

The Forms and Meanings of (In)Visibility Arab-Americans and the State of Terror in Youssef El Guindi's *Back of the Throat and Language Rooms*

Cinzia Schiavini
Università degli Studi di Milano, Italia

Abstract This article investigates two well-known plays by Youssef El Guindi, the most important and prolific playwright of 21st century Arab-American theatre. Both plays are related to the consequences of the terrorist attacks on the Arab-American community, and they explore the structures of control enacted by the security state and the strategies of its repressive politics. The article focuses in particular on the tropes of visibility and invisibility and its paradoxes for a minority that moved from 'invisible citizens' to 'visible subjects' within a few hours. The paradoxes of visibility and invisibility and their divide are here explored in relation to three main issues: the relationship between ethnic identity and citizenship – be it social and/or political; deviancy and the construction of Otherness; and identity and the body.

Keywords Theatre. Contemporary American literature. Arab-Americans. 9/11. Visibility and Invisibility.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Cages of the Mind and the Power of the Gaze. – 3 Which Citizenship: First or Second Class? – 4 Deviancy as Otherness. – 5 Spectral Bodies.



Peer review

Submitted 2021-04-01
Accepted 2021-04-21
Published 2021-07-29

Open access

© 2021 | Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License



Citation Schiavini, C. (2021). "The Forms and Meanings of (In)Visibility. Arab-Americans and the State of Terror in Youssef El Guindi's *Back of the Throat and Language Rooms*". *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie occidentale*, 55, 213-228.

1 Introduction

Before 9/11, Arab-Americans were far from a prominent issue in the American cultural debate and within academic circles, reflecting their general invisibility in American society. Since linguistic and (for Muslim Arabs) religious identities are definitely less easy to identify than physical traits, features or skin colors, Arab-Americans (largely coming from the Middle-East until the seventies and classified by the government as “white”) perhaps faced an easier path to assimilation than other ethnic groups, although forms of discrimination persisted (“white, but not quite”, in the definition of Samhan 1999, 209). It is no wonder that Arab and Muslim-American literature and art has long had such blurred boundaries, to the extent that Arab American writers themselves used the trope of invisibility to define their status and their work - a condition that in many ways long prevented the formation of an Arab-American movement. Apart from very few exceptions, artists, writers, playwrights had difficulties in being published or produced in a distinct and recognisable Arab-American ‘category’, as there was not the basis of ethnic or cultural recognition for that category to exist.

For “the most invisibles of the invisibles” (Kadi 1994, xix), everything changed with 9/11. The immediate effects of the multiple attacks carried out by Arab terrorists were the consolidation of the category ‘Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim’ and the racialisation of Islam and Islamic fundamentalism that led to a proliferation of crimes against Arab-Americans. Arabs started to be perceived as the ‘enemy within’, and although various institutions promptly condemned consequent episodes of racism, the effects of the War on Terror within the national boundaries hit the Arab-American population harder than any other group, to the extent that, after 9/11, racial profiling, arrests, and deportation of Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans came to be depicted as a necessity, essential to America’s declared global war on terrorism.

At the same time, with this unprecedented shift in status from “model minority” to “problem minority” (Naber 2012, 25), Arab-American visibility after 9/11 led to a surge in interest in Arab-American voices and stories told from an insider’s perspective. As Joussef El Guindi - the most important and prolific Arab-American playwright - noted,

For the longest time Arab issues or Muslim issues just had not been on the radar because they were considered ‘too complex’ and the subject matter ‘too edgy.’ Then, after 9/11, ‘suddenly there were calls for plays’. (Stahl 2016, 19)

However, as recent Arab-American history testifies, visibility in society and the arts does not always necessarily equate to power, especially if this visibility is constructed by the dominant discourse.

While there is a correlation between being visible and being recognised as part of a community, for Arab-Americans visibility after 9/11 has often represented a trap, caging the group into stereotypes exploited by mainstream discourse. Though, as Peggy Phelan noted,

visibility politics are compatible with capitalism's relentless appetite for new markets and with the most self-satisfying ideologies of the United States: you are welcome here as long as you are productive. The production and reproduction of visibility are part of the labor of the reproduction of capitalism (1993, 11),

Arab-American stereotypes in the media transformed them into products, catalysts of Americans' fears and anger.

