Beyond Self and Other: Resisting the Binaries of 9/11 in Fiction and Translation

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Introduction

The terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001, and the subsequent historical, fictional and political rhetoric that determined their resounding contemporary significance, marked a watershed moment in the representation and vilification of America’s enemies. The foreign Other, previously geographically, ideologically and politically distinct from the domesticity of American life, violently penetrated this insular sphere of self-definition in the form of nineteen terrorists, in a ‘catastrophic event [that saw] our world, parts of our world, crumbled into theirs’. The subsequent polarisation of identity, the glaring ‘sense of disarticulation we hear in the term “Us and Them”, has not only dominated the commemoration and historicisation of the attacks, but is perpetuated by the conventional translation strategies of domestication and foreignisation’. In literary translation, a pervasive form of this alterity divides source and target domains, establishing an irreconcilable difference that the polarised strategies of domestication and foreignisation consolidate and exacerbate. This approach risks perpetuating a reductive view of 9/11 novels as nothing more than fictionalised accounts of a conflict between the fundamentally disparate binary of the American Self and Terrorist Other.

Informed by Dominick LaCapra’s work on empathic unsettlement, this article will introduce how 9/11 fiction might deterritorialise binary concepts of identity. This framework for literary analysis relocates otherwise static, fictional identities across the

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2 Ibid.
translation divide, in a move that seeks to recognise the inherent body-swapping practice of empathy, translation and imagining trauma. It is with this view of interaction and reciprocity in mind that this article will proceed, with the aim of underlining the value of the translation process as a means of destabilising, and renegotiating, restrictive and binary categories of post-9/11 identities.

**Polarised Identities in Post-9/11 Rhetoric**

The dichotomy of selfhood and alterity, of Self and Other, is inextricable from contemporary attempts at constructing identity, particularly as exterior forces threaten the values upon which these identities are built. The wholesale ‘intensification of the representation of the Arab-Muslim in terms of an alterity that is more absolute than ever’ in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 represents what is perhaps the defining conflict of our times. The attack that brought down the World Trade Centre constructed a higher wall that separates Self from Other, the modernity of the West from the perceived radical fanaticism of the Middle East, in a discourse that sees these two ‘communities’ at an ideological impasse. Moreover, what has been characterised as the irreconcilable nature of this conflict has been perpetuated, even normalised, by post-9/11 rhetoric, and continues to dominate American discourses on immigration, homeland security and the dubiously named ‘War on Terror’.

Crucially, September 11th 2001 saw the location of America’s perceived enemies radically altered. Far from the indistinguishable deserts of the first Gulf War, the Arab-Muslim Other was revealed to have infiltrated the American homeland, with New York as its symbolic capital. Here, familiar narratives of American society as a proud, multicultural melting pot gave way to more sinister fears of the enemy within.

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exacerbated, according to Marshall Clark, by a ‘government and [a] media that wishes to consolidate an impression of the enemy…to stimulate a climate of fear of anyone who “looked like” the enemy at home’.\textsuperscript{6}

The legacy of the faceless terrorist, ‘planted in a Florida town, pushing his supermarket trolley, nodding to his neighbour’, has far outlived the facts of the 9/11 attacks.\textsuperscript{7} Fifteen of the nineteen perpetrators hailed from Saudi Arabia, and yet the actions of the American military abroad have bypassed the origins of the perpetrators in favour of a convenient glossing of all things Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern, fundamentalist: the ‘Ultimate Other’.\textsuperscript{8} The perpetrators cease to exist as distinct individuals, instead presented as an ‘omnipresent and non-localized’, homogenous entity capable of turning the very markers of America’s modernity – air travel, skyscrapers and pro-immigration policies – against their creators.\textsuperscript{9}

The subsequent need to define and clearly package this alterity fed into a more pressing need to consolidate a ‘stable sense of what home is or was… [and the] clear differences between home and away, inside and outside’.\textsuperscript{10} Here, knee-jerk responses to an external threat resulted in an internalised crisis of identity that saw American identity framed by the apparent alterity of the terrorist other. As Leach argues, ‘identity is as much about a process of distinction as it is about identification’, and the need to combat alterity with an undisputable definition of the normalcy of American selfhood prevailed.\textsuperscript{11} Democracy, freedom of speech, civilisation and globalisation – the


\textsuperscript{7} DeLillo, ‘In the Ruins of the Future’.


