Can the Subaltern Body Speak?
Deconstructing the Racial Figures and Discourses of "Terrorism"

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In the past 15 years, over half of all terrorist attacks have occurred in just five countries: Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Syria (Global Terrorism Index 2016). Despite the geographic specificity of terror attacks and the intimate links between zones of political instability, violence, and conflict to the proliferation of terrorism, widespread panic and anxiety about terrorist attacks have created a narrative of proximity and critical intimacy between "terrorism" and Euro-American spaces. This paper will aim to explore and deconstruct the use that results from this narrative of "terrorism" as a racialized term in American discourse and will interrogate the consequences of associating "terrorism" and "terrorist" with specific understandings of violence and bodies.

As I will show, the understanding of a terrorist as related to "radical Islam" and as a manifestation of "jihad" has become so natural that it has defined the ways in which Americans categorize, publicize, and condemn violence, entrenching new processes of social differentiation rooted in racialized understandings of bodies. In Gayatri Spivak's important piece, "Can the Subaltern Speak," she advocates for a methodology that deconstructs the impulse to speak for or listen to the subaltern subject and instead attempts to speak to the subaltern and measure the silences of discourse (Spivak 1988). Spivak asks, "Can the subaltern speak?" In this instance, I want to ask, "can the 'subaltern *body*' speak?" as a way to measure the silence and call forth how ideas about the worth of particular bodies as less valuable than others come to circulate through the ordering of certain violence as "terrorism." As discourses

of "terrorism" circulate, they teach people to how evaluate the worth of bodies, create ideas of terror that are attached to bodies, and create racialized understanding of moral citizenship, all working to entrench racial hierarchy.

Redefining "Terrorism" in Discourse

Current definitions of the term "terrorism" by government agencies and public policy institutions do not reflect many of its uses in social and media discourse. Today, the FBI (2002-2005) defines terrorism as "the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives." This definition, however, is not what is applied in popular discourse and is often not what is used to define or make sense of violence. The departure from the legal and state understanding of terrorism and the social use of the term creates a catachresis, re-shaping, re-defining, and re-imagining what counts as terrorism socially and politically.

The (mis)uses of the word "terrorism" in Euro-American discourse today can be traced to a history of racial stereotypes about Arab and Muslim people (see Said 1978) as well as 9/11 and the War on Terror, increasing the proliferation of the term "terrorism" in the media and in daily discourse (Hess and Marvin 2003; Kellner 2004; Rohner and Frey 2007). As one of the most consequential attacks another country has enacted on American soil outside of traditional war, 9/11 deeply called into question the security of the United States both ideologically and in terms of physical borders. In the wake of the gratuitous violence of 9/11, the American people (and people around the world) looked to U.S. leaders to make sense of this violence. The state and technologies, or "tactics," of the state (Foucault 1982) tell us what acts of violence "are" and dictate the ways in which we first receive information about them; institutions control the content of discourse and are expected to convey the "truth." If these communications link violent events to terrorism and only certain acts are given this

distinction, then that term will slowly consolidate in meaning, regardless of the empirical or state definition of the crime.

Michel Foucault gives a deeper understanding of how the production of discourse and knowledge relates to "the truth." Foucault (1977/1980) questions the "authority" of certain types of knowledge, especially the production of discourse. Discourses for Foucault are sites of knowledge. These sites of knowledge are concepts that knowledge producers created and that are widely known as "the truth" (truth and power cannot be separated). These sites of knowledge interact with one another, creating a web of knowledge, which, according to Foucault, is power at work. These knowledge systems are created by institutions (and now with the rise of the internet, by individuals in everyday circumstances), to construct and perpetuate norms (Foucault 1977/1980). Power at work (discourse) is a force of normalization and in this way discourse is a disciplinary force. Discourse regulates how people behave, what they talk about, and how they interact. In post 9/11 contexts, Euro-American technologies of discourse have installed terrorism as distinctly different from other forms of racialized violence, such as gang crimes, many mass shootings, and police brutality, fitting terrorism into already existing ideologies of violence and the racial order.

To explore the consequences of the discourse of terrorism within the distinct context of a post-9/11 world, I will turn to two different spheres of American experiences with terrorism: foreign and domestic. To explore these spheres, I will employ Anne Stoler's use of philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte's "interior" and "exterior" frontiers. Stoler says: "As Fitche conceived it, an interior frontier entails two dilemmas: the purity of the community is prone to penetration on its interior and exterior borders, and the essence of the community is an intangible 'moral attitude,' 'a multiplicity of invisible ties'" (Stoler 2002, 80). This conception stresses the idea that a national community is premised upon particular moral ideologies, in this case moral attitudes about violence and what violence means both domestically and globally.