Being depicted without being commodified has been the real challenge that Arab-Americans have had to face; being subjects – and not objects – of representation, became a necessity as never before in the aftermath of the attacks. In the arts, Arab-Americans have primarily found visibility through self-representation in the theatre. There are several reasons why theatre, rather than other art forms such as literature or cinema, has been the main forum and medium for resistance to stereotypes by Arab-American artists. Stages and clubs have always been more accessible for minorities than media like cinema or TV, where 'Arabs' and 'Arab-Americans' long remained caged in the role of the villain (Shaheen 2008; Alsultany 2012). The nature of theatrical performance is also particularly apt for questioning issues faced by Arab-Americans as a group over the last twenty years. Not only are performances completed events, that incorporate the politics and policy of identities that produced that event ("always doing a thing done", in the definition given by Elin Diamond, cit. in Najjar 2015, 66), but they also have a history of being employed as a means to challenge the matrix of power or negotiate with regimes of power, and, as Najjar writes, "viewing performances within the matrix of power encourages a permeable understanding of history and change" (Najjar 2015, 66).

Arab-American identity and status within the US after 9/11, the shift from "invisible citizens" to "visible subjects" (Naber, cit. in Amaney, Naber 2008, 2) and the consequences and paradoxes of that shift are at the core of two plays by Youssef El Guindi, *Back of the Throat* (2006) and *Language Rooms* (2012), that deal specifically with post-9/11 Arabophobia and persecution. El Guindi's life is itself significant in testifying to the shifting and increasingly transnational borders of Arab-American identity. El Guindi was born in Egypt and migrated to London with his parents at the age of four, before later returning to Cairo to attend undergraduate classes. He then moved to the US to pursue a graduate degree in playwriting at Carnegie-Mellon University and acquired US citizenship in 1996. After the degree, he

first took up a playwright-in-residence position at Duke University and then moved to Seattle to work full-time on his plays – a body of work that includes *Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith* (2010), *Pilgrim Musa and Sheri in the New World* (2012), *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat* (2014), *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes* (2014), *Threesome* (2016), *Collaborator* (2017), and *The Talented Ones* (2018).

Although not limited to the narrative and consequences of 9/11, El Guindi's work has been deeply influenced by those events. After several of his Arab-American friends had become targets for investigation because of their ethnicity, he started to imagine what could happen if FBI agents were to visit his apartment in search of a suspect. His artistic inquiry is thus located at the crossroads of the political and the personal – imagining the effects on his own mind and body of the processes of investigation, interrogation, and even torture unleashed by the War on Terror. *Back of the Throat* and *Language Rooms* (BT and LR in the text) stage in complementary ways the multiple internment camps within the national borders and the “virtual internment camp” (Haddad, cit. in Almostafa 2020, 46) of the mind that resulted in Arab-Americans' isolation and marginalisation. These plays explore the terrain where different forms of discrimination and violence – religious, racial, and sexual – meet in the construction of a hegemonic narrative of US national security and citizenship after 9/11, where visibility and invisibility are crucial elements in the attempt to avoid violence and the enactment of violence.

Claustrophobically set in a studio apartment, *Back of the Throat* is about an American-born Muslim Egyptian writer, Khaled, who is visited by two federal agents, Carl and Bartlett, in the period immediately following 9/11. The two agents start the investigation in a nonchalant way, claiming to be following a procedural investigation and even providing an evaluation form for Khaled to fill out. Their ‘friendly’ interrogation, however, slowly turns darker and increasingly menacing, with it dawning on Khaled that the agents have already adjudged him guilty of colluding with the 9/11 attackers. They accuse him of helping Asfoor (depicted as the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks and inspired by Mohammad Atta, the leader of the nineteen 9/11 hijackers). The figure of Asfoor haunts the whole scene in the form of a ghost, alongside the three women that have accused Khaled – Beth, his former girlfriend; a librarian; and a stripper. After verbal and physical abuse, the two agents leave, promising they will come back and continue their job. Besides the open ending and the foreboding future, the play also casts shadows on the past: the audience/reader cannot fully grasp what has happened, nor be fully sure of Khaled's role and his relationship with Asfoor, and thus the protagonist's innocence or guilt remains unclear.

