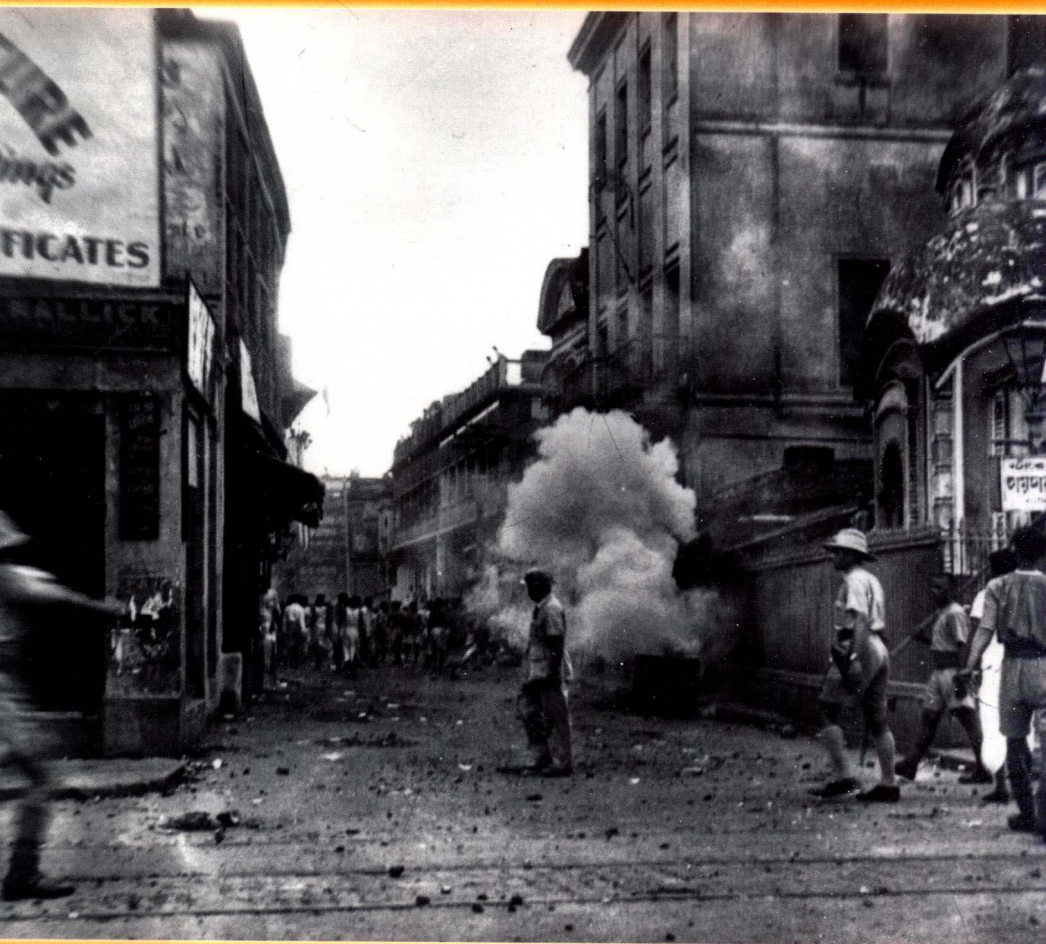


# TERROR AND THE POSTCOLONIAL

*Edited by Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton*



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Stephen Morton



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# Introduction: Terror and the Postcolonial

Elleke Boehmer and  
Stephen Morton

## As If Invoked, Like Dracula

Terror, postcolonial or otherwise, induces affect, as a number of essays in this book describe. Among the affective repercussions of acts of terror are extreme fear, galvanizing shock, vengeful anger, displacement, and, perhaps above all, paranoia – the belief that having struck once, terror will do so again, at the same place, like lightning. Or, even if it has not appeared before, the deep paranoia associated with terror is that, once conceived, once entertained in the mind, terror will inexorably arise, somewhere, and attack the body, whether national, social, or individual, just as Dracula attacks, with his type of watchfulness and cunning.

That day, 7/7/2005, “London’s 9/11” (with apposite, necromantic rhyme), it certainly did seem to this book’s editors that our theoretical engagement with terror and terrorism, defiant and skeptical as it was, had in some way called forth the configuration of terrorist events that manifested all about us. North, east, west of our meeting that day in the heart of London, bombs exploded, the repercussions of which we almost immediately felt; the aftershocks of which pulled through us, forming as we did part of a vast, moving crowd. Thus drawn in, it was as if our academic investigations – especially because they *were* skeptical and against current neo-imperial orthodoxies concerning the unquestioned rightness of the war on terror – had mysteriously invoked these outrages, even conjured them into being.

We had fixed the July 7 date some months before, for a meeting in Senate House to discuss the overall shape and tenor of two workshops we were planning, to which we had given the name this book now bears as its title: *Terror and the Postcolonial*. The workshops, funded in part by the British Academy, as well as by the Canadian High Commission, HARC at Royal Holloway, and the Southampton English Department, set out to address a range of questions concerning the links between postcolonial writing and theory, and the phenomenon of terror. We asked, for example, why it was that the post/colonial state sought to propagate terror? And in what ways did West/non-West divisions underpin the rhetoric of terrorism and its “real world” manifestations? How did postcolonial concepts of, for example, resistance and worldliness contribute to our understanding of contemporary terror? And how might we set about redefining the human in a situation of terror?

