Subverting the Meta-colonialist Structures in Jess Walter's *The Zero*

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Introduction

The present argument embarks upon the idea that the world system of power relations has witnessed a radical change in the exploiter/exploited equation. While power relations and ideologies continue to shape contemporary colonial relations, its impact on both the colonizer and colonized peoples entails redefining the system in terms of meta-colonialism. This is a recent concept used by Hussein Bulhan to refer to the colonial system that "goes beyond in scope or behind in depth what classical colonialism and neocolonialism had achieved" (244). Bulhan, whose discussion of postcolonialism mainly relates to Africa, revised the classical categorization of the colonizer and colonized which according to him is no longer determined by race, territory, or religion. By contrast, it "brings about a wide spectrum of beneficiaries and victims" regardless of the locale they belong to or the nationality they bear (244). Accordingly, the majority of Western common people, "traditional beneficiaries of colonialism … are today in some respects victims of meta-colonialism in ways they neither realize nor wish to critically examine" (244). Hence, the process of (meta-) colonialism undergoes dynamic changes in victim/perpetrator terms in the sense that it seeks to colonize minds rather than territories via the meta-colonial tools of the media. The meta-colonized, accordingly, could be citizens of an imperialist state in the same way a meta-colonizer could be a resident of the developing nations.

Presumably, the meta-colonial elements, their interrelations, and the broader integrated framework within which they develop loom large in some recent fictional texts, political speeches, and media discourse. The media, however, represents the principal carrier of the meta-colonialist strategies as it is observed in Jess Walter's *The Zero* which subverts the way the mainstream media's coverage of 9/11 affairs serves the establishment's interests. My argument, while expanding on Bulhan's concept by dealing with post-9/11 power relations, partially falls back on the propaganda model proposed by Herman and Chomsky (1988) which provides an institutional critique of media performance. The propaganda model identifies how the integration of the media into capitalist structures has allowed governmental bodies and business elites to control media output in order to mobilize public

support for certain political decisions. By analyzing the novel's discursive counter-discourse to the 9/11 official materials, this study interrogates the media's deep penetration into Americans' thoughts and consciousness leading to meta-colonialist realities.

In addition to its satirical tone, Walter's novel *The Zero* has a content to unveil beyond mere fiction. The idea of writing the novel as well as many of its incidents and characters started in the "journals" that Walter kept while ghostwriting for New York City's police commissioner, Bernhard Kerik, at the time of the attacks. In spite of having a privileged access to many, revealing behind-the-scenes moments, the novel features Walter's revised version of the narratives he had once constructed. The firsthand experience of the World Trade Center site and the police corps provided insights that, although they were compromised for a while, left deep scars of disillusionment to surface in Walter's later contemplations. Many journal entries record Walter's sense of alienation and skepticism arising from the "delusional policy and world view" (Walter, "Journals" 20), manufactured in response to the attacks and by which overseas war is viewed as the job of the government, and consumerism as the committed part of citizens to keep up the US leading position in the world.

Taking into account that the 9/11 narrative was submerged by the tremendously delusive discourse of the mainstream media, the novel offers an alternative discourse that makes our familiarity with what happened more authentic. Roughly speaking, the novel's main idea is deeply rooted in the literary genre giving voice to the subaltern against the traditional mainstream attempts to silence the other, i.e., Puritan self-righteousness, the Salem witch trials, anti-McCarthyism, etc. Noticeably, what the world heard regarding the discourse on 9/11 is only a single voice presenting itself as the victim and silencing in the process the voice of the presumed perpetrator. The entire September 11 scenario has a "media-centric nature" due to the "media's role in the re-presentation of reality" (Rodrigues 2). Yet, the media's re-presentation is always influenced by the political and cultural bias that tends to overshadow their coverage ethics. It is actually this prejudiced worldview which motivates Adam Hodges to suggest that the official discourse on 9/11 and the War on Terror could be "only one story (among other potential possibilities) about the world since September 11, 2001" (x). Hodges believes that the society's perception of the attacks in the context of US history was influenced by the media rhetoric, which formulates the "War on Terror" narrative to justify and legitimate the military and political measures undertaken since then. It is this knowledge of the political landscape which precisely determines the counternarrative position of Walter's *The Zero* within the 9/11 and War on Terror discourses.

