). Elaborating on the social motivations behind this idea, anthropologist Mary Douglas and sociologist Aaron Wildavsky have interpreted risk as a social construct emerging from the prevailing subjective consciousness of a society rather than as a reflection of objectively verifiable danger. The selection of certain risks rather than others for conscious public awareness, they contend, helps shape the values of a community and ensures the perpetuation of its social structure. Seen in this light, racial profiling appears as a particular form of risk emerging at a specific historical juncture and reflecting, as Mita Banerjee has persuasively demonstrated, culturally entrenched sites of distinction in American society. “Under extreme psychological duress,” Banerjee argues, “any culture will activate the particular manifestation of difference which is most genuine to it: in the US, this distinguishing marker, which seems to prove salient above all others, seems to be the distinguishing marker of race” (15). Post-9/11 discourses of risk and security extend, however, beyond an explicit concern with race, revising and amplifying the rhetoric of coincidence in post-9/11 novels such as Jonathan Raban’s *Surveillance* (2006) and Richard Flanagan’s *The Unknown Terrorist* (2006), both of which address the consequences of absurdly diligent counterterrorism policies on the domestic front, particularly on the lives of innocent (white) citizens.

Halaby adumbrates this collusion of racial suspicion and indefinite risk by having a hate-crazed youth who adorns his skateboard with the sticker “Terrorist Hunting License” (76) and the Arab American protagonist of her novel converge simply as a result of a traffic accident. If terrorism threatens the larger community, such accidents—where the distinction between the morally reprehensible “foreigner” and the victimized white American is no longer clear-cut—signal the presence of hazard even in the privacy of the domestic realm among people whose lives do not permit a neat moral categorization. Certainly Salwa pursues Jake in spite of warnings about him from her co-workers, while Jassim deliberately withholds information from his boss and mentor. Yet the consequences of these missteps are disproportionately disastrous. It is mainly as a result of racial profiling and sheer coincidence that Jassim and Salwa lose control of their lives, entering a downward

spiral that sees them unemployed, alienated from each other and from their adopted country, and increasingly inclined to suspect that the decision to come to America compromised their happiness. Halaby may even be said to carry the coincidence plot to the extreme by having the victim of the car accident purchase drugs from Salwa's lover prior to his deadly encounter with Jassim. This narrative development appears in line with sociologist Frank Furedi's assessment that "the pessimistic view of humanity that is implicit in the precautionary principle is reflected in the representation of the individual as helpless or sick" (10), hopelessly delivered to forces beyond her agency and control.

The two novels I will consider in this section—Gayle Brandeis's *Self Storage* and Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days*—contradict this view, proposing ways of redefining and consolidating narrative agency that make use of (rather than being at odds with) the text's incorporation of an aesthetics of coincidence and risk. They do so by deftly substituting the types of moral racialization discussed above (grounded in racial profiling) with an ethics of risk, which I interpret less as a neutralizer of racial prejudice than as camouflage for a type of racial politics so insidious that it pervades even those aspects of the text that appear most antithetical to racialization. Finally, as Ursula Heise has compellingly argued, "a consideration of risk and the kind of narrative articulation it requires has potentially important implications for the analysis of narrative form" (747). By focusing on certain textual features, we will see how the two novels bring into play intriguing questions about the relationship between cultural narratives of risk and their formal aesthetics.

On the surface, and not unlike *Once in a Promised Land*, *Self-Storage* is premised on a dynamic of racial "othering" in post-9/11 America. Members of a small American community are united by their suspicion of and perverse interest in the affairs of their Afghan neighbors, further stoked by the mystery of the Afghan wife, Sodaba, the wearer of a burqa that conceals every inch of her body. Yet the unfortunate accident by which Sodaba runs over the daughter of the novel's protagonist, Flan, serves to sharpen an otherwise vague notion of the dangerous other, and simultaneously to defuse it by subordinating it to an environment of undifferentiated risk. In doing so, the novel replaces fear of the Muslim outsider with a close scrutiny of what it means to live with the threat of imminent hazard in a world whose general state of chaos does not permit conventional morality. Brandeis thus transgresses race as a site of social paranoia supporting Welch's suggestion that "America's war on terror is better understood in the context of a 'risk society' rather than in the traditional realm of moral panic" (15). Certainly this story of a small student family housing community in Riverside, California, turning against an Afghan couple after a series of unfortunate and highly fortuitous events does seek to show how misplaced aggression has marred communities across

America since the war on terror. The settler colonialism that Salaita writes about resurfaces in the politically uncouth question voiced by one of Flan's friends as to whether he and his wife may move into the Afghan couple's house once the owners have been deported (139). More importantly, however, the sense of perverse contingency that permeates the novel impels it toward becoming an allegory for the post-9/11 embedding of racial fear within a broader discourse of safety and risk. Unexpectedly, and with a sleight-of-hand shared by the second text discussed in this section, the lynchpin of the novel's plea for an ethics of risk is the work of Walt Whitman.

