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## Cosmopolitan Culture Talk After 9/11

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**Cosmopolitan Culture Talk After 9/11**

By  
Chris Reid

Accepted in Partial Completion  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
*Master of Arts*

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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GRADUATE SCHOOL

Dr. David L. Patrick, Dean

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Chris Reid

5/17/23

**Cosmopolitan Culture Talk After 9/11**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of  
Western Washington University

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## 1. Abstract

This thesis attempts to prove that 9/11 enshrined a troublesome critical ideology in America's most vaunted book reviews and magazines. The ideology sometimes presented itself brazenly. In these cases, I follow historian Mahmood Mamdani in describing it as "Culture Talk" — a discourse that reduces history and politics (in this case, the history of Cold War U.S. involvement in the Middle East) to talk of culture or religion. At other times, however, this ideology wore the mask of "cosmopolitanism" — a loose jumble of ideas centered on the rejection of anything "tribal," "premodern," or "sectarian." In reality, it is very difficult to distinguish those rejected by cosmopolitanism from those disenfranchised by the slow march of the global economy.

Yet cosmopolitanism was and remains a popular worldview in educated Euro-American circles. It is preached at the U.N. and at the *New York Times Book Review*. There especially, and throughout our critical culture, it led to a fascinating and sometimes insidious set of practices: critics praised books that confirmed their sense of facile global community, panned books and authors that questioned the post-9/11 American political consensus, and — most interesting of all — found clever ways to misread books that took an ambiguous or disturbing approach to cosmopolitanism.

This widespread pattern of reception betrays a pernicious critical incuriosity about the political facts of recent history. And incuriosity, at the highest levels of American cultural discourse, aids power: in the violent, unthinking years after 9/11, many of our government's most egregious missteps went unquestioned in the press. When the public is asked to back a paranoid and unjustifiable war, critical laziness has consequences.

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## 2. Historical Context: Why Do They Hate Us?

The end of the Cold War was supposed to bring about the end of large-scale global conflict. With one superpower standing, the ideological wars of the 20th century were over. Jack Kemp, running for Vice President in 1996, declared that “With the end of the Cold War, all the ‘isms’ of the 20th century -- Fascism, Nazism, Communism, Socialism, and the evil of Apartheidism -- have failed, except one. Only democracy has shown itself true to the hopes of all mankind.” (“USA! USA!” roared the crowd). “You see,” he went on, “democratic capitalism is not just the hope of wealth, but it's the hope of justice” (Kemp). It was also the hope of many American intellectuals. Francis Fukuyama wrote in his 1989 “The End of History?” that “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (Fukuyama 4). In the harsh light of actual history, Fukuyama’s thesis has been ridiculed into cliché. But its academic and commercial success — his 1992 *The End of History* was a *New York Times* bestseller — speak to how well it fit the zeitgeist.

The zeitgeist, of course, only made sense if you lived in America. Bosnians, Rwandans, and Palestinians did not experience an end to history, nor were the fruits of the new world order readily apparent to them. Jacques Derrida excoriated Fukuyama in his 1993 *Specters of Marx*: “It must be cried out, at a time when some have the audacity to neo-evangelize in the name of the ideal of a liberal democracy that has finally realized itself as the ideal of human history: never

have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity” (Derrida 106). What’s worse, many of those being subjugated, starved, or exterminated could reasonably blame the United States. In the Middle East alone, they might recall the CIA’s role in recruiting, training, and arming Islamic extremists in the 80s and 90s; the overt and generous U.S. support for Saddam Hussein during the late Cold War; or the conservatively estimated thousands who died in Sudan as a result of the U.S. bombing of the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical factory in 1998 (Chomsky). This is not to mention the nearly 1400 Palestinians killed by U.S.-backed Israeli security forces between 1987 and 2000, 281 of them children (B’Tselem).

In short, there was no end of history, especially not while the world was dominated by a violent, paranoid, expropriative empire. Politics carries on; people sometimes attack the people who dominate them. In Afghanistan, a well-armed and well-organized network of mujahideen (well-armed due to the three billion dollars they received from the CIA during the Afghan-Soviet war) began to organize against the U.S. presence in the Middle East (Parenti 32). Al-Qaeda brought history rushing back to the United States in 1993, when a terrorist cell successfully detonated a bomb at the base of the World Trade Center, killing six and injuring more than a thousand. Eight years later, the same cell’s successful planning and recruiting culminated in the attacks of September 11.

Why did history go on? Derrida, Chomsky, and other leftists had an answer: political terror was in large part a response to acute political conditions, and the U.S. empire had never been benign. But this answer, unpopular in the 1990s, became unthinkable after the trauma of 9/11. To suggest that such an attack had political causes would have been tantamount, for those in the throes of grief and paranoia, to suggesting we deserved it.

This revulsion for any talk of historical causes produced a discourse all its own — a discourse Mahmood Mamdani calls “Culture Talk.” In his 2004 *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, he coins the phrase to describe how politicians and academics spent the years after 9/11 dividing the world into an enlightened, secular “West” and a fundamentalist, tribalist “rest.” Culture Talk, he writes, “assumes that every culture has a tangible essence that defines it, and it then explains politics as a consequence of that essence. Culture Talk after 9/11, for example, qualified and explained the practice of ‘terrorism’ as ‘Islamic.’ ‘Islamic terrorism’ is thus offered as both description and explanation of the events of 9/11” (17-18). This collapse of politics into culture helps Culture Talk operate as propaganda because it answers the question “Why?” without any reference to history. Why were we attacked? Because Islamic terrorists hate our culture. The gaping holes in this explanation are papered over by repetition: the hundredth time an American has read the phrase “Islamic fundamentalism” in the morning news, it sounds satisfying, familiar, and true.

One would expect Culture Talk from a Bush administration bent on revenge, war, and reelection. But the people who distributed it at the greatest scale were journalists, critics, and public intellectuals. Look no further than the lead analysis in the *New York Times* on September 16, 2001: “To be free, rich, and powerful in a world that is mostly none of these things is, inevitably, to engender resentments. Freedom itself can be considered deeply disturbing, even threatening, in many of the world’s poorer societies that are anchored to the old pillars of faith, tradition and submission” (Burns). Notice the way the piece bares its own workings. It begins with an acknowledgement of our freedom, our wealth, and our power. But rather than ask how our wealth was gotten or where our power has lately been wielded, it immediately concludes that

our *freedom* is the offensive article. They hate us because they love their unfreedom, because of their barbaric attachment to “tradition and submission.”

