RSAJournal 32/2021

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Questioning the Borders of Contemporary US Fiction: H.M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*, 9/11 and the American Novel

> *We must understand how "America" is a relational, comparative concept, how it changes shape in relation to competing claims to that name and by creating demonic others, drawn proportions as mythical and monolithic as the idea of America itself.*
> (Amy Kaplan, "Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today")

> *{T}he hybrid is the only space in which the location of cultures and the bearing witness to trauma can really occur. These fictions resist the challenge of silence by deploying forms of speech that are genuinely crossbred and transitional, subverting the oppositional language of mainstream commentary – us and them, West and East, Christian and Muslim. And they respond to the heterogeneous character of the United States, as well as its necessary positioning in a transnational context, by what I would call deterritorializing America. {...} All of them, in short, try to reimagine disaster by presenting us with an America situated between cultures.*
> (Richard Gray, *After the Fall*)

One of the many consequences and effects of the events of 9/11 has been the redefinition of the dialectics between outer and inner spaces, cultures and identities; a redefinition that has inevitably affected fictional worlds as well, as Amy Kaplan's advocacy for a reconceptualization of national identity in American Studies (whereby the United States and Americanness are treated as relational, transnational concepts) and Richard Gray's comment on the failure of many American mainstream novels to come up with an adequate answer to the crisis underline.

What is American and who is American have been very difficult to determine in a globalized world, with the US as both agent and object of globalization. The forms of deterritorialization of American culture are phenomena that have been investigated for at least two decades, both in terms of influence and dissemination on the one hand, and reaction and counteraction on the other. As Paul Giles has pointed out, "American literature is not a natural phenomenon based on national affiliation, nor a narrative whose teleology is directed inexorably toward emancipation, but a field whose perimeters expand and contract in accordance with the maps it projects and the particular atlas it is enclosed by" (277).

The blurred zones created by US deterritorialization have also been fruitfully investigated by postcolonial and world studies, especially regarding the effects of the US "imperiality", as Revathi Krishnavamy defines it (12), that has for a century generated its own forms of economic and cultural influence, and often overlaps with postcolonialism. So-called "post-migratory literature" in particular (Boehmer 250), one of the corollaries of this imperiality, questions and problematizes migrancy, reframing it in global dynamics, particularly after 9/11. As Ahmed Gamal explains,

> the "post" therefore represents an oppositional rhetoric of emerging voices which are profoundly contestatory of the hierarchy of binaristic essentialism. In response to the post-9/11 nostalgic discourse of the dominant which excludes difference and heterogeneity as terror or impurity, post-migratory literature offers textual models of hybridization and dialogic exchange as well as resistance and liberation. (598)[1]

In the investigation of the cultural hybridization and deterritorialization of American culture and literature, of post-migratory phenomena, and of the frictions and reactions generated by this encounter,[2] forms of cultural and literary affiliation to US literature that transcend political status and/or geographical location should be taken into account, as Michael Rothberg suggested in reply to Gray's comments on a US situated "between cultures." Whereas Gray, in his search for literary narratives that could reframe American experience after 9/11, looked mostly, although

not exclusively, at the plurality *within* US borders and at the processes of dislocation and relocation of individuals and cultures within the Western World, Rothberg suggested an investigation of the "fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship [...] a centrifugal mapping that charts the outward movement of American power. The most difficult thing for citizens of the US empire to grasp is not the internal difference of their motley multi-culture, but the prosthetic reach of that empire into other worlds" (154). As Rothberg argues, "[w]hat we need from the 9/11 novels are cognitive maps that imagine how US citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, both for Americans and for others" (157-58). Can the American novel be reconfigured on a global scale not only in terms of reception, but of creation as well? To put it in botanical terms, does the American novel germinate where American culture has been sowed, or can it sprout also where the winds (of the soft or hard power) have scattered its seeds?