Unlike moral panic, which inevitably results in the allocation of blame, the perception and acceptance of risk results in efforts to determine how the hazard can be contained and the self shielded, in other words, the central activity of a risk society is "self storage" and self preservation rather than apportioning blame. What structures this discourse is an implicit consensus about the notions of selfhood and solidarity, the latter largely derived from the former (one cannot imagine or empathize with the other without a solid foundation in the self). The complex rapport between the self and the other is precisely what preoccupies Brandeis in her novel, which promises to supplant the ethic of American individualism with a more sustainable, community-based lifestyle. "I think our cultural focus on the individual and self-reliance can be inspiring in terms of people wanting to find their own voice and trust their own vision," Brandeis comments in an interview, soberly adding, "but it can also be very isolating. Such a focus makes it easy for us to forget how interconnected we are; we can forget to reach out to a larger community that can nourish us" (279).³

The narrative is premised on a "good Samaritan" ethics taken to the extreme: Flan, a white American homemaker, threatens to draw upon herself and her family the outrage of the community and the suspicion of the authorities by helping an innocent Afghan woman evade a federal investigation and possible deportation after her husband has already been detained, presumably at Guantánamo Bay.⁴ To be sure, at least in its underlying message of support for fellow citizens and celebration of human compassion, this scenario is statistically more likely than the stories of discrimination and racial profiling recounted by Halaby. After all, as Steven Salaita has noted, "for every racist comment and report of harassment there were ten stories about 'average' Americans going out of their way to make their Arab neighbors feel safe and welcome" (78). In focusing an entire novel on this act of kindness against all logic (Sodaba almost kills Flan's small daughter), Brandeis implies that Americans should be proud that they were so mortified by the erosion of human rights after 9/11, for this outrage is proof of their exceptional values and superior moral credentials.

Flan's "encounter with otherness," as Richard Gray would put it, ultimately folds back into the self, parodically cementing the differences

between the white American woman and her Afghan protégée. Above and beyond these differences, however, Flan and Sodaba are united by the value they bestow on motherhood—Flan as mother of two children, Sodaba as survivor of several miscarriages and a stillbirth—as well as by a very similar concern with gauging the meaning of their lives in an environment that has yet to give them a chance to excel. In this sense the novel may be said to propose ways of storing and connecting individual selves against a national self that is splintering out of control. Even the idea of selfhood, however, becomes contested, residing somewhere on the fault line between the personal and the political, the singular and the plural, categories whose friction both emits emotional warmth and creates tension. Brandeis in fact opens her novel by citing a poem by Marge Piercy that includes the lines “Sometimes I find no self in me/ but a hungry multitude demanding the use/of my body. Self storage? Is that all/poems are?” The self as nation, besieged by multiple intruders, its body endangered by their colonizing claims, suggests uneasy connections between this novel’s discourse of selfhood and the larger nation-based rhetoric of the war on terror.

As Puar and Rai have noted, in this war on terror the media use the figure of the Muslim woman in what are often racist and chauvinistic representations of the Middle East as part of a colonial tradition which Gayatri Spivak once characterized as “white men saving brown women from brown men” (qtd. in Puar/Rai 127). In *Self Storage*, it is white women who are saving brown women from white men. In keeping with this “Western savior” rhetoric, Sodaba appears as an oppressed victim inspiring both compassion and disavowal. Like Salwa’s, her concealed identity intrigues and incites violence. She is, at the same time, utterly helpless: socially and linguistically isolated, but also physically vulnerable. As Jasmin Zina has written concerning the women of Afghanistan and their representation in the war on terror, “they are invested with freedom and agency only by the grace of the American military complex” (34). Or, as Cynthia Peters notes, “Afghan women are now showing up as ‘pregnant,’ ‘fleeing,’ ‘starving,’ and ‘widowed’—Sodaba is all of these—which reduces them “to the sum of their most desperate parts” (122–23). One cannot help noticing the disturbing rhetoric employed by Brandeis in establishing Flan’s rapport with her protégée: she is continuously tempted to murder her (“I wanted to shake Sodaba, to hug her, to rip her veil off her head and slap her across the face. Or kiss her. Maybe kill her,” 135); her docile body reminds Flan of a caged animal (“I felt horrible thinking that way, but it was kind of true. This was her new cage, and I was her keeper,” 178). Last but not least, while Sodaba cannot survive without Flan’s help, Flan herself is perfectly capable of saving herself when her own situation as the accomplice of a terrorist suspect becomes precarious. Clearly hers is a feminist stance, but Brandeis succumbs to the fallacy of many western liberal feminists who

have been invoking Afghan women as an “‘easy icon’ in need of feminist rescue” (Puar/Rai 127). Krista Hunt calls this practice “embedded feminism,” defined as “the incorporation of feminist discourse and feminist activists into political projects that claim to serve the interests of women but ultimately subordinate and/or subvert that goal” (53).

