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"Zone of Exception": The Question of Constituency in H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*

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we're all Black
brothers
when there's plenty

but when things are short
a Jew is a Jew
Black means African not Asian
and Asian doesn't mean Chinese

only so much room under an umbrella
when it's raining

Shamshad Khan, *Megalomaniac*

Introduction: Constituency After Terror

Pakistani novelist H. M. Naqvi's recent novel *Home Boy* (2009) is the story of three young "Metrostanis" – AC, Jimbo and Chuck – who, although hardly model citizens, are well-integrated into New York City life as an academic, DJ and banker, respectively. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing state of emergency, all three men are arrested and incarcerated in the Metropolitan Detention Center, "America's Own Abu Ghraib" (Naqvi 133). Although innocent and in the United States legally, they find themselves experiencing the shock effect after terror, what Moira Fradinger calls a "zone of exception," wherein the border between legal and illegal becomes blurred: "the law legally suspends itself, in order to preserve itself. A lawless space is thus legally bound: its violence is rationalized by the rhetoric of constituency survival and temporarily tolerated by the legal institutions" (Fradinger 17). Constituency is a way of defining membership, and in times of crisis membership becomes more selective, often defining an enemy within – in this case, young Muslim males – as beyond the pale, especially since the definition of a crime as "terrorism," as a threat to "our" culture, is often dependent on ethnicity and/or religious allegiance.[1] "'Terrorism against democracy,'" Alain Badiou contends, "such is the formula for

[1] Alain Badiou goes beyond ethnicity and/or religion, and places the solidarity-marker "our societies" into the context of Western material well-being as well: "When 'our societies' are spoken of and it is

consensus" (Badiou 2003: 148; original italics). Despite the appeal for universal human rights in a globalized society, these Pakistanis discover that the State still accords itself the power to decide who is a member, and who is granted rights: "'You aren't American!' [the policeman] fired back. 'You got no fucking rights'" (Naqvi 135; see also Fradinger 88). *Home Boy* follows these Metrostanis from a pre-September 11th time of functional integration in New York City through the consequences of suspicion, leading ultimately to their arrest and the threat of imprisonment or expulsion, in other words the novel illustrates how such a zone of exception functions as a political tool to consolidate borders, or constituencies, in terms of cultural identity – especially in the wake of terror – as well as the effects on those who, in the aftershock, are divested of membership.

Strangers in Our Midst

Although the novel speaks almost nostalgically of pre-September 11th, AC, Jimbo and Chuck were never as perfectly integrated as it might seem, since "fitting in" and "being lost in the crowd" are not synonyms, as Amartya Sen suggests in his critique of the multiculturalism experiment in Britain and its implicit encouragement of communitarian thinking, what Sen calls "plural monoculturalism": "Does the existence of a diversity of cultures, which might pass each other like ships in the night, count as a successful case of multiculturalism?" (Sen 156); Tariq Modood too speaks of the "confused retreat from multiculturalism," accelerating in the wake of 9/11 (Modood 48). Arthur Redding, in a discussion of the effects of media violence on the collective imagination, is skeptical regarding this presumption of pre-lapsarian innocence: "This innocence will be threatened by a seductive, pervasive, and almost mystical complex of proliferating temptations frustratingly aligned under the cultural rubric *violence*" (Redding 13; original italics). In terms of constituency, "American" becomes an example of a floating signifier, which Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin describe in this way: "Americanness comes to define all that is positive for those who recognize its call. And it does so without ever troubling its users to specify what particular quality makes a practice or opinion American (or otherwise)" (Morey & Yaqin 36). Alain Badiou remarks on the similar, undefined yet immediately understood character of the signifier "terrorist": "It must be said that today, at the end of its semantic evolution, the word 'terrorist' is an intrinsically propagandistic term. It has no neutral readability. It dispenses with all reasoned examination

declared that 'terrorism' wanted to 'strike them in their very heart' or 'destabilize' them, let us agree that what is being referred to is either still 'the West' but in a more demure fashion, or it is a material paradigm; a certain state of objective wealth which, in itself, has no kind of value for the philosopher and furthermore which would not be able to ground any kind of consistent solidarity. If this is not the case, then why does the crime of New York affect 'our societies,' while neither the millions of AIDS deaths in Africa nor the genocidal disasters in Rwanda affect them in any way? 'Our societies,' designating in a faintly obscene manner the completely relative well-being of some of the wealthiest human groups (minorities) on the planet, hardly make for a presentable face-off against the supposed substance of terrorism" (Badiou 2003: 147-148).