The same view is adopted by Dolores Resano who examines the way the novel engages in a dialogue "with the official narrative of 9/11 as trauma and the War on Terror as a righteous act of national defense" (12). Resano considers the official discourses as "the main intertexts that this satirical novel interpellates, plays with and, ultimately, subverts" (11). The official 9/11 narrative, however, can never be examined in isolation from the media which, in Resano's words, "played a large part, vis-à-vis the government, in identifying certain cultural themes or topoi" (14) to implement repressive actions and policies. Similarly, Timothy Melley explores the contradictions that run through the homeland security state and the multilayered bureaucracy of state secrecy that expands in the post-9/11 era. Melley argues that the satirical tones in *The Zero* are generated by the fundamental unknowing attached to Americans, so much so a retired NYC police officer and first responder fails to understand his exact part in the counterterrorism operation.

Against the expectations of the 9/11 fictional canon, *The Zero*, published in 2006, challenges the entire corpus with its Kafkaesque tone and provoking counternarrative. Many studies agree with the above presumption including Sarah E. Whitney's which analyzes how the novel subverts the traditional narratives of heroism and patriotism in post-9/11 literature. It argues that the novel urges the readers to revise their 9/11 constructed beliefs. David Masciotra, moreover, explores how the novel uses irony to comment on the Bush administration's response to 9/11. Remarkably, while many studies see how the novel challenges the 9/11 dominant narratives, only a few pay partial attention to the media as the main manipulating source of the official narrative and, thus, of the people's mediated consciousness and response. Therefore, the present argument explores, through the following sections, the novel's subversive comments on the media's meta-colonialist model.

Narrative Monopoly

When deeply examined, *The Zero* carries forth Walter's counternarrative to the 9/11 official discourse monopolized by the mainstream media. The subversive tone is set at the technical level by which the novel is divided into three parts: 'Days After,' 'Everything Fades,' and 'The Zero.' The sequence suggests how things boil down to nothing. In Part I, the protagonist is part of a team charged with the mission of investigating the involvement of some suspects in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The investigators, however, engage in law-breaking actions including the scheme to find terrorists even if by creating ones from available suspects. Metaphorically, their job is to turn the "zero" into some value—perhaps the title of the novel is suggestive of the nothingness the protagonist is after throughout the novel. 'The Zero' is

again the title of Part III which opens with a surrealistic scene as Remy wakes up in hospital after undergoing eye surgery. It underlines an illusory mix-up over the post-9/11 life with many details that make it difficult to differentiate between reality and dream. Semi-awake, Remy reviews the repetitive fragments of news, disasters, and scientific discoveries broadcast on his TV screen:

> the random daily shift of national allegiances, wildly famous people who no one could recall becoming famous, the sudden emergence and disappearance of epidemics, the declaration and dissolution of governments, cycles of scandal, confession, and rehabilitation, heated elections […] (263)

The scene sums up the media's channeling of the world's affairs into the viewer's minds coalescing the real, magnified, mediated, or manipulated news. Although the 'dream' includes discursive fragments of real life, its highlights are suggestive of the dominant media discourse and trends. It occurs at the beginning and ending of the novel to suggest how the truth lies beyond the foggy realities manufactured by the media.

Additionally, Walter chooses an investigator as protagonist, whose helplessness showcases the vulnerability of the meta-colonized Americans. Remy's failing eyesight is symbolic of the blurred vision following the attack. The public sight and insight were dependent on the media coverage to understand what was going on. The latter, however, builds its mission on the multiple strategy of convincing, confusing, and constraining. In "Lost in the Field of Vision; Witnessing 9/11," Diana Taylor argues that all she remembers of the few months following 9/11 is about "the failure to understand what I was seeing with my own eyes, to make sense of the images in the media," due to "the downright prohibition of seeing and knowing imposed by the government" (258). Taylor's argument underscores the official constraints imposed on any independent—personal or collective—attempt to make sense of the events beyond the media and government narrative, or to have a trustful access to the truth.

Allegorically, the gaps in Remy's memory render him a site of the struggle between the meta-colonizer and meta-colonized divides. While the meta-colonized Remy surfaces now and then only to showcase his state of ignorance and uncertainty, the meta-colonizer Remy inhabits as well as controls the body that the reader cannot access, thus making even the readers share the same state of ignorance. The dialogical relationship between the two Remys is carried forth through the technique of narrative interruptions which further suggests that the gaps in consciousness are rather collective and occur as a result of what Melley calls a "collective repression" meted out by the "architecture of state secrecy" (17). "It does so," he maintains, "first, by sequestering information and, second, by everywhere reinforcing the radical idea that unknowing is essential to modern

citizenship" (17). In fact, none can sequester information and reinforce unknowing more efficiently than the meta-colonialist media.