Mamdani connects Culture Talk to the long history of colonial domination. “Premodern peoples are said to have no creative ability and anti-modern fundamentalists are said to have a profound ability to be destructive. The destruction is taken as proof that they have no appreciation for human life, including their own [...] Culture is now said to be a matter of life and death. This kind of thinking is deeply reminiscent of tracts from the history of modern colonization. This history stigmatizes those shut out of modernity as antimodern because they resist being shut out” (19). The world is divided into those who share our “cultural values” (freedom, democracy, secularism, capitalism) and those who don’t.

Thus we end up with “Good Muslims,” who endorse liberal democracy and the U.S. role in the Middle East, and “Bad Muslims,” who object. In George Bush’s words, “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” Being George Bush, he put the issue in uncomplicated terms. But it was in this same context that cosmopolitanism — a much subtler, softer, more civilized form of Culture Talk — became the guiding ethos of our “humanitarian interventions” and our literary criticism alike.

### 3. The Rise and Reign of Cosmopolitanism

#### *3.1. Before 9/11: Nussbaum and The Rise*

In 1994, Martha Nussbaum published “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism” in the *Boston Review*. The piece generated robust debate — 29 eminent scholars responded in the ensuing forum — and was in part responsible for the post-Cold War cosmopolitan revival. Nussbaum’s

piece is a response to Richard Rorty's 1994 *New York Times* op-ed on the "unpatriotic" academic left, which, in his view, "refuses to rejoice in the country it inhabits." (Rorty). Rorty wanted the left to expand, but believed "A left that refuses to take pride in its country will have no impact on that country's politics, and will eventually become an object of contempt."

Nussbaum disagreed. In disagreeing, she reached back to the cosmopolitanism of Diogenes, who identified himself not as a member of a state but as a "citizen of the world." Nussbaum saw this as a needed spirit for our times; she was disturbed by the "the renewal of appeals to the nation, and national pride, in some recent discussions of American character and American education" (Nussbaum). For her, as for the Stoics, "we should not allow differences of nationality or class or ethnic membership or even gender to erect barriers between us and our fellow human beings." In the post-Cold War landscape, the greatest danger was not the clash of powers but the surging of nationalism within those powers — what else could inhibit our ability to work as a global community?

Nussbaum wrote from a certain vantage point: "My articulation of these issues is motivated, in part, by my experience working on international quality-of-life issues in an institute for development economics connected with the United Nations." She worked in the late 80s and early 90s for the United Nations Development Programme, then headed by venture capitalist and former Reagan appointee William Draper III (Duignan). When she writes that "Only by making our fundamental allegiance that to the world community of justice and reason do we avoid [the dangers of factionalism]," she writes, ironically, as someone deeply embedded in a *particular* community of globe-trotting, policy-making professionals. "Becoming a citizen of the world is often a lonely business," she sighs, perhaps because of all the international air travel.

Several of the Boston Review's respondents pointed this out; Culture Talk was not yet as entrenched as it would be after the trauma of 9/11. Robert Pinsky, of all people, observed that

Some of the fiercest nationalisms and ethnocentrism of the world are fueled in part by resentment toward people like ourselves: happily situated members of large, powerful nations, prosperous and mobile individuals, able to serve on UN commissions, who participate in symposia, who plan the fates of other peoples while flying around the world and staying in splendid hotels. Shouldn't this reality be the starting place of such discussions? -- or at least included in them? Shouldn't we recognize that our own view, too, is local? (Pinsky)

Pinsky identifies the most central error of cosmopolitanism: the universalization of one's own vaunted place in a mobile, global, well-educated elite. Nussbaum's argues that we should educate our children to understand the systems of air pollution in India, but she never once contemplates how few of our children will ever have a chance to affect those systems.

In this way, cosmopolitanism becomes a particularly well-disguised version of Culture Talk — it ascribes the problems with our world to people's unthinking provincialism, their insufficient education, and their failure to participate in the tolerant capitalism of American empire. The enemy is no longer communism; it is anyone opposed to the status quo. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.

### *3.2. After 9/11: Appiah and The Reign*

Before 9/11, cosmopolitanism was a pleasant, liberal alternative to the more obviously reductive Culture Talk of "the clash of civilizations." After 9/11, it became the mainline liberal counterpart to the Islamophobic warmongering of the Bush administration. At times, it was

nearly indistinguishable from that warmongering. Helen Dexter, in “The ‘New War’ on Terror, Cosmopolitanism and the ‘Just War’ Revival,” argues that the post-Cold War period saw a rise in “military humanism” — the belief that military interventions are justifiable in humanitarian terms, or, more cynically, the retroactive justification of such interventions in such terms regardless of what one believes (57). “Both the major military operations of the ‘war on terror’ so far have been framed, retroactively at least, within a humanitarian discourse. The military episodes in Iraq and Afghanistan mixed the militarism of the West [...] and humanitarian, cosmopolitan rhetoric” (57-8).

The humanitarian, cosmopolitan rhetoric originated in progressive scholarly circles much like Nussbaum’s at the UN. Cosmopolitan political theorists, working from a Kantian understanding of universal moral rights, argued that “international humanitarian law is the most appropriate mechanism with which to solve interstate warfare, and [...] the international juridical regime that has developed significantly since the end of the Cold War is an already existing cosmopolitan regime” (60). This frames humanitarian intervention as “a form of cosmopolitan law enforcement.” They argue that states like Iraq and organizations like al-Qaeda have committed crimes and violated the human rights of thousands, therefore powerful countries like the U.S. have an obligation to intervene. In its more progressive form, this intervention is distinct from war: we go in, arrest the criminals, and protect as many lives as possible.

But in the post-9/11 milieu, this merged with the cosmopolitanism of the neoconservatives themselves. Bush-aligned thinkers like William Bennett asserted that the nation is not a good in itself so much as it is the expression of a political ideal — democracy, for instance, or freedom (Dexter 63). Dexter points out that this is just as much an affirmation of Kantian cosmopolitanism as the more progressive version above; it simply carries the

unassailable nobility of American values somewhat further in its use of force. In response to 9/11, the two cosmopolitanisms became almost identical: one said we should intervene to enforce universally valid international laws; the other said we should intervene to enforce a universally valid vision of American democracy.

This new understanding framed the population of the state itself as a pretext for intervention: we owed it to these people to secure their human rights against the violent, anti-modern fundamentalists tyrannizing them. And by the logic of Culture Talk, these rogue actors inevitably hated freedom, hated our culture, and wished to attack us. Observe: beneath the cosmopolitan consensus lies no profound Kantian vision, no consistent approach to global justice. If there were such a thing, we would intervene in Saudi Arabia to protect the rights of women. If there were such a thing, Samantha Power would not have found, in her sweeping review of 20th-century genocides, that “The United States had never in its history intervened to stop genocide and had in fact rarely even made a point of condemning it as it occurred” (Power xv). No — cosmopolitanism is a form of Culture Talk, plain and simple. It is a way of reassuring ourselves that anyone we attack is, almost by virtue of being in our crosshairs, in the wrong.