Interior Frontiers

These moral attitudes about violence are part of how we imagine citizenship and race in the U.S. American citizenship has historically been predicated on whiteness and the ability to prove one's whiteness (Brodkin 1998). As Jennifer Roth-Gordon (2017, 98) argues, "whiteness is always relative, imagined, produced, and insecure" (Roth-Gordon 2017, 98). In the case of racially coding the terrorist's body in America, we can take this argument to say that *citizenship* is necessarily insecure because the production of whiteness is imagined and relative. Terrorism here acts as a way to (re)define what whiteness and citizenship means. The meanings of whiteness in the United States currently exclude Muslim bodies, further evidenced by the possibility of introducing "MENA" (Middle Eastern or North African) as a new category on the U.S. Census (Krogstad 2014). One can attain and prove citizenship/whiteness, but this can also be disproved. Roth-Gordon remarks that people "engage in the endless process of reading bodies for racialized signs of civility or disorder in an attempt to keep themselves safe and make sense of the violence" (Roth-Gordon 2017, 60). The U.S. public similarly reads bodies for signs of disorder as a way to order national and moral understandings of violence and citizenship in a post-9/11 world, in this context manifesting in acts like interpreting Arab language or a woman wearing a hijab on an airplane as a threat to safety. Given our racialized understandings of terrorists, U.S. citizens read bodies to "expose" these threats amongst our own citizens.

This reading of bodies is evidenced in virtually every breaking news story and investigation into violent acts later classified as terrorism. A recent example can help illustrate this process. In September 2016, there was a series of bombs set off, two in New Jersey and one in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, New York. No one was killed, but several were injured in the explosions. Originally, Mayor de Blasio and city officials did not deem this a terrorist attack (Workman et al. 2016). Their hesitancy, however, drew criticism from the media and they continually fielded questions from the press

asking if this was a possible act of terror. The New York Times commented:

> Mr. de Blasio risked creating a dissonance between the dictionary definition of terrorism — violence with a political motive — and the creeping sense of inevitability that the terror attacks more common elsewhere in the world would find their way to New York. To some, Mr. de Blasio also appeared to conflate terrorism in general — a deadly tactic with many political motives — with terrorism motivated or carried out by the Islamic State and other radical Muslim groups.
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> Goodman and Craig (2016)

This sentiment is significant in its emphasis that not all terrorism is motivated by a "radical Muslim" body; however, this did not influence the New York Times from reading the suspect's body for those specific signs of terrorism in a separate article, again calling forth the catachresis between state definitions and sociopolitical discourse. Once a suspect for the bombings was apprehended, his citizenship and whiteness was immediately called into question. The New York Times article detailing the suspect primarily describes him thus: "Mr. Rahami, who previously served time in jail, was born in Afghanistan but is a United States citizen" (Workman et al. 2016). This simultaneously criminalizes him and establishes his descent as something evidencing his predisposition for "terrorism," nullifying his American citizenship. The article also states:

> At this point, little is known of Mr. Rahami's ideology or politics. He used to wear Western-style clothing, and customers said he gave little indication of his heritage. Around four years ago, though, Mr. Rahami disappeared for a while. Mr. Jones said one of the younger Rahami brothers told him that he had gone to Afghanistan. When he returned, some patrons noticed a certain transformation. He grew a beard and exchanged his typical wardrobe

of T-shirts and sweatpants for traditional Muslim garb.
He began to pray in the back of the store.

<div align="right">Kleinfield (2016)</div>

This statement indicates an attempt to make sense of this type
of violence through drawing a connection to foreign values
and a disavowal of racial citizenship. Stoler remarks, "Racisms
have riveted on ambiguous identities---racial, sexual, and oth-
erwise—on anxieties produced precisely because such crafted
differences were not clear at all…racisms gain their strategic
force…from the internal malleability assigned to the changing
features of racial essence" (Stoler 2002, 144). While no clear
link to international terrorist groups was found, Mr. Rahami's
acts of violence needed to make sense to the American peo-
ple. His identity was too ambiguous and therefore produced
anxieties about intimacy with this unidentified type of "oth-
er." Shifting the discourse to account for his bodily transfor-
mations – prayer in the store, "Muslim garb," and a beard—
allowed this type of violence to be understood through folk
racial ideologies. In Stoler's discussion of Europe's "new rac-
ism" ushered in under colonial rule, she argues that distinctly
physiological distinctions of race were replaced with disguised
forms of racism, installed in the everyday structures of life
(Stoler 2002). This "new racism" has also coded American dis-
course to hide and naturalize racism in racial codes. American
discourses about terrorism in the interior frontier rely on these
racial codes, reading bodies for markers of race, working to
make associations of particular violent events with terrorism
seem given.