The inclusion of specific works in the American literary field according to factors that transcend the author's political and geographical belonging is a tendency shared by various scholars dealing with specific issues or sub-genres of the New American Novel. As Caren Irr states in her exploration of the twenty-first century "geopolitical novel" (that is, contemporary US novels engaging with political issues that transcend the domestic dimension),

> more important than biographical markers for my purposes is an explicit effort to address a North American audience. In general, I view internal evidence such as voice, style, and narrative frame as more reliable indicators of a particular work's having an American reference point than authorial biography. Inclusion in "US fiction" is a matter of genre. It is the use and revision of historically American narratives for making sense of the rest of the world that marks individual works as examples of "US fiction." These genre commitments easily coexist with participation in other national or regional traditions as well. (11)

What I suggest here is that, due to the processes of cultural deterritorialization on the one hand and increasingly transient and hybrid forms of location (and relocation), displacement and migration on the other, works by "traditional" immigrant authors should now be joined by those

by transnational writers whose geographical positionality is less definable, but who are nevertheless repositories of a "performative Americanness" originating both from their temporary first-hand experience as migrants/expatriates and from the effects of American cultural dissemination in their home countries – even in those where the use of both soft and hard power has generated over time a contested terrain of affiliation and disaffiliation, such as in the Arab and the Muslim worlds.

From post-Colonial to neo-Imperial: Pakistani Writing and 9/11

In the investigation of the borders of "America at large" and the dialectics between the US and elsewhere, Pakistan is certainly a peculiar arena of dissemination and conflict. A multilingual and multicultural country created on the basis of a specific religious identity, Pakistan has always been a theater of tensions – from the trauma of the Partition from India to the fractures created by geopolitics and war scenarios in nearby countries. These pluralities and instabilities have become the themes of most Pakistani fiction, with "the emergent dialectical narratives of homecoming and leave-taking as founding metaphors in the modern alternative histories of the nation" and "the proliferation of the liminal space of an expansive South Asian identity and its consequent affiliation with a transnational sensibility resulting from one of the world's largest diasporas" (Ghamal 599). However, deconstructing the idea of an "exclusivist and hegemonic national identity" (Nazir 360) and the attempt to make it more inclusive, both within and outside Pakistan borders, has become increasingly difficult after 9/11, due to both the enforcing of binarism on political, social and cultural terrains in the Western world (and in the US in particular), and the counter-reactions in Middle and the Far East countries (see Kanwal; Aslam; Rana).

Not surprisingly, after 9/11 Pakistani fiction in English, that had already enjoyed international visibility since the 1990s, also began to give voice to the anxieties and the effects of the War on Terrorism on the Muslim population, especially those residing in the US, who were automatically included in the broad category of the "inside enemies." Whereas in previous

decades Pakistani-born authors, like other minority groups, rooted their narratives in the loss of home culture, "substituting personal traumas for politics" (Irr 23), 9/11 forced them to interrogate and explore their liminal status, both in experiential and in artistic terms.

Labeled by the critic Claudia Nordinger "inoutsiders," that is, "authors engaging with the Western World from a position outside the European and American mainstream" (59), Pakistani-born authors like Mohsin Hamid, Ayad Akhtar, Kamila Shamsie, Nadeem Aslam, and H.M. Naqvi are repositories of new, transnational forms of double vision that resemble the "syncretic border intellectual," caught between two spaces and yet "able to combine elements of the two cultures in order to articulate new syncretic forms and experiences" (Mohamed 97). These authors constantly negotiate their relation to the center and the peripheries of the American experience, to its literature and culture (Ghamal 597) – from a position that, although made fluid by their geographical impermanence, is nevertheless sustained by cultural and literary dialectics of appropriation and revision.

Focusing on a transnational Pakistani author, H.M. Naqvi, and his 9/11 novel *Home Boy* (2009), this article investigates how and to what extent novels written by transnational authors interact, or become part of, American literature; how this prosthetic affiliation to a national literature and culture can take place and question, beyond literary borders, the distinction between "Self" and "Other"; and how these narratives and their interaction with (and place in) the American literary canon can both perpetuate and revise the tradition itself.