Moreover, the novel depicts how the mystery of the event is too ambiguous to fathom even by those who investigate its aftermaths. Regardless of how authentic or ideological a particular interpretation might be, it is often the media's coverage and interpretation that give it meaning. Ironically, the people working on the case at ground zero rely on the coverage of news networks. Complaining about the investigators' dilemma to Remy, Paul wishes that they had "watched the whole thing on CNN" instead of having a firsthand experience;

> I envy people who watched it on TV. They got to see the whole thing. People ask me what it was like and I honestly don't know. Sometimes, I think the people who watched it on TV saw more than we did. It's like, the further away you were from this thing, the more sense it made. Hell, I still feel like I have no idea what even happened. No matter how many times I tell the story, it still makes no sense to me. (85)

The events do not make sense unless one gets them mediated from the mainstream channels whose presumable job of informing has turned into misinforming. Their ultimate goal is to serve the meta-colonizer's agenda even if that entails commodifying the people's woes and grievances. To a large extent, the novel addresses the passive internalization of the media dictates and the discourse of power which entails people's unwitting participation in carnivalesque absurdity. As Kristine Miller argues, the novel portrays how a prompted national trauma "has left many Americans feeling like passive victims of a dominant media discourse," where they would rather receive information than become truly informed (45-46). Obviously, there is a difference between the positive role of being truly informed and the passive reception of an elusive narrative while lacking even the will to query the authenticity of information.

Commercialization of Grief

The Zero satirizes the commercialization of the 9/11 traumatic experience by the US media. The collective trauma stands out as the typical mainstream discourse that Walter intends to subvert. Actually, there were two paradoxical levels of the official discourse: proclaiming the US exceptionalism and invincible military power (hero status), on the one hand; underlining the nation's collective trauma (victim status) to justify the need for a strong military response and for a national consent and support, on the other. A great deal of the novel's subversion is directed against the trauma-centered discourse prevailing the early post-9/11 fiction. Regardless of the individual psychic trauma, most of the narrative in the corpus focused on the "collective" or "cultural" trauma defined by Sonia Baelo-Allué as "a wound on group consciousness as a whole" (64). Such a culturally constructed

notion of trauma is referred to by Mac Redfield in *The Rhetoric of Terror* as a "virtual" trauma which, in the post 9/11 context, points at an emotional response that is "mediated, technically produced, not properly real" (2). It exists as a by-product of the over-repeated narrative of loss by the government and mainstream media.

Accordingly, the virtual trauma is magnified in *The Zero* by the mainstream media discourse into a broadly public experience by which even those who are literally out act as if to be closely in. Remy's son, Edgar, and April are two cases in point. April who has lost her sister in 9/11 accepts to participate in a media obituary show in which family members commemorate their lost ones by recalling touching, real-life details from their lives. Ironically, April has to act her part sentimentally when she still tries to cope with the painful discovery that her sister March was having an affair with her husband—another 9/11 victim—around the time of the attacks. April and her brother Gus agree to act an emotional scene which would be edited as a media material. Standing "like actors in a scene," April and Gus are at discomfort, a position that does not help make the show "real." For the director, their performance must be played perfectly, "[t]he realer the better. That's what our show is about. Taking these stories of tragedy and letting people inside" (207). Toni Morrison, in a poem, wages a harsh criticism against the role of media by which reality is overshadowed with hyper-reality and the people's emotive reaction is staged, stating that "I must not claim false intimacy or summon an overheated heart glazed just in time for a camera" (83).

The media's idolization of those who speak on behalf of the victims by presenting them like movie stars results in a social trend to act like a victim's relation. Walter showcases such an absurdist tendency in the parody of Edgar, Remy's son, who acts as if his father has died in 9/11. The boy mockingly mentions what he perceives as the less than genuine "general grief" practiced by the public "as a competitive sport" in order to defend his own personalized approach to mourning (34-36). Edgar finds his own make-believe approach to the virtual trauma of a father's death, in the hope it makes his grief of the event personal like other mates who lost their fathers. Going too far in his self-dramatization, Edgar joins the military to avenge his living father's murder, thus rejecting Remy's attempts to convince him to give up the freakish idea of his father's death. "Anyway," he rationalizes, "I don't think I *can* go back. Not now. Not after I've finally accepted your death" (279). He embodies a culture where grief becomes a heroic status that everyone wishes to gain. The boy's wish arises from the media's staged shows involving the victims' families. It also implies a satirical comment on the way the disaster is turned into a cinematic material meant to purchase the people's consent to political policies.