Throughout the novel, in fact, Flan seeks not only to “embed” her own life in a larger political context that carries the promise of personal redemption, but also to embed Sodaba’s plight into her own, absurdly laying claim to the Afghan woman’s condition. Flan achieves this in two distinct steps: first, she gradually wipes away at Sodaba’s image, producing a blurred impression that she can handle at will; and second, she proceeds to reveal the empty spot within her own self where Sodaba has been neatly tucked away, the emotional cavity whose treatment is more beneficial to Flan herself than it is to Sodaba, who can only crouch inside and wait to be released. The title phrase, “self storage,” gains, then, the added significance of a self forcibly stored within another. Flan perceives Sodaba not as the image of a woman but as an obstacle to vision. “I had never talked with her,” she laments, “had never even made eye contact—I didn’t know if it was even possible to make eye contact through the mesh window in her veil. The couple kept to themselves Once I saw the woman standing in the window while we were eating outside I waved, but she immediately pulled her blinds shut” (18). Flan’s son, Newton, likens the “burqa woman” to a “black ghost” (75); Flan herself looks at Sodaba and sees “an oil spill in the water, or a giant sea mammal” (76), images that relegate her to the inanimate and animal realms.

The hand that tries to completely rub off Sodaba’s existence, with greater resolve than what Halaby’s Salwa described as “flicking away,” grows increasingly insistent: “She almost didn’t seem like a person,” Flan comments with astounding naturalness, as if she were merely observing the plant pathogens studied and cultivated by Sodaba’s microbiologist husband. “She was more an idea of a person. An approximation of a person. A mound of fabric with some breath underneath” (173). The sense of Sodaba’s physical solidity continues to diminish until her race and identity are entirely bleached out for the benefit of Flan’s own purification and self-empowerment. When the Afghan woman retreats to the bathroom of Flan’s friend, in whose remote lodgings Sodaba is now temporarily quartered, Flan imagines her “invisible under the burqa, invisible in the bath other than her hands and feet and the side of her cheek, her body clear as the rushing water” (194). An interesting parallelism emerges when it turns out that Flan’s friend, an aspiring Zen nun, has painted an image of Flan wearing a pair of overalls “shaped like a body was inside of them, rounding them out, but the body was invisible; it was just the overalls, standing, legs about shoulder-width apart, the fabric rippling as if in the breeze. Light shot out of all the holes, like divine shafts of sun” (195).

Compared with Sodaba's invisibility (heavy, dark, and toxic like a secret contaminant), Flan strikes the reader as infinitely more benign and luminous. It certainly looks as if Brandeis were struggling to carve out a blankness within Flan's self where the uncanny other may be housed, probably to compensate for Flan's inability to reach *out* toward the other in Sodaba.

After the traumatic experience of their daughter's accident, gradually Flan and her husband decide to defy fortune and embrace risk as they leave Riverside and go into hiding, possibly forever. At this point the racial plot has been neatly absorbed into a narrative of personal redemption pitted against randomness. While the novel does revolve around an axis of fortuity until the very end, it ultimately projects empathy and compassion as definitive solutions to both racial fear and the uncertainties of risk society. Although the novel is sprinkled with unexpected developments and symbolic narrativizations of risk (such as the wannabe Zen nun's attempts to take life-changing decisions on the basis of randomly placed YES and NO cards, "a Zen practice in itself," 59), gradually the protagonists' actions lapse into the transparent, risk-free behavior of soap opera characters, known primarily for the almost mechanical predictability of their actions. No wonder, then, that Flan's husband, Shae, spends most of his time watching soaps and starts working as a professional screenwriter for soap operas by the end of the novel. The risky adventure of leaving Riverside thus lends gravity to Flan and Shae's humdrum existence, reinvigorating the plot of the soap opera their lives have become: "This could be our chance to break out of our patterns," Flan muses (chance here meaning both opportunity and the courting of danger), "fling ourselves into Whitman's great Unknown together" (231).

At the close of her novel, Brandeis extends her gratitude to Walt Whitman for "giving [her] such gorgeous and expansive words to play with" (253). The game with Whitman's words entails witty linkages between the life situations in which the characters find themselves and apposite citations from Whitman's "Song of Myself." It is not only the text of Whitman's work that Flan constantly conjures up but also generic aspects of the poet's personality and image. Even Flan's occupation—she makes her living by purchasing the contents of unclaimed storage units and reselling them on eBay and at garage sales—demonstrates a Whitmanesque circulation of objects. The suspicion of ownership implied in this trade anticipates Brandeis's use of Whitman to revise narratives of American individualism, although it is not altogether clear to what extent the novel endorses or condemns Whitman's ideas, as Flan's admiration for the poet is boundless to the point of absurdity. Throughout the novel, italicized snippets of Whitman's poetry are used as textual symbols pointing in several directions at once.