This new cosmopolitanism was crowned with Kwame Anthony Appiah’s 2006 *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. (If there is any doubt that the consensus was cultural, political, and absolute, inspect the back: the book was praised by Power herself, Richard Rorty, and the Nobel laureates Nadine Gordimer, Orhan Pamuk, and Kofi Annan.) *Cosmopolitanism* is an odd book — parts of it are devoted to Appiah’s childhood in the markets of Ghana, others to lengthy philosophical discussions of value, relativism, and identity. At times he criticizes the clumsy Culture Talk of those who believe in a clash of civilizations: “In the wake of 9/11, there has been a lot of fretful discussion about the divide between ‘us’ and ‘them.’”

What's often taken for granted is a picture of the world in which conflicts arise, ultimately, from conflicts between values. This is what we take to be good; that is what they take to be good. That picture of the world has deep philosophical roots; it is thoughtful, well worked out, plausible. And, I think, wrong" (xx). He thinks it is wrong because he thinks there are objective, universal values that apply just as much to "the rest" as to "the West"; he opposes relativism at every turn.

But really, this is not the central thesis of his book. The central thesis of his book, laid out in the first pages of the introduction, is that because human nature was formed in small, pre-modern societies, and because we have only recently begun to live in a global moral realm where "Each person you know about and can affect is someone to whom you have responsibilities," we suddenly face a challenge: "The challenge [...] is to take minds and hearts formed over the long millennia of living in local troops and equip them with ideas and institutions that will allow us to live together as the global tribe we have become" (xiii). This equipping is the task of cosmopolitanism. (Recall that Nussbaum's 1993 piece was a call for educational reform — the equipping of minds and hearts. This might be called the soft face of the cosmopolitan mission.)

Appiah is very careful to avoid the more obvious trappings of Culture Talk — he outright rejects them. His cosmopolitan vision is founded on innocuous-seeming universal values like tolerance and pluralism. But there is no tolerance without intolerance, no pluralism without factionalism. The book takes its time admitting these things, but eventually the enemy becomes clear: those "counter-cosmopolitans" who would attack our pluralist society and replace our way of life with the malign universalism of fundamentalist Islam. Here the hard face of the cosmopolitan mission sets in. We might value intercultural exchange, but "there are limits to cosmopolitan tolerance. We will sometimes want to intervene in other places, because what is

going on there violates our fundamental principles so deeply. We, too, can see moral error. And when it is serious enough — genocide is the uncontroversial case — we will not stop with conversation” (145). Cosmopolitans believe that “Everybody matters: that is our central idea. And it sharply limits the scope of our tolerance.” If al-Qaeda is trampling the valuable lives of innocent people, we are bound to intervene.

And why does al-Qaeda trample those valuable lives? Because, in his view, counter-cosmopolitans “think that there is one right way for all human beings to live [...] Join us, the counter-cosmopolitans say, and we will all be sisters and brothers. But each of them plans to trample on our differences — to trample us to death, if necessary — if we will not join them” (145). It is here, in describing the motives of terrorists, that he slips into precisely the Culture Talk he earlier said was wrong (though also “thoughtful, well worked out, and plausible”). “Why many Muslims *do* feel that Christians are still engaged in a crusade against them is a complicated question,” he writes (143). It’s really not: on Sept. 19, 2001, George Bush said “we haven’t seen this kind of barbarism in a long time [...] this crusade, this war on terrorism, is gonna take a while” (CSPAN). But Appiah prefers a different explanation: “I am inclined to agree with those who think that an important element in the psychological mix is a sense that Islam, which once led Christendom, has somehow fallen behind, a sense that produces an uncomfortable *mélange* of resentment, anger, envy, and admiration” (143). This is unadulterated Culture Talk.

As for the roots of tribalism more broadly, and the cosmopolitan imperative that “everybody matters,” it’s instructive to look at how Appiah describes the progress of global capitalism. He spends several pages asking why people in “pockets of homogeneity” (third-world villages, for instance) feel their identity threatened by the modern world. His explanation is simple: “Because the world, their world, is changing, and some of them don’t like

it. The pull of the global economy — witness those cocoa trees whose chocolate is eaten all around the world — created some of the life they now live. If the economy changes — if cocoa prices collapse again as they did in the early 1990s — they may have to find new crops or new forms of livelihood. That is unsettling for some people (just as it is exciting for others)” (103). This glib description of capitalist modernity (pretending they can simply “find new forms of livelihood,” as if many of them wouldn’t starve) belies his facile insistence that “everybody matters.” Clearly some people matter more than others. When it comes to those dispossessed by the global order, “We can sympathize with them. But we cannot force their children to stay in the name of protecting their authentic culture; and we cannot afford to subsidize indefinitely thousands of distinct islands of homogeneity that no longer make economic sense” (104).

What if these people resisted the expropriation of their agriculture and the wholesale destruction of their way of life — what if, for instance, they took up arms against the United States? One strongly suspects that in Appiah’s eyes they would suddenly be violent insurrectionists, and we would be morally bound to intervene. Recall Mamdani’s point about colonial history: “This history stigmatizes those shut out of modernity as antimodern because they resist being shut out” (19). Here’s the secret: cosmopolitans, too, think there is one right way for all human beings to live. Join us, they say, and we will all be sisters and brothers. But each of them plans to trample on our differences — trample us to death, if necessary — if we will not join them.

#### 4. Cosmopolitanism, Culture Talk, and the Critics

##### *4.1. Culture Talk and the Talk of the Culture*

We have seen how the methods of Culture Talk shaped the broad media response to 9/11 and the War on Terror, sometimes under the guise of cosmopolitanism. Now we will examine how Culture Talk played out in the talk of our culture: its books, its films, and their reception in major critical venues like *The New York Times*. Such outlets purport not only to tell us what is true and false in global politics (whether, for instance, there are weapons of mass destruction in Iraq) but also what is good and bad in culture. As curators of the whole world's artistic output, they aspire to a kind of cosmopolitanism. A.O. Scott, lead film critic at the *New York Times*, describes his job like so:

Every culture, every class and tribe and coterie, every period in history has developed its own canons of craft and invention. Our modern, cosmopolitan sensibilities graze among the objects they have left behind, sampling and comparing and carrying out the pleasant work of sorting and assimilating what we find. Meanwhile, we are inundated with new stuff [...] There are so many demands on our attention, so many offers of diversion and enlightenment on the table, that choosing among them can feel like serious work. (*Better Living* 7)

There is much to note about this passage — the dissembling, colonial ring to “objects they have left behind,” the way the critic helps us choose by doing the “the winnowing and contrasting, the measuring and interpreting” (7). But most of all, note the subject position of the critic himself. He is the one who can measure and interpret because he is the one with a view of everything. From on top of the *New York Times*, he can see the whole world, and he brings back what he likes for the rest of us.