Naqvi, *Home Boy,* and America at Large

Among the work by inoutsiders which interrogates and reimagines the interstitial spaces of the post-national scenario, H.M. Naqvi's *Home Boy* (2009) explicitly tackles the contradictory and divergent terrains of US politics and its culture, and thus questions the experiential and literary borders of America at large. A London-born Pakistani writer who grew up in Karachi, Naqvi moved to the US, graduated in 1996 from Georgetown University, and worked in the financial industry before leaving his job to

become a writer. He taught creative writing at Boston University and moved back to Karachi in 2007, where he completed his first and most famous novel, *Home Boy*, recipient of the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2011. *Home Boy* is part immigrant novel, part *Bildungsroman*, part New York City novel. Written *a posteriori* in the first person, *Home Boy* recounts the American period of the self-proclaimed cosmopolitan protagonist Shayzad Lala, alias Chuck, who arrived in New York City from Karachi four years prior to the timeframe of the novel, with a scholarship to study Literature at NYU. Employed in the financial sector after graduating, he enjoys the New York nightlife, clubbing with his friends: Pakistani-born immigrant AC, a PhD scholar, an "intellectual dandy, a man of theatrical presence," and DJ Jimbo, "gentle, moonfaced man-mountain with kinky dreadlocks with a Semitic nose" (Naqvi 2), born and raised in Jersey City. Unexpectedly fired after less than one year, in July 2001 Chuck decides to "take a sabbatical" and become a taxi driver. Certain that "we had our fingers on the pulse of the great global dialectic" (1), Chuck, AC and Jimbo have to change their mind after 9/11, especially after the failed attempt to discover what happened to a not so close friend, Mohammed Shah, alias The Shaman, alias "The Pakistani Gatsby," who lived in Connecticut and whose parties the three friends used to attend. Found by the police in Shah's house, the trio are suspected of being a terrorist cell. They are imprisoned, denied their rights and almost starved to death. Chuck, finally released, despite his love for Jimbo's sister Amo and the prospect of another well-paid white collar job, decides to return to Pakistan. Our last sight of him is aboard a plane, contemplating New York from the sky – his future somewhere else, at least for a while.

Although Naqvi is not a New York native, writing in continuum with the American tradition is at the core of his writing: "I had to consciously think about coming at New York and America as a Pakistani. And I had to think about which tradition I wanted to locate the book in. What made most sense to me, in a conscious or a visceral way, was to locate it in contemporary American fiction" (qtd. in Mohammad 41). While thrusting its prosthetic roots into the American soil and 9/11 novels in particular, *Home Boy* also explores the contradictions generated by material and immaterial American politics, the processes of cultural and literary

affiliations (and disaffiliations), and their forms and effects in the fictional and real worlds.

Shades of Ethnicity: from Other to Othering

One of the characteristics Caren Irr underlines in her analysis of contemporary American novels is their attempt to correct stereotypical ideas about one's own ethnic or religious group, characteristic of the author's aim to address an American audience (11). Naqvi's revision of the immigrant novel pattern can definitely be read in this light. The protagonist's status as an "expatriate" and the heterogeneous community surrounding him allow Naqvi to investigate old and new forms of belonging, articulating the traditional immigrant experience as a plurality of political, social and cultural trajectories, including circular/transnational patterns that question the ways Muslim identities are shaped and re-shaped within the US but also across borders and states.

As in most immigrant narratives, what lures Chuck to America is a distant, mythic version of the country, an apparent "terra cognita as I had been educated by classics such as *Coming to America*, *Crocodile Dundee*, and *Ghostbusters*, and by American programming on PTV that included *A-Team* and *Manimal*" (Naqvi 126-7) – an assumed knowledge that is the first effect of deterritorialization of American culture, but that creates first disorientation, and then the inability to cope with the 9/11 backlash.