Language Rooms adds even more complexity to the exploration of the Arab-American condition in the US after 9/11, weaving togeth-

er repression and 'surveillance' office politics with generational conflicts, family crises and work ethics. The play, set in a secret US detention centre within the US, focuses on Ahmed, an Arab-American interrogator charged with extracting information by any means necessary from Muslims suspected of terrorism. It is a role which requires Ahmed to take advantage of his being Arab and Muslim. At the beginning of the play, Ahmed's colleague and friend Nasser (the only other Arab-American in the detention centre, and a far more skilled translator) warns him that their boss and colleagues are now suspecting him of 'disloyalty', in a similar manner to which they harbor suspicions about the prisoners. The detention centre operates in a state of total surveillance, with twenty-five new cameras installed throughout the complex, where no privacy is guaranteed, no explanation is given for orders, and no secrets are justified. As in *Back of the Throat*, some ethnicities are considered more suspect than others and 'loyalty' must be constantly proved (LR, 138); and although Ahmed's bond with his American identity has been read in terms of an "instant conversion" (Esch-Van Kan 2012, 157), apparently minor episodes such as missing a Super Bowl party held at the detention centre and refusing to use the communal shower are enough to raise suspicions of Ahmed not fitting in, as a worker and as a citizen, or even of being a double agent. Total obedience, authenticity and loyalty to the 'new family' are required at the expense of the real family Ahmed left behind. And in order to prove his loyalty, Ahmed is asked to interrogate his own father Samir, with whom he has not had any contact for years. Samir is believed to be involved with Sheikh Al-Rawi, a radicalised imam hunted by the police. As Samir explained to the policemen, and is later forced to confess to his own son, the reason for his call to Al-Rawi's house is the affair he had with Al-Rawi's wife. The appearance of Samir reveals the anger and shame Ahmed has long felt for his father, for his broken English, for his traditional clothes and habits, for not fitting enough in – despite it having been Samir who decided to move to the US and who encouraged his son and daughter to disassociate themselves from their ethnic past. Here again, the political and personal merge inextricably in a painful confrontation. Meaning and manipulation become extremely blurred and questions are posed: which truth is true, when the father's urge seems to be more to help his son than to save himself? Who is used as the trigger to incite the other's instinctive impulses and feelings? Is Samir under scrutiny, or is Samir's arrest an attempt to draw Ahmed out?

As is evident from these brief summaries, the two plays develop along a common path, questioning the structures of control enacted by the security state and the strategies and consequences of its repressive politics on Arab-American identities. In so doing, both works explore the ways (real and metaphorical) 'visibility' and 'invisibility'

empower and/or disempower the characters involved in the struggle for autonomous affirmation. In a state of surveillance, visibility and invisibility are crucial elements that reveal how, as Peggy Phelan notes writing about minorities and performances, “the binary between the power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility is falsifying”, and that maybe (for Arab-Americans as well) “there is real power in remaining unmarked; and there are serious limitations to visual representation as a political goal” (Phelan 1993, 6). The paradoxes of visibility and invisibility and the divide between them are explored in this article through four crucial elements for the Arab-American experience: ethnicity; citizenship (both social and political); the construction of Otherness through deviancy; Otherness and body.

2 Cages of the Mind and the Power of the Gaze

The first, obvious corollary of visibility in a moment in history when Arabs are identified as potential threats to national security is that being visible for Arab-Americans means potentially being the target of discrimination or even violence. In the shift from ‘invisible citizen’ to ‘visible subjects’, visibility can be equated with vulnerability to becoming persecuted groups. At the same time, the ‘enemy’s visibility’ is crucial in all war scenarios, and the US in the aftermath of 9/11 made no exception: the enemy was the terrorist, constructed in the hegemonic vision through stereotypes and simplifications, the first being that all Arabs are terrorists. In *Back of the Throat*, although Bartlett tries to explain that, not without contradictions, “at no time should you think this is an ethnic thing. Your ethnicity has nothing to do with it other than the fact that your background happens to be the place where most of this crap is coming from. So naturally the focus is going to be on you. It’s not profiling, it’s deduction” (BT, 19), ethnicity is *the* issue. It is the first step in the construction of the terrorist stereotype that the two policemen attempt to pigeonhole Khaled into: the Arab terrorist as a devout Muslim who reads the Koran and as an isolated, dysfunctional individual. As Almostafa notes,

Bartlett’s xenophobic hatred against Khaled arises from the stereotypes of the Arab as treacherous, evil, and terrorist. To Bartlett, Khaled has a “treacherous throat”, he is a ‘bringer of chaos, [and] exemplar of horror’. (Almostafa 2015, 47-8)

