INTRODUCTION
Mapping terror in the war of words

Provocation

On 1 October 2001 I am in Manila beginning to direct a production of Jean Genet's *The Maids*, barely three weeks after a critical event hit the world and got identified in the media as ‘September 11’. In the weeks that follow I direct the play haunted by the explosive power of terror, if not by the imminence of another attack. However, there is not enough time to actually process the unfolding of ‘September 11’ through the virulence of its mediatization, not least because its narrative is mutating and metamorphosing in disturbing ways even as the production acquires a life of its own. Only in critical hindsight do I realize how terror entered the political unconscious of the production even as it was not consciously inscribed in the *mise-en-scène*.

When the short run of the play ends in Manila on 24 November 2001, and I am back in my home-city of Kolkata, seeking refuge in the habitual chaos that animates the daily life of the city, something happens: nothing of magnitude, not another terrorist attack, just a minor event which does not get represented in the international news even though it receives some reportage in the newspapers of Manila. The Republic of Malate, the funky bar and dance club in which *The Maids* had staged their rage against Madame, burned down on 27 November 2001, just three days after the last show of the production. Nothing remained of the Republic: it was burned to ashes.

Was this an accident or an act of arson? An attack or sabotage? Following Paul Virilio’s instruction that the elements of destruction are already factored into the technology of any apparatus, the theatre, both as an institution and as an actual site of production, cannot claim any immunity from the imminence of accidents. We will elaborate on this axiomatic condition later in the book, but for the moment, let us hold on to Virilio’s prescient reminder that ‘the accident is inseparable from its velocity of unexpected emergence’ – a velocity whose invisibility is perhaps more lethal than its material manifestation.

Fortunately, there were no casualties at the Republic of Malate, but given the fact that the only entrance of this ‘theatre’ was also its exit, there could have been many charred bodies if the fire had broken out during the dress
INTRODUCTION

rehearsals or the actual run of the production. Without sounding unduly alarmist, I might not have been alive to be writing this narrative in the first place. More will be said in the first chapter of this book about Genet in Manila, ‘September 11’, and the burning of the theatre. However, I might as well acknowledge these juxtapositions at the start of the narrative as a provocation, the spark that catalyzes the agenda of this book through the short-circuits of diverse performances disrupted by the actualities of terror.

Not having witnessed the actual burning of the Republic of Malate, I could afford to interpret it, in the aftermath of the production, through the comfort of metaphor – the ashes of the theatre providing a central trope for the perilous evanescence of performance. A short critical essay emerged entitled ‘Genet in Manila: Reclaiming the Chaos of Our Times’ (2003b) in which ‘September 11’ provided an arresting backdrop for a reflection on theatre in the context of ‘chaos’ rather than ‘terror’. In retrospect, I would acknowledge that the thesis of this essay was somewhat too buoyant in its uncomplicated radicality: it is better, I had argued, to live with chaos and to resist ‘chaos management’, just as it is necessary to fight terrorism by countering counter-terrorism. The essay had some circulation in postcolonial and Genet studies and I could have allowed it to pass had the political unconscious of its unwritten text not continued to haunt me.

Some years later, while attempting to rework the essay through an integration of the several insights generated around the discourse of ‘September 11’, not least Jacques Derrida’s subversive reading of ‘autoimmunity’ in the larger context of the ‘war on terror’, I faced a crisis. Challenging my naïve assumption that the rewrite of the essay would not pose any particular problem, something uncanny happened: Almost like a letter-bomb or some minuscule weapon hidden in the recesses of my computer, the unformulated content of the essay exploded as it were in my face. I found myself confronting the hard truth that it was no longer possible to circumvent terror through a fictionalization of a somewhat bizarre theatrical accident; I had to think through it. Therefore, from providing the mere background of an essay, terror is now foregrounded in this book, doubling as both its catalyst and subject in and through its relationship to performance.

