

From the Traumatic to the Political:  
Cultural Trauma, 9/11 and  
Amy Waldman's *The Submission*

SONIA BAELO-ALLUÉ

Universidad de Zaragoza

baelo@unizar.es

Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks a long list of novels concerned directly or indirectly with these events have been published. Psychic trauma literature has been especially popular among them, a fiction accused of solipsism and depoliticized discourse by being mostly unconcerned with the attacks' global context and political consequences. This essay does not ignore the importance of the trauma paradigm but focuses on cultural rather than psychic trauma and on Amy Waldman's *The Submission* (2011) as an example of the possibilities raised by the cultural trauma novel. Although rooted in the domestic and the personal, Waldman's novel transcends the shortcomings of psychic trauma fiction by exposing the cultural and political consequences of trauma, thus opening up a new path for future 9/11 fiction.

Keywords: trauma studies; *The Submission*; Amy Waldman; trauma fiction; 9/11 fiction; contemporary American literature

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De lo traumático a lo político:  
el trauma cultural, el 11 de septiembre y  
la novela de Amy Waldman *The Submission*

Desde los ataques terroristas del 11 de septiembre se han publicado bastantes novelas que tratan el tema de forma directa o indirecta. La literatura del trauma psicológico ha sido especialmente popular, una ficción acusada de solipsismo y de usar un discurso despolitizado al no centrarse en el contexto global de los ataques y sus consecuencias políticas. Este ensayo no ignora la importancia del paradigma del trauma pero se centra en el trauma cultural en vez del psicológico y en la novela de Amy Waldman *The Submission* (2011) como ejemplo

de las posibilidades que la novela de trauma cultural conlleva. Aunque enraizada en lo doméstico y lo personal, la novela de Waldman trasciende las limitaciones de la ficción de trauma psicológico al exponer las consecuencias culturales y políticas del trauma, de esta forma abriendo un nuevo camino para la futura ficción sobre el 11 de septiembre.

Palabras clave: estudios de trauma; *The Submission*; Amy Waldman; ficción de trauma; ficción del 11 de septiembre; literatura americana contemporánea

More than ten years after 9/11, many novels have been published that deal with the terrorist attacks and their consequences in direct or indirect ways.<sup>1</sup> A brief analysis of the type of novels that literary critics have studied in the numerous essays, chapters and complete books that have been written on 9/11 fiction shows that the most popular novels among academics deal with domestic, psychic trauma, and are mostly unconcerned with the broader global context and the political consequences of the events. However, in these years, a certain dissatisfaction has also grown, first among literary journalists, and later among some literary critics, as to the shortcomings of this emerging fiction, and the trauma studies approach that has been favored in their analysis. This essay does not ignore the importance of the psychic trauma paradigm when dealing with 9/11 fiction; however, it also examines the danger that individual, psychic trauma fiction has of falling into national solipsism and inadvertently backing ideas of American exceptionalism. Although it is hard to find the great American novel that captures the epoch-making events of 9/11, Amy Waldman's *The Submission* (2011) exemplifies the possibilities and advantages of approaching trauma from a cultural, global perspective. This is a cultural trauma novel that moves beyond the shortcomings of psychic trauma fiction to show the cultural and political consequences of trauma, opening up a new path for future 9/11 fiction.

#### 1. AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND PSYCHIC TRAUMA

To understand why the trauma paradigm has been so popular, it is necessary to go back in time to the aftermath of 9/11. The shocking, unexpected terrorist attacks produced in many people an initial disbelief and emotional numbness, followed by fear and anxiety that led to collective mourning and the idealization of victims, the police and fire officers. Strong patriotic sentiments also developed and, in an attempt to rebuild lost confidence in the strength of the nation, President George W. Bush defended the position that the United States was an enduring nation that had been attacked precisely for its exceptional nature and moral superiority (2003, n.p.). 9/11 was also presented in public discourse as a conflict between good and evil and a clear division was established between victims and perpetrators (Bush 2001, n.p.). In this political atmosphere, the trauma paradigm emerged as the perfect means to safely accommodate this public discourse of patriotism and this melodramatic division between good and evil, at the same time as giving people the means to articulate their personal experiences of suffering and pain through the mass media. However, the trauma discourse was also used to justify the ideology of American innocence, exceptionalism, moral clarity and pre-emptive action. As Richard Crownshaw highlights, Bush's discourse produced a collective melancholia for an idealized national past that never really existed (2011, 760). In order to protect the homeland, this collective melancholia was also combined

<sup>1</sup> The research carried out for the writing of this article is part of a project financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (MINECO) (code FFI2012-32719). The author is also grateful for the support of the Government of Aragón and the European Social Fund (ESF) (code H05).

with a movement in ideology from American exceptionalism to America's state of exception, as seen in the authorization of "indefinite detention," unilateral war and the curtailing of civil rights (Duvall 2013, 281-282).

