THE ARAB AMERICAN POLYPHONIC NOVEL
AND ITS INDICTMENT OF THE POST-9/11
POLITICAL AGENDA

Reem Hazboun Taşyakan

Submitted: January 4, 2024; Accepted: March 6, 2024; Publication: May 15, 2024

Abstract: Following 9/11, the United States, led at the time by the George W. Bush administration, formulated and disseminated a political narrative replete with falsehoods and rigid binaries intended to justify changes to its domestic and foreign policy. That narrative was based on Orientalist tropes and American exceptionalism — ideas which have been part of American political discourse for more than a century. Two post-9/11 multi-narrator novels — Laila Halaby’s Once in a Promised Land (2007) and Laila Lalami’s The Other Americans (2019) — respond to the dominant political narrative by deconstructing the binaries it is based on and by demonstrating its harmfulness to American society. Through close readings that analyze the ideological implications of the polyphonic novel form, this paper reveals that Halaby’s and Lalami’s novels implicate the narrative in the destructive political polarization of the 2000s and the 2010s while subverting persistent modes of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment. Mikhail Bakhtin’s notions of polyphony and dialogism, as well as Jody Byrd’s concept of cacophony, clarify the ways that narration is used in Once in a Promised Land and The Other Americans to enable the indictment of the post-9/11 narrative.

Keywords: 9/11, contemporary Arab American literature, polyphony/dialogism, anti-Arab racism/Islamophobia, American exceptionalism, de-essentialized minority literatures

In response to the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the George W. Bush Administration formulated and disseminated a political
narrative intended to justify destabilizing changes to America’s domestic and foreign policy. Bush’s 2002 State of the Union address was brimming with deceit, seen in his claims that Iraq and other nations “constitute[d] an axis of evil” and were “seeking weapons of mass destruction” as well as “arming to threaten the peace of the world” (Bush, 2002). Such falsehoods and the rigid binaries of good vs evil and east vs west that they are derived from were at the core of the narrative that drove post-9/11 American domestic and foreign policy. They were based on existing Orientalist stereotypes about and biases against Islam and the Middle East. The pervasiveness of the narrative unequivocally worsened the marginalization of Arabs and Muslims and intensified political polarization in American society during the 2000s and 2010s. In the two decades that followed 9/11, a unique type of Arab American novel emerged as a subversive literary response to that narrative.

Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land* and Laila Lalami’s *The Other Americans* are multi-narrator novels that stand apart in the way they merge content and form to implicate the post-9/11 narrative in the increased discord and divisiveness in American society. The novels accomplish this using two main narrative techniques. First, there is a recurrence of references to 9/11 in both texts; those include reflections from the diverse narrators on the attacks themselves, backlash these characters experience from it personally or professionally, and depictions of 9/11’s repercussions in American society in general. The ideas about 9/11 combine to form an autonomous entity that acts as an agent and moves through the minds of the characters and the plot to virulently transmit fear and violence in the fictional communities. The transmission represents the damage that the dominant political narrative caused in American society during the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Second, both novels feature a plurality of consciousnesses heard through multiple narrators with various and often dissonant worldviews; they mobilize those varying perspectives to paint human interactions and perceptions as nuanced in contrast to the rigid good vs evil binaries that make up the dominant political narrative. The perspectives provide access to a cross-section of American voices from many groups, including White Americans, and it is particularly through the White narrators that the novels demonstrate the ambivalence and malleability of their views of Arabs. These features come together to incriminate the narrative by mirroring its role in society and challenging its constitution.

The polyphonic form of *Once in a Promised Land* and *The Other Americans* enables the novels to challenge America’s post-9/11 narrative. In defining polyphonic novels relative to Dostoevsky, Bakhtin characterizes them as having “not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness [but] rather a plurality of consciousness, with equal rights and each with its own world” (Bakhtin, 1981: 6). This description of their dialogic rather than traditional, monologic nature resonates with the dissonant perspectives of the multiple, independent narrators in Halaby’s and Lalami’s novels as well as the
way those perspectives collectively mirror real-world social and political discourse. The presence of a “plurality of consciousnesses” and the dissonant ideas that operate through those consciousnesses create the overlap between narrative form and ideological content that is characteristic of the polyphonic novel (260).

The plot and the ideas that drive the plot are also impacted by the presence of a plurality of consciousnesses in polyphonic novels. Bakhtin affirms that characters in such novels are not objects, but rather subjects unto themselves (Bakhtin, 1984: 7). Related to this is Bakhtin’s assertion that the “ordinary pragmatics of the plot” employed in monologic novels do not apply in polyphonic novels because for the plot to operate logically and cohesively as it often does in monologic novels, the characters would be objects and their ideas would exist to shape the plot based on the will of the author (7, 26). In these novels, the behavior of the 9/11 idea does not lend itself to a linear plot structure. Instead, it forms a separate entity and operates autonomously in such a way that it is like a character or agent in its own right. In this case, it acts as an agent of destruction whose role is villainous in the way it transmits fear and violence between the various characters and consciousnesses. Through dynamics unique to the polyphonic form, these novels mirror the literal ways that 9/11, the dissonant worldviews about it, and the incendiary post-9/11 political narrative all intertwined to cause discord and divisiveness in American society during the 2000s and 2010s.