The Zero, besides, satirizes the way the capitalist media might exploit the catastrophe scene and let the victims bleed more to capture a real-life shot and increase sales. Remy's colleague, Guterak, is willing to sell his experience: "[b]et your ass I'll sell my experiences. I sure as hell don't want 'em anymore" (150). Vividly, the notion of a commercialized trauma is reinforced in Guterak's for-sale experience, Edgar's self-dramatized loss, and the staged grief by April and her brother who, in spite of their second-hand experience of trauma, participate in the reality show *From the Ashes* (223-24). The novel's deliberate depiction of a staged grief is, in Anthony Flinn's words, made into a "counterfeit synecdoche for a generalized, vicarious, and thus artificial sense of loss commercialized into a culturally narcissistic sentimentality to be broadcast and therefore commodified by television" (225).

Undoubtedly, Walter mocks the American consumerism propagated by the media which always tends to trade democracy, freedom, and even the people's woes with the culture of consumption as well as the conception of popular culture. In the words of Maria Diaconu, "[t]he novel depicts how the site becomes the scene for the constant media showcase, with workers posing, celebrities and politicians visiting in a ritual that looks like disaster tourism" (51). Using the attacks to propagate the self is evident in the Boss who is more interested in creating an individual myth by ghostwriting his biography and filming everything he does or says. A film crew follows him to capture his job involvements "for posterity, or for something" and he is always keen "to give them time to set up the next shot before he continued" (51). He may interrupt his daily job duties or conversation and point "his finger at the ghostwriter" (295) so as to allow him to take a brilliant quote down. With all his absurd pretense of patriotism, his office wall is covered with photographs showing him "posing with world leaders and touring The Zero with celebrities" and a certificate from the Office of Liberty and Recovery lauding the "invaluable assistance in the War on Evil" (295).

Walter envisions dual perspectives of the 9/11 catastrophe by which, while the government and business groups can see the opportunities to carry on their capitalist projects, the people cannot see beyond the persistent mess except its desperate aftermaths. The Boss wants the job done so that they—and the nation—will profit by turning to the "[p]rivate. Sector" (119). The vision is, however, different for Remy who closes his eyes to visualize the Boss' profitable future, but all he can see is a kind of surrealistic reality, "a black screen with snowflakes falling and streaking, like crawling beasts beneath a microscope lens. Paper falling against blooming darkness" (119). Perhaps, it is this awareness of the betrayed victims which inspired Walter's dedication at the end of the novel, "[t]o those people whose real pain I witnessed five years ago, I hope there is real peace" (327).

The note is highly suggestive of how the only authentic pain is that of the victims and their families, other pains are performative and exploitative.

Manufacturing Terror

From a deep perspective, the novel also satirizes the political strategies intent to shape the public reaction to the media and government discourses. The main thematic focus of the novel is not so much the event itself as the consequences or, in Walter's own words, "September 12." In the "Journals" he kept while writing the novel, Walter contemplates the powerful machine directing the people's consciousness towards certain delusive ends:

> What exactly am I trying to do? Describe the way we are … trading liberty for security, demanding our own propaganda. Party to our own deception. The propaganda of distraction, of triviality. Endless process of moment, overcoming, forgetting, nostalgia. A nostalgia factory. (14-15)

Since its early response to the 9/11 attacks, the US government was determined to define the attacks within the framework of war, when, according to Resano, "the attacks could have been framed, alternatively, as terrorist acts committed by individuals, and the government's response as an investigation into criminal acts with the objective of bringing the culprits to justice" (10). The agents in manufacturing such a public view are referred to by Barry Glassner as the "peddlers of fear" comprising the media, politicians, and advocacy groups who manipulate Americans' perceptions and profit from the resulting anxiety (Resano 8).