of political situations, of their causes and consequences," and he adds that the word 'terrorism' also "supports predicates," in this case 'Islamic' (Badiou 2003: 145; 143).

Among the protagonists of *Home Boy,* AC is the only immigrant of the three, working as a substitute teacher while pursuing a PhD; Jimbo is a "bonafide American" born in New Jersey, while Chuck is an expatriate in the US on a work visa, employed as a banker (Naqvi 2-4); well-qualified and reasonably successful, they are convinced they belong in New York:

> 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 settler [...] Sure, they said institutionalized racism was only a few generations old and latitudinally deep, but in New York you felt you were no different from anybody else; you were your own man; you were free. (Naqvi 19-20)[2]

The first line of the novel, however, regrets the sudden change, whereby these Pakistanis have gone from being a tolerable, reasonably well-integrated form of the other, the outsider, the stranger to an intolerable enemy: "We'd become Japs, Jews, Niggers. We weren't before" (Naqvi 1);[3] the passive voice, however, suggests that these things just simply happen, when in fact Japs, Jews and "Niggers" are created through a process of representational categorization, what Morey and Yaqin call "structures of representation", regarding Muslims:

> The bearded Muslim fanatic, the oppressed, veiled woman, the duplicitous terrorist who lives among "us" the better to bring about our destruction: all these stereotypes have emerged with renewed force since 9/11. To be sure, they existed before. Yet the scale and spectacle of the Twin Towers and Pentagon attacks, and the reaction to them, has thrust a certain type of Orientalist stereotype firmly back onto our cinema and television screens, into our news media ... (Morey & Yaqin 2-3)[4]

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[2] The highly-qualified Pakistani who seems perfectly integrated into New York high society before September 11th is reminiscent of Mohsin Hamid's protagonist, Changez, of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. See also Aminah Mohammad-Arif, who says: "Many people in the West, Europe in particular, perceive Pakistani migrants as being mostly relegated at the bottom of the social ladder [...] While this image reflects only partly the reality of migrants in Britain, this picture is even more deceiving in the case of the United States, where migrants are fairly educated and affluent. [...] Even more significant is that discrimination against Muslims, and Pakistanis in particular, has been on the rise in the United States, in the wake of 11 September, this being likely to generate common feelings of alienation beyond borders" (316).

[3] Amartya Sen, discussing Sartre's *Portrait of the Anti-Semite*, reminds us that the Jew is created by the anti-Semite (7).

[4] Leif Stenberg, citing Zygmunt Bauman, highlights the grey zone between the clear-cut binary of friend and enemy: "In Bauman's understanding, the stranger – in contrast to friends and enemies – undermines the order of the world and embodies a form of incongruity. The stranger comes uninvited

The hypocrisy of the situation is not lost on AC, who refuses to watch the news, saying "Nobody knows what's going on, but everybody's parcelling myths and prejudice as analysis and reportage" (Naqvi 113-114); the trio feels further wronged, as the 9/11 terrorists were in fact not Pakistani but rather "a bunch of crazy Saudi bastards" (Naqvi 146), whereas all Muslims, regardless of their behaviour or nationality, become objects of suspicion on the basis of religion. Indeed, the standard profile most sought by the police corresponds exactly to AC, Jimbo and Chuck, namely the well-integrated, moderate, even non-practicing Muslim. In fact, it is because they do not follow the "good Muslim" stereotype that these men are seen as threatening.[5] During Chuck's interrogation, as we will see, the police investigator is troubled that Chuck does not fit the mould, that he is not what a genuine Muslim is supposed to be; Sen frankly dismisses the issue as irrelevant: "… we must also ask whether it is at all necessary or useful, or even possible, to try to define in largely political terms what a 'true Muslim' must be like" (Naqvi 14).