Home Boy depicts ethnicity neither as a condition nor an act of self-determination, but a question of readings and misreading, within and outside the Pakistani community. Through the three friends' different status, Naqvi focuses on "gradations" of ethnicity (Cilano 200): Jimbo/Jamshed Khan is a "bonafide American," "born and bred in Jersey" (Naqvi 3); AC/Ali Chaudhry has a green card thanks to his older sister's sponsorship; Chuck/Shehzad is an "expatriate" who had come to the US with a scholarship and then obtained a work visa. Shahzad/Chuck is Urdu, AC is Punjabi, and Jimbo is Pathan; and the only common element is that they are Pakistani by birth or origin.

Whereas for the elder generation ethnicity is the core of identity – Jimbo's father is a devout Muslim, AC's sister Mini is "a pillar of the city's expatriate Pakistani community" (17) – before 9/11 Chuck and his friends naïvely believe in the power of self-determination:

> We fancied ourselves boulevardiers, raconteurs, renaissance men, A.C. Jimbo, and me. We were self-invented and self-made and certain we had our fingers on the pulse of the great global dialectic. We surveyed the *Times* and the *Post* and other treatises of mainstream discourse on a daily basis, consulted the *Voice* weekly, and often leafed through other publications with more discriminating audiences such as *Tight* or *Big Butt*. Save Jimbo, who wasn't a big reader, we had read the Russians, the postcolonial canon, but had been taken by the brash, boisterous voice of contemporary American fiction; we watched nature documentaries when we watched TV, and variety shows on Telemundo. (1)

Together with their nicknames, their self-definition as "Metrostanis" (Metropolitan Pakistanis) – a neologism, coined by AC, that makes them at the same time local and exotic – commodifies their ethnic identity for a system that buys them and endorses an Orientalist vision, eroding individuality and differences. Even when they enjoy some measure of celebrity, their agency is very limited and their inclusion in the *beau monde* is granted by the protection of the affluent (in this case the blue blood patron Dora, Jimbo's girlfriend). However, as believers in the nation's mythologies, Chuck, Jimbo and AC fail to recognize the dynamics of exclusion until the very end:

> In prison, I finally got it. I understood that just like three black men were gangbangers, and three Jews a conspiracy, three Muslims had become a sleeper cell. And later, much later, the pendulum would swing back, and everybody would celebrate progress, the storied tradition of accommodation, on TV talk shows and posters in middle schools. There would be ceremonies, public apologies, cardboard displays. In the interim, however, I threatened order, threatened civilization. In the interim, I too had to adhere to an unwritten code. (121)

More than the transition from "Other" to "Othering" caused by 9/11, in *Home Boy* the turning point is the protagonist's resistance/acceptance to come to terms with a system of discrimination and exclusion at work after as well as before the terrorist attacks. 9/11 forces Chuck to re-read his past experience in a new light: to recall how the city initially appeared to him as "an epic party taking place to which you have not been invited" (162); how the Jewish curator of an art gallery lamented being bullied at junior high because of his ethnic background; how the black *maître* was treated with contempt by customers to whom he was describing six-hundred-dollar wine bottles (120). 9/11 forces Chuck, likewise, to experience the present with a deeper understanding of human relations. He recognizes and benefits from ethnic and inter-ethnic solidarity – from the Moroccan newsagent to the "cabbie brotherhood" (146) of immigrant taxi-drivers.

This awareness contributes to shaping the different epilogues: Jimbo's acceptance of the status quo and his release, helped by the powerful family of The Duck; Chuck's new awareness and his return to Pakistan despite his new job and the prospect of a visa; AC's inability to accept the consequences of 9/11, that worsens his position during and after his arrest, and leads him to be sentenced from fifteen years to life; not to mention the fate that awaits the Pakistani Gatsby, the accidental *deus ex machina* of the story and the one entirely devoted to the American Dream.

Home Boy as City Novel and 9/11: Decentering the Absence

> *Every New Yorker has a 9/11 story and every New Yorker has a need to repeat it, to pathologically revisit the tragedy, until the tragedy becomes but a story. Mine goes like this.*
> (Naqvi, *Home Boy*)

Since it tackles dynamics and effects that go well beyond national borders, the 9/11 novel is inevitably, or should be, transnational (see O'Gorman). Transnationality in *Home Boy* extends beyond place, themes and perspective. It involves the extent to which American culture informs the narrative (Mohammad 41)[3] on multiple levels and the novel's capability to project

the events on a wider scenario, in dialogue with what is outside both New York and US borders.