It is important to consider the fact that diverse Arab and Muslim voices are used in addressing the political topics in both novels. Mazen Naous explains that anti-Arab discrimination and Islamophobia in America stem from the ways Arabs and Muslims are conflated and collectively viewed as “an un-American, violent group whose culture has nothing of worth to contribute to the US” (8). According to Naous, examining Arab and Muslim American experiences together on one axis helps “create dialogic connections that are more equal and transcend … the inequalities of power relationships” (9). He suggests that engaging a multiplicity of Arabs and Muslims in literary and historical analyzes creates a diverse but united front based more realistically on their disparate identities, which is an effective method of increasing their visibility in the US. His work is highly relevant to the way Once in a Promised Land and The Other Americans – when examined together – consider the lives of both Jordanian and Moroccan Americans and the varied ways that identifying as Arab and/or Muslim impacts experiences in post-9/11 America. This relates to Jodi Byrd’s concept of “cacophony” – a term they use to define the existence of dissonant struggles for power among marginalized groups (xxxiii). Byrd describes postcolonial power dynamics as taking place on both vertical and horizontal axes. The dynamics of the vertical axis are restricted to the top-down power differential between the colonizer and the colonized; the horizontal axis is characterized by historically oppressed peoples who are on the same level but are at odds with each other in what Byrd calls “zero sum struggles for hegemony” (xxxiii). While the
dissonance created by those competing struggles is chaotic, embracing the chaos and the complexity that comprises it highlights the struggles of the oppressed. It empowers oppressed peoples by throwing off the equilibrium of the highly polarized power differential of the vertical axis. Considering the variety of Arab and Muslim American identities ethnically, culturally, and racially in literary and historical analyzes presents a more realistic and complex portrait that subverts both European imperialism (because of the arbitrariness of Sykes–Picot-designated national borders historically imposed in the Middle East) and American imperialism (because of anti-Arab American military interventions in the region in the late 20th and early 21st centuries) (Naous, 2020: 9). Challenging those specific power dynamics connects to cacophony because both ideas focus on the decentering of the American nation/empire. In these ways, cacophony is relevant to this study as it engages in the decolonizing discourse that Byrd’s work does – in this case specifically related to the way the texts challenge America’s weaponization of polarizing ideologies to create chaos and destabilizing effects in the communities represented.

The 9/11 Idea as an Agent of Destruction

Given that in dialogic novels, the narrators are subjects possessing both authority and “extraordinary independence” (Bakhtin, 1984: 7), characterization and plot development do not always function as expected when compared to monologic novels. This sense of the unexpected is crucial for observing the way the idea of 9/11 functions in Once in a Promised Land and The Other Americans. Ideas revolving around 9/11 in these novels – while linked to and shaped by the consciousnesses of the multiple narrators – take on a life and will of their own. To delve into the way the 9/11 idea in Once in a Promised Land and The Other Americans forms a distinct entity that operates as an agent spreading fear and violence, it is important to pinpoint the origin of that transmission: 9/11 itself.

Historically, the 9/11 attacks acted as a torch thrown on a centuries-old pile of combustible ideologies including Orientalist sentiment, colonialist gaslighting, and hawkish right-wing fear-manufacturing. The attacks did not simply create the pile or add fuel to it. In a study on the development of anti-Arab racism in late twentieth and early twenty-first century America, Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber make the distinction that anti-Arab stereotypes and Islamophobia existed prior to 9/11, and that 9/11 resulted in an uptick in discriminatory public opinion and foreign policy (Jamal and Naber, 2008: 4). They crucially refer to 9/11 as “a turning point, as opposed to a starting point, of histories of anti-Arab racism in the United States” (4). Carol Fadda also notes that the uptick was a continuation of a pattern and not the start of it. She writes that bigoted views of Arab Americans in the post-9/11 period were simply “a recent installment in a long history of national and international crises and conflicts that have repeatedly and
consistently underlined the provisional nature of US belonging for Arab-Americans” (Fadda, 2011: 533). Naous describes the post-9/11 circumstances around Arab and Muslim identity as “hyper-invisibility” – meaning that if Arab and Muslim Americans lacked visibility due to Orientalist stereotyping prior to 9/11, following 9/11, the increased anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia in America created a “simultaneous visibility and invisibility” for the same communities based on the whims of public opinion and political rhetoric (4). Naous’ term, while not used here, captures the ways earlier Orientalist tropes and post-9/11 conditions converged to impact Arab and Muslim American communities. In line with the trends described above, Once in a Promised Land and The Other Americans portray 9/11 as a turning point, not a starting point, which is marked clearly through the voices of the Jordanian American and Moroccan American protagonists.