America's state of exception and its accompanying trauma discourse and underlying melancholia were also reinforced by certain intellectuals who asserted that, out of the horror of the terrorist attacks, the only good things that could emerge were the end of the age of irony (Rosenblatt 2001, n.p.; Coyne 2001, 18), the death of postmodernism, and a new "moral clarity" removed from pseudosophisticated relativism (Bennett 2002, 150). Other voices instead defended the need for irony and accused the Bush administration of imposing a "new unilateralism" (Fish 2001, n.p.) and "fixed ideas" (Didion 2003). However, it was Susan Sontag, only twelve days after the tragedy, that most clearly denounced the dangers of the trauma discourse and claimed that the Bush administration and some media commentators were using a "reality-concealing" rhetoric with their talk about confidence-building and grief management: "Politics, the politics of a democracy—which entails disagreement, which promotes candor—has been replaced by psychotherapy. Let's by all means grieve together. But let's not be stupid together. A few shreds of historical awareness might help us to understand what has just happened, and what may continue to happen" (2001, n.p.).

In spite of her prescient words, the trauma discourse has permeated both political discourse and 9/11 literature, which has caused a certain depoliticization of both. Many 9/11 novels, especially the early ones, have retreated to the world of domesticity, depoliticizing discourse and assimilating the unfamiliar into familiar structures, ignoring, in turn, the panoramic and public (Gray 2011, 28). For example, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* (2006), Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006) and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) focus not on the causes of the tragedy or even on its cultural consequences for the nation, but rather on the way the attacks affected the lives of specific individuals and families, which some critics have interpreted as a "failure of the imagination" (Rothberg 2009a, 152-158). These early novels narrow the scope to the psychic, individual trauma that the attacks produced without questioning its political and ideological origins. As Pankaj Mishra has put it, "for all that 9/11 stands for in their sentimental and nostalgic novels about New Yorkers coping with loss, it could be a natural disaster, like the tsunami" (Mishra 2007, n.p.). Curiously enough, in spite of the obvious limitations that psychic trauma fiction has when dealing with 9/11 as a cultural event, the popularity of these novels among academics is undeniable. This is probably so because, since the 1990s, trauma studies have become a major field of interdisciplinary research, and those scholars who had already been working in the field received psychic trauma novels as an opportunity to put into practice their own theories. In an insightful essay Lucy Bond goes as far as to suspect that "some theorists may have seized upon 9/11 to illuminate the phenomenon of trauma, rather than utilizing trauma (or traumatic paradigms) to illuminate 9/11" (2011, 755).

On the tenth anniversary of the tragedy other critics looked back on the literary fiction produced to date in an attempt to find the great 9/11 American novel, capable of capturing the traumatic consequences of the event without simply offering domestic approaches to the tragedy. For example, Richard Crownshaw (2011, 757-776) and Richard Gray (2009, 139) have defended Cormac McCarthy's 9/11 allegory *The Road* (2006) as a novel that breaks with national fantasies of an innocent homeland and American exceptionalism. Duvall and Marzec, in their introduction to the special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* (2011), looked for a more politically engaged 9/11 novel and found it in Jess Walter's *The Zero* (2006), a good candidate since it combines both a political and a domestic satire, and in Salman Rushdie's *Shalimae the Clown* (2006). In *Studies in the Novel* (2013), Duvall has more recently explored other possible, less realist approaches to 9/11 and has found that postmodernism and irony are still useful tools to depict the new geopolitical landscape. He has suggested novels such as Ken Kalfus's *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006) and, again, Jess Walter's *The Zero* since it deploys irony to satirize the American response to the attacks and to comment critically on America's post-9/11 state of exception (Duvall 2013). Another novel that for some critics has overcome the dangers of depoliticization is Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008) due to the encounter with the immigrant it portrays (Rothberg 2008). Adam Haslett's *Union Atlantic* (2009) and Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010) have also been mentioned (Morley 2011) but they address the post-9/11 world in very general terms and without really dealing with the attacks' direct consequences, or doing so in very oblique and indirect terms. Other critics have looked beyond the US to find novels that approach the post-9/11 world in non-US centered ways (Cilano 2009).