\textsuperscript{10} Michael Rothberg, “‘There is No Poetry in This”: Writing, Trauma, and Home’, in Greenberg, J. ed., \textit{Trauma at Home: After 9/11} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), p. 151.

buzzwords of postmillennial America – find, in the construction of the Arab-Muslim Other, their antitheses, in anarchy, religious doctrine, and barbarism. In this way, the intensification of alterity is mirrored by a rationalisation of the Self. This reciprocal construction of identity sees a set of polarised boundaries, ‘civilized and savage, town and wilderness, “them” and “us”’, placed under equal force and pressure, where the consolidation of notions of selfhood requires a corresponding homogenisation and radicalisation of otherness.\footnote{Richard Gray, ‘Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis’, \textit{American Literary History}, 21.1 (2009) \url{<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/american_literary_history/v021/21.1.gray.pdf>} [Accessed 18/11/2013], p. 135.}

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, the sheer ‘disparity between the insignificance of the perpetrators (non-state actors, marginalized even in their own countries) and the enormity of their crime…was something truly exceptional’, and is particularly striking when considered alongside the wholesale standardisation of the terrorist as Other.\footnote{Doran, p. 10.} Distinction, then, is suppressed in favour of a problematic glossing of identity that sees the terrorist made ‘to represent the Arab-Muslim world in general, or at least to speak for this world’, just as the victims of the attacks, regardless of their nationality, religion and ethnic background, were unified to represent the aspirational and ideological values of the United States, and indeed the West, in political and media narratives.\footnote{Ibid., p. 12.}

From an American perspective, the sheer scale of the physical destruction witnessed on September 11th accounts for the singular representation of the post-9/11 American identity, as New York came to stand as synecdoche for the nation. Indeed, the significance of the architectural markers of identity, and the psychological repercussions of their destruction, cannot be overlooked. Whitehead has stressed that ‘the collective memory of city dwellers’, and the referents to which these groups anchor a universal sense of identity, ‘is affected far more by a disturbance in their physical surroundings…than by the most violent national upheavals that leave buildings...
intact’. The fall of the twin towers, then, may not be best understood in terms of its symbolic meaning, but in terms of the repercussive effects of physical and geographical absence on the identity of individuals inhabiting those spaces:

The attack struck at the very heart of the American psyche, since it was an assault on one of the very iconic references around which an American way of life has been formulated. The attack on the building was equally an attack on American national identity.

In the process of mediating and accessing traumatic experience, the twin towers, as ‘the single most salient symbol of American-dominated global capitalism and the single most visible symbol of American military domination’, are made to stand for America itself. The current status of Ground Zero duplicates this process, bringing together the otherwise spatially and temporally distinct spaces of trauma, commemoration, mausoleum, and, with the opening of the memorial museum, conservation: a centrifugal point on the Manhattan grid to which all things 9/11 are drawn.

**The Dilemma of the Post-9/11 Novelist**

Parallel to a steadfast reassertion of ‘the virtue of nation and community…and a feeling of pride in the American way of life, its values, it culture, and its democracy’ is the overwhelming sense that 9/11 incurred a crisis of literary form and representation. As DeLillo warned, ‘the world narrative belongs to terrorists…it is left to us to create the counternarrative’ in the face of the technological, high-speed and violently spectacular, terrorist discourse. While the sense that literature and in particular the American novel must ‘recognise that some kind of alteration of imaginative structures [was] required to register the contemporary crisis’, the pressures

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16 Leach, p. 87.
18 Smelser, p. 270.
19 DeLillo, ‘In the Ruins of the Future’.
and expectations of a novelistic response to the trauma were varied, and problematic, in their demands.\textsuperscript{20}

The counternarrative, for some, represented an opportunity for ‘opposing the official narrative and those that amplify the events’; an expectation that literature could somehow uncover the authenticity of the event beyond the visual singularity of the attacks in media and political discourses.\textsuperscript{21} This essential authenticity, then, contributes to the need for ‘exploratory narratives, not only as a means for countering trauma [but also] to place 9/11 into a historical framework’ that converts incommensurability into accessible and meaningful products of literary imagination.\textsuperscript{22} Yet the call for literature as a form of meaning-making was matched by unprecedented doubt, at least for contemporary American writers, over ‘whether the mass experience of terror and catastrophe can be translated into an individual artistic response’: whether the incommensurable scale and trauma of the event might resist literary form and interpretation altogether.\textsuperscript{23} Here, post-9/11 fiction is charged with resisting and combating violent, terroristic modes of expression, with didactic or ethically-charged motivations: a crisis of purpose at odds with historical and political discourses of self-preservation and American fortitude. Once more, the risk of perpetuating binary constructions and ‘problematic equivalencies’ of identities remains, and Anker underlines the need for post-9/11 literature to reject engagement with ‘the American predicament through recurrent plot devices and motifs that both capture the domestic in jeopardy and indict narcissistic American self-reference’.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{20}Gray, p. 134.


