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Ivana Kirin
J. J. Strossmayer University of Osijek, Osijek, Croatia
ikirin@ffos.hr

The politics of fear in Yussef El Guindi's *Back of the throat*

Abstract: The events of September 11 and the ensuing 'war on terror' saw the rise of private and structural Islamophobia in the USA. Centuries-old essentialist myths and stereotypes have been used to perpetuate the image of Muslims and Arabs as the antithesis to the West, most often as could-be terrorists—a danger to both individual and national identity, values and even life itself. As Svendsen (2008), Furedi (2018), Ahmed (2014) and Bauman (2006) argue, whoever controls fear, controls society. This paper examines the cultural and discursive strategies of disciplining through the reproduction of fear and safety narratives in Yussef El Guindi's play *Back of the Throat.* It analyses the reciprocal effects culturally constructed fear has on both its subjects and objects. Finally, it describes the lived experiences of Arab/Muslim Americans in the aftermath of 9/11, in the climate of prejudice-driven fear that undermines their individual freedoms and civil rights.

Key words: fear, cultural script, discursive strategies, Islamophobia

1. Introduction

The tragic events of September 11, 2001, when nearly three thousand people lost their lives at the hands of nineteen Arab Muslim men who hit multiple targets in the heart of the US, arrested the attention of millions around the world, as the coverage of terrorist attacks unfolded in real time on television. In the days that followed, as the nation and the world were recovering from the initial shock and grief, 'the clash of civilizations' theory—arguing that the US is "on a civilizational collision course with Islam" (Beydoun, 2018, p. 82)—gained momentum. This ultimately led to the spread of fear, suspicion, and even paranoia through society. Fear has always been "a political tool" (Svendsen, 2008, p. 120), and in the aftermath of 9/11, it was used to redeploy "division into friend and foe" (p. 116),

with an important question remaining to be answered, namely, who this enemy is that is threatening to destroy the idea of civilized society and its values.

Lars Svendsen (2008), Frank Furedi (2018), Sara Ahmed (2014, and Zygmunt Bauman (2006) all agree that fear is culturally constructed and transmitted. As Furedi (2018) explains, "a cultural script" provides and "transmits rules about feelings and also ideas about what those emotions mean", thus providing a system of meaning through which society engages with fear", whereby the script itself is "informed by taken-for-granted cultural facts that are reproduced by common-sense narratives" (pp. 14–15). Svendsen (2008, p. 16) argues that fear is one of the most powerful political resources used by authorities and profit-driven media to communicate the biggest dangers *du jour*, although there might be a considerable difference between their possibility and reality. Although the fears that plague contemporary society are "far less based on direct [or lived] experience," "the consciousness of fear" (Furedi, 2018, p. 13) reached an all-time high after the attacks. According to Furedi, the narratives of fear create a system of meaning, "a background, context and set of assumptions that guide people in the way they go about making sense of, and responding to threats" (2018, p. 7). Among many scares that circulate people's consciousness and media in the contemporary world, the figure of a 'terrorist' is perhaps the most threatening. Not only can terrorists strike anywhere, anytime, with any weapon; it is also not quite clear who 'they' are. As Furedi claims, "the imprecise and incoherent manner with which the narrative of terrorism is communicated" (2007, p. viii) amplified the public response and - by recycling Orientalist rhetoric - made vulnerable a group of people labeled Arab or Muslim.[1] Although there were attempts not to associate closely Muslim religion and culture with 'the enemy,' as the 'real' Islam has nothing to do with fundamentalist, radical Islam, "the project to isolate the West adversaries" was doomed to fail, as it uses "a negative designation of what they are not" (Furedi, 2007, p. xiii). As a consequence, the 'us-versus-them' binary used to describe Arab and Muslim Others around the world became "inscribed on the racialized bodies of Arab- and Muslim-Americans 'over here', in the US" (Fadda-Conray, 2014, p. 142), which enabled the construction of a patriotic American identity that excluded racialized religious and ethnic individuals as unpatriotic and dangerous, therefore "to be monitored, controlled and contained" (Fadda-Conray, 2014, p. 143).