It is undeniable that psychic trauma is an important part of what happened on 9/11 and a novel dealing with the events and their aftermath should not ignore the domestic aspects of the tragedy. As Catherine Morley puts it, the power of fiction "goes well beyond the narrowly political" (2011, 720) and should not sacrifice "the domestic dramas of everyday life" (731) for global networks. Instead, it should combine the narrow and the broad, the everyday with geopolitical issues. Home, identity and sovereignty are all affected by globalization and the latter is not an issue that 9/11 fiction should ignore, but it needs to be approached without losing the power of individual and family dramas. Of course, as a theory of fiction it is hard to disagree with Morley's views but it is also hard to find US novels that achieve this perfect combination of the global and the local. This essay explores these possibilities by analyzing Amy Waldman's *The Submission* (2011), a novel that manages to combine the global and the local, the numbness of psychological trauma with the polyphony of cultural trauma, and which is rooted both in the domestic and the personal but does not ignore globalization and the way it affects all types of identities. This novel shows trauma in a potentially new way, providing a new way forward for 9/11 fiction which has often been trapped in narrowing conceptions of trauma and the impossibility of its articulation.

## 2. *THE SUBMISSION*: A COUNTERFACTUAL NOVEL OF CULTURAL TRAUMA

As we have seen, from the very beginning, in 9/11 fiction there was a confrontation between the trauma discourse and the critical political discourse and it was apparently impossible to have both at the same time. The trauma paradigm has traditionally been understood as anti-narrative, dealing with silence, numbness, inaction, fear, pain, retreat; the political discourse needs narrative, it asks questions, and deals with context, history, perspective, action. Literature has drawn from both, as we can see in the trauma novel and the political novel. The cultural trauma novel, on the other hand, combines the traumatic and the political and, as we will see, offers channels that the psychic trauma novel cannot provide. Amy Waldman's *The Submission* focuses on the panoramic and the political, and on the collective and cultural aspects of trauma for the nation. *The Submission* is a counterfactual novel written on the tenth anniversary of 9/11. It deals with what happens in the United States two years after the terrorist attacks when an anonymous competition is organized to select a design for a Ground Zero Memorial. The jury chooses a Garden but they soon discover with surprise that the winner is an American Muslim architect called Mohammad Khan. Thus, *The Submission* is a 9/11 novel of trauma that deals with the cultural trauma of a nation trying to close its wound by choosing a fitting Memorial, which, rather than bringing closure and healing the nation, opens a new wound in the country's social fabric.

Amy Waldman (born 1969) is a former *New York Times* reporter and this is her first novel. The reception of the novel has been very positive and Michiko Kakutani has even seen it as an example of what a 9/11 novel should be, given its "big historical backdrop and pointillist emotional detail" and its "visceral understanding of how New York City and the country at large reacted to 9/11, and how that terrible day affected some Americans' attitudes toward Muslims and immigrants" (2011, n.p.). Kakutani has not been alone in her appraisal of the novel, which won the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize and an American Book Award and was a finalist for the Hemingway Foundation/PEN First Fiction Award. Curiously enough, when upon publication reviewers first tried to establish a literary context in which to place the novel, they largely ignored 9/11 literature and focused instead on big political and social novels like Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (Kakutani 2011; Witt 2011). Amy Waldman has mentioned as models authors like Richard Price and Jonathan Franzen for the way they combine "very intimate portraits of people but also how are they changed and are their personalities and histories changing these very public grand events" (Waldman, in Brown 2011, n.p.). Other critics like Rebecca L. Walkowitz have mentioned as literary frame of reference the novel of multiculturalism linked to a large metropolis (2012, n.p.). Only recently has the novel started to be considered along with other 9/11 political novels like Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008) but still acknowledging that Waldman's novel breaks new ground. As Keeble points out: "*The Submission* is directly political in a way that even the politically charged novels by Hamid and O'Neill are not" (2014, 165).

Emily Witt opens her review of the novel for the *New York Observer* by underlining Waldman's distance from fiction and closeness to nonfiction and journalism. For Witt, *The Submission* is "more a synthesis of her firsthand experience as a reporter than an examination of collective memory" (2011, n.p.). Although it is true that journalism and the mass media play an important role in the story, it is undeniable that *The Submission* is an examination of collective memory that deals with how, in order to overcome a national trauma, societies need to remember and integrate their pain into the nation's official narrative. This is why traumatic memory is so open to manipulation, since specific power groups may try to rewrite it so that it meets their own interests. The whole discourse of patriotism and American Exceptionalism that followed 9/11 may be read in this light.