The novel pokes fun at the investigations carried out by the federal agencies as part of the war on terror which culminates in the covert-ops. With the absence of any concrete evidence against the Middle Eastern suspects the federal agencies proceed to stage a sarcastic counterterrorist operation. When Remy finds out that every member in the framed terrorist cell is dually an agent for the counterterrorist team, he protests: "[i]s there anyone in this cell who happens *not* to be a government informant?" (294). Bishir, Jaguar, and other Arabs are all employed by Markham and Dave to act as terrorists. Thereafter, they are horribly killed in a real tragedy so that the federal agencies can record a heroic video about a successful anti-terror operation. For the Boss, scapegoating the Middle Eastern men is justifiable since they belong to "our enemies" (298) who "have all engaged at one time in anti-American actions or thoughts" (298) and are "animals capable of this kind of barbarism" (298) so they must be stopped before even thinking of it. Walter mocks the paradoxical job of the national security system, which, in the process of combating presumable enemies, creates real ones. The complicated framing scheme where the

actors are scapegoated and thus silenced casts doubts round the authenticity of the official narrative about terror provided that the only narrative at hand is that of the media which is part and parcel of the scheme.

The above scene casts the light on the way the war on terror relies on cinematic techniques to shape people's perception of the events as well as to ensure the public consent to the subsequent battles. The entire mission shrinks into an absurd and ironic show by Dave of the CIA whose dramatically fabricated story about 'CELL 93' epitomizes the post-9/11 official rush to create an enemy and schematize a crime so as to strike a fake success. In a press conference, Dave rationalizes the cell's codename, stating:

> We're not sure. Maybe the group formed in 1993, although most of the relationships date from much earlier. Another theory, from our analysts, was that the name refers to the ninety-nine names for Allah, and that by subtracting the six members you get ninety-three. Of course, we are also monitoring FM radio stations with that frequency, listening to call letters, dedications, play lists, that sort of thing. (268-69)

In such a poser atmosphere, the novel makes it difficult to tell who is who by redefining the blurry perpetrator/victim standpoint. Walter raises a significant question about how credible the media's stories are and to which extent our judgement of the world can rely on them. While the Middle Eastern characters acting out assigned roles are presented to the public as terrorists, the real terrorists are proclaimed heroes although they stand behind the entire bloody and delusive setup protected by their ethnic privileges as well as the unlimited authority meted out by the nature of their job. As Heike Schwarz notes, the novel "depicts the politics of fighting the foreign terrorism just to reveal the so defined outside threat of terrorists only as a force that originates from within: the official othering of the enemy conceals the fact that the threat comes from inside America" (389). To emphasize the political agenda behind the staged covert-ops, Walter digs it up in Remy's subconscious: "[o]ne day he dreamed two men debating whether the recent bounce in The President's popularity was entirely due to the recent victory over a terrorist cell" (325). In this way, the novel invites the reader to consider that terrorism is a political strategy and the real terrorists might be those who stand behind the whole scheme.

March Selios is another example of the agencies' attempt to garner an illusory success by finding a scapegoat and dramatizing a plot to make it look like a big catch. While she is framed on baseless evidences, the activities that make her befit into suspicion include how "for a time in the 1990s, she raised money for Palestinian relief charities, protested Israeli aggression" (57-8). The Documents Department believes that March Selios had been tipped off by her ex-boyfriend, Bishir Maidan, a suspect member of a sleeper cell who

might "have had advance knowledge of the attacks that morning," (62) to flee the towers on the day of the attack. The irony is climatic when the reader discovers that March is killed in the attacks and the telephone call she received was from her sister April upon discovering the illegal relationship between her sister and ex-husband.

Nevertheless, most of the novel's counter-discourse to meta-colonialist America is uttered out by Jaguar who stands for the author's mouthpiece to highlight the fact that the present outcomes are part of the history of America's political involvements. Represented as a stereotype of Arabs, Jaguar is a framed terrorist whose radicalism is due to losing "a family member, perhaps a son, during the first Gulf War" (273). His words to Remy, while spying on Kamal, are suggestive of America's intriguing foreign policy and its backfire:

> I'm sorry, but your idea of *us* tends to be a little bit fluid, my friend. *Either you're with us or...* what? You switch sides indiscriminately ...arm your enemies and wonder why you get shot with your own guns. I'm sorry, but history doesn't break into your little four-year election cycles. *Are you with us?* (291; emphasis in the original)

Jaguar's reflection is reminiscent of the US suspicious role in supporting and arming militias and insurgent groups to combat rival powers or possible threats, an act that sometimes results in undesirable consequences. The Afghan insurgents is a case in point. Osama bin Laden and the *mujahideen* were created and trained in the early 1980s by America with the purpose of enforcing its Cold War against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Although the strategy was futile for the time being, it resulted in the emergence of the Taliban that the US has been engaged in war against after 9/11.