As these negative, essentialist, and derogatory conceptualizations and portrayals of Arab/Muslim Americans in the mainstream media, literature, academia, and elsewhere were unfolding, Arab American writers offered counternarratives to challenge the deep-rooted 'us-versus-them' dichotomies by providing insight

[1] The terms *Arab* and *Muslim* are often used synonymously in the US and elsewhere, despite their identification of various nationalities, ethnicities, religious affiliations, spoken dialects, and cultural heritage. For disambiguation, see Fadda-Conray, (2014, 12–17) or Alsultany (2012, 9–10). The umbrella term *Arab/Muslim* will be used in this paper when denoting a multiplicity of national and religious identities.

into both individual and communal experiences, opinions, and concerns of Arab/Muslim American citizens within the US cultural and political landscape and their connections to Arab homelands, which "cease to be the ostracizing factor that prohibit them from asserting US belonging" (Fadda-Conray, 2014, p. 3). In his play *Back of the throat*,[2] Yussef El Guindi (2019) examines these entrenched binary views - perpetuated by Orientalist and Islamophobic discourse - that underline the need for complete assimilation in the dominant US cultural frameworks. By close reading of the text, this paper analyzes the performative effects of fear on both its subjects (those who fear) and objects (those who are feared), as fearing is a reciprocal process. It examines culturally conditioned scripts and discursive strategies used by persons/groups in power to discipline and assert dominance by reproducing and thus legitimizing the dominant narratives (Van Dijk, 1993) circulating after the 9/11 attacks. Furthermore, it analyzes how this reproduction affects Arab/Muslim identities, now considered a national security threat, rendering them unassimilable and un-American - the 'enemies within' to be detected and disciplined.

2. The reproduction of fear and its consequences

"I recall the surreal images and events of that day as if they happened yesterday. And just as intimately, I remember the four words that repeatedly scrolled across my mind (…) 'Please don't be Muslims, please don't be Muslims'" (Beydoun, 2018, p. 6). Khaled A. Beydoun's words reflect insecurity and fear most Arab/Muslim Americans felt after the 9/11 attacks. This fear converged with that of all American citizens, the fear of more terrorist attacks. Only this time, the enemy was close, on American soil, "a foreign body (…) against whom the security state promises to defend its subjects tooth and nail" (Bauman, 2006, p. 148). The very openness of American society began to be questioned as its vulnerability, "in which openness itself is read as a site of potential danger (…) as spaces where bodies and worlds meet and leak into each other" (Ahmed, 2014, pp. 68–69; cf. Bauman, 2006, pp. 96–98). This openness, that is, the openings it provides, involves a sense of both present and future danger, causing othering of those who are not 'us', "dependent on particular narratives of what and who is fearsome" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 69). According to Ahmed, "[s]uch narratives work by generating a subject that is endangered by imagined others whose proximity threatens not only to take something away from the subject (job, security, wealth), but to take the place of the subject" (2014, p. 43). Fear, therefore, works as a call for action, that is, it "*works to restrict some bodies through the movement or expansion of others*"

[2] *Back of the throat* is a one-act play that premiered in San Francisco in 2005. It is one of El Guindi's best known and awarded plays.

(2014, p. 69). Following the 9/11 attacks, anyone could be suspected, profiled, and even detained as a terrorist, but not everybody was affected in the same way. As Bauman notices, it only took "a few suicidal murders on the loose (…) to recycle thousands of innocents into the usual suspects" by simply reprocessing these individual acts "into the attributes of a '*category'* [emphasis added]" (2006, p. 122). That category is not new; it is "a modern extension and articulation of an old system that (…) cast Islam as a rival ideology at odds with American values, society, and national identity" (Beydoun, 2018, p. 18) and redeploys the Orientalist[3] discourse abundant with stereotypes about Arabs/Muslims "deeply rooted in the collective American imagination" (Beydoun, 2018, p. 18), now "stoked by the state to galvanize hatemongers and mobilize damaging policies targeting Islam and Muslims" (Beydoun, 2018, p. 6). The swelling tide of Islamophobia, the fear and suspicion of Arabs/Muslims, found them "fearing a knock on the door by government agents" (El Gunidi, 2019, p. xx), as El Guindi himself describes his feelings in the introduction to *Back of the throat*. The play depicts the effects of *dialectical Islamophobia*, the link between its private and structural forms, "the least detectable (…) process by which structural Islamophobia shapes, reshapes, and endorses views or attitudes about Islam and Muslim subjects" (Beydoun, 2018, p. 40), thus legitimizing stereotypes and misconceptions, bolstering private fears, suspicions, and even violence.