For Jeffrey Alexander cultural trauma affects whole communities, who see their sense of identity shattered by the events. According to him, "[c]ultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (2004, 1). In *The Submission* the discovery of the identity of the designer of the Garden shatters the nation's sense of identity once more and triggers a public firestorm that grows as antagonistic positions are established. Paul Rubin (the chairperson of the jury) invites Mohammad Khan to withdraw his submission if he wants to see America heal since he views the selection as a new wound opening in the country. He tries to convince him with these words "I don't know why anyone who loves America, wants it to heal, would subject it to the kind of battle the selection of a Muslim would cause. Think of Solomon's baby" (Waldman 2011, 65). Since Khan refuses to withdraw or even explain his design, the Memorial fails as a place around which the nation can reconcile. In this sense, Gauthier has claimed that what makes Khan's design so unsettling is that "it would bring perpetrator and victim, intentionally or not, in close proximity to one another" (2015, 207). It becomes a new site of cultural trauma that forces society to confront its own notions of freedom, tolerance, non-discrimination and equal opportunity policies.

The Memorial becomes a cultural trauma replayed in society by varied pressure groups: jurors, journalists, politicians, family members, liberals, conservatives, illegal immigrants, artists, Muslims, and so on. What makes this novel especially kaleidoscopic is the fact that within these groups new antagonisms and unexpected alliances are established due to social class, gender or political ideology. Rather than the personal perspective of the psychic trauma novel, this cultural trauma novel shows how the nation's sense of collective identity is shaped and how trauma and the memory of trauma is played out in society through a prolonged process of collective uncertainty, negotiation and contestation over the proper form of commemoration and the proper way to articulate loss.

American national identity is based on the idea that one can always heal and place the past in its proper context. Memorials play the role of facilitating the coming to



terms with the past and the healing of the victims (Sturken 2007, 14). Thus, Ground Zero is a place of both memory and mourning, a place to work through pain. An official memorial needs to accommodate both the individual suffering of the victims and the suffering of the nation. After 9/11 small and spontaneous memorials emerged around some fire stations, Union Square and Ground Zero. They were mainly collections of candles, photographs, flags, soft toys and flowers. There were also missing posters and memorial walls. The *New York Times* published the “Portraits of Grief” where victims were individualized and named (2002). As Marita Sturken notes, this process served “to pull these individuals out of an abstract image of mass death and to render them different, unlike any others” (2007, 175). E. Ann Kaplan has also remarked on how the posters of lost people stuck along Tenth and Twelfth Streets turned into a vast communal outpouring of emotion and made visible the need for closure (2005, 7, 12). However, unlike these personal memorials, an official memorial needs to account for the abstract image of death, it needs to be symbolic enough so that it means something for everyone, but it should also give the direct victims some recognition and consolation. It is the kind of memorial that should be able to close the wound of 9/11 on a national level.

### 3. THE RIGHT TYPE OF MEMORIAL

The debate over what an official memorial should be like opens *The Submission*. The jury has whittled the entries down to two. Ariana, a famous sculptor, lobbies for “The Void,” which is a black granite rectangle, twelve stories high, over an oval pool, with the names of the dead carved onto its surface. It is a design that Ariana finds “visceral, angry, dark, raw, because there was no joy in that day” (Waldman 2011, 5). She wants a place to act out trauma, to confront the pain, rather than work through it. Claire, whose husband was killed in the attacks and who represents the victims in the jury, prefers “The Garden,” which is made of real and cast-steel trees and has a white wall with the names of the victims. For her it gives hope, it represents recovery and healing. They finally choose the Garden but its meaning will change once the Muslim identity of its designer is discovered and as the different pressure groups claim it to be “a martyr’s paradise,” “Victory Garden” or “Trojan horse.” The *Wall Street Journal* will claim: “Two decades of multicultural appeasement have led to this: we’ve invited the enemy into our home to decorate” (Waldman 2011, 116). This fictional account of the mass media reaction to the hypothetical choice of a garden designed by a Muslim architect as the national 9/11 memorial, is to be understood in the real cultural atmosphere that 9/11 produced. For Paul Giles, 9/11 became for the United States “the most visible and haunting symbol of the new permeability of its borders, its vulnerability to outside elements” (51). The homeland needs to be guarded when the border between the domestic and the foreign cannot be easily policed and, in the novel, Khan’s design and Khan himself look foreign, even though he was born in the United States and, in origin, his design was just a garden in which to mourn the pain produced by the terrorist attacks.