\textsuperscript{22} Literature after 9/11, ed. by Anne Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 1.


From each of these perspectives, casting 9/11 fiction as a reactive and resistant counternarrative risks pigeon-holing the genre as an exercise in ticking boxes, the American novelists in question merely serving a didactic or politicised purpose. As such, novels of this genre have been criticised for a failure to represent the authenticity of traumatic experience, instead securing a one-dimensional portrayal of the alterity of terrorism, and favouring an inward-looking narrative of the domestic repercussions of the attacks, rather than speaking to their symbolic and historical status for society, and literature, at large. According to Mishra, even the most prolific of American novelists (including Don DeLillo, Martin Amis and John Updike) are only capable of creating ‘identikit terrorists’, while their domesticised storylines are seen as a missed opportunity, where ‘cataclysmic public events are mediated purely and simply in terms of their impact on the emotional entanglements of their protagonists’. Despite this criticism, 9/11 fiction has done much to challenge the binaries of selfhood and otherness, whether through attempts to understand the religious or personal motivations behind fundamentalist attacks (Updike’s *Terrorist*), the psychological effects of urban destruction (O’Neill’s *Netherland*), or to unpick grief and the process of entitlement, to free speech, to mourn, to challenge political rhetoric, in the aftermath of 9/11 (Waldman’s *The Submission*). However, such works of fiction are subjected to an equally problematic exterior force that risks reinstating Self and Other as ideological and irreconcilable rivals: the process of literary translation.

**Domestication and Foreignisation: Perpetuating Binaries via Translation**

The polarised strategies of domestication and foreignisation have, in recent years, come to the fore of literary translation theory. Catalysed by the surge in postcolonial literature and criticism in the 1990s, this binary framework for translation

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operates on the assumption that a system of fundamentally irreconcilable differences divides source and target cultures and, by extension, the stylistic and linguistic elements of the literary works native to each. As such, domesticating and foreignising strategies pinpoint the linguistically and culturally-specific elements of foreign works of literature. Domestication seeks to ‘inscribe [translated texts] with linguistic and cultural values that are intelligible to the specific domestic domain into which they are assimilated’.  

The translation process prioritises target-text fluency and intelligibility, suppressing the markers of a text’s foreign origins for the intended audience, thus allowing the work to be read as if it were originally produced in the target domain. In contrast, foreignising strategies seek to ‘signify the difference of the foreign text…by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language’, challenging target-reader comprehension through the preservation and emphasis of cultural, ideological or linguistic elements specific to the source domain. Often conceptualised as ‘a mutually exclusive dichotomy’, the oppositional nature of these strategies hinges on the assumption that beyond the discursive content of the work lies a wider framework of linguistic, cultural and stylistic codes and values with which a translation must engage. Here, literature is seen, rather riskily, as representative of the literary or linguistic heritage from which it emerges, offering an insight into the ethics of difference that divide the cultural domains implicated in the translation process. Inherent to this process of polarisation is the question of which domain, or literary and linguistic features, might play the role of normalised target culture, its counterpart reciprocally cast as alterity.

The extent to which the source-target dichotomy might be polarised by domesticating and foreignising strategies figures significantly in recent revisions and adaptations of literary translation approaches, and many theorists have extolled the potential power of the translator to intervene in this relationship. In this most recent

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theoretical adaptation, domesticating approaches have been reframed as ‘a type of ethnocentric violence, [capable of] excluding or reducing cultural difference to sameness’, while foreignisation has been advocated as a potential ‘form of resistance against [the] ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism’ represented by the dominance of Anglo-American canons and genres in world literature.\(^{31}\) The question of how far translation might respond to socially, ethically and politically charged events and identities has led to a reappraisal of domesticating and foreignising strategies as the tools of a wider minoritising or resistant translation approach. From this perspective, the extrapolation of the conventional domestication-foreignisation dichotomy emphasises the potential for literary translation as a destabilising force against English language dominance in world literature.