In order to pigeonhole the Other into a codified and identifiable visibility, they must be deprived of the power of auto-determination and transformed into an object of representation. To single them out, they must be physically and metaphorically isolated: their normalcy has to be dismantled, both in terms of identity and in their interactions with

others. In order to obtain this “internment of the psyche”, as Nadine Naber defined this psychological violence (Naber 2012, 50), tearing apart their links to others is crucial. In *Back of the Throat*, the policemen’s manipulation of the three women witnesses (a sign of how unbalanced power relationships also work along gender lines) relies on the suspect’s visibility and on what the three women allegedly saw. Beth saw Khaled meeting people in a park whom she thinks may have been terrorists; Shelly (the librarian) and Jean (the stripper) allegedly saw Asfoor and Khaled together. Moreover, another indefinite, almost ghostly appearance is crucial in the accusations against Khaled: in the photos used as proof of his encounter with Asfoor in the strip club, only an ear and a jaw are vaguely visible (BT, 25). A silhouette that reveals nothing – or so Khaled believes (BT, 27) – is molded by the two agents into Khaled’s form, his visibility shaped by external factors and information. Even the blurred image of Asfoor as remembered by Shelly with “this cloud of dirt around him” (BT, 28) is probably not even him: “You know, how new information about a person suddenly makes you see that person in a different light. I’m sure if you’d told me he’d saved the lives of a family from a burning house I’d be remembering him differently – though probably not” (BT, 29). Everything, as Khaled points out, comes down to a “Rorschach test” (BT, 10). People see what they want to see:

context is everything. Otherwise, yes, some of this I know looks suspicious. I’ve played this game myself; walked into my studio and wondered what it might say about me; seeing if something would make me out to be something I’m not. (BT, 11)

Language Rooms takes the metaphor of visibility/invisibility and the power of the gaze even further. It is Ahmed’s boss who asks Ahmed if his “shyness isn’t symptomatic of a more secretive nature” (LR, 149), emphasising the same equation between the act of concealing and terrorism. The same applies to Samir, whose betrayal of his family is linked to a more serious one – a betrayal of his adoptive country, so well-hidden that not even his son realised what was going on. Seeing and being seen are explicitly framed in a power relationship: when Nasser, objecting to Ahmed’s refusal to take communal showers because the latter does not feel comfortable being naked in front of others, points out that “You have conversations with naked people all the time” (LR, 139, referring to suspects being interrogated), Ahmed replies that “That’s different. They’re blindfolded” (LR, 139), underlying his privileged position in not being seen. The disempowerment of the gaze becomes, for Arab-Americans, a permanent state after 9/11, as Samir confesses, “My sight has become so bad these past weeks that I – I’m no longer sure what is in front of me. I think I have hallucinated whole people these past weeks” (LR, 163). That these hallu-

cinations persist is evident in his belief that his son is “hope - When it is darkest [...] Is the light not getting brightest?” (LR, 163-4).

In contrast, for Ahmed the appearance of his father represents not light, but darkness: besides being hurt by his father’s extramarital relationship, Samir is a ghost that reappears in front of Ahmed in a similar way to how Asfoor’s ghost appears to Khaled in *Back of the Throat*. Like Khaled, Samir is also tormented by how others see him, firstly through the photographs of him with Sheikh Al-Rawi that allegedly prove him to be guilty, and then by how his own son, ashamed of his father’s ethnic visibility, remembers him:

I did cringe when I walked down the street with you. When you insisted on wearing your gallebeya, that long dress, like you were oblivious that we were in a country that might find that odd [...] And when you rolled your mat and prayed in the fucking mall. The mall. In a corner off the food court, where my friends could see you. I thought, Jesus Christ, what a fucking Arab. What a goddam hideous weirdo Muslim is this? Is that my father blind that his son is dying watching him act out like a performing buffoon? Or were you just quietly giving the middle finger to everyone? (LR, 182-3)

It is Ahmed who perceives the two identities - the Arab and the American - as being in opposition, something that raises questions concerning the relationship between ethnicity and citizenship, and the meaning of the latter for Arab-Americans, especially in the wake of 9/11.

3 Which Citizenship: First or Second Class?

The attempt to distance oneself from their own ethnic group and choose other forms of identity is one of the first consequences of the (negative) connotations of Arabness that emerge in *Back of the Throat*. Unsurprisingly, Khaled denies not only his faith in Islam and reading the Koran, but also knowing the language, despite some of his books being in Arabic. Uneasy about the policemen’s interest in a present from his mother, a picture framing the word ‘God’, he explains that “religion tends to favor abstraction to, eh, human representation” (BT, 4), indirectly pointing out the dangers of visibility. As Mohammed notes, Khaled’s efforts to not be singled out on the basis of ethnic origin is the spontaneous reaction to the policemen’s (and the state’s) discriminative attitude (Mohammed 2020, 169), an attitude that relies on the visible materiality of ethnicity.