Impulse

While the burning of the theatre can be regarded as the provocation of the book, its actual creative impulse is somewhat more idealistic as I have been driven by one pivotal question: How can one free terror from the hegemonic discourse of terrorism? This disentangling of terror from terrorism can be seen as a dilution of the political, even as a capitulation to a form of philosophical thinking which risks anaesthetizing the ‘real’. However, I would argue that the only way of breathing life into the vocabulary of terror is to insist that it should not be conflated with what has come to be hegemonized as ‘terrorism’,
even as Talal Asad reminds us that, in terms of actual usage and discursive practice, terror has become a ‘shorthand’ for terrorism.\(^5\)

I could be challenged: Why this impulse, this somewhat anarchist desire to ‘free’ terror? Today’s language of terrorism, I would respond, is inseparable from the larger discourse that has emerged around ‘September 11’, which has been primarily authored, produced, and performed by the United States Security and Defense Departments, buttressed by a plethora of war-mongering think-tanks and advisory committees, information and disinformation services. If one wishes to counter this discourse and emphasize the obvious fact that Americans are not the exclusive victims of terror, then one needs to acknowledge that terror is experienced in multitudinous, palpable, and infinitesimal ways across the world, where ordinary people live with terror on a daily basis.

In this scenario, which is more truly global than the essentially American war on terror, there needs to be some way of calling attention to these other manifestations of terror, which are not determined by ‘September 11’, even though they may be affected by its fall-out. Far from being exceptional, terror can be regarded as the new banality of evil in our times, functioning in a diversity of ways, open to a spectrum of causes, manipulations, rumours, fears, tensions, and resentments, ranging from the most global and national of political interventions to the most quotidian intimacies of everyday life. Terror can strike when one least expects it, not just in cyberspace or the anonymity of the global city, but in the most familiar of neighbourhoods and streets as well.

Having acknowledged my impulse to free terror from terrorism, I should also acknowledge that it is fraught with methodological and theoretical problems. To spell out a bitter home-truth which emerged in the actual writing of this book: Even as the impulse to free terror from terrorism is desirable and necessary, it is not exactly viable given the sheer dominance of the discourse on terrorism today, which may be engineered by the United States but which has proliferated worldwide, both among its allies and adversaries. Indeed, as much as one needs to resist the conflation of terror with the so-called ‘war on terror’ precipitated by ‘September 11’, it is not easy to dis-imbricate the diverse epistemologies and affects of terror from the larger rhetorical and political apparatus of terrorism in which it is subsumed.

In effect, all we can do is to keep the tensions alive between ‘terror’ and ‘terrorism’ by calling attention to different contexts, modalities, and histories of terror, which in this book extend to an examination of communal violence in the Indian subcontinent, the genocide in Rwanda, the intensified racial divides following the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa, among other insurrections and failed experiments in peace-building and secular coexistence. As will become apparent in the course of the book, these widespread manifestations of terror demand their own articulations of local, regional, and national contexts that tend to be flattened, if not erased, within the terrorist imperatives of the ‘September 11’ narrative. In close engagement with these diverse contexts, therefore, this book is an attempt to open the multiple
languages of terror not merely to inflect the global discourse of terrorism, but also to suggest other ways in which it can be understood and resisted at more concrete levels of lived history and experience.

**Doublespeak of ‘terrorism’**

Enough has been said for the discerning reader to demand some clarity on the terms being used, not least ‘terrorism’ and ‘terror’. What follows is a brief exposition of these terms at discursive and disciplinary levels. Even as there is no consensus on the official definitions of terrorism, we have no other option but to engage with them not least because they could be the most powerful legitimizing devices for the perpetration of terror in our times. The absence or lack of consensus around adequate official definitions does not stop them from being used in insidious ways.