The title Once in a Promised Land is an ironic reference to the idea that the “American Dream” is a myth, especially for marginalized Arab Americans. It is understood at the start of the novel that the stereotypes, which worsened after 9/11, already existed in the protagonists’ community. Despite the pre-existence of those prejudices, 9/11 is distinctly conveyed as the trigger for the destabilization of the lives of Salwa and Jassim, the Jordanian-American protagonists. The 9/11 turning point is apparent in the first chapter of Once in a Promised Land through two separate sections of inner monologue – one from the perspective of Jassim and one from the perspective of Salwa. Those sections highlight a moment of simultaneous serenity experienced by each of them, marking the shift. While Jassim is taking his daily swim, the description of his internal state reads, “Today, a day that changed everything, Jassim cleared his mind, forced away thoughts of work, of preoccupations, and relaxed for the last time for many years to come, letting his thoughts go where they wished” (Halaby, 2007: 5). Meanwhile, Salwa is at home experiencing a similar feeling:

Nestled there under the cool covers, alone while her husband swam, Salwa found peace, a peace she would remember for years, as it would be scratched away within the hour by men whose culture was a first cousin to her culture, whose religion was her religion. (11)

These temporally parallel monologues – a feature that reflects the text’s polyphonic form by giving distinct but simultaneous perspectives – contain lines connecting that wave to the 9/11 attacks using the words “a day that changed everything” and “it would be scratched away within the hour.” These lines mark the transition from a state of (relative) equilibrium to a state of chaotic imbalance that is instigated by ominous thoughts and experiences related to 9/11, which come together to cause a wave of fear and violence in Jassim’s and Salwa’s lives.
Despite the fact that *The Other Americans* takes place more than a decade after *Once in a Promised Land*, the 9/11 turning point is still apparent. The novel takes place in the conservative Mojave Desert region of California and centers on Moroccan American protagonist Nora Guerraoui and the killing of her father Driss in an anti-Arab/Islamophobic hate crime. The back story linked to the murder of Driss reveals that 9/11 was a trigger for earlier discriminatory attacks against the family, especially the arson that took place on September 11, 2001, in which the family’s donut shop was burned down in a racially-motivated crime. Through flashbacks, we see violence stemming from the larger 9/11 attacks reverberating into the 9/11 arson and leaving lasting repercussions on the Guerraoui family as well as other characters. In one such flashback, Nora reflects on her father’s business success after moving from Casablanca to California decades earlier, focusing on the pride and comfort he felt in his work then. She admits that the arson was a turning point for the family and a shift away from the sense of security that defined the family’s early days in the community. Nora recalls that “… all [of] that changed one September morning … I remember that the smell of smoke reached me first” (Lalami, 2019: 35). In reading those words alone, it initially seems Nora is speaking directly about the terror attacks and the smoke from the Twin Towers in New York on 9/11. However, it is then understood that she is referring to the arson because she stated earlier in that line:

>I knew something terrible would happen. You remember his business was arsoned after September 11th? They never found out who did it. And then he put up a huge flag outside his restaurant, like he had to prove he was one of the good ones. (25)

The display of the flag as a form of self-defense shows how the local 9/11 attack shifted the sense of pride and comfort Driss once felt, indicating the 9/11 turning point that prompted the intensified disintegration of security for the family and cohesiveness within their community.

The 9/11 turning point and subsequent spread of fear and violence metaphorically represents the way America’s post-9/11 narrative caused increased polarization in the country and broke down any pre-existing sense of accord (because when fear-responses dominate and impact public opinion and behavior, cohesiveness deteriorates). In that way, the dominant political narrative is implicated in that deterioration by way of this 9/11 idea as it weaves its way throughout the numerous narrations and consciousnesses. The transmission pattern also mirrors real-world developments in post-9/11 America, such as in the context of the aforementioned 2002 State of the Union address – in which Bush introduced the world to the terms, “axis of evil” and “War on Terror” (Bush, 2002). That speech was
filled with pretenses about capitalizing on unity in post-9/11 America, like when Bush claimed that:

> September 11 brought out the best in America ... I [applaud] your unity and resolve ... Yet as we act to win the war, protect our people ... Americans deserve to have this same spirit directed toward addressing problems here at home ... we must act first and foremost not as Republicans, not as Democrats, but as Americans. (Bush, 2002)

Because those calls to unite were tenuous and disingenuous (as they did not reflect the extreme partisanship of American politics), they failed. Additionally, because of the manipulative fear-mongering tactics built into the follow-up statement – “We are protected from attack only by vigorous action abroad and increased vigilance at home” (Bush, 2002) – many citizens were coerced into supporting the unnecessary wars claiming to fight “evil” overseas and the unconstitutional increases in surveillance to “protect” from threats domestically that came with the Patriot Act.3 As a result of that support and ongoing manipulation along those lines, fear and bigotry increased and daily life was disrupted and destabilized to account for increased vigilance around perceived threats of terrorism, even domestically. In the novels, those literal patterns are translated through the 9/11 idea to show that the narrative acted as a centrifugal force imposed on society, which had destabilizing effects on the Arab American protagonists.