As most 9/11 novels, *Home Boy* focuses on the relation between the self and the city before and after the tragedy. Chuck's fantasy of mastering the metropolis that opens the narrative – "I'd since claimed the city and the city had claimed me" (Naqvi 3) – is paralleled by his illusion that the city is easy to decipher, like its topography. However, the emphasis on the grid structure reveals Chuck's superficial knowledge of New York, whose complexities are revealed to him by the two abrupt events in his American life – the sudden loss of his job in the financial sector and 9/11.

Becoming a taxi-driver allows Chuck to become an integral part of the city, to understand "connections between places" (Golimowska 91) – topographical, social and cultural: with and among the outer boroughs (Jackson Heights and Queens) and their ethnic communities. These outskirts and their immigrants join the ones Chuck already knows, first and foremost Jersey City, "like Manhattan gone awry" (Naqvi 44), where Jimbo's sister Amo and his father live. As Golimowska notes, "Jersey City is the counter-society, a distorted reflection of Manhattan, an answer to the metropolitan flair and character of the 'real' city on the other side" (88-89). Untouched by New York's splendor, it will also remain unscathed from the wounds and ruins of 9/11, though of course Jersey City was marked by its own decay well before the fall of the Towers.

After 9/11 only the "skyline of memory" (17) is left, a skyline that is inevitably two-dimensional. When the three Metrostanis "become Japs, Jews, Niggers. We weren't before" (1), their relationship with the city changes as well. Chuck's fear and sense of vulnerability leave him at a loss, incapable of finding reference points in the world surrounding him (Golimowska 6). Venturing downtown again after three weeks, the night is "slightly out of frame, slightly off-kilter" (Naqvi 7): Chuck recognizes almost no one in his favorite bar and even Jimbo has been replaced with another DJ. Although AC, with notable concision, declares that "[t]hose bastards [the terrorists] have fucked up my city! They have fucked up everything!" (22), the city is no longer *theirs* (as it probably never has been), as the thugs mistaking them for Arabs and beating them a few moments later make clear. Contrary to most 9/11 American fictions (from DeLillo's

The Falling Man to Jonathan Safran Foer's *Incredibly Loud and Extremely Close*) the protagonist does not and cannot make the city familiar again, as the night of the "Shaman Run" proves: Chuck is first stuck in traffic, then forced to give his former boss a ride even though he is off duty, and finally arrested and taken to the Brooklyn Metropolitan Detention Center, where he is deprived of food, and physically and mentally abused.

The most evident change after 9/11 is obviously the scar in the geographical and social fabric of the city. Ground Zero becomes the void core of the urban experience, a void that needs to be revised and transformed into a story – a hard task, after the hyper-medialization of the terrorist attack and its visual consumption. Like most 9/11 American novels, Naqvi opts for the "speaking of silence" through elision. First, he interrupts the long flashback and resumes it two or three weeks after what is left implicit; then, when Chuck's mind goes back to that day, what he and the employees of the 55th floor of the Midtown building saw outside the windows facing South remains unspoken. Naqvi's narrative expedients have different meanings, the first being the refusal to transform the tragedy into a spectacle. At the same time, de-materializing the contours of that absence allows Naqvi to link this void to other absences in the story (Cilano 193-94, 203), to connect the expatriate's two *loci* of affiliation, and thus question the centrality and exceptionality of 9/11.

Absences and voids in New York multiply after 9/11: Pakistani enclaves like Jackson High and Little Pakistan become desolate and empty. Many "fled across the border" (Naqvi 229), to Mexico or Canada, afraid of the backlashes fuelled by racism and xenophobia. It is the sense of alienation from the city and his American life after 9/11 and the Detention Center that leads Chuck to attempt suicide by taking pills: and tumbling on the floor after overdosing, he "felt numb, dead, like my father" (200).