If we turn to the prevailing definition of ‘terrorism’ provided by the US State Department – a definition which preceded and framed the ‘war on terror’ – we learn that it is identified as ‘premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience’. The asterisk following ‘noncombatant’ indicates that, for the State Department, the word refers not only to ‘civilians’ (the target of most terrorist attacks, also identified as ‘innocent people’), but to ‘military personnel’ as well, who are ‘unarmed or off duty at the time’. This obvious stretching of the word ‘noncombatant’ was evidently inadequate for the US State Department, because, as the ‘war on terror’ intensified, it proceeded to invent an entirely new ‘legal’ category – ‘illegal enemy combatant’ – which confounds legal experts to this day. In this regard, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the language of the law has been radically altered since ‘September 11’ and liberal American lawmakers are as puzzled and provoked by these changes as legal experts and activists in the rest of the world.

Exposing the chicanery of the US State Department’s use of ‘illegal enemy combatant’, Tzvetan Todorov (2009) calls attention to the well-established distinction between those perpetrators of violence in peacetime who are generally designated as ‘criminals’, and those ‘enemy soldiers’ in wartime who must be treated according to the protocols of international conventions. Since the Al-Qaeda terrorists are not ‘regular army members of a country that signed the Geneva Conventions’, they cannot ‘benefit from these protections’ (32–33). At the same time, they cannot be designated as ‘ordinary criminals’, because then the Police Department would be a more appropriate institution to deal with their crimes. This is where it becomes expedient to designate a ‘war on terror’ – the first of its kind in the world, where a war is being waged on nothing less than an abstraction, with no end in sight, thereby enabling the United States to set itself above all national and international laws for an indefinite period of time. In a state of ‘war’, the State Department is under no
INTRODUCTION

obligation to adhere to ‘laws applicable in times of peace’ (33). Yet, as Todorov points out the obvious irony: ‘since the war is not directed against another country, the international conventions do not apply either!’ (33). So, within the logic of this doublespeak, the State Department creates its own legitimacy to invent a conundrum like ‘illegal enemy combatant’ which effectively allows the US government to place apprehended individuals outside the reach of laws and norms, and hence to practice torture’ (33).

Inevitably, ‘torture’, in turn, gets redefined. Detainees at detention centres like Guantánamo and the former Abu Ghraib prison can no longer be considered ‘tortured’ if they are ‘regularly raped, hung from hooks, immersed in water, burned, attached to electrodes, deprived of food, water or medicine, attacked by dogs and beaten until their bones are broken’ (34–37). None of these violent and sadistic acts, and no amount of ‘sensory deprivation’, involving hearing, smelling, seeing, breathing, sleeping, can qualify as torture.9 All these ‘deprivations’ are better designated as ‘abuse’, not ‘torture’, as the former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld confirmed in his equivocal response to the atrocities at the Abu Ghraib prison. For ‘torture’ to be truly torture, as Todorov emphasizes, it is necessary for the detainee to lose at least ‘one vital organ’ – it could be a leg, or an arm, or a burst liver, or incontinence for life’ (34). Even the death of a detainee following ‘abuse’ can qualify as ‘torture’: the grotesquerie could not be more extreme.

In contrast, ‘abusive’ actions are more cogently linked by the CIA to the necessary task of extracting ‘actionable intelligence’ from detainees – an ‘intelligence’ which was endorsed by President Bush in his paternalistic assumption that the American people expected the government to do their job.10 Exposing the absurdity of ‘[pretending] ... to act on things by changing their name’, Todorov articulates a sober truth: ‘It is not because we say that the systematic destruction of a person will not be called torture that it ceases to be torture ... [R]eality is not altered in any way by this new designation’ (39–40).