In covering this world, the *New York Times Book Review* aspires to precisely the reasonable objectivity preached by cosmopolitans like Appiah. As Kyle Paoletta writes in *The*

*Nation*, “The editors cover the book world as if it were any other news beat: They assign reviews that tend to be informative rather than interpretative, telling readers what books are being published, how relevant the new releases are to current affairs, which of them might be worth purchasing, and which authors are on the rise” (Paoletta). Editor Pamela Paul admits “The *Book Review* has a long tradition of being a political Switzerland.” Yet Paoletta also rightly observes that “While claiming to be a political Switzerland, the *Book Review* has seemed to skew to the center-right, with conservatives reviewing conservatives, centrists reviewing centrists, and very few leftists to be found.” Given that post-9/11 cosmopolitanism was, as we’ve seen, a coalition between the neoconservative right and the liberal, humanitarian center, this makes the *Book Review* an ideal breeding ground for cosmopolitan ideology.

I contend that the “culture talk” of seemingly apolitical literary critics is not so different from what Mamdani describes in scholarship and the mass media. Books and book reviews, like the news, are ways of representing and filtering the world. But unlike the news, literature aspires to the expression of deep, timely human truths. Literary and critical malpractice therefore has profound effects: if a novel vindicates American hegemony and is widely praised, its vision of the world might help to shape our vision of the world. If a novel criticizes cosmopolitan ideology but is widely misread as valorizing it, fewer of its readers will leave unsettled. Our public sense of reality is at stake. And when our public, led by warmongers, thrashes in its post-9/11 rage, it makes sense to imagine that institutions like the *NYTBR* will praise books that celebrate the cheap pluralism of empire, denigrate books that promote “tribal” or “sectarian” views — books that ascribe acts of terror to concrete political causes — and misread books that question American hegemony or the value of the cosmopolitan order.

The following case studies attempt to prove this hypothesis. In “Enthusiastic Cosmopolitans,” I argue that beneath the passionate cosmopolitanism of authors like Martin Amis and Colum McCann sits either a pernicious Islamophobia (Amis) or a tasteless, self-centered interest in “transgression” (McCann). In “You’re Either With Us...” I argue that book critics systematically panned and misread writing that challenged their cosmopolitanism, whether by Osama bin Laden or Susan Sontag. And in “Enlightened Misreadings,” I show how these clever misinterpretations were used to incorporate novels like Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Teju Cole’s *Open City* into the cosmopolitan mainstream — even when those novels by no means endorsed cosmopolitanism.

## 4.2. Enthusiastic Cosmopolitans

### *4.2.1. Martin Amis in the Aftermath*

In the month after 9/11, mainstream critical outlets published editorials and essays from practically every living canonical writer in Britain and the U.S: John Updike, Martin Amis, Denis Johnson, Susan Sontag, Ian McEwan, Don DeLillo, Amitav Ghosh, David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, and Toni Morrison, to name only a few. These pieces are not universally interesting, but many are revealing insofar as they reveal the knee-jerk workings of Culture Talk in real time.

Amis, to his credit, begins his piece in *The Guardian* with a sentence ill-fitted to Culture Talk. “Terrorism,” he writes, “is political communication by other means” (Amis). He even does some quick math in the hope of snapping Americans awake: “How many of them know, for example, that their government has destroyed at least 5% of the Iraqi population? How many of

them then transfer that figure to America (and come up with 14m)?” He is quite ready to critique the naiveté and the self-serving foreign policy of America. But when he gets to the terrorists, he slides into a familiar groove: “All over again the west confronts an irrationalist, agonistic, theocratic/ideocratic system which is essentially and unappeasably opposed to its existence.” For Amis, the terrorists are not driven by those millions of Iraqi dead. They know only irrationalism and theocracy. By the end of the piece, he has arrived at the remarkably cosmopolitan idea of “species consciousness,” “something over and above nationalisms, blocs, religions, ethnicities. During this week of incredulous misery, I have been trying to apply such a consciousness, and such a sensibility. Thinking of the victims, the perpetrators, and the near future, I felt species grief, then species shame, then species fear.”

Evidently he forgot his species consciousness by the time he declared, in a 2006 interview, that “The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order. What sort of suffering? Not letting them travel. Deportation — further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they’re from the Middle East or Pakistan.... Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children” (Morey 1). That same year, he published “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” in the *New Yorker* — a fictional retelling of the final moments of the life of one of the hijackers. His fictional Atta is constipated, hideous, and insecure; at one point he imagines how even if he bailed on the attacks, no one would ever let him fly again. “The profiling wouldn’t need to be racial; it would be facial, merely. No sane man or woman would ever agree to be confined in his vicinity [....] And that name, the name he journeyed under, itself like a promise of vengeance: Muhammad Atta.” Clearly Amis’s Islamophobia grew more pronounced as the years went on — from conventional Culture Talk in 2001 to the rather shocking insinuation, in 2006, that a

perfectly ordinary Arabic name is “itself like a promise of vengeance.” But no one at the *New Yorker* or *The Guardian* seemed to mind.

#### 4.2.2. Colum McCann’s *Cosmopolitan Transgressions*

Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin* opens with a panoramic burst of cosmopolitanism. All of New York City pauses to watch a fictionalized version of real-life daredevil Philippe Petit cross a wire between the Twin Towers. “They found themselves in small groups together [...] Lawyers. Elevator operators. Doctors. Cleaners. Prep chefs. Diamond merchants. Fish sellers. Sad-jeaned whores. All of them reassured by the presence of one another. Stenographers. Traders. Deliveryboys. Sandwichboard men. Cardsharks. Con Ed. Ma Bell. Wall street. A locksmith in his van on the corner of Dey and Broadway...” (4). The list goes on. New Yorkers of every “class, tribe, and coterie,” to quote A.O. Scott, are cosmopolitanized by a moment of transcendent beauty. Is this likely? Would the lawyers and the fish sellers truly be “reassured by the presence of one another?” For McCann, writing in 2009, this question is irrelevant — the moment is meant to be an inverted 9/11. In McCann’s own words, “The tightrope walk was an act of creation that seemed to stand in direct defiance to the act of destruction twenty-seven years later” (359). But this act of creation (creating what?) is significant less for its own sake than for the way it ties together the city, and thus the many strands of his plot.