First, building on the poet's egalitarian vision, which makes the business of one man the business of all mankind and vice versa, Brandeis uses

Whitman as shorthand for the surveillance and paranoia that befell American communities, even in categorically “blue” California, after the 9/11 attacks. “I don’t know if it takes a village to raise a child,” Flan marvels upon seeing the gaping crowds gathered outside her house after her daughter’s brush with death, “but that village certainly turns out when a child is hurt. To help and to gawk, both. *Whatever interests the rest interests me*” (124). Later she answers her son’s question as to what God’s eyes look like by offering the panoptical hypothesis that “maybe all our eyes are God’s eyes” (143). While her statement implies that the collectivity of vision is what makes it divine, one cannot help wondering whether the corporeal invisibility she attributes to her friend and arch nemesis Sodaba doesn’t by now begin to resemble an existential rejection: not only is she foreign, needy, and utterly helpless, but her failure to reveal herself to the eyes of others (i.e., the eyes of God) places her in the zone of whatever is the opposite of or impervious to divinity. Ironically, Sodaba finally takes shelter in a Zen monastery—an establishment that we imagine to be operated by modern-day Whitmans—where she remains a hidden and indigestible human enclave.

Self Storage also evokes the inflationary empathy that Whitman’s work, taken at face value, seems to propagate. In Flan’s mind, a mind increasingly frustrated with the physical apathy and emotional disinterest of a husband who lives to watch TV, this empathy translates into the inexplicable desire to bestow (mouth) kisses on anyone who crosses her field of vision, from Afghan men to toddlers. At least in the case of Sodaba’s husband, this bizarre behavior can be made to appear as a wholesome cure for the suspicion that the Bush administration irresponsibly sowed in everyone’s minds: “Isn’t that who the news told us to be scared of, angry Middle Eastern men? Isn’t that who all those color-coded alerts were supposed to warn us about? All I could think about, though, was kissing him. His tongue would be thick with mayonnaise. Warm. I tried to shake the sensation from my head. Maybe Whitman had corrupted my thoughts” (83). The narrator in fact opens her narrative as a moderately cultured ingénue eager but as yet unable to put on the mantle of self-confidence and defiance worn by Whitman: “*I celebrate myself*. Sorry. I just can’t do it. Walt Whitman starts ‘Song of Myself,’ the greatest poem in the world, with those three words. I wish I could follow his lead, start the same way, but I can’t. The words sound tinny in my own voice – arrogant, wrong” (3). Flan sets out to overcome this incapacity in herself by first celebrating the selves of others, her identity paradoxically gaining in solidity and strength through selflessness. In fact, Whitman’s outward attention to the world and its inhabitants is used to gloss over the transcendental self-attention practiced by this book’s protagonist.

It could be argued that what Brandeis most immediately associates with Whitman is an inflated Americanism that leads the novelist to take recourse to the poet whenever the moral purity and pre-eminence of the United States

are at stake. “To me,” Whitman noted, “the United States are important because, in this colossal drama, they are unquestionably designated for the leading parts, for many a century to come. In them History and Humanity seem to seek to culminate” (Whitman, *Prose Works* 742). Flan, too, plays the leading role in *Self Storage* and seems to embody the essence of the common humanity that Brandeis intended to highlight in her book. This humanity is hardly “shared,” however, as none of the other characters can match Flan’s humane intervention, revolving around her like mere satellites that reflect and better showcase the blinding light of her compassion. The “air of defiance, radical egalitarianism, unabashed individualism, almost jingoistic Americanism” (Reynolds 66) attributed to Whitman thus apply to Flan herself. Admittedly, both Whitman and Brandeis’s heroine can be said to react to external circumstances that force them to go on the defensive. Flan careens down the path of extreme patriotism in response to the violent national shudder prompted by the September 11 attacks. Whitman inserted his inflated sense of individuality and personal strength into the gaping space left behind by a series of events propelling the United States into political disarray. As David Reynolds explains, “into the vacuum created by the dissolution of the nation’s political structure rushed Whitman’s gargantuan ‘I,’ assimilating images from virtually every aspect of antebellum American structure in a poetic document of togetherness offered to a nation that seemed on the verge of unraveling” (67).

Despite the author’s avowed intentions, however, *Self Storage* is far from a “document of togetherness.” The narrative arc of the novel evolves from an insistence on the virtues of connection and community-building to the rewards and promise of the dream of freedom pursued *away* from the community that had initially seemed to nourish the protagonist. When Flan realizes that by saving Sodaba from deportation she has drawn the ire of federal authorities, Flan escapes with her family to build a home away from Riverside. She makes this momentous decision entirely by herself (her husband, Shae, is not consulted) and with a frenzy probably intended as a paean to the American Dream, with post-9/11, counterterrorist thrills thrown in. Even this selfish, unsympathetic decision follows Whitman’s script. To quote Wai Chee Dimock, “as much as it is a poetry of accumulation, ‘Song of Myself’ is also a poetry of divestment, a poetry that spins out an endless catalog of the self’s many attachments only to distinguish the self from all those attachments” (70). Not only does Flan abruptly break her attachments to her friends and to her community, but she also abandons all of her possessions, except some family photographs, a painting, and, naturally, *Leaves of Grass*. Ultimately even the book—a rare, valuable edition—is sold for ten thousand dollars, despite the fact that it contains the precious scribblings of Flan’s late mother, who left nothing behind apart from these penciled notes. With this money, however, the family will be able to survive wherever they decide to settle, so the mere coincidence by which Flan manages to sell her copy of

Whitman at such an exorbitant price erases the consequences of the earlier accident that left her daughter injured and bleeding under the tire of Sodaba's car. This unequivocal happy ending and the blanket distribution of happiness excludes, however, the Afghan couple, who exits the narrative as soon as Flan's virtue and compassion have been sufficiently underlined. In other words, although the novel's plot was initially triggered by racial marginalization, later replaced by a sense of generalized risk (as Sodaba's accident has shown), in the end the outrage with which Flan responded to the racial profiling of Sodaba is forgotten in favor of an individualist starting-over scenario—rather than, say, an active engagement on Sodaba's behalf against the injustices of the war on terror.