Predictably, there is no dearth of deadly euphemisms in the larger discourse around terrorism and torture that attempts to camouflage blatant crimes against humanity. Alex Danchev, a particularly fine reader of such euphemisms, points out the absurdity of an official report on abuses at Guantánamo whose ‘treatment [of detainees] did not rise to the level of prohibited inhumane treatment’.11 There is almost a parodic quality to such official niceties. More blatantly, a familiar category like Prisoner of War (POW), subject to the laws of the Geneva Convention, has been replaced, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq, by the more malleable Person under Control (PUC), which is ‘literally pronounced puck’, as in ‘fuck a puck’, which literally means to ‘administer a beating’.12 Human Rights Watch confirms that PUCs held during the war in Iraq in Fallujah were ‘fucked’ routinely; they were also ‘smoked’ (subjected to ‘forced physical exertion’).13

If I somewhat over-emphasize a discursive thrust in this war on words, it is to highlight their performative energy, whereby words are not just descriptions
but the embodiments of action. Later in this introduction, I will emphasize why the concept of ‘performativity’ whereby words are actual manifestations of doing is so integral to the critical analysis of this book. For the moment, let us recall that in the so-called ‘Holy War of Error’, to use Sami al-Haj’s felicitous phrase, the nomenclature of entire missions has been subjected to linguistic alteration and distortion. Operation INFINITE JUSTICE, for instance, was replaced by ENDURING FREEDOM, following the reminder that the former category is more readily associated with the prerogatives of deities and divine forces than governments. Likewise, the notorious word ‘crusade’, mouthed by Born-Again Christian President George W. Bush, was promptly censored for its association with specifically Christian forms of violence against Muslim ‘infidels’.

It could be argued that these political blunders and semantic shifts in the language of war are not new: Prior to ‘September 11’ the American branding of ‘rogue states’, for instance, used aggressively during the Clinton administration between 1997 and 2000, was abruptly replaced by the impossibly bland ‘states of concern’. However, the figure of the ‘rogue’ (a wild animal capable of running amok at any moment) continued to mutate in its demonization of targets like Saddam Hussein, arguably the ‘beast of Baghdad’. As Derrida reminds us, ‘The beast is not simply an animal but the very incarnation of evil, of the satanic, the diabolical, the demonic – a beast of the Apocalypse’. Primordial associations die hard even as beasts are tamed or effectively culled and the language of violence and torture is ‘cleaned up’. The old names lurk like palimpsests that refuse to be erased, not unlike the ‘global war on terror’, which still continues to resonate long after it has been renamed ‘Overseas Contingency Operation’.

Beyond the manipulation of categories by the Defense and Security Departments of the US State, one needs to acknowledge that the global discourse of terrorism, as James Der Derian (2009b) reminds us, rejects any attempt to be subsumed under rigid official definitions. Disdaining the dominant tendency to simplify terrorism under the weight of a ‘corrosive mix of official opportunism, media hype, and public hysteria’, Derian emphasizes the need to highlight the ‘differences and contradictions’ of terrorism which constitute a ‘heavily conflicted field’ in terms of ideology, philosophy, and practice. Even as all terrorism may be said to converge around ‘strategies of intimidation and violence’, these strategies get consolidated through vastly different mechanisms, agencies, and targets encompassing a wide series of formations, including mytho-terrorism, anarcho-terrorism, socio-terrorism, ethno-terrorism, narco-terrorism, state terrorism, anti-terrorism, and pure terrorism. What concerns me in this book is not this spectrum of terrorism(s) as mapped so virtuosically by Derian across histories, cultures, and times, but the ways in which words in the ‘war on terror’ get secreted within the most normal – and lethal – of categories.

One such category is the almost territorial regard that Americans have expressed for ‘Ground Zero’, a category which emerged with an uncanny
INTRODUCTION

complicity at the very start of the ‘war on terror’ in the United States out of a consensus between the print and electronic media and public sentiments in the American population at large. With an eerie swiftness, as the cultural critic Gene Ray (2005) has pointed out, the New York Times used ‘Ground Zero’ on 16 September 2001 to describe the smouldering ground of the ruins of the World Trade Center. By this time the category had already caught on and spread widely across different sectors of civil society, without any significant debate or discomfort relating to its use in everyday life. Countering this proliferation of an essentially deadly category, Ray reminds us that ‘Ground Zero’ was first used to designate the ground of the nuclear site of Hiroshima, where all traces of life had been annihilated. Tellingly, to this day, all photographic and visual evidence of the atrocities on Hiroshima and Nagasaki still continues to be censored in the United States, thereby reducing the most formidable demonstration of ‘terror-bombing’ on civilians to a dark secret, internalized yet unacknowledged in the public domain. With ‘September 11’, however, it could be argued that this secret has been finally ‘outed’ by the strange appropriation of Americans claiming their victimhood through an implicit, yet unacknowledged, comparison to those Japanese people on whom their own government had used the first nuclear bomb in the world.

