

*Abstract:* “Paranoia after September 11: Submitting to the Specter of Terrorism”

The war on terror, hinging on an engagement with hermeneutics and epistemology, relies on an accurate reading of the Other, a reading that encompasses knowing plans and understanding actions. The danger in an atmosphere of fear is either to over-read or to misread people and incidents. In an intriguing parallel, literary critics frequently perform what Eve Sedgwick-Kosofsky calls paranoid reading or the “drama of exposure”: revealing conflicts and contradictions covered by a text’s narrative camouflage (8). Analyzing a text, we seek to identify the Orientalist, homophobic, or conservative streak hidden between lines, beneath its surface. Sedgwick surmises that paranoid inquiry, the “detection of hidden patterns of violence and their exposure,” has come to seem “entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry” (143, 126).

September 11 literature enacts these expressions of paranoia: Yussef El Guindi's play *Back of the Throat* and Amy Waldman's novel *Submission* accentuate the efforts of representatives of government, media, and the general public to expose one person’s – the protagonist’s – affiliations with terrorism. At the same time, the two works also engender in us, the readers and critics, a reflection on our own response to the protagonist’s framing: How does the association with terrorism occur and evolve? Which elements of the play and the novel do we use ourselves to construct an image of the protagonist? Do we possibly over-read? Readers and critics are surrounded by a paranoid discourse on terrorism outside the text, which arguably fosters our implication in the paranoid discourse within the text: our heightened awareness of paranoia in public conversations and literary narratives may guide us to critique instances of paranoia, even expose them, thus perpetuating paranoid practices.

Trying to illustrate and unveil paranoia and fear in the two examples of literature of terror, we are perpetuating the practice of paranoid reading; moreover, the texts' ambiguous representations of the main characters and our awareness of – even conditioning by – post-9/11 discourse on terrorism prompts us to read the protagonist in a paranoid fashion, as we vacillate between dismissing and discovering his potential guilt. Literary criticism, including the analysis of paranoid texts and characters, often risks integrating paranoia practices. I adapt Sedgwick's theory of paranoia for the purpose both of illuminating textual artifacts (characters, dialogues, events) – addressing the paranoia that surfaces in post-9/11 literary explorations of terrorism and the war on terror – and for the very process of reading and analyzing primary texts.