In *Once in a Promised Land*, the 9/11 idea infiltrates Salwa’s and Jassim’s lives and results in various manifestations of violence, such as a car accident Jassim causes early in the novel. The portrayal of his thoughts in the sections leading up to the accident indicates that the stress he feels as a result of the terror attacks is sending shockwaves through his daily life, even amid routine behaviors, like his daily swim. In lines such as, “His actions were automatic, but his brain seized on picture after picture, humans leaping from impossible heights, plumes of smoke filling the air and then charging down the narrow streets” (Halaby, 2007: 19) and “… the tension of the past two weeks detaching itself in clumps, the wreckage of four planes cluttering the space around him, ash filling his lungs” (39), we see the extent to which the shock of 9/11 is infiltrating his mind. His incessant mental processing of 9/11 and bigotry aimed at him distract him while driving home. In that state of mind, his car swerves and runs into another character, Evan, who is skateboarding on the shoulder of the road. In a new violent episode that is a direct repercussion of the earlier one – seen through the connection between Jassim’s behavior and his reckless driving – the impact kills Evan.

On the surface, this sequence of events can be read as a cause-and-effect relationship between a stressed individual and his actions and decisions, which is the
way it might be interpreted when considering a monologic novel. Bakhtin noted that in the polyphonic novel, because characters are subjects rather than objects, “an ordinary pragmatic interpretation at the level of the plot [is insufficient]” (Bakhtin, 1984: 7). In *Once*, the potency of the 9/11 idea goes beyond a mere human stressor in this scene and instead acts on its own behalf. In doing so, it becomes a metaphor for the power of the damaging post-9/11 narrative and the damage it caused in American communities. This is especially true because the 9/11 idea causes the unintentional homicide of a community member outside of Salwa and Jassim’s marriage; therefore, it does not only impact the Arab American community, but also reverberates outside it. This reveals an overlap between the post-9/11 experiences of Arab Americans and Americans from other walks of life in the sense that the toxic narrative driving the post-9/11 agenda became everyone’s problem. This is important – not to take focus away from the challenges imposed on Arab Americans – but to center their experience as one that is valid to the Arab American community and beyond.

Similarly, in *The Other Americans*, Driss’s feud with the neighboring business owner Anderson eventually leads to Driss’s murder – a hate crime perpetrated when Anderson’s son AJ hits Driss with his vehicle and then flees the scene. It is not a coincidence that in both novels, violent events like fatal car accidents are used to represent the increased racial and ethnic tensions in America during the time periods represented in them. In both examples, the accidents are the culmination of a build-up of fear and anger on the part of Jassim and AJ, and the vehicles that impose such final and decisive acts of violence (whether intentional or unintentional) represent the way the accumulation of ideas linked to 9/11 come together to operate as an agent of destruction. Not only does Driss’s murder represent the marginalization and demonization of Arab Americans in the aftermath of 9/11, but it also shows that tensions linked to 9/11 act as an agent of fear and violence and represent assaults on American society caused by the post-9/11 narrative.

To add to this, the internal thoughts of the bigoted narrator Anderson reveal that the intersection where Driss was killed has been prone to accidents for decades. Anderson rationalizes the accident in his mind in an attempt to convince himself that his son could not have murdered Driss. He says,

> … the intersection of the 62 and Old Woman Springs Road used to be called “Crash Corner” because of how often accidents happen there. Gruesome ones, too, with body parts mangled into car parts right there in the middle of the road. (Lalami, 2019: 102)

These details give a sense of the history of violence in this community; the way the descriptions of the accidents resemble images of the aftermath of 9/11 (and
even resemble the way Jassim recalled the attacks in his mind just before the accident (he caused) link the violent location to that historic event. Nora mentions this location in a later scene when she explains that, “The restaurant had been built … on land that belonged to Chemehuevi Indians, by … a pair of homesteaders from Corona” (176). These historical references from differing viewpoints set a precedent for the way the idea of 9/11 storms in and further transmits violence, especially in this location. They also resonate with Bakhtin’s claim that “consciousnesses and ideas are parallel in polyphonic novels,” or “lie side by side on a plane of coexistence” (Bakhtin, 1984: 31). Finally, they add another layer to the violent setting and its ideological basis by mentioning homesteaders. That reference alludes to pre-existing destructive conditions based on oppressive rhetoric and action, such as “Manifest Destiny” and the Homestead Act of 1862, which resulted in the seizure of millions of acres of Indigenous land (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014: 141). This trauma-laden (literal and metaphorical) intersection of competing oppressions also resonates with the concept of cacophony – especially with Byrd’s call to “imagine cacophonously” – an act requiring us to “understand that the historical processes that have created our contemporary moment have affected everyone at various points …” (Byrd, 2011: xxxiv). The historical processes behind America’s post-9/11 agenda did not begin in a vacuum. The violent episodes are allusions to existing ideologies that were based on essentialist binaries and embodied by American policy for decades, then later re-purposed through the dissemination of the neo-conservative agenda in the early 2000s, causing a new level of destruction to America’s social fabric.