The real-life memorial competition was organized by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, also two years after 9/11. Although it was not an anonymous competition, it was very popular and received five thousand two hundred and one entrants from sixty-three nations. The designs of the eight finalists were made public and were discussed in the mass media. As happens in the discussion between Ariana and Claire in the novel, there were concerns that the style of most designs was abstract modernist minimalism, rather than a more figurative representation which would be easier to understand. James E. Young, a member of the jury for the real-life National 9/11 Memorial at Ground Zero, has claimed that even though the real jury's internal arguments did not unfold the way they do in *The Submission*, Ariana and Claire's opposing views highlights "a fundamental tension between the families' need for closure and the contemporary artist's need to articulate unredeemable loss" (2012, n.p.). The final memorial design was Michael Arad's "Reflecting Absence," which seems closer to Adriana's choice of design in *The Submission*, but also shares some aspects with Claire's Garden choice. It's an open plaza filled with more than three hundred oak trees and two massive pools with waterfalls cascading down their sides, into the space of the towers' footprints. The names of the victims are inscribed around the edge of these Memorial pools. The emphasis on the footprints of the towers, the voids they left, symbolize the nation's loss but the trees also provide a natural atmosphere of consolation and recovery. It is meant to be a place for the nation to heal but also a place for the nation to be proud since in Ground Zero we also find the One World Trade Center, formerly known as the Freedom Tower, which is the highest building in the United States and has a symbolic height of 1776 feet (a reference to the year when the United States Declaration of Independence was signed).

The initial, personal opposition between fictional judges Ariana and Claire is the beginning of many other binary oppositions that constitute the backbone of this novel, which is divided into four parts. At the beginning, identities seem fixed and characters are close to stereotypes. We have the ambitious, unethical tabloid reporter, the anti-Muslim Christian crusader, the Muslim activists, the oppressed Muslim woman, the assimilated Muslim, the wealthy liberal widow, the conservative politician, the liberal one, etc. Unlike other 9/11 novels, like Jess Walter's *The Zero* (2006), which favor a limited, third-person narration that focalizes on the main character (Duvall 2013, 284), in *The Submission* we have an omniscient, third-person narrator that focalizes on every character. While the ironically impaired angle of vision and the breaks in consciousness of the main character of *The Zero* symbolize American political blindness towards the state of exception (Duvall 2013, 285), in *The Submission* the fragmentation of the narrative process provides the reader with many different perspectives that shape the debate over how to deal with memory and trauma in the cultural arena and across diverse cultural forums. For example, after we are introduced to the original situation and the way the jury inadvertently chooses the design sent by Mohammad Khan, in chapter three we have access to Mohammad Khan's past and how he was harassed by

authorities after 9/11 simply for being a Muslim. We also learn that he was born in the United States, has received a secular education and has hardly ever been to a mosque in his life (Waldman 2011, 28). In this way, the shock of the jury's choice of a Muslim is countered by the direct access to Mohammed's life. Then, the narrator moves back to Claire and her memories of her past life with her dead husband and her present life as a widow with a child. We are invited to identify with every character, to get to know each perspective, simply in order to see things from a different one.

Khan's lawyer tells him once: "Your mind operates like a kaleidoscope: just shift the view and suddenly everything looks completely different" (175). Even Claire will also realize that "there are two sides to everything, including this. Probably more than two sides" (200). Therefore, from very clear-cut positions, most characters evolve and see other perspectives that make them question their initial beliefs. This is a process that the narrative structure reinforces with the constant crisscrossing of perspectives making readers participate in the kaleidoscope that emerges. This narrative technique is especially welcome if we take into account that in most 9/11 narratives there is a lack of encounter with "the other." The few attempts in this direction have only scratched the surface as seen in John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), Martin Amis's short story "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" (2006) and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007). In fact, even bearing witness to the culturally other is missing in most 9/11 early novels, though with some notable exceptions like Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007).

#### 4. THE UNSUITABLE DESIGNER

In the second part of the book the controversy becomes public when Mohammad's name is leaked to the press and the debate over the suitability of the jury's choice becomes an issue of national debate. The simplified initial positions are made more complex. For example, Claire is not the only victim any more. Sean is introduced as the brother of an Irish firefighter who died on 9/11, and he becomes a strong opponent to the Garden. Both Claire and Sean are victims but they are separated by ideology (Claire is liberal; Sean is conservative) and by social class (Claire is a wealthy WASP; Sean is working class and undereducated). Sean cannot understand why Claire favors the Garden memorial: "Maybe money made you feel less, Sean thought, picturing Claire in her mansion, which was bigger than he'd even imagined (and he'd spent a lot of time imagining it), bigger than any he'd seen" (119).