Similarly employing Whitman's words as a gloss on post-9/11 racial suspicion and the vagaries of the accidental that help disguise it, Michael Cunningham's novel *Specimen Days* (in fact a trio of linked novellas) maps the broader historical contexts of the terrorist attacks, at the same time envisioning their impact in the distant future. The dawning machine age in 1870s New York is the setting of the first tale, "In the Machine," which describes a community riven by ethnic and class differences. The Irish boy at the center of this story recites Whitman lines partly as a symptom of the post-traumatic disorder caused by his brother's death, and in a further hallucinatory twist he even appears to meet the poet on the streets of New York. The third tale, "Like Beauty," imagines a world "after the meltdown" (236), a national disaster only evasively described. Earth is shared here by humans and a socially repressed alien race known as Nadians. Whitman's function is to provide moral guidance to the story's protagonist, a humanoid robot who mechanically recites disjointed lines at random moments, and whose maker sees in poetry a means to forestall or defuse life's contingencies: "I wanted to give you some moral sense," he confesses. "To help you cope with events I couldn't foresee. I thought that if you were programmed with the work of great poets, you'd be better able to appreciate the consequences of your actions" (281). It is in the second story, "The Children's Crusade," a neo-noir piece set in post-9/11 New York, that race, risk, and Whitman's sublimation of selfhood converge in a way that makes this narrative interesting to juxtapose with *Self Storage*.

Cat, a black female police investigator in New York who takes the calls of people threatening to carry out acts of massive and public violence, fails to tag as dangerous and credible the threat of a young boy who ends up killing himself and a wealthy banker at Ground Zero. A second, very similar attack occurs (also after prior warning), this time against a poor burger-flipper, as if to prove that "you're not safe if you're a real estate tycoon, and you're not safe if you work for minimum wage" (154). By the time the third young caller is put through to Cat, we know the young perpetrators are part of a cell coordinated by a woman who goes by the name of Walt Whitman and indoctrinates the children with

the poet's teachings. As in *Self Storage*, Whitman's textual relevance is made up of small, orchestrated moments that require the reader to fill out narrative interstices with intertextual adhesive. If Brandeis uses the broad, indiscriminating ecstasy of Whitman's vision as shorthand for hedonism and compassion, Cunningham invests it with the moral ambivalence of our post-9/11 era, cannily acknowledging Whitman as a useful interlocutor in exploring the pitfalls of contemporary patriotism. Whitman, insists the NYU academic whom Cat consults in investigating her case, was not (simply) a patriot, since that would imply "a certain fixed notion of right versus wrong" (146), a notion that both Cat's profession and the detective genre adopted by the story presuppose in equal measure. Key to Cunningham's evocation of Whitman to encode the moral morass in which a nation haunted by memories of terror finds itself is the ambitious line of equivalence the poet himself draws between his own moral makeup and that of his country; "I make the poem of evil also," Whitman proclaims in "Starting from Paumanok." "I commemorate that part also, / I am myself just as much evil as good, and my nation is" (Whitman, *Complete Poems* 54). This slippage from personal to national investment lies at the core of Cunningham's narrative, which enacts the transference of national paranoia onto personal risk through a redeeming attempt to resolve a crisis of national proportions by encoding it into personal experience.

In contrast to Brandeis's extended citations, Cunningham's invocation of Whitman is at once more elliptical and more intense. For one thing, the poet's hubris-ridden diction (which Cunningham assumes but never quotes at length) insistently recalls to contemporary readers the post-9/11 rhetoric of national self-reliance. "There are moments in Whitman," Jacqueline Rose writes in her review of Cunningham's *Specimen Days*,

that tip over into something more troubling: we will build 'an enlarg'd, general, superior humanity,' he writes in *Specimen Days*. In 'Salut au Monde!' his most translated poem, he moves across the globe 'in America's name.' At what point does a nation's exuberance start to obstruct its vision? 'Sharing,' as we have seen only too clearly in relation to Iraq, can be a form of domination, and being lavish with one's own values can be a cover for taking power. 'As nature, inexorable, onward, resistless, impassive amid the threats and screams of disputants, so America,' Whitman wrote to Emerson. 'Let all defer.' (25)