For the two of us located at separate institutions, Stephen Morton at the University of Southampton, Elleke Boehmer, then at Royal Holloway, University of London, the Institute of English Studies in Senate House in Bloomsbury seemed an excellent, central place to meet. This was especially the case as we had invited a few other colleagues, now among the contributors to this volume, to participate in the meeting. We were keen to gauge their different insights into the risks and difficulties involved in organizing a series of terror workshops that would seek to analyze contemporary developments while retaining historical and ethical perspective, and foreground the terror phenomenon without making of it a spectacle. In the event our colleagues never made it to Senate House that morning. They were turned away at stations proximate to London, instructed that “something had happened” in the capital and it was best not to continue on their journey.

Setting out a little earlier than the others, to confer before the discussion proper began, we two workshop conveners were geographically closer to Bloomsbury – though we hadn’t yet met – when a strange electricity made itself felt in the air. At just after nine o’clock in the morning we were, as we remember, so close to what was soon identified as the epicenter of the unfolding developments that universal confusion still reigned about the unnamed (and unnamable) “event” that had, to us palpably, taken place. All that was clear was that the Underground was being evacuated and the grille gates at the entrances to stations being shut, but the police could not or would not yet explain to the puzzled public why this was. They were taking precautions, was all they said; there could have been an electrical fault,

so they were recommending that people travel by London bus instead. (By this point, at 8.50 a.m., three bombs of the four that were to go off that day had already exploded – at Edgware Road, Aldgate, and deep in the Underground, not far from Russell Square station.) There was something amiss somewhere, some red alert, that much was evident, and the police were responding with extreme distraction.

Shuffling out of Euston Station alongside hundreds of other Tube evacuees, one of the editors, Elleke, saw a red-faced policewoman haring over to a police car slewed crazily up against a curb on Euston Road, crying “where, where, where?” Stephen, walking up to Senate House from Waterloo Station, saw the streets emptying as if by magic. As he wandered past police cordons near Bloomsbury, and beneath the whirring of helicopters, he could not help but think of Iraq, where similar scenes and sounds were daily being played out. He wondered about the connections, causal, rhizomic, and otherwise, that linked the carnage and confusion in those streets to these. (Bilal Abdulla, who two years later, in June 2007, allegedly laid car bombs in central London, certainly claimed that his motive was to introduce the effect of living in Iraq to the British public: he wanted to give Britons “just the taste, the taste of fear”) (Attewill 2008: 4).

Meanwhile Elleke, who had successfully avoided being pressed on to one of the waiting red Routemaster buses, was heading down Tottenham Court Road from the north. Around 9.30, as she exited a Starbucks coffee shop on Tottenham Court road with a takeaway coffee in hand, a man leaving at the same time, a step in front, expressed out loud his opinion, to anyone who might be listening, that “it’s got to be a terrorist attack.” (About 20 minutes later, at 9.47, another Tube evacuee, Hasib Hussain, who had followed police directions with his lethal backpack still intact, denoted the fourth bomb on the number 30 double-decker bus, in Tavistock Square, not far from the statue of Gandhi, and about as far from Euston Station as the Starbucks shop.) By now mobile phones were no longer working; strangers were muttering to one another in the street that there was no signal to be had; and queues began forming at phone booths in the snaking, ambling way reminiscent of the pre-mobile-phone era.

Though in terms of physical proximity we editors could probably have heard the Tavistock explosion, we did not in reality (though retrospective memories are of course full of screaming sirens and dull thuds). But as soon as we met in the darkened rooms of the Institute of English Studies, where Warwick Gould, the Director, offered stoical good cheer, as well as a radio, we began remarking on the strange quirks

of fate and odd juxtapositions that were marking the morning. Throughout Senate House the blinds had been pulled down as another "precaution," one of the many moments in the day when people responded to the events with obvious "Blitz"-type defenses. Elleke recalled how, years before, she had left a South Africa gripped by a state of emergency imposed by the apartheid regime – a country where terror attacks were daily expected, and counter-terroristic responses routine. And now, here, in the timeless heart of London, the atmosphere of emergency and non-specific alarm was being repeated, as if with hyperbolic force.

An aimless and remarkable day then ensued. Bar the occasional screaming of ambulances and police cars, London fell gradually silent. Shops closed, smaller public buildings were evacuated, the British Library shut its doors at noon. Vast and largely speechless crowds were on the move, trying to get home, reach loved ones, escape the city, process their fear. Small huddles of individuals stood clustered outside electrical shops, or wherever there were televisions that showed the unspooling events. People barely spoke, in order not to miss crucial information when it came. News channels began slowly to piece together a story of sorts: of "London's 9/11," the calamity that had in many quarters been expected, on this day timed perhaps to coincide with the G8 summit at Gleneagles, where Tony Blair, a key propagator of the Iraq War, was presiding.