Invalidating Rigid Binaries Through Nuance

Through a plurality of American voices that demonstrate complex and nuanced depictions of human intentions and interactions, *Once in a Promised Land* and *The Other Americans* implicate America’s post-9/11 narrative by breaking down the rigid binaries and essentialist stereotypes it is based on. Those binaries are evident in Bush’s 2002 State of the Union address during which he specifically referenced these binaries – such as enem(y)ies vs all(y)ies, evil vs good, and terror vs security – a total of 89 times during the 48-minute-long 2002 State of the Union address (Bush, 2002). This breakdown of diametrically opposed views links to Fatima Assef’s work on *Once in a Promised Land*, in which she explains that Halaby opposes the ruling principles of post-9/11 America – all relating in some way to “hyper-patriotism” and “racial determinism” (539). The nuanced portrayals of inter-personal relationships in both Halaby’s and Lalami’s novels reveal that the perceptions non-Arab characters have of Arab American characters disrupt the rigid binaries associated with the post-9/11 narrative, or “the US worldview that
is restricted to the binarism of East and West” (539). In disrupting the latter, the novels also deconstruct long-standing Orientalist portrayals of Arabs and Muslims that Carol Fadda deems “the shared vocabulary used to reify the vast differences between a ‘civilized’ US culture on the one hand and a ‘barbaric’ and backward Arab and Muslim landscape on the other” (Fadda, 2014: 2).

Through the narration of bigoted White characters, it becomes clear that the bigotry does not originate from the above-stated kind of pre-existing notions about Arabs (at least not consciously), but is mainly based on the troubled pasts and personal experiences of the characters. The sentiments of White characters toward the Arab American protagonists show varying degrees of human empathy, despite the fact that their views are malleable and sometimes lead to racially driven violence committed against the Arab American characters. The nuanced behavior of the narrators is not meant to justify their bigotry, but rather is included to show that human thoughts and actions are not as simple and one-dimensional as the good vs evil dichotomy of the prevailing political narrative. Such complexity of consciousness – both in terms of nuanced views and the malleability of opinions – is indicative of the subjective quality of characters in dialogic novels. They do not appear as “fixed elements in the author’s design,” or objects possessing convenient thoughts and dwelling in convenient circumstances solely to fit a singular ideological agenda (Bakhtin, 1984: 7). By complicating the characters’ intentions and interactions in this way, the novels deconstruct the simplistic and extreme motives prescribed by the post-9/11 narrative. And by calling attention to the experiences of Americans from several ethnic and racial groups, including White Americans, the novels expand upon the idea of cacophony by presenting accounts of Americans whose experiences co-exist on the horizontal axis regardless of ethnic or racial identity (because few citizens were able to escape the destabilizing impacts of post-9/11 neo-conservative rigid lies, fear-mongering, and manipulation tactics).

Nuanced human intention and motivation appear in Once in a Promised Land through Jassim’s interactions with the bigoted former marine Jack Franks. At Jassim’s gym where the two characters interact, Jack tells Jassim that his daughter is married to a Jordanian man “from the sticks – or the sand” and that she “became an Arab” (Halaby, 2007: 6) – by which he means she converted to Islam. When Jassim mentions that he’s married to a Jordanian woman, Jack prods further to find out what she looks like and whether she wears a hijab. Jassim, feeling that Jack has crossed a boundary, stops answering, but Jack rambles on in a way that Orientalizes an Arab woman at his bank. Jack says, “I’m just amazed by the beauty of the women there. Incredible. The hair, the eyes. No wonder you fellas cover them up” (7). Jassim soon realizes that the woman Jack is talking about is his wife, Salwa, who works at the bank. This particularly personal example of bigotry accurately reflects right-wing views based on Orientalist tropes about Arabs and
Muslims that were present in America both before and after 9/11. Jack is arguably the most bigoted character in the novel, and yet through later scenes narrated by him independently, we witness the complexity involved in his decisions and behaviors. He recalls difficult events from his recent past, such as his divorce and estrangement from his daughter, and he also reveals that he binge drinks and directly blames 9/11 and its aftermath for the downward spiral he has experienced. He reflects that “the Twin Towers were flattened” and that in the “few hours and the days that followed, everything he had run from came bubbling to the surface. All that was really wrong in his life came back to haunt him, to erase the man he had become” (163–165). Because he is narrating that section, we have access to the details that reveal his unhappiness in life and his obsession with Salwa, which stem from his grief.

Jack later ruminates over his suspicion that Jassim might be a terrorist stating that while “He harbored no ill will toward either Salwa or Jassim, [he] just felt that not everything was in its place, as it should be” (172–173). He adds that he is not even “sold on [Jassim’s] being a terrorist” (173). These lines present his intentions and motivations as ambivalent and more complex than the black-and-white rigidity of the post-9/11 narrative because he’s not making a split-second decision based simply on appearance in the way of racial profiling. Jack’s ambivalence does not stop him from reporting Jassim to a friend in the FBI, but that decision also shows nuance. Jack admits that, “For the first time in years he felt he was armed with a righteous and vital responsibility and therefore important, selfless” (173), so feels he has become whole again after the report and that feeling does not stem from his fear of Jack being a terrorist. Rather, what provokes the report is his history of personal turmoil and the resulting need to feel he has done something for what he thinks is the greater good. The idea of feeling “selfless” for reporting a community member as a terrorist harkens back to when Bush stated in 2002 that “tens of thousands of trained terrorists are still at large. These enemies view the entire world as a battlefield, and we must pursue them wherever they are” (Bush, 2002). The sequence of events in Jack’s life undermines the rigid binaries that post-9/11 rhetoric endorsed by showing a more complicated dynamic, but they also show the susceptibility of community members to that rhetoric.