The book’s cast is like a sample from its opening panorama: an Irish priest, a subway surfer, a novice hacker, an aging judge, and quite a few sex workers (inevitably either “hookers” or “whores”). What is supposed to be beautiful about the book is the way these different people, from different walks of life, are brought together by small moments of beauty, decency, and

forgiveness. Recall that in Nussbaum's cosmopolitan vision, "we should not allow differences of nationality or class or ethnic membership or even gender to erect barriers between us and our fellow human beings" (Nussbaum). McCann's plot dismisses one such barrier after another. An Irish Catholic priest befriends a group of drug-using Black sex workers; a rich White woman is brought together with a working-class Black woman over their sons' deaths in Vietnam; a sex worker's daughter is adopted by the same Black woman and, 20 years later, is like a niece to the rich White woman.

Perhaps from our vantage point this plot sounds dangerously confident in its racial boundary-crossing; perhaps it sounds somewhat thin. It is both. McCann admitted in a *New York Times* profile that "he often wrote about people living grittier lives than he had ever experienced. 'You know certain people keep themselves awake by cutting themselves and sprinkling salt in their wounds?' he said. 'Part of it possibly is the desire to stay awake in the real world and to know how lucky I am and to realize that other people's lives are not as good as mine'" (Rich). A morally hollow interest in "difference" if ever there was one — but the profile is far more interested in his "hale good looks" and his freshly-minted National Book Award than his politics. The original *NYT* review is just as friendly: besides tossing off the phrase "aging black hooker" with glee, its author says "It is a mark of the novel's soaring and largely fulfilled ambition that McCann just keeps rolling out new people, deftly linking each to the next, as his story moves toward its surprising and deeply affecting conclusion" (Mahler).

McCann received such unquestioning praise from the *NYTBR* because his book is so much like the *Book Review* itself: it believes it is a fair-handed representation of a diverse, cosmopolitan country. If it, like Nussbaum and Appiah, is on some level provincial, biased, and politically backward, who cares? The most rarefied critical voices say otherwise.

### 4.3. You're Either With Us...

#### *4.3.1. Reviewing Radicals*

The *NYTBR* does more than review literature. In keeping with its mission to report widely and objectively on the world of books, it also reviews plenty of political nonfiction. In examining its review of the collected writings of Osama bin Laden, I hope to demonstrate that even when tossed the softest pitch in the world — the work of an actual terrorist mastermind — the *NYTBR* could not resist responding in the language of Culture Talk. And in examining its responses to the work of respected academics like Noam Chomsky and Edward Said, I hope to show that its cosmopolitanism was consistent, hyperbolic, and malign.

In 2006, Noah Feldman reviewed bin Laden's writings, collected in *Messages to the World*, for the *NYTBR*. This review is as interesting for what it says as for what it omits: reviewing a book that makes constant — indeed, often exaggerated — reference to America's interventionist wars in the Middle East and its support of Israel, Feldman neglects even once to mention Israel, Palestine, or Afghanistan. Iraq is mentioned once, in the context of the targeting of civilians... by al-Qaeda. Instead of addressing U.S. foreign policy or the recent history bin Laden so effectively weaponizes, Feldman devotes the bulk of the review to a critique of bin Laden's Qur'anic scholarship. He concludes that "Bin Laden's move to supplant the scholarly tradition, arrogate authority to himself and embrace violence on a grand scale represents a power grab of historic significance. When bin Laden says he is engaged in a war of religion, he is doing more than trying to mobilize Muslims -- he is trying to make himself their legitimate decision

maker, and thus their leader” (Feldman). While acknowledging that bin Laden is at odds with the vast majority of Muslim scholars, he also makes it seem like the terrain of bin Laden’s authority comes from his *religious* expertise, rather than his position in regional politics and recent global history. “Culture Talk,” Mamdani writes, “has [...] turned religion into a political category” (24). Feldman does just this.

It might not be surprising that the work of bin Laden himself prompted such a thoughtless response. But cosmopolitan Culture Talk was just as pronounced in the *Book Review*’s take on Noam Chomsky’s *Hegemony or Survival* (a review written by Samantha Power, who, as mentioned above, published an extensive study on U.S. indifference to genocide). Chomsky argues that the war on terror is one in a long line of violent American responses to counter-hegemonic movements in the Third World — responses which are usually disguised as “counterterrorism” or “liberation.” But although Power accepts many of his historical examples, she calls his book a “raging and often meandering assault on United States foreign policy and the elites who shape it” (Power). She does justice to many of Chomsky’s points (she by no means accepts the Culture Talk of the neoconservatives), but ultimately says “Chomsky is wrong to think that individuals within the American government are not thinking seriously about the costs of alliances with repressive regimes; he is also wrong to suggest that it would be easy to get the balance right between liberty and security, or democracy and equality -- or to figure out what the hell to do about Pakistan.” In one sentence, Power reveals all the grandstanding provincialism of the cosmopolitan. It is up to us (we who work for the U.N. or at the highest levels of American government) to balance liberty and security, and to decide what to do about Pakistan. If only everyone understood how difficult this is — if only they laid down their sectarianism and accepted our expertise on human rights.

This is disappointing (one recalls Paoletta’s observation about “conservatives reviewing conservatives, centrists reviewing centrists, and very few leftists to be found”), but it is merely the continuation of a long tradition. In 1994, as post-Cold War cosmopolitanism first gained ground, David Shipler reviewed Edward Said’s *The Politics of Dispossession* in the *NYTBR*. The review, titled “From a Wellspring of Bitterness,” describes reading these “vitriolic writings” as “like being yelled at for hours on end” (Shipler). Said, whose insights into the way we stereotype the Middle East have informed generations of literary and historical scholarship (including Mamdani’s), is here “a master of overstatement whose numbing invective often vitiates his arguments.” Perhaps the reason for this scathing dismissal can be found in Shipler’s conclusion, where he confesses “to an unfair advantage: I know most of the people Mr. Said assails, including moderate Israelis who have long worked for coexistence with the Palestinians.” What is strange is not that Shipler, so obviously biased, didn’t like Said’s book — what is strange is that the *New York Times* gave the review to a crony of Said’s interlocutors. The spirit of cosmopolitanism, apparently, is objective only when convenient.

#### 4.3.2. *Zero Tolerance*

If the post-9/11 media discourse was deeply sympathetic to cosmopolitan literature, it was also deeply hostile to anti-cosmopolitan politics. But what happens when a respected literary figure attacks Culture Talk head on? In the weeks after 9/11, Susan Sontag did just this. The lasting controversy generated by her remarks will illuminate the period’s rigid consensus (from the *New Republic* to the *National Review*) that American interventionism must not be questioned.