When it comes to "fathers", absences abound in the novel. In a world where women are the fulcrum of families and communities (Mini, The Duck, the late Mrs Khan, Amo, and Chuck's widowed mother), the Shaman's disappearance, which the narrative ambiguously suggests could be related to the attacks, becomes even more disquieting. Although he is only an acquaintance, The Shaman is the closest to a father figure to Chuck, even in his end. Chuck's father's death too, allegedly an accident

in the bathtub, remains a mystery, and the suspect that Chuck's father actually committed suicide remains. The "accident" took place in 1985, when the Afghan war was having a profound impact on Pakistan and its society – a war that involved the US too. Although the connection between the Afghan war and Chuck's father's death is never stated, the fact that he died in a time of conflict re-enforces for Chuck the connection between Pakistan and the United States – both wounded by the violence of wars, one experienced directly, the other as a blurred memory by the protagonist; both sites of absences for fatherly figures gone missing, real or putative ones, as the two countries are for the protagonist.

Both absences require narratives to transform those traumas into words in order to find reconciliation and healing. However, the continuity of memory has been broken and only fragments that cannot be interpreted remain – like the Shaman's (almost empty) house and the few traces of him left there; like Chuck's father's camera, preserved as a shrine, with pictures still inside, or his suitcase, Chuck's mother's gift for his trip to the US: "There was some story there but I didn't know it. I didn't know anything about anything" (126).

As Cilano notes, "tying together migrancy and absence, the suitcase represents for Chuck missing narratives" (205-06). The emptiness of the suitcase exemplifies the transnationality of absences: these absences become connections, underlying the interdependence between places like Karachi and New York, united by the signs of a glorious past, of an uncertain future and by voids at their core. By intertwining a Pakistani missing family narrative with 9/11 events, connecting New York and Karachi, *Home Boy* takes a step forward on the path of 9/11 American novels and indirectly questions the exceptionalism and uniqueness of the American narration of tragedy and absence.

Conquerors, Mohicans and Pakistani Gatsby(s): Literary Performativity and the American Canon

"Americaness" is performed in Home Boy not only through the protagonists' attitudes and behavior, but also through the literary performativity of

the text itself. Besides formal and thematic affinities with contemporary American novels, *Home Boy* abounds in direct and indirect references to works, characters and voices from the American canon and thus engages in an articulated and continuous dialogue with the American literary tradition. By incorporating elements of US writing and reframing them through the migrant's perspective, Naqvi shows the pervasiveness of the American imagination, in its territorialized as well as de-territorialized forms. At the same time, Chuck's reading of his and his friends' experience in the paradigm of the American classics is also a strategy that questions to whom that tradition belongs, who and what informs it, and ultimately who is and who can be considered "American".

Mohammed Shah, alias the Shaman, alias "The Pakistani Gatsby", is the character that constitutes the most explicit link between Naqvi's novel and the American classics. The fascination with Gatsby and its re-writing in a transnational framework characterize several post-9/11 novels, like Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2009), all works that, like Naqvi's, create interesting parallels between two different moments of crisis in American history and literature. However, in *Home Boy* the transition from the national to the transnational is more evident, with all the main characters belonging to the Pakistani world – and with the implications that this belonging entails.

Just as in Fitzgerald's text, Mohammed Shah's is an American success story, "from rags to riches," that turns into tragedy, ending with a sudden and violent death. Like his precursor, Naqvi's Gatsby also hides his real identity and his obscure past in order to erase the barriers of ethnicity and power. His "ostentatious parties" (Naqvi 21) in his Connecticut house, his ambition propelled by a need to be accepted in the community he wants to be part of, his essentially solitary nature, his death (in the fall of the Towers) as an indirect consequence of what he has longed for – not love for a woman, but economic power, and the hate it generates (Golimowska 93) – are all elements that the Shaman and Fitzgerald's character share. Here too Gatsby's dream is still a contagious aspiration for the new migrants (Heidemann 293), as Chuck makes clear when he reacts to AC's insistence on driving all the way to Connecticut to check whether the Shaman is safe and sound: "this isn't about the Shaman. This is about you" (Naqvi

85). Together with Gatsby's glittering world, the temporal and spatial peripheries of that universe (and of Fitzgerald's novel) are also investigated and transposed by Naqvi to the twenty-first century, ethnic scenario. It is not difficult to glimpse a contemporary "valleys of Ashes" in the empty Little Pakistans after the attacks and, in particular, in the abovementioned Jersey City, with its first generation blue collar immigrants still nurturing suburban dreams.