Complicating the intentions and motivations of Jack Franks doesn’t justify his behavior; it shows that humans are doubtful, ambivalent, and malleable. They can either succumb to or overcome brainwashing propaganda, but the potency of the propaganda and the high level from which it originates causes many to fall prey to it, especially when their past experiences color their decisions. But regardless of whether they fall prey to it or not, the binaries are diluted in this portrayal. Halaby does not depict humans as robots reacting simplistically to a color-coded terror alert, which leaves no room for nuance because each of the levels indicates that
there is a threat despite the fact that there are varying levels of that threat (HSAS).
Instead, they are portrayed as multi-layered and complex to challenge the power
dynamics of the dominant narrative.

This pattern of nuanced human intention appears in *The Other Americans* as well.
The novel’s mid-2010s political climate is accurately shown as one in which
anti-immigrant, and particularly anti-Islamic sentiment, is pervasive. The conserv-
ative town where the story takes place is situated near the 29 Palms Marine base
and is described as featuring “Marine flags on houses and yellow ribbons on cars”
(Lalami, 2019: 94) – symbolizing the hyper-patriotism and often xenophobic
views of the town’s right-wing citizens, some of which are narrators in the novel.
The American flag symbolism seen throughout both *Once in a Promised Land* and
*The Other Americans* connects to Steven Salaita’s discussion of intensified jingo-
ist rhetoric after 9/11, which “reinforc[ed] a national identity made universal in the
image of the majoritarian elite” (Salaita, 2007: 24). That perceived “universal”
identity stems from American exceptionalist ideology, which, in fact, marginal-
izes many groups, including Arab Americans (24). American exceptionalism was
given new life following 9/11, but dates back to America’s emergence as a domi-
nant world power, and like the flag symbolism in *The Other Americans*, it is omni-
present in American narratives about itself used to legitimize its foreign policy
actions (Said, 1994: 285, 290). It is also reflective of the real-world political divis-
siveness in the 2010s that eventually led to the election of Donald Trump with
roots in the divisive rhetoric of the post-9/11 agenda. Even before he became pres-
ident, Trump stoked the flames of divisiveness in America, emboldening the
already embedded racism in many communities while gaining followers and
future campaign supporters. This was seen during Barack Obama’s presidency
when Trump promoted the highly reported conspiracy theory referred to as
“birtherism” to provoke existing prejudices and sow political divisions (Klinkner,
2014: 4–5, 26).

That brand of bigotry and polarization, helped along by manipulation from the
US government and the media, is apparent in the mid-2010s setting of *The Other
Americans*. But even in such an environment, the multi-layered nature of human
intention comes through, especially through depictions of bigoted White charac-
ters. Through the autonomous narration of business owner Anderson and his son
AJ (who we later learn murdered Driss), we learn that their racism is more com-
plex than the post-9/11 narrative would have us believe, refuting the rigid binaries.
It also shows that although the narrative is based on lies bearing no resemblance to
human intentions and motivations, those with pre-existing histories like Anderson’s
and AJ’s are easily targeted by the lies and can easily buy into the narrative.
Anderson reveals the roots of his bigotry in statements like, “All kinds of people
have been coming here. All kinds … they’re changing this place and wanting me
to be grateful for it. They didn’t ask if we wanted them here, they just came” (Lalami, 2019: 213). These revelations are highly characteristic of the xenophobic ideas that increased political divisions in the 2010s and ultimately led to the election of Donald Trump and his actions in office that further spurred xenophobic sentiment through countless incendiary racist comments. But while Anderson’s intentions are full of racist sentiment, they are more nuanced than the simple ally v. enemy propaganda that backed the post-9/11 agenda.

The sections narrated by AJ are filled with self-justification for his racist thinking and ruminations about past difficulties. They also reflect the growing divisiveness in American society. He mockingly called out “liberals” in the way that became so common in the latter part of the 2010s, seen in lines like, “everyone goes on and on about celebrating diverse culture, the oh-so-enlightened liberals turn on you and call you names” (289). In a chapter from AJ’s perspective that is full of anti-Asian slurs, he explains the root of his bigotry: the fact that he lost his business in the recent past because an Asian woman reported him for negligence. AJ says, “I couldn’t believe it – this woman came into my country, could barely speak my language, and then sued me for negligence” (291).

While these two characters are clearly bigoted to the point of being dangerous, their backstories are significant in a way that goes beyond character development. As with Jack Franks in Once, Anderson and AJ have unresolved issues from the past that make them prime candidates for manipulation by the increasingly polarizing rhetoric caused by the rise of Trump and his brand of conservatism.