Later on another new victim is introduced: Asma Anwar, the widow of an illegal immigrant from Bangladesh also killed in the attacks. Even though they are all victims their views on the Garden are very different. As psychic trauma victims they may all have been overwhelmed by their loss, which resists language and representation (Whitehead 2004, 3). In trauma theory it is often believed that trauma can also help create new types of solidarity and communities. According to Cathy Caruth, "trauma

itself may provide the very link between cultures" (1996, 11). However, in the case of victims the issue is a bit more complex because they may be linked by their pain—Kai Erikson talks about "a gathering of the wounded" (1995, 187)—but they may also experience estrangement and separation not just from non-victims, but from other victims too, leading to fragmentation and more pain. *The Submission* displays the frictions that competitive memory may cause in individual victims based on their race, ethnicity, gender, social class, age, political ideology and religious beliefs. They all view their pain from different perspectives and present specific histories of victimization. However, *The Submission* can also be read as an example of "multidirectional memory," a concept defined by Michael Rothberg as an alternative to competitive memory, which "cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal and cultural sites" (2009b, 11). As Keeble explains, following Rothberg, *The Submission* is also an invitation into "multidirectional memory" as it gives access to all these different perspectives and establishes the need for reconciliation and collaboration in the construction of a multidirectional collective memory that escapes exclusivist visions (2014, 168).

In spite of this invitation into multidirectional memory, *The Submission* focuses more on competitive memory and on the separation that the victims experience due to their different origins, backgrounds and identities. They all feel a sense of entitlement, and demand to be heard, but they cannot find a single voice with which to express their wishes as a group. In this sense, the novel separates from more optimistic accounts of trauma like Arthur G. Neal's belief that national trauma "is shared collectively and frequently has a cohesive effect as individuals gather in small and intimate groups to reflect on the tragedy and its consequences" (2005, 4). *The Submission* focuses more on competing groups, separation and social estrangement and it is probably so because its focus is not on the immediate aftermath of 9/11 but on the social, political and cultural articulation of the trauma. According to Smelser, when the trauma becomes cultural, it is articulated in the mass media and its mechanisms are established and sustained by power structures, social agents and contending groups (2004, 39). Thus in the second part of the novel, lobby groups emerge, turning an individual fight into a group objective. On the one hand, the Muslim American Coordinating Council defends Khan and his right, like any other American, to win the competition. On the other, relatives' and first responders' associations emerge to defend their right to choose their own memorial. Working through psychic trauma is a personal process since victims may not even share or be able to share their experience with any others. Cultural trauma is a public event that is openly played out in society where power and access to the mass media are equally important.

## 5. THE UNSUITABLE DESIGN

It is in the third part of the novel that the mechanisms associated with cultural trauma start to work. First of all, the debate becomes more complex because it stops revolving around Khan's Muslim identity and moves to the design itself, which starts

to be interpreted as an Islamic Garden, maybe even a martyr's paradise. Ambivalence and doubt affect the main characters and groups. Unlike in psychic trauma, in cultural trauma a series of carrier groups need to broadcast claims of an injury and demand reparation to an audience that needs to understand the nature of the pain, of the victim and of those responsible. The mass media, state bureaucracy, the legal system or even literature will publicly articulate this process leading to the revision of the collective identity. This acting out process is carried out in the novel by, on the one hand, Save America from Islam (SAFI) and the Memorial Defense Committee but also by the Committee to Defend Mohammad Khan, the Mohammad Khan Defense Fund and the Mohammad Khan Protection League. The debate is also played out in the media as a series of advertisements against the Garden are aired on television. Khan's lawyer wants to counter these advertisements with a series of commercials that reinvent Mohammad's identity: "We need you holding up pictures of your children,' he said, and, when Mo [Khan] reminds him that he has none, the lawyers retort is 'Borrow some. We've got to humanize you. No, Americanize you. We want your family albums. Your Boy Scout medals. We want to run ads in advance of the public hearings'" (209).

The Muslim American Coordinating Council prepares an ad campaign to defend Khan with the motto "An Architect, not a Terrorist" but Khan pulls out of the ad campaign since "he felt like a new product being rolled out to market" (172). The either/or rhetoric is the only one that works to win the public debate. As a consequence, Khan's complex identity needs to be simplified by the media: he is either a patriot American who only wants to comfort the victims with his design, or a radical who has created an Islamic Garden to mock the victims. To escape these simplifications Khan also undergoes his own identity crisis and, in spite of having received a secular education, decides to observe Ramadan and grow a beard. He also feels "half god, half freak" (155) when celebrities like Susan Sarandon, Tim Robbins, Robert De Niro, Rosie O'Donnell and Sean Penn start to back his cause.

These simplifications need to be understood in the context of cultural coping of traumatic events. As Kalí Tal states, personal coping and cultural coping are not the same thing. Cultural coping is achieved through several strategies. One of them is mythologization, which turns trauma "from a frightening and uncontrollable event into a contained and predictable narrative" (1996, 6). Society needs to assimilate an unexpected trauma that eludes sense-making, hence the trauma needs to be domesticated and simplified. If in psychic trauma, traumatic memory is transformed into narrative memory as part of the working through process, in cultural trauma events are transformed into a set of symbols that codify the experience, creating a formula or pattern (7). In *The Submission* messages are simplified through media campaigns and the use of symbols like pro-Garden green ribbons, anti-Garden stickers and American flag pins that both sides choose to wear since patriotism is always a safe choice when American identity is at stake.