With such appropriations of categories, whereby the Ground Zero of Hiroshima becomes the Ground Zero of the World Trade Center, one begins to realize the layers of deception by which the terror inflicted on a particular population in one part of the world continue to be denied, even as a very different kind of terror is claimed through the same description in another part of the world. Is this historical amnesia, or political delusion? How may we develop a closer understanding of how people suffer in different contexts of violence and intimidation without conflating their suffering under the sign of a common victimhood?

Risk of misunderstanding

In any scenario of terrorism, it could be argued, there is an acute, almost hyper-tense, paranoia in relation to the use of words. What makes the language surrounding the ‘global war on terror’ particularly paranoid has to do with its emphatically unilateral and monochromatic discursive thrust, which is further enhanced through the intensification of surveillance. Against this scenario, any writer reflecting on terror today faces the fear or the very real possibility of being misunderstood. In my own experience, I am compelled to return to my tract on The Question of Faith (1993), which was published shortly after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, India, on 6 December 1992, precipitating communal riots across the country. In my attempt to free ‘faith’ from the demons of ‘fundamentalism’, which is somewhat similar to my impulse to free ‘terror’ from ‘terrorism’ in this book, I am reminded of the prescience of the rather grand opening sentence in my tract on faith: ‘In the
best of all possible worlds, writing can be misunderstood’. Why is misunderstanding more fraught with risks today? Is it because we are living in the worst of times? This could be a hopeful conjecture.

On a more pragmatic note, I would say that we are living in an environment where the technologies of surveillance have intensified particularly in liberal democracies where the myth of free speech has been placed under severe duress. There are new legal mechanisms which place enormous curbs on critical thinking or dissent; the Freedom Act in the United States and internal surveillance mechanisms monitoring telephone conversations, websites, e-mail correspondence, and academic writing, border on an almost ‘unreal’ surveillance, resulting in intimidation and a climate of unease at unconscious levels. While this cannot stop us from writing critically, any more so than it can stop WikiLeaks from countering state surveillance through its own subversive information-busting practices, it does demand a new vigilance that should not degenerate into paranoia or self-censorship.

Looking back on my attempt to question the inner complexities of faith, I remember indicating in my tract that there is a sinister side to faith, as the Epistle in James (2:19) of the Bible recognizes: ‘Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble’. Even devils have faith. This is a chastening thought in the context of the global scenario on terror, except that the identification of devils may not correspond to what the likes of Fox News and CNN would have us believe. The crusaders of ‘just’ wars could be devils in their own right. Nonetheless, juxtaposing The Question of Faith with what I am writing now, there is something to be said about speaking for faith in opposition to different kinds of fundamentalism and intolerance. It is much harder to make any such claim in speaking for terror. The obligatory assumption is that one needs to speak against terror. To speak for terror, or even to address it in a non-judgmental context, is to risk being branded either as a terrorist or a terrorist sympathizer. Will this narrative escape being branded in this manner and identified as ‘anti-American’, if not ‘pro-terrorist’? Without sounding unduly pessimistic, an honest response to these knee-jerk reactions, which, in my view, restrict the possibilities and risks of critical thinking, would be: I’m not sure.