The play follows the interrogation of an American-born Muslim Egyptian writer, Khaled, by two federal agents, Bartlett and Carl, in his studio in New York City. The visit begins as informal and casual, "as casual a visit like this can be" (p. 3). As the agents talk to Khaled, they go through his things, setting aside those they deem suspicious. Khaled hesitates when interrogated about religious items, signalling his awareness of their overdetermined meaning and the possibility of being incriminated for possessing them. When asked about a picture in a frame, Khaled explains that "it says, er, 'God'" (p. 3). A few moments later, the agents find a book: "It's the, um—Koran" (p. 4). He tries to distance himself from both items, declaring them presents from his mother, "her idea of a subtle hint" (p. 4) for him to become religious. Furthermore, the use of fillers 'um' and 'er' here and elsewhere in the play signals his reluctance and uneasiness when questioned about items that might directly link him to terrorism. When they find the Quran, Bartlett states: "Huh. So this is it" (p. 4), adding meaning to the mere possession of the book, marking Khaled "a suspect of radicalization (…) [based on his] prejudice-driven fear that his faith might sour him toward terrorism" (Beydoun, 2018, p. 129). When discussing religion with Khaled, Bartlett states: "I guess the point is there are consequences for our actions. Funny, huh. How a book can have such an impact" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 5). Although this sentence is a reply to Khaled's explanation as to why he is not religious (he does not like the latter part of the

[3] For a discussion on the Orientalist discourse, see Said (1978/2003).

message of the book "be good, or else" (p. 4)), Bartlett's utterance can be read to implicitly function as a warning to Khaled if (or, more likely, when) established that he was one of the terrorists in the attack, due to his affiliation to Islam and the Quran, that there will be repercussions.

Following Bartlett's foreboding remark, the conversation continues:

Khaled Yes. I was just reading about Martin Luther and the Reformation and how the whole—
Bartlett (*interrupting*) Am I pronouncing that correctly? 'Kaled'?
Khaled Close enough. (*To Carl*.) Is there anything in particular you're looking for?
Bartlett Don't mind him. He's just going to do his thing.
Khaled But if there's anything—
Bartlett (*interrupting*) With your permission, if we still have that.
Khaled Go ahead. But if there's something—
Bartlett (*interrupting*) 'Kaled'?
Khaled Er, Khaled.
Bartlett 'Haled'?
Khaled More Khaled.
Bartlett 'Kaled'.
Khaled That's good.
Bartlett But not exactly.
Khaled It doesn't matter.
Carl Khaled.
Khaled That's it.
Bartlett It's that back of the throat thing.
Khaled Right. (p. 5)

This excerpt demonstrates several strategies at the surface or "micro-level" of communicative events, often indirect and subtle, used to exercise dominance, such as "intonation, lexical or syntactic style (…) turn-taking strategies, politeness phenomena (. ...) pauses, laughter, interruptions (…) forms of address and pronoun use, and so on" (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 261). Although these may be characterized as cases of (occasional and incidental) impoliteness of individuals in various situations not necessarily signalling the will to achieve dominance or incite fear, when directed at or about specific groups and with no "contextual justifications other than such group membership (…) an act of discourse impoliteness may be a more or less subtle form of sexism, ageism, racism or classism, among other forms of group dominance" (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 261); in other words, such acts are "breaches of discourse rules that presuppose equality" (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 265). Bartlett establishes his superior position by addressing Khaled by his first name from the very beginning of the play. In addition, Khaled is constantly interrupted and not allowed to finish his thoughts or sentences. Furthermore, he is not allowed to initiate or steer the topic of conversation, as can be seen from the first sentence of the excerpt. Finally, the use of demonstrative 'that' in "It's *that* [emphasis added] back of the throat thing" carries a deep cultural significance of Bartlett distancing himself - by not being able to pronounce Khaled's name - from

Khaled, an alien Other whose being and values are not reconcilable with Bartlett's national, religious, cultural, and linguistic American identity (cf. Van Dijk, 1989, p. 35). By othering Khaled on the basis of his name only, Bartlett reproduces the dominant 'us-versus-them' dichotomy and assigns inferior status to Khaled, which is mirrored in his communicative strategies.