Yet Cunningham's America is far from impassive before the threats of those who resist its expansion, instead "bombing other countries simply because they make us nervous" (171). This sense of impending threat, whether justifiable or not, forms the narrative nucleus of "The Children's Crusade" and results in the ambient fear that "you could easily, at any moment, make your fatal mistake. That we all humped along unharmed because no one had

decided to kill us that day. That we could not know, as we hurried about our business, whether we were escaping the conflagration or rushing into it” (105). The precise nature of the danger is equally mysterious: from full-on terrorist attacks to small-scale murders perpetrated by youngsters who strap rudimentary pipe bombs around their chests, embrace total strangers in parks and along avenues, sacrificing themselves and their victims in the explosion. The unknown is thus twofold: not only when and where we could encounter risk, but also exactly what could befall us any minute is cause for concern and permanent anxiety. As Ulrich Beck has argued, risk awareness is informed not only by personal and second-hand experience, but also relies on “second-hand non-experience,” in other words, on the expectation of a risk that has not yet been experienced (72). Or, in the chilling terms proposed by former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, it depends on so-called “unknown unknowns,” that is, the threats we don’t know we don’t know, and as such serve as ideal justification for pre-emptive action. Ironically, the woman calling herself Walt Whitman and the children she has hoarded and trained as terrorists employ the apparatus of fear and risk only to protect their vision, loosely inspired by Whitman, of a world as yet uncolonized by technology, industrialization, and precisely the kinds of hazards to which she herself contributes. “Whitman,” she claims, “was the last great man who really and truly loved the world. The machinery was just starting up when he lived. If we can return to a time like Whitman’s, maybe we can love the world again” (188).

Faced with such overwhelming insecurity, Cat and her colleagues at the police department desperately hope that the killings are not random (100), as “cause and effect [are] always comforting” (107), and certainly more conducive to the illusion of safety that she and her co-workers are professionally obliged to secure. Their desire for clarity—“I hope there’s something there to see. I hope it’s not just...randomness. Chaos” (155)—pits the visibility of perceptible danger against the chaos of blank risk. References to race and racial profiling illustrate precisely the kind of danger that Cat and her co-workers can tackle more easily. Cat especially appears to have resigned herself to being a victim of racial profiling; she summons “a regal bearing” upon entering an antique shop—“I have no intention of slipping any of your sorry shit into my handbag” (159), her posture means to signify—and even accepts without demur the exoticism that her white, yuppie boyfriend demands of her as “stern black goddess of law enforcement” (165). As soon as she slips out of character by betraying her fear and emotional vulnerability, their relationship already dims into a generic memory, the memory of an “older black woman” (165), a “colorful character” (166), cherished but utterly replaceable. Leaving the city with the third little terrorist boy, whom she has decided to adopt, Cat bitterly observes the other passengers on the southbound train as they make “a little extra room for her, unconsciously, the way New Yorkers do when

they sense the presence of someone strange. Black woman with a compromised white child. Crazy” (193). The second boy, who blew himself up in Central Park, had been black, but neither Cat nor he was able to discern their shared race simply by speaking on the phone. “Funny,” Cat concludes. “Two black people, cop and killer, each assuming the other must be white” (154). As in Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, racial profiling (here even literally, Cat being a “profiler”) does not attach to a particular race, feeding instead on the cultural intensity of racial contrast.

Indeed, the child’s race contributes nothing to the case. In effect, “The Children’s Crusade” not only reverses racial stereotypes (the policewoman is black), but appears to dismiss the notion of race as a risk factor to the point of complete disregard. Even though Cat herself clearly does not consider the color of her skin to be immaterial and enjoys shocking people who might mistakenly expect her to be poor and uneducated, she refuses to factor in race as a potential hazard. Everyone, without exception, looks suspicious to her: “The guy nervously unloading boxes from a bakery truck, the jogger in Princeton sweats, even the blind man tapping along with his cane—they all seemed like potentials. They were, in fact, all potentials. Everyone was. The trick was to keep living with the conviction that almost everyone was actually harmless” (127). Even a (white) colleague who expresses exaggerated enthusiasm about capturing and punishing the amateur terrorists provokes her sense of alarm with his “pure, shining conviction” (140). Just as Whitman envelops everyone to the same degree in sympathy and compassion, Cat is suspicious of everyone she sets eyes on, yet derives from this a sense of common humanity similar to the “shared heart” Brandeis repeatedly invokes in *Self Storage*. Precisely because danger is so meticulously concealed, suspicion cannot alight on any single individual; in other words, if everyone is a suspect, no one truly is. To that extent, even though she cannot help examining everyone she meets for signs of danger, Cat occasionally exonerates everyone and voices a distinguishably Whitmanesque, all-encompassing acceptance:

Just about everyone, or everyone who was at least minimally functional, had to get up and get dressed. Even the ones who were going to call her and tell her about their plans to shoot or stab or ignite somebody. Even the ones who were going to strap a bomb to their chests and blow up a businessman on the street. Here we are, all of us, going through this daily miniature rebirth, and doing it together. (114)

It is this sense of (color)blind solidarity that prompts Cat to flee with the orphan, seeking a purer life, as out of place in post-9/11 New York as the riderless horse she sees running up Broadway, causing her world to momentarily tip on its axis (160). “With a sense of vertiginous recklessness, a queasy and light-headed plunging” (192), she leads the child away from the city as

she would have ridden the white horse away, absorbing some of the child's own recklessness (just as Flan had soaked up Sodaba's fear and gone into hiding in that novel's final act of flight).