As mentioned, 9/11 precipitated a flood of literary comment. Its most prestigious channel was the *New Yorker*, where many of the country’s esteemed writers gathered two weeks after the

attacks to share their thoughts. Most focused on the horror of the falling towers or, in Franzen's phrase, the "death artists" who planned the attack. Susan Sontag did not. She wrote, in a brief three paragraphs, about "the disconnect between last Tuesday's monstrous dose of reality and the self-righteous drivel and outright deceptions being peddled by public figures and TV commentators" (Sontag). "Where," she asked, "is the acknowledgment that this was not a 'cowardly' attack on 'civilization' or 'liberty' or 'humanity' or 'the free world' but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions?" She describes her horror at the swathe of public figures who all of a sudden "stand united behind President Bush." And in several brief sentences, her conclusion cuts through all the Culture Talk of the loudest country in the world: "Let's by all means grieve together. But let's not be stupid together. A few shreds of historical awareness might help us understand what has just happened, and what may continue to happen. 'Our country is strong,' we are told again and again. I for one don't find this entirely consoling. Who doubts that America is strong? But that's not all America has to be."

What a brave thing to publish in a country convulsing with the stupidity of its unprocessed grief. Her bravery, of course, did not go unpunished. The critical response was practically immunological in speed and scope. In the *Washington Post*, Charles Krauthammer called Sontag one of the "voices of moral obtuseness" emerging after the attacks; he also compared her to Jerry Falwell and asserted that the U.S. spent the 1990s saving the world's Muslims (Krauthammer). Richard Brookhiser still hadn't forgotten the three-paragraph piece in 2007, when he wrote for the *National Review* about "Sontag's shameful New Yorker essay, in the first issue after 9/11, which was the harbinger of the 'we deserved it' school of thought that now stretches from Osama to Ron Paul" (Brookhiser). This is unsurprising in the *National Review* —

what's remarkable is that one finds the exact same comparison in the "progressive" *New Republic*, where Lawrence F. Kaplan began his piece three weeks after the attacks by asking "What do Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, and Susan Sontag have in common?" (Kaplan). The kindest appraisal (though no less disturbing) came from Frank Rich in the opinion pages of the *NYT* — "Such has been the disproportionate avalanche of invective about Susan Sontag, Bill Maher and Noam Chomsky that you'd hardly guess they were a writer, a late-late-night comic and a linguistics professor -- Americans with less clout and popular standing than a substitute weatherman on the 'Today' show" (Rich). Sontag and Chomsky were renowned in the U.S. and abroad, so in its confidence that both were irrelevant, Rich's op-ed is instructive. It shows that even sympathetic occupants of the halls of cosmopolitan power could not conceive of a media landscape outside their influence. Just as for Nussbaum the U.N. represents the sum total of international politics, for Rich, the critical mainstream is the sum total of American political and cultural thought.

#### 4.4. Enlightened Misreadings

It doesn't take much critical skill to endorse cosmopolitan aesthetics or to bash leftists like Sontag and Comsky. The most compelling reviews to emerge from post-9/11 critical Culture Talk creatively *misread* novels that otherwise might have threatened or destabilized the cosmopolitan consensus. Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* was, in its reception and its film adaptation, stripped of ambiguity and political force. Teju Cole's *Open City*, a novel of profound cosmopolitan unease, was read as a simple endorsement of liberal solipsism and A.O. Scott's "grazing," "sampling," and "comparing." These reviews and adaptations are, unlike

many thus far, fascinating for their deftness rather than their idiocy — they go to great, sophisticated lengths to muffle these disquieting books.

#### 4.4.1. *Neutralizing Ambiguity in The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

Mohsin Hamid's 2007 novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a complex story about a young Pakistani man's rise and fall in corporate America. Its first draft was written while Hamid was a young Pakistani man at the peak of his career in corporate America. Its final draft, five years later, was written after he rejected that career and emigrated to London (*Discontent and its Civilizations* 92-93). Significantly, its first draft was also written in early 2001. At this stage, Hamid thought the novel "would be a look at America with a gaze reflecting the part of myself that remained stubbornly Pakistani" (*Discontent* 91). But in the wake of 9/11, Hamid was forced to reckon with the ways America gazed back — the ways he and others from Muslim-majority countries were reduced, in the popular imagination, to religious zealots and potential terrorists. His novel morphed into a response. At this stage he gave it its powerfully ambiguous frame tale: Changez, the protagonist, recounts his story aloud to an American interlocutor at a table in Lahore, but it's never clear just who this American is or why he's so interested in Changez. Is the glint of metal in his jacket a gun or an accessory? Does his mobile phone connect him to a newsroom or a CIA outpost? What is Changez guilty of, if anything?

We never learn. The novel's brilliance lies in its refusal to grant us these key pieces of information. Hamid's narrative strategy creates a startling effect for the reader: it feels like it's up to you to puzzle out the guilt or innocence of the novels' characters, and it feels vitally important that you succeed. This mentality is Hamid's real creation. His book convinces us that we can and must decide what's true about people whose stories we do not fully know — in other contexts,

this is called stereotyping. And in forcing us to stereotype, Hamid's novel exposes the process, governed by fear and ambiguity, by which we stereotype in the first place.

Mira Nair's 2012 film adaptation actively strips the story of this political quality. She collapses the ambiguity of the frame tale into the tidy moral tension of a thriller — Changez is now across the table from Bobby Lincoln, former journalist turned CIA operative. She also expands and “complicates” the political situation of the frame tale by establishing that Changez flirted with, but ultimately rejected, overtures from fellow scholars to join them in their violent Islamist scheming. Where the book leaves us frightened and unsure, her film reassures us that he has refused counter-cosmopolitanism. At the end, he delivers a speech at the funeral of his student, who was killed by Bobby Lincoln. The boy's parents, he says, “ask us not to cry for their son. Too many tears have flowed into the river. They ask us not to take revenge in their son's name. Too much blood has flowed into that river. They ask us not to curse fate. Allah holds our son in His embrace. Wipe your tears! And pray for a future free of dictators and tyrants, free of all invaders.” In attempting to portray Islam as peaceful, Nair accepts the terms of the cosmopolitan argument — she accepts that the question was about Islam in the first place. And in aligning “dictators and tyrants” with “all invaders,” Changez ironically echoes the moral logic of cosmopolitan intervention. It might be bad to invade, but it's less bad than tyranny.

In “RefRACTing Fundamentalism in Mira Nair's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012),” Ana Cristina Mendes and Karen Bennett argue that “Having him convert to pacifism was [...] the only way [Nair] could end the tale coherently without alienating her public” (119). Funding and box office figures were at stake. And Nair, as director of the film adaptation, is as much an interpreter of Hamid's book as any critic. The interpretation she develops — one centering a

facile multiculturalism, an abstractly spiritual non-violence, and a thoroughly exotic, ahistorical picture of Pakistani political Islam — is cosmopolitan through and through.