Khaled's US citizenship is being stripped away from him from the very beginning of the play. Khaled is compliant at first, believing that his US citizenship and passport ensure his legal and civil rights (even though Carl immediately takes away his passport and "(…) *puts it among two or three other items*" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 7), a pile that grows throughout the play). As Khaled's uneasiness and awareness of the possible turn of events due to his Arab/Muslim heritage - despite his US citizenship - begin to grow, he tries to emphasize his role as a 'good Arab' citizen:

> **Khaled** Are you sure? The strange thing is I was going to call you. A friend of mine said he would, which made me think I should too.
> **Bartlett** Who?
> **Khaled** Er—a friend?
> **Bartlett** Right; and that friend's name?
> **Khaled** (*hesitates*) Hisham. He wouldn't mind me telling you.
> **Bartlett** Hisham what?
> **Bartlett** Darmush. He was thinking of calling you too.
> **Bartlett** I look forward to hearing from him.
> **Khaled** I thought maybe I should just to let you know I'm—here, you know. *I am who I am* [emphasis added] and—just so you're not wondering—in case my name comes across your desk which it obviously has. I wish you'd tell me who gave you my name. (p. 7)

Aware of his essentialized identity and assigned ontological liability—"I am who I am"—making him vulnerable and possibly guilty-by-association,[4] Khaled stresses his 'good Arab' role by zealously offering his help, stating that he was willing to cooperate even before the agents' visit, as did many other Arab/Muslim Americans, believing that "collaborating in the war-on-terror effort to identify terrorist in the community" (Beydoun, 2018, p. 121), while at the same time "downplaying their Muslim identity" (Beydoun, 2018, p. 121) and emphasizing their Americanness might mitigate the suspicion tied to their identity.[5] Khaled is also aware of being scrutinized by friends and acquaintances, "people with scores to settle [o]r skittish

[4] Khaled is accused of plotting the attack with Asfoor, one of the terrorists in the attack as, among other pieces of dubious evidence, Khaled is reported to have been seen with him in "the only library for miles" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 30). The librarian, Ms. Shelley, one of the witnesses, "can't be definite" she saw Khaled and Asfoor together; nevertheless, she "does think she saw [Asfoor] *nearby* [emphasis added]" (pp. 30–31) when Khaled was getting a book. Ironically, Ms. Shelley herself observes the irony in the fact that "new information about a person suddenly makes you see that person in a different light" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 29).

[5] Alsultany explains that Arab/Muslim Americans were often presumed to have "information about terrorism by virtue of their race or ethnicity" (2012, p. 61).

neighbors" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 7). This depicts the atmosphere of fear experienced by Arabs/Muslims immediately after the attacks; as Khaled describes it, it is like "battling ghosts" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 8). Finally, he underlines his role in the 'good versus bad Arab' narrative by conceding how a certain George is "a little too curious about where I'm from" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 7), despite the fact that "[his] connections with [his] country of birth are long gone" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 8). Here, the role of 'good Arabs' is reiterated as "those who successfully and consistently distance themselves politically, religiously, and often physically from the bad Arabs" (Fadda-Conray, 2014, p. 143). Ironically, Bartlett advises Khaled that he does not have to work hard at appearing innocent, if he really is innocent, since we all have "small stuff we'd rather not have other people see" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 9).

Nevertheless, the "small stuff" Bartlett mentions soon begins to develop into something more sinister when he finds a porn magazine. Although Khaled disregards this as "not a big deal" and "legal" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 9), Bartlett disagrees, stating that even if legal, it "doesn't make it alright" and asks Khaled: "You think this is *healthy* [emphasis added]?" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 9). According to Bartlett, a picture of a woman draped over a cow is "on the kinky side" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 9),[6] and he goes further to conclude that it does not have a place in society, comparing it to "murder," which is also present in society, but that fact "doesn't make it okay" (p. 9). This shows that Bartlett is deeply under the influence of dominant discursive practices where Arab/Muslim men are portrayed as having 'unhealthy' sexual affinities. As Fadda-Conray explains, "the security of the US homeland necessitates perpetuating the foreignness of Arab and Muslim bodies, with this foreignness always being a gendered one that pits (…) [the] perverted figure of the Arab or Muslim man against a hypermasculine and heteronormative (or even homonormative) understanding of US nationalism and citizenship" (2014, p. 165). Bartlett declares Khaled's interest in porn magazines "a few feet outside of (…) category" of normal (El Guindi, 2019, p. 14). He continues to build the narrative of Khaled's 'abnormal' sexuality after asking Khaled to switch on his computer. Khaled refuses, as he has some unfinished stories that he is writing and feels this would be a violation of his privacy. Bartlett instantly 'deduces' that Khaled is trying to hide "smut," "weird fantasies," "child porn with domestic pets involved," all of which points to his "bestiality" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 16).[7] This exchange ultimately reveals Bartlett's view of Khaled as "a terrorist (…) a queer, nonnational, perversely racialized other [that] has become part of the