Instead, what Khaled tries to construct for himself is a political legitimacy, unmarked and neutral, by insisting on his American citizenship and its tangible and visible proof - the passport. His repeat-

ed insistence on asserting his political affiliation is aimed at seeking out just treatment. “Did I mention I’m a citizen, by the way. I can show you my – Right. Just so you know” (BT, 7). However, citizenship is another benchmark for identity. What is citizenship? A political status? Or a right based on descent and history, as Barlett seems to suggest? “You come here with shit, from shit countries, Knowing nothing about anything and you have the nerve to quote the fucking law at me? [...] *It’s galling*. Sticks in my throat. To hear these people who got there *two hours ago* quote back to me Thomas Jefferson and the founding fathers. They’re not his fucking fathers!” (BT, 22).

As the interrogation demonstrates, American citizenship can turn into an empty container – as it proves to be for Khaled, deprived as he is of his rights and of belonging to his adoptive country. Rather, there is a real, valuable ‘first class’ social citizenship, and a merely formal and legal ‘second class’ citizenship, with a huge gap separating the two. As Grewal explains:

The gap between legal citizenship and social citizenship belies the idea that the nation is a natural entity, merely a territorially bound political unit; rather, the United States is a place both physical and also imagined, one that is produced and perpetually reproduced by a community of citizens who collectively imagine that they share a deep, horizontal kinship. (2014, 4)

This dream and horizontal kinship are full of cracks and fractures, especially for Arab descendants after 9/11. Ethnicity and citizenship are often rhetorically opposed in both plays, recurring as images and stereotypes: “God: I know your type, so well. The smiling little Semite who gives you one face while trying to stab you with the other. You’re pathetic, you know that. [...] You’d kill for a visa” (BT, 44).

Disassembling and diminishing political identities and citizenship is subtler in *Language Rooms*, the ‘Us vs Them’ being far more nuanced. Since Arabness has two faces (the Good Arab – personified by Nasser – in service to the state and part of the system of control; the Bad Arab, the suspects being interrogated; and Ahmed and Samir, dangling between these two poles), ethnicity is not enough to deny political and social affiliation. In order to diminish Ahmed’s political identity, his willingness to belong, to be an American citizen, must be doubted. Being American means, for Ahmed’s supervisor Kevin, being loyal: fitting into what looks like a welcoming and inclusive group of colleagues in the detention centre (by taking part in the celebration for the Super Bowl or using the communal shower with the others), that is not supposed to discriminate against him for his ethnicity, just as Kevin himself fits in, who claims not to suffer any discrimination as an African-American. Ethnicity and its visibility however are not neutral: it is due to his ethnicity that Ahmed

is chosen to work as an interpreter, despite the fact he has not mastered the language. Ahmed and Nasser's ethnic visibility is exploited by the system, that uses it to gain the prisoners' confidence, whereas their Americanness, that would allow them to "fit in" (the mantra of the play), is always questioned and undermined. The balance and coexistence of ethnic and political identity is constantly unstable, depending on - and here lie the grounds for accusations - the subject's willingness, rather than on social pressures and forces. This is why Ahmed is suspected of disloyalty, of not having provided enough information, of not being cooperative enough. *He* is seen as not allegedly wanting to fully belong, it is *he* who contradicts his Americanness. Loyalty is a key word in Ahmed's story, precisely because everything is supposed to come down to his will. By focusing explicitly on the issue of the protagonist's loyalty - to his workmates or his family, to his ethnic background or the US - *Language Room* erases the role of social and political pressures on Arab-American lives after 9/11.

However, self-declared loyalty is not enough to determine "which side you are on" of the Arab-American dichotomy - citizenship and ethnicity cannot be disassembled easily, particularly if ethnicity is both the working tool and the trigger of social fears. And especially if citizenship is not a status that can be taken for granted, but a transitory condition based on social consensus that can always be erased.