Mendes and Bennett also call our attention to the “refracting” done by the literary press. Reviewers from the Indian subcontinent tended to identify with Changez and praise the book’s radical form. Saeed Ur Rehman wrote that the interaction between Changez and his listener is “healthy for Pakistani literature as well as Pakistani identity” since “for the first time in Pakistan’s intricate and messy relationship with the United States of America, we have a scenario, though fictional, where the American listens to the Pakistani for such a long time” (qtd. in McSweeney 119). In America, by contrast, the novel’s reviews contained a prominent strain of skepticism and defensive anger: “is Pakistan entirely vulnerable and weak during the face-off with India in 2002?” asks one reviewer (qtd. in McSweeney 120). Paula Bock in the *Seattle Times* resorted to the same cross-questioning: “Of course, on 9/11, America was the bombing victim. So why is Changez lashing out against America?” (qtd. in McSweeney 120). In the *New York Times*, Karen Olsson concluded that “We are prodded to question whether every critic of America in a Muslim country should be labeled a fundamentalist, or whether the term more accurately describes the capitalists of the American upper class. Yet these queries seem blunter and less interesting than the novel itself” (Olsson). The discomfort betrayed in these reviews testifies to the book’s power, which is to say its ambiguity.

A simple fact lies near the center of Hamid’s novel: plenty of people hate America for good reasons. The slow emergence of this fact is a large part of what creates the book’s tension — we have no choice but to listen as Changez explains, in great detail, why he smiled when the towers fell. The fact that neither Nair nor American reviewers could comfortably translate this point for their audiences suggests the hegemonic power of Culture Talk. In this instance, Culture

Talk almost amounts to a taboo: one *cannot* entertain the idea that political Islamist violence has causes. This is the same as saying one cannot allow it its politics or its history. By this view, terrorists attack America because they hate our freedom or they're tribal and premodern; they are not so much real people responding to real political conditions as they are agents of pure evil, attacking us from outside history and outside rational thought.

#### 4.4.2. *Open City and a Certain Kind of Solitary Liberalism*

Teju Cole's 2011 *Open City* was widely received as a "cosmopolitan novel." (To be fair, at one point Julius, the novel's narrator, literally sends an acquaintance a copy of Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism*.) Miguel Syjuco wrote in the *NYTBR* that while its plotlessness and allusiveness would dissuade some readers, the real ones would stick around. "[Cole's] readers will be those who understand that all stories are interconnected, that literature is not mere entertainment, and that art is nothing if not an extended conversation spanning eras, nations and languages" (Syjuco). This "extended conversation" is no small part of the cosmopolitan prescription. And in a review for the *Guardian*, cosmopolitanism is pitted against plot and action: "action is the wrong spoor by which to pursue this book. What comes strongest off it, instead, is a cosmopolitan range of reference. Moments of genuine narrative are most often the springboard for a jump into book chat, music trivia or historical disquisition" (Foden). These reviews notice salient things about the book, particularly its tremendous range of reference and its chorus of ethnically and geographically diverse voices. But they radically misunderstand the novel's broader project, which is to portray cosmopolitanism's absolute failure to create meaningful connection.

How does the novel enact this failure? Pieter Vermeulen tracks Cole's methods in "Flights of Memory: Teju Cole's *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism." The novel's range of reference and its diverse cast, he says, can only be understood in relation to the affectless voice of Julius, its narrator. Several "aesthetic experiences" fail to provide Julius with human connection, or even with a memorable experience. When he steps from the street into the subway, Julius observes that "Aboveground I was with thousands of others in their solitude, but in the subway, standing close to strangers, jostling them and being jostled by them for space and breathing room, all of us reenacting unacknowledged traumas, the solitude intensified" (qtd. in Vermeulen 47). Huge stretches of the book are devoted to Julius's urban wanderings, but in the end they are simply so many forms of dissociated loneliness: his choice is between more or less intense forms of solitude. Vermeulen, tracing this pattern throughout the book, writes that "The novel can be read as a catalogue of failed attempts to live up to the expectation of achieved polyphonic form. Instead of a cosmopolitan connectedness, the novel's main figures of transport — walking, memory, art — at best provide experiences of shared isolation" (47). Julius fails to live up to his boundary-crossing potential as a mobile, educated world citizen. He has all the advantages of Appiah and Nussbaum, but finds his subject position far less richly rewarding.

If this was all, the novel would merely be *un*-cosmopolitan. But it is more: it is, in the extent and the ramifications of his failure, *counter*-cosmopolitan. At one point in the novel Julius travels to Brussels. "It is easy to have the wrong idea about Brussels," he says. "One thinks of it as a technocrats' city, and because it was so central to the formation of the European Union, the assumption is that it is a new city, built, or at least expanded, expressly for that purpose" (97). But no — Brussels is old, very old, and with its age comes a history. In World War Two, "there had been no firebombing of Bruges, or Ghent, or Brussels. Surrender, of course, played a role in

this form of survival, as did negotiation with invading powers. Had Brussels's rulers not opted to declare it an *open city* and thereby exempt it from bombardment during the Second World War, it might have been reduced to rubble" (emphasis mine). The Brussels of today, seat of cosmopolitan technocracy, exists thanks to the morally bankrupt behavior of Brussels in the past. History, in this passage, rushes back to unsettle our understanding of the present, the same way the history of Cold War American foreign policy rushed back on 9/11. This rushing back occurs again and again in the novel, most notably to Julius himself, when an acquaintance accuses him of raping her at a party during their youth.

Thus the novel itself becomes an open city — it is full of opportunities for human understanding, but with each opportunity comes the risk that history will intrude and lead to willful or accidental misunderstanding. Imagine Kwame Anthony Appiah took the clean moral abstractions of *Cosmopolitanism* to a hundred random spots on the globe and shared them with the nearest inhabitant. An account of such a journey might read like *Open City*: cosmopolitanism, plunged into history, dissolves, leaving the poor cosmopolitan naked — he is nothing, after all, but a lonely self.

The fact that none of this came through to our literary critics ought to speak to the way they imagine themselves. Even James Wood declared that "More than anything, *Open City* seems a beautifully modulated description of a certain kind of solitary liberalism common to thousands, if not millions, of bookish types. Julius's friends, for instance, are into various green and ecological causes; Julius stands to one side, and it is clear that his political inactivity has to do with his ability to see things so well. 'It was a cause, and I was distrustful of causes,' he tells us, 'but it was also a choice, and I found my admiration for decisive choice increasing, because I was so essentially indecisive myself'" (Wood). It is remarkable that Wood chose this moment —

where, we might say, wartime Brussels gazes admiringly at France and England — to glorify “a certain kind of solitary liberalism.” He finds Julius, despite the rape accusation, a “mild” hero. “He is central to himself, in ways that are sane, forgivable, and familiar. And this selfish normality, this ordinary solipsism, this lucky, privileged equilibrium of the soul is an obstacle to understanding other people, even as it enables liberal journeys of comprehension.” Again Wood reads Julius as an emblem of liberalism, one whose “privileged equilibrium of the soul” allows him to go on “journeys of comprehension.” Yet Wood also seems forced to admit, in a way that renders his last sentence nearly meaningless, that this same equilibrium “is an obstacle to understanding other people.” Which is it? Confronted with another ambiguously charged counter-cosmopolitan novel, the critical establishment contorts itself in incomprehension.