Everywhere we editors turned on our long walk through London that day the communications and transport infrastructure was stopped, closed, locked down. The worst thing was not being able to phone home and worrying about family and friends. Until much later, when we eventually found ourselves on last trains rattling emptily out of the capital, the concept of getting home seemed the ultimate impossibility, here on this bright summer's day in a surreal, *flâneur's* London without traffic. Now, a strange quiet after-echo appeared to hang in the air following each footfall one made. It was as if the silence around one (the absence of cars, double-decker buses, taxis) was already creating an atmosphere of reverence, intoning the tiny imperceptible pauses, moments of hush, that would begin by slow accumulation to mark this inconceivable and (for many) infinitely painful Thing that had happened.

And so – leaving Senate House, wandering directionless from place to place, stopping at the Quaker building where everyone was either drinking or serving cups of hot tea, trekking down Marylebone Road in the direction of Paddington – we editors could barely name the term

which had occasioned our being here today. Terror. *Terror*? For us the word was so blatant, so raw, as to be close to unmentionable; so bizarrely coincidental, we couldn't begin at the time to confront what these unfolding events meant to us. It resembled a case of delayed decoding in a Conrad novel: like his narrator Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* we were aware and yet not aware that "arrows" (that is, terror, the knowledge of a terror attack) were coming at us from all directions (Conrad 1995: 76–8).

As this analogy suggests, the terror we experienced that day felt to us invoked, called up, and we, interpellated by it. Truly it seemed as if we had brought this thing upon us and so could not call it by its name, its common-or-garden street name – terrorism; a terror attack – lest we risk further ensnaring. Briefly, Elleke wondered whether she would continue for the rest of her life to find herself locked into repeat patterns of terror events, as if postcolonial existence meant being shuttled like this from one terror zone to another – as bizarrely anticipated in her novel about Irish-South African terrorism, *Bloodlines* (Boehmer 2000). Still preoccupied by the relationship between the war in Iraq and these London events, Stephen reflected on the metaphorical language of foes within and without that the state mobilized to justify its recourse to security measures, metaphors which aided and abetted the very acts of terrorism they claimed to repress.

We also could not avoid comparing the sight of the streaming crowd of hundreds upon hundreds walking the long straight road from Euston Station to Paddington (and skirting the Edgware Road's no-go zone), to images we'd seen of crowds on the move elsewhere in the world: 1947 Partition, China's Long March. The analogy of the Blitz and the Blitz spirit did indeed press everywhere on our senses – in those widely made and shared cups of tea, in the rueful toughing-it-out smiles perfect strangers exchanged with one another. Shades of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, too, were unmistakable, in the crowds flowing (whether over London Bridge or everywhere else), in the intimations of a ruined city. Terror effects, projected outwards, hurtling, bringing pain, anger, fear, were already transferring into the quotidian in these concrete, predictable ways, translating into the stories and images we were outlining for one another, about the day we'd shared, ever since that moment when, at 8.50 a.m., London life had seemingly changed.



## Terror, the Colony and the Postcolony

Terror; counter-terrorism; terrorism; war on terror; Islamic terrorists; terror cells; solutions to terror: the vocabulary of terror has in recent years become the bass note to Western government rhetoric, if not to political and journalistic discourse more broadly. “One person’s terrorist is the next person’s freedom fighter” is an oft-heard truism (Walter 1969: 5), which implicitly concedes that we all perceive some overpowering horror against which our counter-terroristic standards, our values of freedom and heroism, are defined. For early twenty-first-century Western societies, it seems, terror represents the ultimate fear, the unsaid that can only be condemned, never condoned; and one of the few near-taboo subjects of comedy. The Iraqi journalist Muntadar al-Zaidi, who threw his shoes at the former US President George W. Bush during a press conference in 2008 in a high-risk gesture of defiance, may seem to offer a counterpoint to this taboo by targeting a figure associated with the “war on terror”; however, the incident predictably led to his arrest and imprisonment.<sup>1</sup> The subjective violence of the real world, writes Žižek, the violence that takes the form of mass murders, genocide, and rape, masks the underlying objective violence of capital, systemic, anonymous, that informs “real-life developments and catastrophes” throughout (Žižek 2008: 10–11).

Yet how do we understand this phenomenon of terror, that seems at once so contemporary and so age-old and constant; at once systemic, yet convulsive; so archetypal, but of its nature so evanescent? Is terror a historical force that flashes up at moments of crisis in the inchoate forms of the sublime; or is it by its very nature heterogeneous and chameleon-like, a form of auto-immunity, taking expression from the methods and approaches of its individual terroristic exponents? Is terror chaos or crisis; catachresis or cataclysm; a gradually unfolding process or single spontaneous instant, if with long-lasting painful effects (Walter 1969: 5)? The *Oxford English Dictionary* distinguishes between terror as the emotional state, as might be attributed to a tale of terror; and terrorism, or a system of terror, as when a person or group adopts a policy of intimidation intended to strike with terror those against whom it is adopted. Yet this latter free-floating, liberal understanding of terrorism denies the fundamental point that terrorism as political violence is the ground upon which sovereignty is in many cases defined in the colonial present.