   While these incidents of "home-grown terrorism"
often are made sense of through drawing connections to for-
eign influences and breaking down racial ambiguity, there are
incidents of contradiction. These incidents, however, do not
reveal a breakdown in this treatment of terrorism and terror-
ists; rather, they reveal how entrenched these ideologies of
race and terror have become. Dylan Roof is a white man who
opened fire on an African American church, killing nine Afri-
can Americans. He confessed that he did this to incite a race

riot; his "manifesto" detailed his hatred towards black people, remarking that black-on-white crime is the biggest issue facing America (O'Connor 2015). He additionally said that slavery was an exaggerated myth and that segregation existed to protect white people from black people (O'Connor 2015). Despite his clear political motives and espousal of white supremacy, he was charged with a hate crime and murder, not domestic terrorism. Let us revisit the FBI's own definition of terrorism: "the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives" (FBI 2002-2005). This incident clearly fits this definition and there is overwhelming evidence of his political and social objectives. Yet, white supremacy as terrorism does not fit with the image in which people have been trained to make sense of terrorism. This type of violence cannot make sense within our conceptions of racial citizenship. Rather, 9/11 created a figure of transnational terrorism as distinctly *foreign* and distinctly *Muslim* that has come to be synonymous with the definition of terrorism itself.

However, what happens when the government and the American public do finally understand whiteness as compatible with a terrorist? This can be seen in a recent incident in which three white men who were calling themselves "The Crusaders" were arrested on domestic terrorism charges for intent to bomb a housing complex and mosque of predominantly Somali immigrants (Berman et al. 2016). The FBI described the group as, "a militia group whose members support and espouse sovereign citizen, anti-government, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant extremist beliefs" (Beckman 2016). This group is certainly not the first group of white actors to be charged with domestic terrorism, but the image and treatment of terrorism in widespread discourse does not vastly change because of cases like these. In my analysis of over 50 news sources covering this story, only 20% contained the word "terror" or any of its offshoots. Additionally, in the 10 sources that did contain the word, four included the word only once and three others only included mention to terrorism in indexing

the charge of "domestic terrorism" by the FBI. Furthermore, a plot to kill over 120 people with an explicit goal of inciting more violence against Muslims and immigrants was not breaking news on any major national news outlets. This contrasts to similar domestic terrorism cases (like the above in New York City) where the actor(s) are non-white and non-Christian. Again, white supremacy, even as technically classified by the U.S. government as terrorism in the internal frontier (the KKK as one example), does not destabilize a fundamentally racialized view of terrorist as "other", as non-white, and as not sharing a racialized moral citizenship. In assessing terrorism in the interior frontier, we can see how American popular discourse establishes this moral citizenship in which terrorism must involve certain types of victims (white) and certain types of perpetrators (non-white). This further entrenches a harmful racial hierarchy in which people are trained to conceive of non-white bodies as less valuable, less American, and as always already dangerous. Focusing on these markers of racial citizenship allows people to justify and reaffirm these categories. This shows the level of effort involved in upholding the racial order and the ways we make sense of violence. Here, the "subaltern body" can only speak as a perpetrator of violence.

Exterior Frontiers

This sense of racialized morality extends to the exterior frontiers, where non-white bodies are still seen as incompatible with being the victims of terrorism. This is very well evidenced in the vastly different treatment of two similar terror acts happening just one day apart in Beirut, Lebanon and Paris, France in November 2015. In Beirut, two suicide bombers killed over 43 people and wounded over 200 in a neighborhood in Southern Beirut (Levine 2015). The bombs devastated this predominantly Shi'a neighborhood in an open-air market, bustling with families gathering after work (Samaha 2015). The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) claimed responsibility for the attack. One day later, there was a series of coordinated terror attacks in Paris within populated commercial areas consist-

ing of two suicide bombings and a mass shooting at a concert (Reilly 2015). Over 130 people were killed and over 300 were injured, resulting in a city-wide lockdown. ISIL also claimed responsibility for this attack.