4 Deviancy as Otherness

Besides relativising and undermining the value of political citizenship, the recourse to 'deviancy' is a further strategy that enforces the process of 'Othering' and making the other recognisable. Deviancy here is intended as a departure from a norm that is strategically (and visually) constructed in order to promote an exclusive form of citizenship and political belonging, although that form is not exempt from contradictions. In the two plays, relational and sexual deviancy in particular are depicted as the elements most closely linked to 'terrorism': both are perceived as perversities, the latter related to the political facet of identity, and common in stereotypical representations of Arab-Americans (Frey 2008, 6). Fadda-Conrey notes how in *Back of the Throat*,

The agents' strategy of disassembling his (Khaled's) behavioral normalcy leads to the erosion of his citizenship and the rights that it should convey. After all, in the post-9/11 national security state depicted in the play, the only citizenship allowed or deemed safe is of the hetero- and homonormative, compliant, and docile kind. (2014, 167)

Khaled is proven to be Other and thus “less American” by establishing that he is deviant, disturbed on an emotional level and in his relationships – a dysfunctionality (a common trope in the depiction of the Arab terrorist) underlined by Beth, his former girlfriend, angry about the end of their love affair. Khaled’s sexual fantasies and desires come under scrutiny. And, in a dubious but effective syllogism, whatever is hidden by an Arab-American becomes proof of an involvement in terrorist activities – including, for example owning porn magazines, although pornography is not a crime, as Khaled points out. Both sexual deviance and terrorism are directly related to the trope of (in)visibility. Like most relational and sexual deviancies, terrorism too requires its own converts to conceal themselves, and the greater the invisibility, the more successful the effect.

Beside porn magazines, other aspects of an assumed non-normative sexuality also become suspect, in this case Khaled’s passivity regarding sex and – as alluded to by Beth – his alleged infidelities with people he furtively met in the park. Here again, terrorism and relational perversities overlap: whereas Khaled justifies the encounters as meetings with other writers, these encounters are interpreted at first as love affairs by Beth, and then as terrorist activities by the agents and Beth after 9/11 attacks. The connection between non-normative sexuality and terrorism is even more evident in the accusations made against Khaled by the third woman, the stripper that reports Khaled meeting Asfoor in a nightclub. Khaled’s disinterest in Jean’s lap-dance show connects the charge of terrorism to Khaled’s failed heterosexual desire, and heterosexual desire is connected with patriotism, as Fadda-Conrey notes:

In some productions of the play, Kelly Cupid herself performs such an intermixture of heterosexuality and patriotism through her American flag-inspired costume, which confirms the binary of healthy patriotic heterosexuality versus perverse homosexual terrorism. [...] What becomes clear in the second part of the play is that the basis of the agents’ conviction of Khaled’s guilt is intricately and closely related to what they perceive as his questionable non-normative sexuality. Even though the strip search does not yield a confirmatory tattoo sighting, a guilty or innocent verdict vis-à-vis any terrorist act remains irreversibly connected to Khaled’s sexuality. (2014, 169)

Heterosexuality as a patriotic act versus hidden and violent homosexuality/terrorism is another element of the culturally constructed relation between the body and the nation. Beth compares the 9/11 attacks to the rape of a woman multiplied by thousands – something Khaled is accused of enjoying. In the lap dance show, the healthy, heterosexual woman’s loyalty to the US is evinced by both her wearing

(and then stripping off) the American flag and her telling the agents everything she thinks she knows, including what she could not see, but only imagine. Here visible patriotism contrasts with the invisible bodies of the two suspects, Khaled and Asfoor, hidden in the club toilets for their alleged homosexual intercourse, terrorist activities, or both. Failed masculinity is equated with failed patriotism: it is not a coincidence that one of the forms of physical torture suffered by Khaled (and by many prisoners in real life) is the violation of Khaled's private parts with a kick – symbolic of the violation of all suspected and persecuted men, and at the same time of the revenge for the masculinity of the American self / state violated by the 9/11 attacks.

Sexual humiliation is also recurrent in *Language Rooms*. One of the first accusations against Ahmed, and the first reason for suspicion, is his refusal to demonstrate his masculinity by taking communal showers. His yearning for privacy and invisibility, his right to hide his body and his virility from public view, exposes him to the suspicion of having homosexual tendencies. Samir too experiences psychological and physical humiliation regarding a body-related deviancy. Besides being stripped in front of his son and the agents, he is also worried that he might be forced to ingest milk, to which he is allergic, in a new form of torture devised for terrorists.

A lot of suspects are – strangely – lactose intolerant. We don't know why. There's a study underway to determine if there's any connection between lactose intolerance and – some of more extremist behavior we see. (LR, 179-80)

Intolerance to milk, a “deviancy of the body”, is also associated with terrorism, underlining the culturally constructed link between terrorism (the product of a dysfunctional mind) and physical dysfunctionality – bodies whose visibility and invisibility are culturally, socially and politically constructed as well.