The advertisements on TV use the technique of mythologization that Tal defines as a usual practice for the cultural coping with trauma. 9/11 is reduced to a series of well-known, recognizable images that become the narrative of the events.

"Have We Forgotten?" another [advertisement] began, the words white on black. Then came a montage of the attack's most harrowing sights and sounds: the jumpers swimming through air; the desperate messages on answering machines; the panicked voices of emergency dispatchers; the first fulminating collapse, and the second; the tsunami of smoke chasing terrified New Yorkers down narrow, rumbling streets; the aghast faces of witnesses, the distraught ones of orphans. Then, "The Jury Forgot"—and a faint, but unmistakable, image, almost a holograph, of Mohammad Khan—"But the Rest of Us Haven't." (Waldman 2011, 168)

Hence the meaning of traumatic experiences becomes a battle between the victim, the community and the political power and is seen in political discourse, popular culture and scholarly debate. As Kalí Tal explains, the result of this battle has important effects and consequences. For example, if the victim's trauma is appropriated by the dominant culture, it may be reshaped and retold in such a way that it does not threaten the status quo. However, if victims manage to control the way their trauma is codified, they may be able to influence future political action (1996, 7). In *The Submission* it becomes obvious that there are many different ways to interpret Khan's design and many ways to present Khan's Arab-American identity. The media provide the resources to silence certain interpretations and reinforce others, thus Khan fears that he has lost control over his own design when the advertisements on TV simplify, appropriate and codify it.

## 6. THE LOCAL TURNS GLOBAL

The fourth and final part of the novel turns the debate into something violent and global. There is a public hearing when Khan finally explains his design: "Life goes on, the spirit rejuvenates—this is what the garden represents. But whereas the garden grows, and evolves, and changes with the seasons, the wall around it changes not at all. It is as eternal, as unalterable, as our mourning" (Waldman 2011, 217). Inadvertently, he also claims in passing that a man wrote the Quran, which causes imams from the Netherlands to Nigeria to denounce him, a fatwa is issued against him in Iran and a mob burns his effigy in Pakistan. As it is summarized in the book: "The crazies he was supposed to keep watch for had broadened beyond Muslim-haters to Muslims who hated him for not being Muslim enough" (240). However, it is Asma's speech (the Bangladeshi widow) and her subsequent assassination that become the turning point in the debate. Whereas Sean decides to stop fighting against Khan (262), Claire organizes a press conference with members of the Muslim

American Coordinating Council to ask Khan to withdraw and to unite around a different memorial. As Roth and Salas suggest, collective trauma is coped with by “overcoming the polarity between perpetrators and victims in order to reach a social consensus that may reconstruct the sense of collective identity” (2001, 11). With this reversal of Sean and Claire’s initial positions Khan finally withdraws and the memorial ends up being a kitschy, but safe, garden of flags.

Claire’s words after her meeting with Khan are very interesting: “If Mr. Khan had shown more willingness to explain his design, so it wouldn’t be the subject to misinterpretation, or even to modify it, I would have continued to push for the Garden and many of the families would have done the same” (Waldman 2011, 274). In a way, one of the underlying mysteries in the novel is precisely Khan’s reasons for designing a garden for the memorial. Not even in those chapters in which the omniscient, third-person narrator focalizes on Khan, do we learn of the actual reasons for his choice of design. Because of this mystery Gauthier believes that readers will probably experience some empathic connection with Claire, and may question their own misgivings about Khan, who is presented as the other of the novel: “Just as the otherness of Arab and Muslim-Americans was heightened after 9/11, so too is the designer’s. Waldman thus creates a scenario where ambivalence exists on both sides” (2015, 209). This ambivalence is highlighted in the final chapter before the epilogue. It is a flashback to Khan’s visit to Afghanistan, where he was sent by his firm to submit a design to build the new American embassy in Kabul. This is an episode that is presented in chapter five of the novel, and which shows Khan as a simple architect who has no interest in religion or politics. The details of this trip are also included in a report that the chairperson of the jury, Paul, orders the security consultants to prepare in order to find out more about Khan’s identity when he learns that his design is selected. However, the flashback in chapter twenty-five shows a different aspect of Khan’s visit: the way he happened to find Babur Gardens in Kabul and the peace that he encountered there. The scene suggests that Khan may have been inspired by an Islamic garden after all when designing the memorial, but it also implies that it was the peace he found there, rather than any political or religious implications, that fed his inspiration.