[6] Khaled tries to explain the nature of the picture as an "anti-leather kind of thing" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 10), which is described in the blurb as "a cow wearing a human" (El Guindi, 2019, p.10), but Bartlett dismisses this explanation, stating that "the woman doesn't seem to fair well" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 10).

[7] Bartlett bases his investigation on preconceived opinions, not facts: "I am frankly amazed at just how abnormal everything is in your apartment. (…) I'm getting that uncomfortable *feeling* [emphasis added] that there's more to you than meets the eye and not in a good way," and when asked by Khaled if he is joking, he replies: "I try not to joke before *drawing a conclusion* [emphasis added] (El Guindi, 2019, p. 14).

normative script of the U.S. war on terror" (Puar, 2007, p. 37) used to profile and police such identities: "You became a citizen so you could indulge in your perverted little fantasies, you sick little prick. Come here, wrap the flag around you and whack off" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 23).

The deconstruction of Khaled's supposed political, racial, and sexual identity in order to show him a threat to public safety reaches a crescendo at the end of the play when the agents directly implicate him in plotting the 9/11attacks in a strip club with Asfoor, where he allegedly went "to get a hard-on while plotting death and destruction" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 47). They provide questionable evidence (a receipt, a fatigue jacket, and a baseball cap) and an eyewitness account by "a Ms. Jean Sommers, a.k.a. Kelly Cupid, 'Dancer Extraordinaire and Stripper Artiste'" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 48). When shown Khaled and Asfoor's photos, Jean identifies them, "yeah, kinda (…) I'm pretty sure (…) both of them were Middle-Eastern, that I know" (El Guindi, 2019, pp. 49–50). According to her account, neither of the men are interested in her act and lap dance, which seems strange to Kelly: "At one time I stuck my boobs in his face and he actually moved his head" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 50). Frustrated, she decides to break her professional code and make Khaled climax, "I reached down and squeezed. Just one time (…) So easy" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 51).[8] Furthermore, she follows Khaled and Asfoor into the restroom, where she supposes they "might have been sucking each other off" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 51). This scene reflects Jasbir K. Puar's concept of *homonormative nationalism* which appeared simultaneously with the fortification of heteronormativity with "an aggressive militarist, masculinist, race- and class- specific nationalism" (2007, p. 40). Following the 9/11 attacks, white, homosexual, and queer stigmas were converted into "acceptable patriot values," now symbolizing US modernity, open-mindedness, and inclusivity (thus at the same time reiterating heteronormativity as the norm) and transferred as negative and deviant to the bodies of Arab/Muslims "through associations with sexual excess, failed masculinity (that is, femininity), and faggotry" (Puar, 2007, p. 46).[9] Images of "homosexuality, (…) hypertrophied heterosexuality, or failed monogamy" were widely circulated in media and were quickly adopted as a means of identifying potential terrorists, "*a barometer of ab/normality involved in disciplinary apparatuses* [emphasis added]" (Puar, 2007, p. 37).

Further incriminating Khaled, another witness, his ex-girlfriend Beth, recounts a conversation with Khaled after the attacks, soon after which they broke up. She

[8] According to Fadda-Conray, in some theatrical productions of the play "Kelly Cupid herself performs (…) an intermixture of heterosexuality and patriotism through her American-flag inspired costume, which confirms the binary of healthy patriotic heterosexuality versus perverse homosexual terrorism" (2014, p. 168). Similarly symbolic, in the script of the play she wears a cowboy outfit with two pistols on her hips.