5 Spectral Bodies

In their downward spiral from polite conversation to intimidation and torture, both *Back of the Throat* and *Language Rooms* show a system of state security where multiple types of violence rely on seclusion and the invisibility of specific bodies. Both plays are set in spaces where only the victims and perpetrators know of the abuses, and spectators are forced to take on the disquieting role of reluctant witnesses.

While detention is explicit in *Language Rooms*, it also plays a key role in *Back of the Throat*. Khaled's private space, his home, is violated by the policemen, who search it and turn it into a prison. Here

they are free to psychologically, and then physically, abuse him, far from view. In *Language Rooms*, this same function of secluded space is made explicit (and under the aegis of the state) by setting Ahmed and Samir's story in the detention centre. Like Khaled, Ahmed also experiences the violation of his privacy - not a private physical space, but an emotional one - with the system of control tearing down the barrier he built to keep his job separate from his past and family. The encounter between son and father creates a short-circuit that gives a new significance to the meaning of 'detention': whereas for Samir the cage is the condition he has been living in by being estranged from his loved ones (LR, 173 "I've been in prison since my family was lost to me [...] Your mother dies, you and your sister leave"), for Ahmed his father's arrival in the detention centre marks the beginning of torture, since he and Samir "kind of cancel each other out" (LR, 168). And since the visions of what constitutes a prison are different, so too will the abuses suffered be different.

The most disturbing form of violation is surely that suffered by the body. While psychological torture could perhaps be deemed less unacceptable, physical torture is decidedly more problematic in Western culture. As suggested by Najjar (2015, 217-18), one useful concept to understand how forms of physical torture on Arab-Americans in the aftermath of 9/11 came to be accepted, or justified, although not explicitly, is Judith Butler's theory of "derealization" (Butler 2004, 33), or the "interminably spectral" (Butler 2004, 33-4) - a process that, according to Butler, started in 1968 and reached its peak after 9/11. Just as citizenship can be deemed 'visible' (the passport shown by Khaled - a legal status) or 'invisible' (the social value of that status), bodies too are socially constructed with multiple readings and meanings related to (in)visibility. Butler focuses on the social vulnerability of bodies, noting that although a sense of grief or anguish for every human who suffers is the rule, some humans nevertheless become deemed as less worthy of grief than others, especially if they can be classified as the "Other", i.e. if recognised as different from us. 'Spectral' is a term applied to somebody that is perceived by the mind as not existing, or not human, conceivable as pure abstraction or pure materiality - as happens with distant images of enemy soldiers in battlefields filmed by drones, as though they were mere dots in a videogame, or (in terms of pure materiality) people objectified in war pornography. 'Spectrality' occurs through recognising the Other as an abstract idea or a composite of physical parts, rather than as a human being, with individuals no longer associated with humanity but objectified, and thus becoming visually consumable.

Categories and stereotypes are clearly functional to 'derealisation': objectification and de-humanisation can be achieved by negating individuality, a fact that legitimates situating a whole group at the mercy of a hegemonic power structure, placing that group under

surveillance and subjecting it to dehumanising situations, irrespective of whether its members are innocent or guilty. In both plays the dematerialisation of the body and dehumanisation – mainly via acts that negate the subject’s sensitivity – are emphasised, both through words and deeds. Bartlett starts employing words when he uses one of his threats to evoke the ultimate reduction of the self into an abstract form: “Right now you’re standing on our permission not to be disappeared into little atom-sized pieces of nothingness” (BT, 27). In *Back of the Throat*, dematerialisation of the body is represented by the figure of Asfoor, the terrorist whose body was erased by his own violence. At the same time, Asfoor is the most ‘tangible’ part of the play, inspired as he is by Mohammed Atta, and being the ghost that resists the process of dematerialisation and refuses to become spectral: “I’m bleeding into you and there’s nothing you can do about it” (BT, 30), are his first words when he appears onstage, reminding Khaled and the spectators that he was (and must be remembered as) flesh and blood, and warning them that his materiality, in real and metaphorical senses, affects everybody, including the audience.

Language Rooms portrays several forms of torture that can be inflicted on individuals, from the psychological pressure on Ahmed to the objects shown onstage to be used for physical torture on suspects. In this play the process of derealisation is even more strongly articulated and affects several characters onstage. The first form of derealisation is the one employed on prisoner’s bodies. The prisoners are victims of spectacle and action, as we are reminded by Ahmed and Nasser when they discuss interrogating blind, naked people and allude to the use of their equipment, including the newly arrived “meditation suit”, a wetsuit that is used to extract information from prisoners by completely isolating them from the rest of the world. The objectification of prisoners’ bodies is rendered even more explicit in Kevin’s words, when he confesses that “We love unpacking people, so to speak, like those Chinese boxes or Russian dolls” (LR, 146), peeling away layers and layers of clothes and dignity.