Contributing to Cat's sympathy with the child is her remorse for the death of her own son, Luke, as a result of a misdiagnosis that could have been prevented, had Cat decided to consult a second doctor. Traumatized by this earlier misfortune partly caused by her failure to meet and neutralize risk, Cat overcompensates in the present by sacrificing everything and assuming the ultimate risk of obtaining nothing in return: "She and the boy were hurtling toward the day when, with milk on the table and a dog browsing for scraps, her adopted son, her second Luke, the boy she had rescued, would decide that he finally loved her enough to murder her" (196). In behaving so foolishly, at least by conventional (and legal) standards, Cat responds to risk with risk, embracing hazard in both its negative and positive dimensions, not only as danger but also as opportunity, as the voluntary and redemptive acceptance of uncertainty. The boy may be an inveterate criminal, yet Cat "might still want to be his mother even if it proved fatal" (196), in an attitude that calls to mind theories of terrorist psychology that attribute such deviance to inconsistent mothering.⁵ In this sense, the story could be seen as politically problematic, to the extent that it might lead the reader toward a subliminal acceptance that terrorists and those who harbor them are deranged but ultimately savable, as long as we agree to "mother" them (which, in this case, means interrupting the course of their lives and carrying them away to a place where we think they will be happy and safe).

Yet it is through some of its textual features that this story's ethical and sociological relevance becomes most apparent. "To die is different from what any one supposes, and luckier" (196), one of the boys had written on a wall outside Cat's apartment. This is a Whitman line, so open and baffling that one could go at it, as the NYU scholar would put it, "from just about any angle and find something that seems to support some thesis or other" (147). The angle I would like to explore here results from the convergence of three separate issues: the narrative form of the text and the way it mirrors the story's theme of uncertainty and risk; Whitman's "noncontingent" poetics (Dimock 77) as it applies to Cunningham's text; and, finally, the conceptualization of what may be called an ethics of risk as the opposite of what I referred to earlier as moral racialization.

Brandeis and Cunningham clearly choose different paths in narrativizing risk. The structure of Brandeis's novel suggests that whatever risks the characters may encounter, the readers can rely on the guidance of the first-person narrator. The shock and disorientation caused by the fallout of 9/11 and the accidents befalling the protagonists are thus absorbed and neutralized by a narration that consistently restores context and control. Cunningham, however, plays his hand with much more energy and relish, partly because

Specimen Days constitutes a departure from his previous novels in terms of character dynamics and plot sequencing, both of which pivot on a pattern of build-up, release, and expectancy. The plot of “The Children’s Crusade” evolves gradually, each character receiving their time in the spotlight; revelations and reversals abound: one boy is black; Simon, Cat’s boyfriend, turns out to be a superficial thrill-chaser. Some of these are clichés of the police procedural genre, which Cunningham is re-working here, and yet—like the concept of risk itself—the narrative does not rely on these concrete events, but on the anticipation and anxiety created by their tenuous linkages. Cat herself, while clearly a product of cliché-blending, transforms almost surreptitiously from a kind woman who makes a living by being compassionate into an irresponsible individual whose empathy is as impartial as it is impersonal. Although she does leave everything behind in order to offer the little boy a chance at a normal life, it is this very act that seems to betray as much flippancy as generosity. Her boyfriend vanishes inexplicably from her memory; the office worker with whom she has been having a casual affair is dignified only with a terse farewell note; and her job, which she must have considered at least honorable if not virtuous, cannot stop her from leaving. As for the little boy, even Cat admits he will play the (merely derivative) part of a second Luke.

In a twist on the neo-noir genre, the female protagonist (at once femme fatale and detective) unravels at this point, her character distorted by a series of contradictions. Cat may choose to embrace the risk of being killed by her adopted son, or she may opt to stay behind and protect New York from murderous children, but if dying is luckier, then the whole structure of illusions distinguishing life and death, safety and risk, becomes flawed or invalid. If this hypothesis is accurate, then the reason why Cat fearlessly leaves the city with a potential criminal in tow is not that she has decided to bravely face the risk, but simply that she no longer believes in risk at all. By enveloping the world in a mantle of goodness, Cunningham’s narrative suppresses any potential for danger, not because this doesn’t exist but because Cat decides not to perceive it; if risk is nothing but the perception of risk, then lack of perception will result in a risk-free world. “The Whitmanian self,” Wai Chee Dimock explains,

is thus always lucky, he can only be lucky, whether he lives or dies. And he is just as lucky as everybody else. In being so assured of that fact, in having so little room for surprise, let alone for complaint, he might also be said, paradoxically, to be beyond luck What does it mean for a self to be beyond luck? Martha Nussbaum has argued that an ethical life that aspires to be noncontingent is also one that is necessarily impoverished. (77)

Indeed, Martha Nussbaum values the openness of human existence created by chance, which is, according to Nussbaum, beyond human control, and

does not happen through an individual's agency, "as opposed to what he does or makes" (3). Chance, then, cannot be fully controlled by an autonomous self, but that is not to say that it cannot be tampered with at all. To reiterate Douglas and Wildavsky's contention, risk is less a matter of individual perception and more the result of social enforcement, which indicates those aspects of life we see as threatening or destabilizing. What Whitman withholds from us, Dimock claims, is what she calls "an ethics of preference" (78), which I understand as a moral system that assists in discerning between one option and its opposite, a system that can be used to counter what Douglas and Wildavsky call the "risk portfolio" (8) emphasizing certain social risks as more urgent than others.