The use of a plurality of voices to depict nuance and ambivalence in human interactions is most evident in sections narrated by characters who become intimately involved with the Arab American protagonists. These characters are generally less bigoted or are at least questioning their bigotry more seriously because of the bonds they are forming with the Arab American protagonists. During a scene in Once in a Promised Land that follows 9/11 and is narrated by Penny, with whom Jassim has a brief affair, she is evaluating her anger over the attacks, her pride in the US, and her love for George W. Bush while watching the evening news one night. The access to Penny’s perspective reveals her ambivalent perceptions of Arabs. At first, she is “… outraged, sickened that there were people so sinister that they would want to harm innocent Americans” (Halaby, 2007: 280). But when her friend questions her willingness to date an Arab, Penny says that “Jassim is a good guy – he’s not like them, shouldn’t be judged like them. But those people over there, they oppress women and kill each other. They’re the ones who should be bombed” (281). The intimate connection between the characters makes Penny’s ambivalence different from that of Jack Franks, who does not have enough of a personal connection to prevent him from reporting Jassim. Penny is able to separate Jassim from the labels she is giving the foreign monolith of Arabs
in her head, showing the complexity that comes from human interaction that contradicts essentialist rationale. However, Penny does not entirely let go of her generalized perception of “those people over there,” which confirms the pervasiveness of anti-Arab stereotypes following 9/11 and the potency of the fear-mongering.

In *The Other Americans*, Nora’s love interest Jeremy reveals even more complex sentiments behind his past experiences and feelings toward Nora and her identity as a Moroccan-American. Jeremy is characterized as someone who struggles with PTSD brought on by several tours in Iraq as a marine. Jeremy felt he could never please his father — a conservative who Jeremy describes as living a sedentary life until, “Al-Qaeda flew planes into the World Trade Center in New York” after which he “sat up in the easy chair and for the first time started to pay attention to the television” (Lalami, 2019: 27). Jeremy’s father’s conservative leaning, which is directly linked to the 9/11 turning point, was encouraged by his addiction to Fox News. Jeremy was neglected for those reasons, which eventually leads to him dropping out of college to join the Marines, in part to please his father. This sequence of events traces Jeremy’s fraught history all the way through to his deployment to Iraq during the US invasion. The scenes narrated from his perspective reveal that a complex history of insecurity led him to believe the lies about Iraq and develop a bias against Arabs. This type of characterization differs from certain popular film depictions, for example, of one-dimensional patriotic characters promoting essentialist ideas, such as the Bruce Willis major general character in the 1998 film *The Siege*. By complicating the motivations of such characters, these novels disrupt the cognitive distortion that guides American exceptionalism, which is based on Orientalism and the European exceptionalism that the concept itself claims to undermine (Said, 1994: 285).

*The Other Americans* contains an element of redemption that is prompted by Jeremy’s relationship with Nora and the resulting dissolution of his rigid thinking. Through Jeremy’s internal monologue during an intimate scene with Nora, we see him beginning to reconcile what he went through in Iraq and how ideologically misguided he was. This is similar to *Once* in which Penny is also more open to altering her views of Arabs due to her connection with Jassim. But perhaps because Penny’s relationship with Jassim is a brief affair that seems less like a union that can heal past trauma, the redemption that Nora and Jeremy’s relationship produces in *The Other Americans* goes to another level of showing that human connection is not only complex, but powerful enough to undermine the brainwashing rhetoric of the past. Jeremy reaches a level of self-reflection where he reviews the derogatory terms for Arabs that he used while in Iraq and admits to himself that justifying the war in his mind caused him to “dehumanize the enemy in order to fight it” (Lalami, 2019: 167). Because of the connection he is developing with Nora, Jeremy’s views of Arabs and Muslims shift from the dehumanizing toward the humanizing. He admits,
“I felt shame overtaking me, followed by a private rebellion” (167). The last line suggests that he is developing an opposition – gained through human interaction – to the brainwashing that once dominated his political thinking. The “private rebellion” phrase points to a key difference between *The Other Americans* and *Once in a Promised Land*. While *Once* follows the slippery slope that ensued in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 – when the “if you see something, say something”-style FBI reporting abounded and unstoppably crushed many Arab and Muslim-Americans like an avalanche – *The Other Americans* contains themes of resistance-building that *Once* does not. This dissimilarity should not just be chalked up to a simple variation between authors and styles. The resistance shown in the way Jeremy overcomes and even opposes his prior bigotry points to another strength stemming from human interaction, which is that it fosters a sense of solidarity that can encourage unifying to resist oppressive forces in greater numbers.