Naqvi's re-writing also shares the geographical locating of origins and destinations with Fitzgerald's masterpiece. *The Great Gatsby* is both an immigrant and a migrant story: if Jay Gatz is of obscure origins and foreign descent, and Nick Carraway migrates from a periphery (the Midwest) to the center (New York) and then back, the same can be said of the Shaman and Chuck. In the latter case Nick's circular journey is turned into a spiral – from (and to) the borders of the deterritorialized America to the US and its internal margins, the Pakistani community, the center and the NY glamorous club scene, then to the Pakistani community after his release from prison, and ultimately back to Karachi, his old and new home.

Gatsby is the most recognizable of the literary figures and models Naqvi re-writes. The "performative literary Americaness" enacted by the author through themes and plot sits alongside that performed through the narrator's voice, his reading of his and his friends' experience in changing cultural frames that testify to a Pakistani's shifting positioning in American society – or, rather, to Chuck's perceptions of it. Significantly, in the hectic and fragmented time sequence of the long flashback that constitutes the backbone of the narrative, the meta-textual level, with its ventriloquism of American literary voices, is the only diachronic pattern followed by Chuck.

At the very beginning, when claiming the city, echoes of conquerors and explorers clearly resonate in Chuck's voice. Pakistanis are, in his perspective, the "New Breed" half-mocking in the bitter irony of his backward glance both Columbus and the Pilgrim Fathers:

> We who arrived in the West after the colonial enterprise, after our forefathers, heroes, icons – the likes of Syed Ahmed Khan, Mulk Raj Anand, and M.A. Jinnah – found the east coast of the Atlantic habitable if not always hospitable, but America was something else. You could, as Mini Auntie told me once,

> spend ten years in Britain and not feel British, but after spending ten months in New York, you were a New Yorker, an original. (15)

When their vulnerability is revealed, their literary persona changes accordingly. Like Aru, the Jewish curator of a Chelsea art gallery who confessed that as a kid he felt like "the Last of the Mo's" (4), after 9/11 Pakistanis become the "New Mohicans," as one of the thugs labels them before the fight: "Moslems, Mo-hicans. Whatever" (24). The shift from the "rhetoric of the conquest" of the opening to the allusion to Cooper's most famous novel addresses the new post-9/11 forms of American imperialism and xenophobia (Hai 84), which bind Pakistanis in the cultural reservoirs of the "inside enemy". At the same time, the parallel emphasizes how Other and Othering are extremely relative concepts ("Others" also being the original inhabitants of the land) and the need for a reconceptualization.

Who is American and who is not? According to Jimbo, Chuck is "the good man Charlie Brown" (Naqvi 179) since he takes care of the loved ones, whereas Chuck, in his bewilderment after his release, feels closer to Holden Caulfield, a frail and frightened adolescent in search of answers, although probably not exactly those sought in Salinger's novel: "I drifted south, in the general direction of the Pond. It wasn't to ponder the age-old question: where do the ducks fly in the winter?" (193). If "every New Yorker has a 9/11 story," Chuck not only proves himself a New Yorker by telling his story, writing it along the lines of the most famous pages of American literature; his performative cultural affiliation to the US and its narrative is also useful to critically articulate the epilogue and the protagonist's final decision which is both the refusal of an American social identity and a reappraisal of a renewed cultural one.