Perhaps the voice that Walter gives to Jaguar opens the door for the many potential meanings behind the 9/11 story which the official discourse tends to overshadow and silence. Taking this into account, the present catastrophe is a climax of several overt and covert episodes in which the US engages in double standards and generates "the conditions of [its] own destruction" (DeRosa 177). Obviously, a deliberate acontexualization—detaching 9/11 from its historical context—is meant to distract the attention from the possible political faults leading to the tragedy as well as the upcoming strategist actions and policies by the meta-colonial authorities.

Through the voice he gives to Jaguar, Walter addresses the political amnesia blinding Americans from seeing realities in the same way as the protagonist's memory disruptions prevent any progress in the investigations. Remy's memory gaps are suggestive of the American political amnesia that tends to see the consequences in isolation from the causes, to feel the present pains yet forget the entire stream of events leading down to them. This can be inferred from the holes disrupting Remy's mental "string of events, the causes of certain effects. He found himself wet but didn't remember rain. He felt full but

couldn't recall eating" (43). Walter states the collective nature of Remy's memory gaps in the third part when Remy contemplates that the gaps are not his problem alone, but are deep-rooted gaps in the culture they all share; "[p]erhaps nothing made sense anymore *(the gaps are affecting everyone)* and this was some kind of cultural illness they all shared" (264; emphasis in the original). Conceivably, Walter invites the Americans to recover from Remy's case and keep a "track of things" (65) in order to understand events in their proper historical contexts.

Rhetoric of Exceptionalism

The novel includes an implicit critique of the meta-colonial proclamations that America is unique and the post-9/11 discourse is exceptional. The American ideals of equality and social justice are refuted by actual practices to which Remy bears witness. Ironically, class discrimination gets reenacted at the wall of the missing and the dead on which Remy had once read that "America was a classless society, but the walls of missing and dead disproved this" (73). Besides, through Mahoud's case, the novel comments on the divisive rhetoric in which many minorities, namely Arabs and Muslims, are cast in the "un-American" and "unpatriotic" categories (Fadda-Conrey 532). Even worse, the FBI built a vast network of informants to infiltrate Muslim communities and, in some cases, cultivate fake terrorist plots (Aaronson). Such manufactured networks took advantage of the fear of stigmatization amid the minorities who have to choose between collaboration or accusation.

The officially channeled racial bias and abuse are portrayed in the case of Mahoud, a victim of presumed Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism. He is a "vaguely Middle Eastern" man (111) who owns a restaurant. He has reported an act of vandalism: someone has thrown a rock through his shop window, with a note and a pig's ear duct-taped to it. The note says: "[g]o home, camel-fucker. We know where you live" (111). Later on, the novel reveals that it has been a trick by Remy and Markham to pulley him into collaborating with them. Neither the sign he puts on his shop, that says "I am Pakistani not Arab," nor the fact that his son is "in the American army" (111) can appease Mahoud's abusers and mark him as a good citizen. Mahoud is blackmailed by the detectives to inform about his brother-in-law Bishir in return for security, "[t]hen maybe we can protect your family" (114). The scheme hints at how what seems to be a public wave of hatred against a people could be channeled by official agencies to serve strategic goals. The novel takes Mahoud's model to denunciate the FBI's search for "preterrorists," individuals whose intentions, rather than actions, are suspicious (Bartosiewicz 30). The scheme also includes creating terrorists like the framed Middle-Eastern characters

who are forced to act a scene which supports the stereotypes against their own people.

For Remy, Americans are too democratic to die together like a herd. In contrast to the idealist image drawn by the media for the victims "grabbing hold of one another in burning corridors or comforting each other as the heat rose and the ground beckoned" (74), Remy visualizes a more realistic image. He saw many people falling, burning and crying alone, "generally being alone, which, no matter how we live, is always the way we go" (75). From a different perspective, thinking and acting alone describes not only the victims' desperate fate but also the self-interested materialism dominating the left-behind community which finds a gain in every pain. April's lawyer is making up a case for compensation for Dereck. For the purpose, he asks for "[w]edding photos, vacation photos, holidays," since "[p]ictures are tremendously effective" and can sell "the sob story" (173). His tricks note ironically the materialist rush for insurance by a society that is supposed to be too depressed and melancholic to think of the 9/11 victims in terms of gain. Another example of the above materialist rush is given in the real estate brokers who look at the period "as the dawn of a new age, an unprecedented period of growth in real estate wealth" (185) not to be missed.