The treatment of these nearly identical terrorist attacks could not have been more different. According to a Google search trend analysis I conducted of the phrases "Paris attack" and "Beirut attack" during the month of November 2015, interest in Paris outnumbered Beirut 100 to 1 at its peak.[1] Search activity correlates with the vast difference in mentions of these two incidents in the media and condemnation of them by world leaders. President Obama issued a statement about the Paris attacks saying, "This is an attack not just on Paris, it's an attack not just on the people of France, but this is an attack on all of humanity and the universal values that we share" (Reilly 2015). He continued on to say:

> Paris itself represents the timeless values of human progress…The American people draw strength from the French people's commitment to life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness. We are reminded in this time of tragedy that the bonds of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* are not only values that the French people care so deeply about, but are values that we share
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> Reilly (2015)

This solidarity between America and France is based on shared national values, or evaluations of national morality, entrenched in the principles of liberalism. Uniting with France in condemning this attack with no mention of solidarity with the Lebanese people positions the Paris attack as a terrorist attack on shared national and moral values of humanity founded in "equality" and positions the Beirut attack both as not terrorism and as an attack on those outside of "humanity" and without these "universal values."

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1 See Google trend analysis conducted by the author: https://www.google.com/trends/explore?date=2015-11-01 2015-11-30&q=paris attack,beirut attack.

When the President of the United States does not condemn *both* of these attacks, this signals to the media and to the American people that one of these incidents must be spoken about (meaning it is abnormal) while the other is silenced (normalized). In the instance of Beirut, we must measure this silence: do Muslim bodies matter, too? Can the "subaltern body" speak? The majority of Euro-American discourse does not focus on Beirut because this incident is read as Muslims bombing Muslims. This does not fit into the distinct image of terrorism that American discourse recognizes. Instead of seeing Lebanese civilians murdered by ISIL, people saw an attack by ISIL on Hezbollah or Shi'a Muslims: an act of terrorist against terrorist. For America and France, Beirut was positioned as a space in which terrorism was normalized and expected, whereas in Paris terrorism was something constructed as out of place, as too intimate and too proximate to American values. For Beirut, there were no national monuments lit up in the colors of the Lebanese flag, no way to overlay a Lebanese flag onto a Facebook profile picture, and no way to signal a safety check on social media to loved ones. This disparate treatment of these two similar incidents is both a reflection of the constructed image of a terrorist as non-Euro-American, non-white, and Muslim and also constitutive of a narrative that makes Muslims and people of Middle Eastern descent start to internalize their lives as less valuable than white bodies. On the blog "A Separate State of Mind," Elie Fares writes:

> The more horrifying part of the reaction to the Paris terrorist attacks, however, is that some Arabs and Lebanese were more saddened by what was taking place there than what took place yesterday or the day before in their own backyards. Even among my people, there is a sense that we are not as important, that our lives are not as worthy and that, even as little as it may be, we do not deserve to have our dead collectively mourned and prayed for.
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> Fares (2015)

These incidents of terrorism encountered in the exterior frontier, in foreign spaces, reveal how terrorism begins to make sense to people. Terrorism relies on the manufacturing of "common sense" narratives, positing only certain acts as terror and only certain bodies as worthy of being victims. Terrorism then connotes violence against white bodies in white spaces, perpetrated by brown, "Muslim" bodies of Middle Eastern descent. This example is also revealing of a broader narrative of national morality predicated on racialized citizenship. For France and the United States to "share" values of liberty and equality also poses citizenship in these places as fundamentally at odds not only with the values of terrorists (ISIL and Hezbollah in this case) but also with the values of the Middle East as the places that are seen to produce this terrorism. Racialized citizenship in the United States is shown to value lives aligned with "whiteness" and to devalue and be suspicious of bodies read as Arab or Muslim.

Conclusion

Narratives around terrorism encountered in both the exterior and interior frontiers reproduce the fear of the Muslim other and re-entrench racial hierarchy, silencing and dehumanizing the "subaltern body." This fear constitutes a narrative of proximity with terrorism in the interior frontier, a critical intimacy with the other, giving way to insecurity and anxiety. To make sense of this, Americans are trained to view this other as fundamentally at odds with American citizenship, leading people to read bodies for signs of terrorism as racial difference.

In a global context of Middle Eastern people falling out of categories of whiteness in the United States and Europe (Krogstag 2014), we can see how the figures and discourses of terrorism work to reimagine and re-entrench racial hierarchy in our society. Furthermore, these discourses train people into particular understandings of which bodies are valuable--especially which dead bodies are valuable. It becomes exceptionally

important to deconstruct the definitions and uses of "terrorism" and "terrorist" in order to denaturalize the body of the terrorist as being only Muslim and non-white and the only victims of terrorism as white or Euro-American. We must measure the silences surrounding the "subaltern body" both in life and in death, opening up spaces to illuminate other injustices and instances of violence that are muted by similar processes of categorization and dehumanization.

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