Go East, Young Man: Escape and Return in a Post-migrant Perspective

From its very title, *Home Boy* openly address the question of belonging and its complexities in transnational geographies and cultural deterritorialized landscapes. "Homeboy" itself is a definition that generates ambiguity

along Chuck's path: Who is a homeboy? While for the gang of Latinos that use this epithet he is the greenhorn easy to scare – and probably to rob or beat – (Naqvi 64), for the Duck the "Pakistani homeboys" are duplicitous in their (different) altered behavior at home and outside (73), whereas for the sympathetic detective who releases Chuck the term turns into a suggestion, or a warning – "Go home, boy" (119) – although where to return to remains uncertain.

The epilogue is inevitably related to the definition of who Chuck is and where he belongs to. Although the ending seems to enforce the opposition between here and elsewhere, New York and Karachi are constantly superimposed in the protagonist's mind. His decision to go back to Pakistan is a refusal of an American life in a country he feels he does not belong to, but also of a path he had already envisioned when Amo tried to persuade him to stay – with what to Chuck seems a "suggestion of marriage in the tenor" (Naqvi 211). Chuck is aware that going back to Karachi is a return, and at the same time an escape, not only from hate and discrimination, but also from the prospect of settling down – something he finds he "could not quite commit to" (212).[4] This decision is read by Chuck in continuity, rather than in discontinuity, with the American spirit – or at least the one that informs most of its narrative:

> When you think about it, the peculiarly American trope of escape has informed narratives spanning the western to the comedy [...]. The protagonists, often paired, are not in pursuit of golden fleeces or holy grails, like the heroes of yore, but are pursued, usually by the long arm of the law. They are outlaws or are rendered outlaws by the whimsical, uncharitable vicissitudes of the modern world. Like the residents of New Hampshire, they aspire to live free or die.
>
> And though you root for the youthful antiheroes, you know dam well they were doomed from the word go. They will never make it to the Promised Land.
>
> Escape is not so much a destination as a frame of mind.
>
> I was there.
>
> (198-99)

Running away is American; from law, from persecutions, and from the prospect of a family of your own – something that can be dreamed of, like

with the Girl from Ipanema rejecting him (13), but remains, as it was at the beginning, "minus father figure" (28).

Becoming American is a matter of laws and politics. Being American is, to paraphrase Naqvi, a frame of mind. And the American spirit can be found more in those who leave than in those who stay. Chuck's departure then is not a rejection of Americanness, but an amplification of its contradictions, an affirmation of a liminal status of dissent and belonging. Questioning US politics and its internal and external borders is not contradicted, but legitimated, by a cultural appropriation of the US in its imaginative and literary milieu that expands the limits of national literature and contributes to the reframing of its geographies of identity.

Notes

[1] See also Alali, "Introduction"; Medovoi; Versluys.

[2] See Edwards, *After the American Century*, where the author discusses the way American culture is appropriated, transformed and integrated in a specific context thanks to digital media and its circulation.

[3] "What do I mean by contemporary American fiction? I would think of Don DeLillo onwards. So in 1971, I think, DeLillo published *Americana* and that kind of sensibility informs *Home Boy*. And of course there's Jonathan Franzen and Michael Chabon […] and Rick Moody. This is the broad framework *Home Boy* is located in. There are no allusions to Shakespeare. It's all contemporary Americana. I'm contending with America, you know, in the twenty-first century, so there is a conscious effort to kind of summon Americana in this novel" (Mohammad, 41).

[4] "I would have to be employed and prospering, and Amo would have to complete her studies before the subject could be officially broached. Then one day I would travel to Jersey City on the train, sweaty and anxious and dressed in my Sunday best, to ask Old Man Khan for his daughter's hand. [...] Afterward we would rent a junior one-bedroom on the Upper East Side before applying for a mortgage on a more accommodating apartment, and in a decade or so, with both of us earning six figures, we might move to the suburbs, like the Shaman, Scarsdale perhaps, because of the schools. After producing progeny, we would live out the rest of our days with a SUV in the garage, assorted objects d'art in the drawing room, and a view of the manicured lawn. At the end of the day, it was a vision I found I could not quite commit to. 'Maybe you could visit me in Karachi,' I said. 'You'll like it there. It's a lot like New York.' That was the truth" (Naqvi 212).

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