[9] This heteronormative imagery also included those people of color and immigrant groups deemed patriotic enough or serving "symbolic and material needs, for example Condoleezza Rice, the U.S. military" (Puar, 2007, p. 40).

strongly disagrees with Khaled when he says, "we have to look for the 'why'" of the attacks and reexamine "our policies" and "root causes" to get "the bigger picture" so that something similar does not happen again. Beth is not interested in discussing this and concludes that the terrorists are just "evil assholes" who committed "a rape" of the country (El Guindi, 2019, pp. 36–37). As she tries to leave, he demands to know where she is going, to which she answers: "Why? Are you afraid I might say something to someone?" (p. 39). Khaled becomes aware of the gravity of the situation for having expressed his opinion: "You can't talk like that. Not now. Not even for a joke, people take this shit very seriously" (p. 40). As Hall et al. suggest, crime—or in this case terrorism—has a "pre-history: conditions of existence" (1978, p. ix) that can and should be discussed. Nevertheless, like Beth, the media tend to focus on a single incident only, removing it from its geopolitical, historical, and social roots and context. What Khaled suggests in his exchange with Beth is not that he condones the attacks or does not mourn the victims but that "something is standing in the way of these 'conditions of existence' being treated as part of the phenomenon" (p. ix). Hall explains that the 'decoding' event of mainstream media messages may occupy three hypothetical positions: the *dominant-hegemonic*, when the recipient takes "the connoted meaning (…) full and straight," the *negotiated* position, with "adaptive and oppositional elements (…) reserving the right to make a more negotiated application," and the *oppositional* position (2005, pp. 125–127). Nevertheless, in the aftermath of 9/11 events, "voicing such interrogative forms of dissent against imperial ventures overseas" and noting that violence executed on 9/11 "should in fact be regarded as part of a chain of violence to which people across the globe are repeatedly subjected" (Fadda-Conray, 2014, p. 157) by the US, was not welcome, as can be seen from Khaled's fear that his opinion might incriminate him.

As the play progresses, Khaled becomes more adamant about his innocence and demands his legal rights be observed—he wants agents to leave, requests a lawyer, and insists on knowing what the charges against him are, as is his right guaranteed by his US citizenship and the Constitution: "This is my country too, you know. This is my country! It's my fucking country!" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 21). This completely provokes Bartlett: "And if I hear you say 'this is still America' one more time I am going to throw up. I will open my mouth and hurl a projectile of my burger down your scrawny traitorous throat" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 22). Carl tries to mitigate the situation and calm Bartlett down by stressing that immigrants can and do become US citizens. Bartlett concedes, explaining his reaction by reversing roles, whereby he becomes a victim: "We tip-toe and we apologize and we have to kiss their assess" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 23). He goes on by stating that he has "nothing against immigrants" for "this country wouldn't be anything without them" (El Guindi, 2019, pp. 23–24). He mentions his great grandfather, who was also an immigrant and who, with the rest of the family, "worked hard to make this country the place it is" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 24). However, he continues by accusing Khaled on not making a contribution, being unemployed and on welfare,

in essence—"taking from the system (…) leeching" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 24). Van Dijk considers these discursive strategies as one of the more common ways of marginalizing and disempowering vulnerable groups (1993, p. 266). "Apparent denial" (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 266) in the form of disclaimer 'I have nothing against X, but…' is followed by "positive self-representation," personal "storytelling" (cf. Van Dijk, 1989, p. 34), and "negative other-presentation (…) a systemic association of ethnic minorities with problematic cultural differences (…), crime, welfare abuse" (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 264). These minorities, therefore, incite fear by becoming a threat "to the interest and privileges of the dominant group," who subsequently become 'the real victims who are discriminated against' (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 264). Bartlett, therefore, successfully reproduces and legitimizes dominant propositions generated by the nationalist political elite and adopted by media, since it is easy to accept them in "socio-economic situations of white poverty and insecurity" (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 265) and/or the atmosphere where anxiety and fear of terrorist attacks dominates. To sum up Van Dijk's argument, racism is enacted at the highest political levels in political discourse, laws, and policies "that cause and confirm ethnic or racial inequality" (1993, p. 268). Following the "top–down direction of racism (…) lower groups and institutions (…) maintain similar prejudices and similarly engage in discrimination" (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 268).