Unlike individual trauma, which may disappear through psychological work, in cultural trauma there is a constant, recurrent struggle that stirs up the troubling memory time and again, and to psychologically work through the trauma is not enough since social consensus and reparation are also necessary. The epilogue of the novel is set twenty years later. Khan lives in Mumbai, is near to sixty and has become a wealthy architect. In the intervening years his public image has been recouped and there has even been a retrospective of his career in the Museum of New Architecture in New York called “Mohammad Khan, American Architect” (Waldman 2011, 286). American Muslims are now accepted in American society since the nation seems to have moved back from the state of exception to American exceptionalism. However,



he is stuck in the past and still feels that: "America had offered his immigrant parents the freedom to reinvent themselves. Mo [Khan] had found himself reinvented by others, so distorted he couldn't recognize himself" (293). William (Claire's son) and his girlfriend Molly visit him because they are filming a documentary about what happened with the memorial. Rebecca L. Walkowitz interprets the documentary film as being a living memorial that documents the story of Khan's failed memorial and, to do this, William and Molly record those that took part in the controversy and their response to each other's interviews (2012, n.p.). In a way, the documentary mirrors the structure of the novel since once more some of the main participants in the controversy have a chance to look back and reflect on the decisions they made twenty years before. There are also people who did not have a voice then, but do now, like Edith—Paul Rubin's widow—and Abdul—Asma's son. William and Molly show Khan the video of Claire and record Khan's response to it. Later on, they will show it to Claire again in what seems a final attempt to make each of them understand the other's point of view and provide an opportunity to close the wound.

Khan shows them how the design for the original memorial has become the private pleasure garden of a rich Muslim. Instead of the names of the dead inscribed there though, there is Arabic calligraphy, whose meaning Khan does not reveal. However, William resists the new meaning of the Garden and adds a few small rocks in a corner as a private tribute to his father. His individual pain for the loss of his father thus finds a way into Khan's design, adapting its meaning to William's need. Even though he does not know what the Arabic calligraphy means, he makes the Garden mean something special to him alone, finding a place for his father's memory within it. This may be the small redemption that Waldman claims can be found in the ending, alongside the general feeling of loss and regret (Waldman, in Lawless 2012, n.p.).

In *The Submission* the individual pain of specific families plays an important role in the story (Claire and her son William, Asma and her son Abdul), but the novel does not simply retreat to the world of domesticity and ignore the consequences for the nation. One of the dangers of focusing on the effects of trauma on the individual psyche alone is that it may leave aside the conditions that made the attacks possible. As Judith Butler has claimed: "Isolating the individuals involved absolves us of the events" (2004, 5). Along these lines, Lucy Bond believes that "prioritization of individual experience empties theoretical reflection of all contextualizing historicity, displacing the event itself as the focus of attention" (2011, 749). The novel's greatest achievement is that it combines psychic and cultural trauma, the global and the local.

If, as sociologists suggest, cultural trauma changes the sense of identity of members of a collectivity, we cannot ignore the fact that, as a consequence of globalization, US national identity has changed since 1980 when the country entered "a transnational era, one more centered around the position of the United States within global networks of exchange" (Giles 2007, 46). Given this context, Michael Rothberg states that 9/11



demands “a literature that takes risks, speaks in multiple tongues, and dares to move beyond near-sightedness” (2008, 140-141). 9/11 is a cultural, transnational trauma of global scope and reflects the ways in which the world has changed. *The Submission* starts with the individual trauma of Claire and other 9/11 victims but becomes cultural and collective when the choice of Khan’s Garden tears the social fabric. The story returns to the personal when Claire’s son works through his pain by writing his dead father’s name with a few small rocks in a corner of the Garden. *The Submission* deals with the global circulation of traumatic memory, the types of traumatic reception and the commodification and ideological instrumentalization emerging from cultural and social traumas. In a time of globalization, novels about trauma and memory cannot just look inwards since to understand the conflicts of the self, one has to look beyond the self.

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Received 7 April 2015

Accepted 30 September 2015

Sonia Baelo-Allué is an Associate Professor at the University of Zaragoza (Spain), where she primarily teaches US literature. Her current research centers on trauma studies and 9/11 fiction. She has published *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction: Writing between High and Low Culture* (Continuum, 2011) and co-edited with Dolores Herrero *The Splintered Glass* (Rodopi, 2011) and *Between the Urge to Know and the Need to Deny* (C. Winter, 2011). She is also co-editor of the journal *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies*.

Address: Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras. Universidad de Zaragoza. C/ Pedro Cerbuna, 12. 50009, Zaragoza, Spain. Tel.: +34 976761518.