Sometimes, the author resorts to the mouthpiece technique to address Americans about their shortcomings. The old Middle-Eastern man appears and declares Walter's explicit derision against American idealism. The man's critique encompasses three salient features defining the Americans' worldview and lifestyle. First, they define the rest of the world in terms of its relationship to the USA: "[y]ou're always convincing yourselves that the world isn't what it is, that no one's reality matters except your own" (222). As a result, they never admit their wrong policies although many victims are falling down, since "[y]ou can't truly know suffering if you know nothing about rage. And you can't feel genuine rage if you won't acknowledge loss" (222). Second, the entire nation is run like "a public relations firm" by changing facts and claiming "victory in every loss" (222). The catastrophes they may or may not cause to the world mean no more than an entertainment show, "[t]he rest of the world wails and vows revenge and buries its dead and you turn on the television. Go to the cinema" (222). Third, they surrender their whole being to the propaganda of the TV and cinema's visual entertainment, "[y]ou demand the propaganda of distraction and triviality, and it has become your religion, your national faith" (222-23). In this faith, Americans are like the superstitious fundamentalists, "wrapping the world in cables full of happy-ever-after stories of fleshy blondes and animated fish and talking cars?" (223).

Throughout the novel, the awareness of conspiracy looms large in the speech of the government officials, namely the Boss whose

discourse exemplifies a cultural—sometimes political—paranoia in which the enemies' hatred of America is magnified. The term "cultural paranoia" is used by Patrick O'Donell to refer to the sense of conspiracy and uncertainty dominating the contemporary US narrative (5). From a relevant perspective, Richard Hofstadter defines social paranoia as a "belief in the existence of a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspirational network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character" (14). In this light, the cultural paranoia is actively practiced by some higher-rank officers who tend to view the 9/11 events in terms of a great conspiracy against the US democratic and liberal prominence.

According to the Boss, the actual war is between capitalism and its opponents; America is envied for its capitalist way of life and its response should be by maintaining the same capitalist way of life. The actual war, in his words, is fought "with wallets and purses, by making dinner reservations and going to MOMA, by having drinks at the Plaza" (51). The Boss again confirms the sacred capitalist battle by asking Remy to collect WTC document leftovers least victory goes to the enemies. "By God, we will gather every receipt, every purchase order, every goddamned piece of paper otherwise […] *They win*" (54-55; emphasis in the original). Standing for the Bush Administration's official policy of end justifies means, the Boss defines the counter-terrorist operation in terms of the analogy by which, while the framed terrorists are "ducks to start falling," Remy is a hired dog, "[a] dog doesn't ask questions. He doesn't worry about causes" (298). To silence any inquiry about their silly action by linking it to anti-national conspiracies, Remy's raised questions are considered as doubting the actions of the political administration, thus giving support for enemies: "[e]very question we ask is a love letter to our enemies" (54). The Boss' paranoid worldview underlines an official 9/11 tendency to "create a triumphant myth out of pure tragedy" (Walter, "Conversation" 6). Walter refers to the costly bill of freedom that Americans have to pay by accepting a hegemonic discourse.

Zeroness as a Metaphor

Now, to which extent does the title 'zero' address the novel's scope and focus considering its subversive nature to the media discourse? Obviously, "The Zero" refers to the site of devastation, Ground Zero (WTC) in New York City as well as to other past scenes of colossal destruction like Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Walter may deliberately omit the first part of the name "ground" choosing to call it "Zero" in order to strip the locale—place and time—from the proclaimed exceptionality when all they signify are the capitalist interests and meta-colonial agendas apart from the real stories of grief. "The Zero"

is, thus, a ground that has been taken away, erased out with its history, "*[w]hat's left of a place when you take the ground away?* Is the place even there anymore?" (308; emphasis in the original). It becomes a construction site, a large socket in a city that is used to "cannibalizing itself block by old block to make way for the new" (308). How suggestive the term 'cannibalizing' is to connote the capitalist unquenchable appetite for devouring everything including the self. The crater left by the disaster along with the dead bouquets, regardless of their emotional, ethical and national significance, will never wait long before a new building is screwed in.

According to Jaguar, the Zero stands for "[a] state or condition of total absence. The point of neutrality between opposites" (309). In this context, the Zero comes to mean the absence caused not only by the loss but also the arbitrary failure to acknowledge that loss and, moreover, the intentional attempt to recompense the failure with a make-believe success. As Walter notes in his "Journals," the Zero symbolizes "[t]he speed with which the country moves on, digests even this" and how "we're in Iraq" soon after the fact (18). Besides, the Zero is a state of moral inertia in which the "negative lessons of history" (Bercovitch 2002, 254) are not revised to be avoided. This is reinforced by Remy's reflection on the absence of zero in a clock which poses a state of "[n]o balance. No starting place" (96).