Unlike Whitman, I would argue, Cunningham longs for such an ethics of preference. In fact, he appears to suggest that coming in to fill the space left behind by a vacuous ethics of risk is an arbitrary morality that may in the end revert to racial difference as its principal site of distinction. Whether they live or die, it does make a difference to New Yorkers that a black woman is the sole caretaker of a helpless-looking young child. Whether she admits it or not, Cat will be haunted by this discrepancy wherever she decides to get off the train and start a new life. "We'll have books and no television, and I'll do the best I can with the boredom and racism" (155), Cat hopefully declares, without realizing, perhaps, that the boredom of indifference is precisely the niche into which racism will settle. Her mistake is to believe that if nobody is safe then risk itself becomes superfluous and with it the important mechanisms through which a society will determine its sites of danger. Seen in this light, Cunningham's novella might be said to endorse assertive action for the purpose of risk management after 9/11 by offering the instructive scenario of a world in which people decide to confront risk simply by refusing to perceive it.

I have suggested two ways to think about the intersection between narrative, ethics, and the racially informed discourse of counterterrorism. First, Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* productively assesses the overbearing moralism of racial profiling in the war on terror, especially in relation to its most vulnerable targets, citizens of Arab American descent. Second, with appropriate variations I have looked at the category of risk to elucidate the attempts of Brandeis, Cunningham, and to some extent Halaby to connect the threat of the racialized other with a more generalized sense of insecurity that pervades contemporary society which, according to Frank Furedi, "has used the technical language of risk management to distance itself from explicit moral judgments" (150). Yet far from disappearing altogether, racism and racial profiling in these texts transmute from explicit to tacit. I hope these readings have also pointed the way toward some of the implications that racial profiling might have not only for a thematic study of post-9/11 literature but, beyond that, for a consideration of narrative and literary form as expressing an aesthetics and ethics of social risk. In their intertextuality

and revisionist formal choices, these fictions are no longer conscripted to the post-traumatic imagination of earlier 9/11 novels. Their generic ambiguity, their uneven concern with racial fear in a climate of generalized menace, their collapsing of moral categories creates a milieu where race and risk, visual profiling, and faceless threats interfere with each other. And this is suggestive of the ambiguities of the war on terror itself, which cannot easily be situated on either side of the moral dividing-line that upholds its aims.

NOTES

1. For an impassioned discussion of race and the genealogy of hate violence against Arab and Muslim communities after 9/11 see Ahmad. What further reinforces the salience of visible ethnicity in an examination of Arab American identity after September 11 is that prior to the attacks, the Arab American community was largely, in Nadine Naber's words, "the 'invisible' racial/ethnic group" ("Ambiguous Insiders" 37) of the United States. Palestinian American scholar Lisa Suhair Majaj aptly summarized this ambiguous categorization shortly before the 9/11 terrorist attacks: "Arab Americans occupy a contested and unclear space within American racial and cultural discourse. Although classified as 'white' by current government definitions, they are conspicuously absent from discussions of white ethnicity, and are popularly perceived as non-white" (329). This status was fundamentally changed by the 9/11 events and the panic they generated. As Steven Salaita has noted, with the beginning of the war on terror "Arab Americans evolved from invisible to glaringly conspicuous (whether or not the conspicuousness was welcomed)" (74) and often became the victims of racial violence.

2. This sexualized xenophobia is also in line with the discursive practices of European colonialism where, according to Anne McClintock, "the rhetoric of *gender* was used to make increasingly refined distinctions among the different *races*" (55, emphasis in original).

3. Brandeis's novel assumes that sympathy is an indisputably positive concept. However, as Amit Rai has argued, although sympathy was central to the rehabilitation of disfavored classes throughout the nineteenth century, by marking off the populations in need of benevolence, it only deepened the rifts it had set out to bridge (xix). Consequently, "sympathy has become something of a 'bad' word in political and cultural discourse, bearing connotations of a patronizing, even colonizing benevolence" (xii).

4. Apparently, husband and wife are subjected to different forms of repression, he to institutional detention, she to public opprobrium based on her appearance. This chimes with Nadine Naber's observation that "federal government policies disproportionately targeted men while hate crimes and incidents of harassment in the public sphere disproportionately targeted women" ("Look, Mohammed" 293).

5. On the "personality defect" model of terrorism, which holds that terrorists suffer from pathological personalities emerging from a damaged sense of self, see Post and Ruby.

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