When the question of loyalty is posed, the Islamic transnational *ummah* trumps national loyalty, meaning that Muslims are often defined as unpatriotic, at least in terms of dominant fidelity, as Jocelyne Cesari points out:

> The presence of Muslims within the West, which extends the locus of their belonging beyond their traditional geographic constraints, complicates those narratives through which regimes have forged loyalties to state and nation. (Cesari 91)

Given what Ali Nobil calls the "transnational paradigm," the question of loyalty is further complicated by the fact that migrants do not necessarily have to choose between one country and another: "… they can be embedded in more than one society simultaneously" (Nobil 64). Once again, though, these Metrostanis don't quite fit the stereotype, as they consider themselves genuine New Yorkers; AC even laments, after the attacks: "Those bastards […] they've fucked up *my city*!" (Naqvi 29; original italics), thus refuting the simplistic notion that identity is reducible only to religion.[6] Along these lines, Amartya Sen theorizes:

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and settles in an environment. He is not a distant enemy. Instead, he calls for attention in the same way as a friend. He represents something threatening. It is possible for the stranger to leave of his own free will, but he may also be forced to leave." See "Islam, Knowledge, and 'The West,'" (104).

[5] Citing the Fox drama *24*, Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin highlight the profiling strategy used by the security services: "Our main targets are European Muslims with Western educations, passports and the potential to blend into Western society" (149).

[6] Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin also note the fear of contagion which is a consequence of this imposition of a singular Muslim identity: "Cultural acts derive from religion, and any other impinging

> Indeed, the world is increasingly seen, if only implicitly, as a federation of religions or of civilizations, thereby ignoring all the other ways in which people see themselves. Underlying this line of thinking is the odd presumption that the people of the world can be uniquely categorized according to some *singular and overarching* system of partitioning. Civilizational or religious partitioning of the world population yields a "solitarist" approach to human identity, which sees human beings as members of exactly one group (in this case defined by civilization or religion, in contrast with earlier reliance on nationalities and classes). (Sen xii; original italics)

The result, Sen continues, is "misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world" (Sen xii), what he later calls "descriptive misrepresentation" which becomes the foundation for denigration and exclusion (Sen 8). Thus the disequilibrium of constituency is exposed: although the three Metrostanis see themselves as belonging, as members, as genuine New Yorkers, they are perceived by others as Muslims – and only Muslims (what Modood calls "'representation' as the public imagining of groups *qua* groups" 41; original italics) – along a slippery slope of associations which leads ultimately to conflation with terrorists.

If the shared stock of social schemas – the kind of collective mental shorthand which allows one to fill in the blanks even when data are missing (see Martha Augoustinos and Iain Walker 32)[7] – was already in place before September 11th, then the attacks themselves do not so much trigger a fundamental change but rather an increase in intensity, a reinforcement of the "clash of civilizations" formula so dear to the neoconservative agenda, and hence a clash of constituencies. Within the cosmopolitan diversity of New York, these Pakistanis were better able to navigate in the atmosphere of suspicion and fear, or at least it seemed so, although after Chuck's incarceration even the city becomes threatening. It is when they leave the city, on a trip to check on the welfare of the Shaman, that the trio will stand out even more and arouse not simply suspicion but action. Chuck has a bad feeling about the trip (Naqvi 93), and even before they are out of the city they run into a police roadblock, and for the first time Chuck feels vulnerable:

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factors such as class, gender, or doctrinal or regional differences are considered less crucial to the formation of identity. The trouble with this view – which privileges religious identity above all else – is that by failing to discriminate properly it allows for a resonant chain of association to be set up in which the aberrant activities of Muslim groups (or individuals) in one part of the world are seen as having unavoidable corrupting effects everywhere else" (Morey & Yaqin 58-59).