Another, more pragmatic, reason for being misunderstood is that my use of ‘terror’ in this book sprawls. I draw the word ‘sprawls’ from a fine reflection by the sociologist Charles Tilly on ‘Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists’ (2004) which refuses to get locked in the purism of heuristic categories. Adopting a sceptical position, Tilly emphasizes that ‘Social scientists who attempt to explain sudden attacks on civilian targets [like the World Trade Center] should doubt the existence of a distinct, coherent class of actors (terrorists) who specialize in a unitary form of political action (terror) and thus should establish a separate variety of politics (terrorism)’.21 Refusing to make a virtue out of coherence even while enunciating his position with scrupulous clarity, Tilly opens himself to a spectrum of extreme forms of violence like
INTRODUCTION

genocide and ethnic cleansing, which 'sprawl across a wide range of human cruelties'.

This 'sprawl' of 'human cruelties' is only too evident in my own reading of
terror in this book, which I refuse to confine within any one location or
modality of violence, playing into the narrative of American exceptionalism
which the 'war on terror' seems to demand. Not only does my narrative
encompass different locations and practices of terror in the Philippines, the
United States, India, Rwanda, and South Africa, it also engages with different
modalities of violence including genocide, war, ethnic and communal violence,
in addition to acts of terrorism. Needless to say, there is a risk here in diffusing
the grammar of terror, which is further complicated by the interdisciplinary
methodology adopted in this book.

Interdisciplinarity becomes almost mandatory in exposing the scattered
locations, cultural contexts, disjunctive temporalities, and multiple agencies of
terrorism, which, as Charles Tilly emphasizes, is not 'a single causally coherent
phenomenon'. Rather, it is increasingly a mutant and technological hybrid of
intersecting networks, driven less by any clear-cut ideology or religious belief
than by a multitude of discontents and resentments. To pin terror down to any
particular discipline, within the strictures of any one vocabulary or institutional
framing, is to miss out on its deadly elusiveness. If, in this book, I find myself
intersecting the languages of theatre and performance studies with cultural
studies and the social sciences, this is not so much a strategy on my part, but rather
a methodology in attempting to make sense of violence in all its multidimensional,
enigmatic, and yet intransigent circumstances.

Ambivalences of terror

Moving outside the domain of sociology, one needs to acknowledge that terror
could be more ambivalent than terrorism. Turning to the Oxford English
Dictionary, one is struck by the gamut of enigmas surrounding the word, as
opposed to the more technical and instrumentalist definitions of 'terrorism'.
The very agency underlying 'terror' in the OED is complicated in its two most
dominant senses: Terror is at once 'the state of being terrified or extremely
frightened', as well as 'the state or quality of being terrible or causing intense
fear or dread'. Terror can be felt, experienced, embodied, but it can also be
inflicted and imposed as in the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution
between September 1793 and July 1794. During this time, revolutionary tribunals
conducted arbitrary trials and executed 'enemies of the people', legitimizing
their action on the grounds that terror is 'an emanation of virtue', a necessary
'government by intimidation'.

According to Terry Eagleton (2005), this 'modern invention' of terror operating
as terrorism is 'twinned at birth' with the 'modern democratic state'. Contrary
to its political legitimacy, it is the state which provides one of the most deadly
grounds for the relentless spate of riots, killings, massacres, and ethnic
INTRODUCTION

cleansings that take place within its borders. Even while states across the world would like to claim some kind of immunity against the charge of terrorism, by virtue of their legality sanctified by constitutions, law courts, and the rule of governance, the reality is that ‘state terrorism’ intensifies in almost direct proportion to its capacities for being camouflaged or euphemized. The usual pretexts of maintaining ‘law and order’ against insurgents and anti-social elements, along with the grander mission of protecting civilian rights against foreign aggression, are often used as legitimizations of terror in their own right.