*The Other Americans* also contains a justice-seeking aspect that *Once* does not. Nora’s efforts to gain retribution for Driss’s murder reflect the decade in which the novel was written (as well as the decade that it depicts). It is understood at the very start of the novel that the narrative will revolve around the murder because the novel opens with the four words: “My father was killed …” (3). That line also portends the nature of the case, which gradually moves from being seen as accidental death to a pre-meditated murder and hate crime. This distinction is significant because the reclassification of the incident as a murder reflects the virulence of the earlier post-9/11 agenda and the later increase in polarization in America in the mid-2010s. Nora’s pursuit of justice for her father’s death is a metaphor for events that took place in America during that decade. They represent the Trump-era liberal and progressive fight for justice in the face of destabilizing changes, such as the 2017 Muslim Ban. The justice-seeking element in *The Other Americans* is integral because Nora’s fight against the hate crime runs parallel to the idea of dismantling the dominant narrative and subverting the power that created it. During the tumult of Trump’s early days in office in 2017, and similarly in the midst of Bush’s immediate post-9/11 reactionary response, it was easy to pin all the blame on right-wing politics. But anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia in America – born from long-standing Orientalist discourse – supersede the divides of American politics and exist across the political spectrum – especially in the ways they contribute to the myth of American exceptionalism and shape America’s foreign policy.

**The Fallacy of “Exceptional Americanness”**

Extreme divisiveness and destabilization occur when a nation’s leaders deal in bigotry and weaponize blatant falsehoods, such as in America following 9/11. Halaby’s and Lalami’s novels reflect the damage that imposing those lies and
tactics caused in American society by depicting the 9/11 idea as an autonomous agent and featuring a plurality of voices that demonstrate nuance and ambivalence in perceptions of Arab Americans. By doing so, they implicate and subvert post-9/11 American rhetoric. They also place multiple Arab and Muslim American experiences in conversation with each other as a way to broaden the often essentialized identity of those diverse groups. As a result, the novels oppose anti-Arab and Islamophobic behavior rooted in Orientalism while simultaneously showing the damage the post-9/11 agenda caused in many American communities through damaging polarization. Through these polyphonic novels, Arab American literature moves toward the center and drives home the idea that Arab and Muslim American experiences are relevant to the whole of America.

Steven Salaita describes the anti-Arab and Islamophobic tensions in post-9/11 America as a “social atmosphere that marginalizes Arab Americans and induces [their] appropriation as Other into narratives of exceptional Americanness” (24). Salaita’s words ring true but describe only one facet of the complex sociopolitical changes that arose in the fallout of 9/11. Indeed, the Islamophobic and Anti-Arab backlash led to the othering of Arab Americans, causing violent and lasting repercussions. Once in a Promised Land and The Other Americans explicate that struggle by centering the narrative around diverse Arab American protagonists. But through a plurality of voices, they also show that American exceptionalism is not a private club that everyone in America is a part of except the marginalized. They show that multitudes of Americans were impacted by the shifting tides in the early twenty-first century and that they were used as pawns to alter public opinion, sow divisions, and justify things like increased surveillance domestically and American military interventions abroad.

All of the characters we hear from in Once in a Promised Land and The Other Americans through their autonomous narrative lenses – despite the fact that many of them are bigoted offenders and even murderers – have in common susceptibility to the destabilizing effects of the hateful, dishonest, and divisive narrative that drove the post-9/11 agenda in America. In this way, American exceptionalism is indeed a fallacy – but is one that most Americans are appropriated into. This is a valuable line of thought to follow, not as a way to claim that all Americans are equal targets or victims, but to underline just how central the Arab American experience is to the broader American experience when an agenda fueled by hatred of Arab Americans is at the core of a sea change of domestic and global politics. For these reasons, analyzing the polyphonic and dialogic nature of these novels and their indictment of America’s post-9/11 political agenda is of utmost significance if America is to confront the sociopolitical identity crisis that emerged at the crucial 2001 turning point and persisted through the 2010s and beyond.
Notes

1. The repercussions of 9/11 include hyper-patriotism displayed in communities, signs of increased government surveillance, and depictions of pro-war propaganda from the US media and government.

2. There is precedent for the discussion of polyphony and dialogism in Anglophone Arab novels. Dallel Sarnou examines the ways polyphonic Anglophone Arab literature written by Arab women in diaspora produces distinctive narrative voices located at the crossroads of east and west, and how those voices traverse multiple cultures and ethnic identities (Sarnou, 2016: 203). She determines that the unique positioning of these women distinguishes their work from other female writers while offering insight into challenges faced by Arabs in diaspora (203), which is a trend apparent in both *Once in a Promised Land* and *The Other Americans*.

3. AlSultany captures this moment when she writes that, “The government’s overt propaganda of war was palatable to many citizens on edge and regarded with suspicion by others as the government passed the USA Patriot Act, initiated war in Afghanistan and later in Iraq, and publicly explained the terrorist attacks by stating ‘they hate us for our freedom’” (AlSultany, 2013: 162).

4. Some of the starkest examples were Trump’s claims in 2015 that those crossing the US–Mexico border are often “rapists,” the reference to African nations in 2018 as “shithole countries,” or his dubbing in 2020 of COVID-19 as both “The China Virus” and “the kung flu” (González-Ramírez, 2019).

5. In addition to the fact that AJ is the perpetrator of the hate crime that *The Other Americans* revolves around, the text also implies that he is likely an avowed white supremacist (Lalami, 2019: 279).

References


https://www.chicagoreporter.com/20-years-after-09-11-anti-arab-imperialist-racism-is-alive-and-well/