[7] Here we are of course making reference to social representation theory, as elaborated by Serge Moscovici, and briefly summarized by Gerard Duveen in his introduction to Moscovici's landmark work: "… representations become common sense. They enter into the ordinary and everyday world which we inhabit and discuss with our friends and colleagues, and they circulate in the media we read and watch. In short, representations sustained by the social influences of communication constitute the realities of our daily lives and serve as the principal means for establishing the affiliations through which we are bound to one another" (2).

> I had no idea what triggered [the policeman's] concern – and frankly, I never may – but at the time the following thought hit me: *We're a bunch of brown men in a car, the night of heightened security in the city.* We looked appropriately unshaven, unkempt, possibly unwholesome. I could have been silly or paranoid, but it was the first time I had felt this way: uneasy, guilty, criminal. (Naqvi 97; original italics)

Chuck highlights the crescendo of his feeling of unbelonging, from uneasy to guilty to outright criminal. These three brown men, although simply driving to Westbrook, Connecticut, to check on a friend who has not been seen since September 11th, are indeed guilty, guilty of what Zygmunt Bauman calls "the unforgivable sin of late entry," and as such, Morey and Yaqin add, they disturb "nativist myths of a timeless national past" (Bauman 59; Morey and Yaqin 37). Although Chuck is worried that he may be too paranoid, there seems to be, in post-9/11 America, the equally convincing argument that perhaps such paranoia is justified, since the current climate of suspicion and fear has become a permanent part of the psychological and political landscape, and he is not alone in his paranoia. The New York neighbourhood known as Little Pakistan is unusually quiet, Chuck notices, "as if the natives, bracing for a hurricane, had left town in a hurry [...] Later I'd learn that in the sweeps following 9/11, many had fled across the border, to Canada, to Mexico, with not much more than the clothes on their backs. Many would leave for the homes they had left decades ago, never to return" (Naqvi 229). Chuck, waxing nostalgic, reminisces about the plans he'd made with his friends for a road trip to the Western US, but makes the brutal transition to post 9/11: "It might have all been fanciful conversation, but it didn't really matter anymore. Who then could have anticipated that it would soon not be possible for three brown men to drive across America in a rented car…?" (Naqvi 87). Not finding the Shaman at home, AC, Jimbo and Chuck break into the house with the intention of waiting for him, but the neighbours don't wait long before calling the police to report suspicious activity.

A Legal Zone of Exception

Although breaking and entering is normally a routine matter for the local police, it is FBI agents who show up; three Muslim males breaking and entering after 9/11 becomes an issue at the federal level. The trio is arrested, and as they are led outside to the waiting squad cars Chuck understands once again that he is already guilty in the public imagination, already "represented," already categorized as the hyena in our midst, as the enemy within: "…*walk with your head up high, like you've done nothing wrong,* but couldn't, and it didn't really matter, because no matter what I did, I couldn't change the way I was perceived" (Naqvi 130; original italics). The perp walk becomes part of a performance, the creation of a scapegoat – a form of what Badiou calls "a theatrical capture of an adversary" (Badiou 2003: 156) –

comforting the public with the illusion that the regime is protecting them and has removed a dangerous criminal, yet with no corresponding obligation regarding truth, as Redding suggests (in a discussion of the Nazi propaganda machine, as a means of responding to a 'crisis'): "Girard calls these 'sacrificial' crises and points out that victims are after all arbitrary, surrogate victims rather than the responsible parties [...] By systematically eliminating sense, by 'emptying' the body of speech, so to speak, the regime hopes to reweave upon it the harrowing truth of that particular regime" (Redding 19-20). In this context, the "truth" is that American cultural identity is under attack from an internal enemy, and is hence justified in using extraordinary (and extrajudicial) means to defend itself. Arriving at the Metropolitan Detention Center, where "the worst abuses in the American prison system after 9/11 took place" (Naqvi 133), Chuck is immediately threatened with deportation, as his H-1 B visa will expire in a week's time; without a visa, he will find himself in a downward spiral since visa illegality automatically leads to other assumptions, as Junaid Rana explains in the context of the 2002 US Justice Department's 'Absconder Apprehension Initiative':