By the end of the play, Khaled is physically tortured, as his guilt is no longer doubted (if it ever was in the first place). Carl informs Khaled that beatings "have been coming since we got here, because of repeated references to *an innocence that is not yours to claim* [emphasis added]" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 43). He continues, "If you were innocent, why would I have kicked you? (p. 43). As Bauman observes, the exploitation of fear "cancels the cumbersome task of supplying evidence of the guilt and malice (…): appointed enemies can't prove their innocence, since their guilt lies in having been authoritatively accused, not deriving from what they do or intend to do, but from what they are" (2006, p. 116). Although the agents try to convince Khaled that their visit is not "an ethnic thing" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 19), they immediately concede: "You're a Muslim and an Arab. Those are the bad asses currently making life a living hell and so we'll gravitate towards you and your ilk" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 19). As they leave Khaled's studio, they promise to come back, "later, tomorrow" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 53).

3. Conclusion

In the aftermath of 9/11, simplistic, essentialist, and often dehumanizing portrayals of Arabs/Muslims "as perpetual aliens, volatile extremist, and potential or actual terrorist" (Fadda-Conray, 2014, p. 2) dominated political and academic discourse, mainstream news, and entertainment media, and became "the shared vocabulary used to reify the vast differences between a 'civilized' US culture (…)

and a 'barbaric' and backward Arab and Muslim landscape (Fadda-Conray, 2014, p. 2).[10] Thus, culturally scripted and communicated fear works in two ways, "through and on the bodies of (…) its subjects, as well as its objects" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 62) and involves both proximity and distance in their relationship: by bringing them together, it reopens past histories, and through reiteration of stereotypes, it causes them to move further apart. By establishing others as fearsome to one's self, one's way of life and even the very life itself, violence against others becomes easily justifiable. Consequently, the object of fear, the one who fears the fears of others, becomes "sealed into a body that tightens up, and takes up less space" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 69). In his play, El Guindi critically examines the effects that fear and the ensuing implementation of laws and policies restricting or negating legal and civil rights have on Arab/Muslim bodies and their identities, which are now shrinking under ontological and epistemological violence perpetuated both by individuals and institutions that are in a dialectical relationship. As Beydoun explains, in the post-9/11 United States, "any manifestation of Islam" - imagined, rather than understood - triggered fear and caused suspicion and surveillance at best, detention and prosecution at worst (2018, p. 101). This resulted in neutralizing and distancing oneself from one's political, religious and cultural Arab/Muslim identity, as well as assuming the 'good Arab' identity, "conceding to the directive that the only acceptable iterations of Arab culture within the US are those that reify a bland, uncritical type of US multiculturalism" (Fadda-Conray, 2014, p. 152).

The agents and 'witnesses' in the play uncritically reproduce dominant ideology and values. Although somewhat mitigated and subtle, "their basic attitudes may not have changed very much" (Van Dijk, 1989, p. 34), revealing prejudice, xenophobia, and racism that inform their opinions and actions. As Furedi explains, they are under the influence and reproduce the script "through which fear is nourished [and] cultivated" (2018, p. 24). This cultural script provides "the norms, rhetoric and taken-for granted assumptions that inform the way we fear" as well as a "guidance about how to interpret and respond to uncertainty and threats" (Furedi, 2018, p. 28). According to Alsultany, in the post-9/11 atmosphere of fear, both individual and national safety was to be achieved by subordinating the value of freedom as "safety trumps all other rights during times of crisis" (Alsultany, 2012, p. 53). The exceptional moments of crisis (no matter how real or probable), Alsultany continues, deem it more important to be safe than to not discriminate, whereby racist discursive strategies are reconfigured, as can be seen from agent Carl's words: "You know what I really resent? … What you force us to become. To protect ourselves. We are a decent bunch" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 46).

The politics of fear has become the foundation of modern democracies, with fear being used as a tool for social control, often obscuring explicit and direct

[10] Although some portrayals of Arab/Muslim Americans might at first seem benevolent, they "ultimately end up affirming their perceived national and religious Otherness" (Fadda-Conray, 2014, p. 2).

racism. The narrative of fear is thus restricting the freedom of both its subjects and objects. In times when "'exceptional' moments of crisis have become the rule" (Alsultany, 2012, p. 53) and the climate of fear is promoted on a regular basis, it is necessary to offer an analysis of fear discourse and its (re)production in both institutional and everyday interaction, as it directly affects personal and civil rights and freedom. After 9/11, it has targeted Arab/Muslim Americans. The question is not if, but when, other minority groups will be targeted, or as agent Bartlett notices in the play, until "other bad asses from other races make a nuisance of themselves. Right? Yesterday the Irish and the Poles, today it's you. Tomorrow it might be the Dutch" (El Guindi, 2019, p. 19).

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