Good translation is minoritizing…cultivating a heterogeneous discourse, opening up the standard dialect and literary canons to what is foreign to themselves, to the substandard and the marginal.\(^{32}\)

In a bid to promote heterogeneity in canons of translated literature, this model allows translators to exercise a potentially pervasive form of agency over both source text selection and the strategies implemented in the translation process itself. Put simply, in minoritising and resistant discourses on translation, translation strategies and theoretical approaches risk being subordinated to the whims of a politically or ethically motivated translator. Source and target works are here presumed to exist on either side of a cultural and ideological rift that only the translator might hope to straddle. To this end, a foreign language text may be selected from genres of national literature that, crucially, an individual translator considers to be underrepresented in the target domain, or to have destabilising properties once translated and dissimilated into the receiving culture.

From this perspective, translation is the stuff of resistance and reaction. Lawrence Venuti, a major proponent of domesticating and foreignising strategies, sees these ‘interpretative choices as largely determined by a wide range of social and cultural institutions’ to which a translator is, perhaps unknowingly, bound, resulting in a set of

\(^{31}\) Kruger, p. 15.

\(^{32}\) Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation*, p. 11.
translator-specific traits that arguably undermine attempts to validate translation as a methodologically accountable process. \(^{33}\) Moreover, the distinction between minoritising and resistant translations is far from clear. While minoritising translation seeks to challenge linguistic homogeneity, resistant translations actively ‘resist ethnocentric attitudes [by] defying target language expectations and stereotypes’, and seek to exert their own dominance by refusing the existence of homogenised canons and literary forms beyond their own cultural domain. \(^{34}\) Crucially, the essential difference upheld by domesticating and foreignising strategies remains stubbornly present in this most recent revision of the approach. While the interjection of these new terms does represent a shift from target-reader oriented translations to prioritising the linguistic, stylistic and structural elements of the foreign text, the framework still requires source and target to be polarised, and a sense of affiliation or loyalty to one side of the source-target divide must to made: a problematic form of favouritism in the face of the emotionally-charged discourses on identity and homeland in post-9/11 discourses.

Venuti himself has sought to tackle accusations of domestication and foreignisation as essentially reductive and oppositional approaches:

The terms ‘domestication’ and ‘foreignisation’ do not establish a neat binary opposition that can simply be superimposed on ‘fluent’ and ‘resistant’ discursive strategies. The terms ‘domestication’ and ‘foreignisation’ indicate fundamentally ethical attitudes towards foreign text and culture, ethical effects by the strategy devised to translate it, whereas terms like ‘fluency’ and ‘resistancy’ indicate fundamentally discursive features of translation strategies in relation to the reader’s cognitive processing. \(^{35}\)

Yet if domestication and foreignisation are to be recast as fundamentally ethical concerns and approaches to the translation of 9/11 literature, it seems pertinent to echo

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DeRosa’s question of how one can hope to ‘ethically evaluate the ideological beliefs of the other when the binary of innocent victim and violent aggressor is so firmly established in one’s foundational imagery,’ and affiliated with the normalised domain of the translation process. 36 The very binaries on which domestication and foreignisation function impose a wider set of polarising demands on the cultural and linguistic domains implicated in the translation process. Moreover, attributing absolute agency to the translator where literary texts are already under pressure to dichotomise identity, risks either reducing translation to the whims of individual and subjectively motivated translators, or recasting the translator as a homogenised entity to the extent that the Translator functions as nothing more than a static referent, equal to Self and Other, in post-9/11 discourses.

Unsettling Self and Other

The shift away from a polarised conceptualisation of source and target cultures, and the notions of Self and Other that such a binary opposition inevitably fosters or exacerbates, has been pursued beyond the field of translation studies by numerous literary-based theorists seeking to accommodate the vast complexity of contemporary literary systems in an autonomous, theoretical framework for literary analysis. Empathic unsettlement is one such parallel branch of study, crystallised by the inevitable body-swapping experience observed in the attempts of 9/11 literature to somehow render an authentic experience of identity and otherness, in response to emotional and physical trauma. Developed by trauma theorist Dominick LaCapra, empathic unsettlement may be defined as

feeling for another without losing sight of the distinction between one’s own experience and the experience of the other…it involves virtual not vicarious experience – that is to say, experience in which one puts oneself in the other’s position without taking the place of – or speaking for – the other, or becoming a surrogate victim who appropriates the victim’s voice. 37

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36 DeRosa, p. 158.
By distinguishing between virtual and vicarious representations of the Other, LaCapra opens up the possibility for a methodological framework built upon the very network of exchange that makes literary translation such a challenging field for those wishing to move beyond the binaries of conventional translation theory.