> This initial violation as an exhibit of illegality and criminality was deemed enough to warrant suspicion based on the potential to commit terrorist activity. In this rationale, criminality followed a logic in which the illegality of visa status translated into the potential for further criminal activity, most threateningly terrorism. (Rana 57)

In terms of traumatic experience, Cara Cilano further suggests that such "anticipation of future 'traumatism' obstructs the 'work of mourning' while it also works to justify the violations of democratic principles, civil liberties, and agreed-upon conceptualizations of justice that have emerged in the wake of September 2001" (Cilano 14). The arrest of the protagonists – we follow Chuck's interrogation, and hear of the others' experiences afterward – assumes a sort of collective guilt on the part of Muslims in America. In response to the interrogator's question, "why [do] Muslims terrorize," Chuck rationalizes: "As a Muslim, [the interrogator] figured, I would have special insight into the phenomenon – knowledge of the relevant fatwa or some verse in the Koran – just like a black man, any black man, should be privy to black-on-black violence" (Naqvi 146), and indeed the interrogator is frustrated that Chuck cannot answer the question (Naqvi 147-148). The interrogator never considers the possibility that perhaps he's asking the wrong question, especially of someone who is not part of the dominant constituency or ingroup, not privy to the nuances of the aforementioned social schemas and their resulting associations and conclusions; keep in mind that most Muslims condemned not only the Twin Towers attacks but also opposed the US aggressions in Afghanistan and Iraq (Modood 47). This collective guilt, or at least the assumption of guilt by association, furnishes the myth which then justifies violence, the "center that history

refuses to provide" (Redding 54). Morey and Yaqin too speak of representational creation in the context of scapegoating, giving the example of the Fox television series *24*, "one of the most shamelessly gung ho of post-9/11 dramas," airing just a few weeks after the Twin Tower attacks and the instauration of the Patriot Act, which gave US law enforcement agencies greatly expanded powers, all justified in the name of the war on terror and largely accepted by the American public (Morey & Yaqin 145). Morey and Yaqin explain the none-too-subtle characterizations of *24*:

> … the enemy is seen to be already *within* […] Society and the nation are viewed as an extension of the family and, in the good and bad parenting motif that runs through the series, delinquent elements must be punished and malevolent outside forces repelled. It is significant that the threatening figures are either Arabs or have been educated in Europe, where they are presumably immune from the benevolent patriotism of the American education system and thereby more prone to radicalization. (Morey & Yaqin 149; original italics)

The Patriot Act is of course a euphemism for what Fradinger calls "violence as binding a political community together when its borders are in crisis; violence, rather than political reason, is woven into and bound to the fragile determination of political membership" (Fradinger 3), thus revealing the "suicidal nature" of democracy (Fradinger 7).[8] Although Chuck had already had intimations of the consequences of 9/11, it is his arrest and interrogation which signal his absolute entry into the State's "zone of exception," wherein the rules of democratic equality before the law no longer apply, as Fradinger explains in the context of boundary formation through violence in the wake of "an event":

> an inversion of the relation between transgression and norm. In this sense these zones signal an "evil of" autonomous politics, to borrow from Alain Badiou's phrase for his meditation on an "ethics of" an event, instead of simply "ethics." The logic of ordinary transgression – that is, of ordinary evil, and thus, of any "moral" precept – is incapable of accounting for this zone's dynamics. In terms of any democratic logic, this evil of politics annihilates difference and transforms the threat of equality into the safety of identity. We may describe the exception pertaining to this zone with the paradigm of immunology. Long associated with images of communal safety, as Roberto Esposito reminds us in *Immunitas,* immunity implies being exempt from common law, and guarded from danger. An immune power exempt from law can

[8] "For lack of a 'natural' order, this kind of politics deals with contingency by way of structuring conflict. […] Underlying all formulations lies the concept of a society that has granted itself the capacity to undo its institutions; thus some famous pronouncements about the 'suicidal nature' of democracy, ranging from John Quincy Adams's 'there was never a democracy yet that did not commit suicide,' to Jacques Derrida's 'democracy has always been suicidal.' A tragic predicament, one could say: to protect democracy against its others is to suspend its self-questioning, so that in preventing its suicide, we may assassinate it" (Fradinger 7).