##### 5. Conclusion: Critical Stupidity and the Higher Cosmopolitanism

“Terrorism is stupid. Terrorists are stupid. It seems to me that these truths have not been sufficiently acknowledged, especially by movies, which tend to imagine terrorists as the diabolically clever authors of complicated conspiracies” (“Hairbrained Plans by Halfwits”). So begins *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott’s review of the 2010 film *Four Lions*. The film is a farce about five young British Islamist extremists plotting a suicide bombing. They aren’t very good at it — one of them blows himself up next to a sheep in an empty field, another wants to bomb the local mosque in order to “radicalize the moderates” — but what they lack in expertise they make up for in dedication.

Sadly, what they lack in human comprehensibility is irretrievable: not one of the men seems like someone who would actually want to blow himself up. None of them ever even give a strong reason; we're simply expected to take as a given that these insecure goofballs have been radicalized to the point where they want to commit mass murder. Waj, younger brother of the main character, is in it for the "rubber dinghy rapids" he expects to find in heaven, while the main character himself, Omar, is happily married and lives in a nice flat with his son. In theory, the five men are alienated, confused, and ripe for radicalization. In practice, all but the White convert Barry seem kind, stable, and enmeshed in community.

So why do they want to kill people? The movie never tells us, but I think A.O. Scott is exactly right: it's because, in the world of the film, terrorists are stupid. They're stupid primarily because they do violent things for no reason, or out of sheer egoism — in Scott's understanding, "dreams of glory tethered to half-baked ideas and harebrained plots" (Scott). Scott really liked this movie, which makes sense, because he also really hates stupidity. In a self-authored "dialogue" at the start of his *Better Living Through Criticism*, he writes the following:

A: [...] There is no room for doubt and little time for reflection as we find ourselves buffeted by a barrage of sensations and a flood of opinion. We can fantasize about slowing down or opting out, but ultimately we must learn to live in the world as we find it and to see it as clearly as we can. This is no simple task. It is easier to seek out the comforts of groupthink, prejudice, and ignorance. Resisting those temptations requires vigilance, discipline, and curiosity.

Q: So then what you've written is a manifesto against laziness and stupidity?

A: You could put it that way. (11)

He goes on to say he hopes the book is also “a celebration of art and imagination,” but his case is clear. Criticism is the opposite of — and the antidote to — laziness and stupidity. Terrorists like the ones in *Four Lions* are lazy and stupid.

But is that Scott’s whole reading of the film? Basically, yes. For someone committed to “vigilance, discipline, and curiosity,” he seems incurious about the human characters before him. “Waj and Faisal are disarmingly sweet-natured,” he says, and he thinks that Omar’s life as a “regular guy with a job as a security guard, a good-humored wife [...] and a young son makes him all the more likable” (Scott, “Hairbrained Plans”). He doesn’t seem to mind that these sweet-natured, likable people are also supposed to be violent extremists — in fact, he thinks it makes perfect sense. They’re stupid; terrorists are stupid; case closed. In a way, this approaches the zero degree of cosmopolitanism: they hate us not for our freedom, or our culture, or our politics, but simply because they, unlike us, are idiots.

Here we might return to Mamdani. Early in his book he observes that Culture Talk tends to divide the world into open-minded, secular cosmopolitans and violent, tribal fundamentalists. The key difference between the two is their stance on “modernity” — liberal humanists love it while gun-toting fundamentalists hate it. “Premodern peoples are said to have no creative ability and anti-modern fundamentalists are said to have a profound ability to be destructive. The destruction is taken as proof that they have no appreciation for human life, including their own” (19). To his long list of epithets — “premodern,” “anti-modern,” “tribal,” “fundamentalist” — we might add Scott’s simple “stupid.”

It’s fine to hate stupidity and laziness; it’s also fine to hate terrorists. Stupidity, laziness, and terrorists are all bad. But in this case, Scott’s criticism encourages precisely those things he despises. In failing to wonder about the causes of terrorism, he commits the error behind all

post-9/11 Culture Talk: he accepts an easy answer rather than investigate the difficult history of U.S. involvement in the Middle East. To believe that “culture,” “civilization,” “modernity,” or “stupidity” are the reasons for terrorism — let alone to write in that belief for the largest newspaper in the country — is to betray a settled and pernicious lack of curiosity. It is, in fact, to behave rather stupidly.

This stupidity has now marked more than two decades of American literary criticism. It was alive and well in 2017, when Dwight Garner, reviewing Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire*, wrote these bumbling lines: “This novel may seem to wobble in the minutes after its landing gear retracts. There are lurching shifts of tone as it moves between matters of the heart and of state. Do not panic. Order something from the drinks cart. Shamsie drives this gleaming machine home in a manner that, if I weren’t handling airplane metaphors, I would call smashing” (Garner). How does Garner, moments after describing *Home Fire*’s protagonist being strip searched at an airport, manage to make its author sound like a hijacker? It is not an accident, but it also seems strangely sloppy, almost unintentional. It is simply the blindness of cosmopolitan privilege — the systemic incuriosity and the myopic critical stupidity that predominate in circles where our books are winnowed and contrasted.

One final note. Susan Sontag, who was very rarely stupid, was also, despite her piece in the *New Yorker*, not strictly a counter-cosmopolitan. In 1980, she wrote a piece about Elias Canetti called “Mind as Passion.” In it, she described his “far-flung Sephardic family” and his “childhood rich in displacements” (183). “He has,” she wrote, “almost by birthright, the exile writer’s easily generalized relation to place: a place is a language” (184). Yet Canetti, a multiply exiled polyglot Jew living through the horrors of the twentieth century, chose to write in German. “Pious tributes to Goethe’s inspiration [...] attest to that loyalty to German culture which would

keep him always a foreigner in England [...] and which Canetti has the privilege and the burden of understanding, Jew that he is, as the higher cosmopolitanism.” This higher and more hidden cosmopolitanism, born of necessity, suffering, and deep devotion, serves as a counterexample to mainstream U.S. critics’ credulousness in the wake of 9/11. Canetti’s is the cosmopolitanism of exile, not the cosmopolitanism of bureaucracy; it celebrates art and imagination not as solutions to global violence but as forms of refuge from that violence; it is not the universalizing myopia of privilege but it is itself a privilege, and a burden, and a gift we would do well to keep at hand as our history continues to unfold.

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