Derealisation is also inflicted on both Ahmed and Samir. The psychological pressure on Ahmed is so powerful that he himself voices his sense of becoming invisible and immaterial: “It’s like I’m being disappeared down someone’s rabbit hole and I don’t know why” (LR, 162), he admits when questioned by Kevin. As for Samir, one of the methods used to negate his humanity is by negating the most human feeling he was allegedly moved by – love, for the Imam’s wife as well as for his own son, who perceives him as insensitive and excessive in his religious conformity.

As suspects, both Ahmed and Samir are also menaced by physical violence. When Kevin suggests that Ahmed should ask Samir to undress to apply the protocol, the latter’s desire for invisibility in order to cover his betrayal stands in contrast to the humiliating visibility

of his body in front of his son, a visibility that makes him even more vulnerable and exposed to violence, although in the end the threat of violence is not acted out.

Though Samir is presented as the suspect, Ahmed turns out to be the real target of the system; and he is the victim of the full dematerialisation process. At the end of the play he is speechless and invisible, caged in the plexiglass box and inside the 'meditation suit'. Kevin had previously noted, "When I said you're like a son to me - you are. A confused son. Who isn't quite comfortable in his own skin" (LR, 186), and a chilling new skin is therefore provided by the state. Through the plexiglass box and the meditation suit, visibility and invisibility become entangled in order to fully enhance the derealisation process: while the torture must be visible (the plexiglass box), the physical suffering is cancelled through the meditation suit, and, with it, the political responsibility of that act. This space for 'thinking' is the perfect metaphor for what Arab-Americans have been asked to become: pure thought, in cages of the body that are cages of the mind, muted and invisible - with no rights, no body nor language, exactly what post 9/11 paranoia and the War on Terror forced them to be.

Bibliography

- Almostafa, M. (2015). "Rethinking the Stereotypes and Violence Against Arab Americans in El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* and Shamieh's *The Black Eyed*". *Studies in Literature and Language*, 10(4), 41-50. <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/6776>.
- Alsultany, E. (2012). *Arabs and Muslims in the Media. Race and Representation After 9/11*. New York: New York University Press.
- Amaney, J.; Naber, N. (2008). *Race and Arab-Americans before and after 9/11*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.
- Diamond, E. (ed.) (1996). *Performance and Cultural Politics*. London: Routledge.
- El Guindi, Y. (2019a). *Back of the Throat* (2006). *The Selected Works of Yussef El Guindi*. New York: Methuen.
- El Guindi, Y. (2019b). *Language Rooms* (2012). *The Selected Works of Yussef El Guindi*. New York: Methuen.
- Esch-Van Kan, A. (2012). "Amazing Acrobatics of Language - The Theatre of Yussef El Guindi". Hornung, A. (ed.), *Arab American Literature and Culture*. Heidelberg: Winter, 151-69.
- Fadda-Conrey, C. (2014). *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging*. New York: New York University Press.
- Freij, M. (2008). *The Lighter Side of Evil: Arab American Artists in New York*. Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Emory University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology.

- Grewal, Z. (2014). *Islam Is a Foreign Country. American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority*. New York: New York University Press.
- Kadi, J. (ed) (1994). *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*. Boston: South End Press.
- Mohammed, A.S.M. (2006). "Exacerbation of Panic Onstage: Ethnic Problems and Human Rights Violations in Yussef El Guindi's *Back of the Throat*". *Studies in Literature and Language*, 3(3), 2006, 165-73. <http://www.cs-canada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/2208>.
- Naber, N. (2012). *Arab America. Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism*. New York: New York University Press.
- Najjar, M.M. (2015). *Arab American Drama, Film and Performance: A Critical Study, 1908 to the Present*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.
- Phelan, P. (1993). *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London: Routledge.
- Samhan, H.H. (1999). "Not Quite White. Racial Classification And the Arab-American Experience". Suleiman, M.W. (ed.), *Arabs in America. Building a New Future*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 209-26.
- Shaheen, J. (2008). *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs After 9/11*. Northampton: Interlink Publishing/ Olive Branch Press.
- Stahl, M. (2016). *Arab and Muslim American Female Playwrights: Resistance and Revision Through Solo Performance*. PHD Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Drama, Tufts University.