> claim to immunize the city from the danger of its dissolution by injecting a danger of enmity into the community that it itself can eliminate by virtue of its immunity. (Fradinger 16-17; Fradinger is referring to Badiou's *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* 2001)

Chuck's release from the Metropolitan Detention Center will in no way release him from the "zone of exception," as the State's power extends well beyond prison walls; the authorities intend to deport him when his visa runs out in five days if he has not already left, leading to legitimate questions – especially as Chuck is innocent of any wrongdoing – about whether the State is more interested in vengeance than in justice, given Badiou's assertion that a State's response to a crime should not be other crimes (Badiou 2003: 143). Riding home from prison on the subway, Chuck no longer feels like a genuine New Yorker, even in the multicultural, multiracial salad bowl of that city:

> On the subway ride from prison, I looked away when people looked at me. An ancient Chinese couple in matching embroidered Mao suits watched me unflinchingly and, it would seem, unforgivingly. [...] I was conscious of the way I looked, behaved, the way I anxiously scratched my nose, my ear. When they announced "Please report any suspicious activity or behavior" over the speakers, I closed my eyes like a child attempting to render himself invisible. (Naqvi 154)

Chuck goes for a walk in the park, a site of fond memories, and even there cannot relax: "... I noticed a short black female cop in the arch below. Although there was nothing threatening in her manner, I instinctively shrank within myself and looked away, looked at the sky" (Naqvi 249). Chuck, so frightened that he faints, awakens to discover that the police officer was not coming for him at all, understanding only later how his sentiment of belonging has changed forever:

> It was later that I realized that I had been in the throes of some sort of culture-bound psychosomatic psychosis, like the hysteria in fin-de-siècle Vienna that had inspired the Great Quack, or brain fog in West Africa that periodically turned men and women into zombies, or anorexia and bulimia that ravaged prep-school and party girls in Manhattan. The authorities gave me the existential heebie-jeebies. They had become what scarecrows or clowns were to some kids, tomcats or mongooses were to me, avatars of the Bogeyman. (Naqvi 250)

Chuck is so distraught over the situation that he attempts suicide by overdosing on pills. Awakened much later from the failed gesture by the telephone, Chuck answers to find that he has been offered a job and hence will be able to renew his visa: "It took me several moments to appreciate that I had been duly notified of a fortuitous, unexpected development. It took

me several moments to appreciate that the afternoon I attempted suicide, I had been offered a way out. Then I puked all over the place" (Naqvi 257). Calling his mother to report the recent hardship and his incomprehension at his loss of membership, of constituency, Chuck decides it is time to go home to Pakistan:

> "What do you want me to tell you, Ma? That life's changed? The city's changed? That there's sadness around every corner? There are cops everywhere? You know, there was a time when a police presence was reassuring, like at a parade or late at night, on the street, in the subway, but now I'm afraid of them. I'm afraid all the time. I feel like a marked man. I feel like an animal. It's no way to live. Maybe it's just a phase, maybe it'll pass, and things will return to normal, or maybe, I don't know, history will keep repeating itself ..." (Naqvi 262)

In spite of his recent job offer, in spite of the mutual attraction between himself and Jimbo's sister Amo, in spite of his past as a genuine New Yorker, Chuck decides to leave. He no longer belongs, and he understands that he never will; even if the effects of 9/11 diminish with time, there will be other "events" – history will indeed repeat itself – and the zone of exception will evolve in response and once again revoke his membership. Although he's lived in the US for quite some time, Chuck possesses almost nothing, realizing in starkly material terms what he'd already come to understand in terms of cultural identity and constituency; that he is in fact not an original settler, but only a squatter, and has been from the beginning – the "event" has merely acted as a catalyst. The American Dream is revealed as hollow, the American myth of equality and justice exposed as a lie, at least in the wake of terror when constituencies become much more selective and highly defensive, when the law suspends itself and democracy commits suicide, when the definition of "one of us" becomes very narrow indeed.

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