Empathic unsettlement provides a terrain for relocating the various identities and lenses through which the traumatic experience of 9/11 is viewed, not in relation to the counterforce of alterity, but in proximity to the incommensurable event to which they gravitate. This model for mapping the proximity of fictional identities – to each other, to the Event and beyond the boundaries of the text, into the world of author and translator – becomes increasingly significant when literary analysis expands to include a comparative reading of translated texts. By mapping both source and target identities and positions around an Event that occupies a fixed narrative position in both literary domains, a direct comparison of shifts between the texts becomes possible. This has the potential to provide an insight into how translation, as a form of empathic unsettlement itself, might function as an unrivalled tool for literary analysis, rather than a means for the production of purely derivative works of literature.

Equally significant here is the inherent culpability that LaCapra recognises in the practice of empathy, the same virtual body-swapping that the translation process must mimic, allowing for difference to be reframed in relation to the traumatic event, rather than privileging the position of the first-person empathiser over that of the perceived victim, or a normalised target over an estranged source. This virtual experience, the simulation of otherness, is distinguishable from ‘crude empathy… [which] appropriates the experience of the other, reduces it to familiar frames of reference and therefore violates its singularity’, in much the same way as a domesticating translation might seek to absorb a foreign text into home canons and typical genre forms.  

This ‘simulation of otherness’ is where much contemporary translation theory falls down, particularly in its failure to recognise the similarities and shared ideologies that shape the construction of reciprocal others (rather than the Other) in literature and translation, and instead favours a model of irreconcilable difference and segregation. Where domestication and foreignisation are conceptualised as opposing poles on a sliding scale of cultural difference, resistant and minoritising approaches require some kind of radical opposition or difference to be observed in order to justify their political motivations and intervention. While advocating translator agency admittedly touches upon the issue of how the domesticating and foreignising strategies are used to differentiate Self from Other, such a development also reduces this phenomenon into an individually-implemented translator trait, rather than a product of the traceable cultural or literary pressures on translation practice. Empathic unsettlement provides a lens through which a complex network of reciprocal and ever-shifting identities might be viewed when pinned down to a singular, fixed narrative event. Put simply, this approach preserves the singularity of literary identities, independent of their real-world and translation counterparts, thus allowing such positions to be interrogated as theoretical values around a spatially and temporally fixed point: in this case, the visual narrative of 9/11.

LaCapra’s framework allows for a vision of empathy as ‘a dual structure, a movement both towards and away, which forms a simultaneous gesture of proximity (identification, subjectivity) and distance (objectivity, critical understanding)’: distances that inevitably oscillate across the translation divide.39 It is this reciprocity that forms the basis of my approach to the literary analysis of contemporary 9/11 novels and their corresponding translations into French as part of my wider doctoral project. The virtual experience and simulation of translation makes this perspective possible, and the stylistic and literary shifts secured via this process can be used to gain an insight into how identity, influenced by post-9/11 discourses and metanarratives on Self and Other, might be reconfigured as an interactive network of co-dependant, and co-created,

'perpetrators, victims, hybrid perpetrator-victims, bystanders, so-called rescuers and others’.40

**Conclusion**

‘The condition of identity is never a static one. It resides neither in the state of being connected, nor in the state of being distinct’.41 And yet, post-9/11 narratives and contemporary translation theories consistently polarise the identities implicated in this ideological conflict as static definitions of Self and Other. Empathic unsettlement, as a framework for comparative literary analysis, has the potential to relocate and renegotiate this seemingly irreconcilable rivalry, introduced by political and media discourses and perpetuated by domesticating and foreignising translation strategies. Rather than creating a third space beyond this dichotomy, LaCapra’s framework for recognising proximal identities destabilises the fixed narrative positions of Self and Other, relocating the event as a static, visual referent across the source/target and text/translation divide. This comparative approach to literary and translation analysis prioritises empathic encounters and the reciprocal construction and interaction of fictional identities; a methodological shift that not only promises to liberate the study of 9/11 fiction from static and conflicting notions of identity, but which also represents a step towards reiterating the hermeneutic values of literary translation itself.

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