In addition, the Zero is suggested in Edgar's comment on his father's job as a liaison, "the person who was halfway between things" (108) and whose life is "defined more by the things you don't do than by the things you do" (108). This signification of the title is confirmed by Walter's statement that "Remy is the Zero" ("Journals" 19) as well as the eye surgery by which Remy is supposed to regain his sight in the left eye. According to the surgeon, he cannot see with it as before as it will be flawed with "blurry images, especially on the edges, but in essence that eye is … gone. Black. Kaput" (266). This could be symbolic of the ground zero, a deep and black scar left by the collapse of the WTC, provided that the doctor asked him to avoid flying for the good of his eyes which cannot endure the flight pressure.

All in all, the Zero encompasses the meaning of multiple metaphors. First, the fifty-feet hole replacing a skyscraper is turned into an existential abyss swallowing the meta-colonized American dream that the protagonist represents. Second, the Zero—in the words of Jaguar—is invented by Arabs to give value to positive numbers through highlighting the negative ones as well as infinity. Ground Zero has the same function. It weighs the proclaimed ideals of civilization against the harsh realities imposed by politics. Third, it strips everything down to its basic level including the democratic America which is now supposed to rise from ashes and rebuild itself properly avoiding the previous flaws. It also signifies many actions that come full circle: the mock detective that ends up where it began; the

American innocence that boils down to nothing; the collective trauma that turns out to be a carnivalesque farce in which everyone takes part knowingly or unknowingly; the American myth of heroism unveiled as a fictive and cinematic product; the vagueness of crime/retaliation equation; the commercial motivation behind the mobilization and stigmatization; and the rootlessness of most of the official 9/11 narrative.

Conclusion

Admittedly, *The Zero* constitutes Walter's counternarrative that interrogates the official monopolized narrative and offers an alternative space to see through it. In his "Journals," Walter inquires: "[w]hat if the great 9/11 book comes not from there, but from here, one of those fuzzy places that doesn't exist to them" (16). Such a statement poses an important question on how the episodes constituting the "9/11 book" are authored—given a coherent form as desired by the author —"there" and by "them". Walter identifies himself with ordinary Americans who inhabit the place "here" and who have nothing to do with the America represented by policy makers and war-mongers. Such a duality by which the ordinary Americans identify themselves as separate from the ruling class marks the meta-colonial borderlines in power relations.

To align Walter's statement with the above arguments, *The Zero* envisions a meta-colonial discourse adopted by the media which deepens the gap of misinformation. Distraction is one of the media's meta-colonial strategies which works out through shifting the focus to trivial details such as March's case, the made-up terrorist cell, paper restoration, etc. which become ultimate goals that make success more attainable. It notes how the main concern of the upper management is not so much to combat the terror as to show people their progress and impress them even if some cinematic tricks and measures are employed. In America, the alliance between the media and political fantasy results in a fuzzy exchange of places between virtual and real worlds. Everything that the government does or says is staged and mediated via the media channels to achieve a certain impact on the people and manufacture consent. This casts light on the meta-colonial system which creates enemies in the same way it creates allies and exponents. It targets its people in the first place as they constitute the platform where it can launch its strategic goals.

The novel makes use of a multiple subversive mechanism to convey its dissident message. Whereas the protagonist's memory loss stands for a political amnesia by which 9/11 is considered as an exceptional moment in isolation from the US political history, his split personality might reenact the meta-colonial dichotomy marking the two Americas arising in the post-9/11 era. An America which is involved in absurd

preemptive security measures that complicate rather than solve the problem and create rather than demolish enemies. This is represented by the decision-makers and official management, the "them" in Walter's terms or the meta-colonizers whose main goal is to preserve their interests and make the whole nation act according to such a motive. The other America, standing for the common people, is an occasional interruption of Remy's regained consciousness which is a scapegoat of the former's selfish and miscalculated actions. The common people are doubly victimized in the sense that they fall under the direct vengeful reaction of the former's self-created enemies, on the one hand, and they are mobilized by the former to sacrificially participate in its military off-shoots, on the other. Ultimately, the national cause they are elusively made to champion turns out to be not so much America but the meta-colonialist class.

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