In its adjectival uses, ‘terror’ is, indeed, linked to ‘terrorism’ as in the familiar associations of ‘terror alert’, ‘terror attack’, ‘terror plot’, ‘terror suspect’, ‘terror tactics’, and ‘terror act’. More formidably, there is the phenomenon of ‘terror-bombing’ inflicted, for instance, on Germany during the Second World War by the Allied forces, resulting in the deaths of 600,000 civilians. This deliberate targeting of civilians has been justified by Michael Walzer (2000), the foremost proponent of ‘just war’ theory, on grounds of ‘supreme emergency’ where it becomes necessary to ‘wager’ the crime of terrorism in order to avert ‘moral disaster’ — in this particular case, the evil of fascism. However, there would appear to be a time-frame for the dubious ethics of such terror-bombing: in early 1942, it was necessary according to Walzer because Britain was vulnerable to being defeated by Germany; however, by 1943, when it was evident that Germany was not going to win the war, terror-bombing became a morally unacceptable strategy to end the war.

From this example, it becomes clear that ‘terror’ cannot be freed from ‘terrorism’, even as it gets justified through strategically evasive advocacies of ‘just wars’, which I will elaborate on towards the end of this book in the difficult context of seeking justice outside the law. Countering the equivocal ethics underlying a ‘moral’ understanding of war — after all, from whose implicitly superior, reasonable, and non-relativist sense of morality can ‘terror-bombing’ be justified? — we have more sublime incarnations of ‘terror’ provided by the Oxford English Dictionary. Here we encounter surreal images like the ‘terror bird’, which refers to a species of ‘large, extinct and typically flightless birds of prey’; the ‘terror-gleam’ or ‘dark mist that hovers over the river Thund in Scandinavian mythology’; and, at a deeply visceral and corporeal level, a ‘terror-drop’, which refers both to a ‘terrifying parachute drop’ as well as to a ‘drop of sweat produced in a state of terror’.

I have deliberately inserted these startling associations of terror to work against the dominant assumption that ‘terror’ is best regarded as an abstract and external condition or state. Indeed, in the early stages of writing this book, I was advised by at least two philosopher-friends that it was prudent to keep terror at a distance and, at all costs, to avoid the emotional and psychological dimensions of terror. At a linguistic level, I realized that my interlocutors were keen on pinning terror down to a noun — an abstract noun — without acknowledging its adjectival and verbal implications. I also realized that they were not entirely ready to implicate themselves in terror. Therefore, the simple
expression ‘I am terrified’ had at least one of them struggling for an adequate translation in German.

In addition to regarding terror as ‘extra-state collective action’ involving ‘physical force’, we have no other choice, I believe, but to regard terror, in Gayatri Spivak’s words, as ‘the name of an affect’.31 In Chapter 2 of this book, which focuses on the demonization of Muslims in the larger context of communalism in India, I will discuss the insidious ways by which minorities are marked through specific aspects of their physiognomy or dress – a beard or a turban can affect all kinds of terrorist identifications or misidentifications. ‘Where “terror” is an affect’, as Spivak emphasizes, ‘the line between agent and object wavers’.32 While the consequence of this ‘wavering’ results in the volatility of fear and uncertainty in the public sphere, it also affects the way in which terrorists are perceived by those who are threatened by their menace.

As Spivak complicates the affect of terror, ‘there is also a sense in which the terrorist is taken to be numbed to terror, does not feel the terror of terror, and has become unlike the rest of us by virtue of this transformation’.33 This notion of terrorists being numbed to the terror they inflict on others is one way by which they are demonized, reduced to ‘machines’ or unthinking, unfeeling brutes or ‘beasts’, as opposed to those whom they terrify, who remain only too human and vulnerable. For terrorists, it is assumed that human life is cheap, if not dispensable. This leads to all kinds of hypocritical associations:

> When the soldier is not afraid to die, s/he is brave. When the terrorist is not afraid to die, s/he is a coward. The soldier kills, or is supposed to kill, designated persons. The terrorist kills, or may kill, just persons.34

Through her precise analysis, Spivak makes us see how the ‘affect’ of terror leads to questionable moral judgments. Far from being locked within a vortex of incomprehensible emotions, it compels us to be more reflexive about our own complicity in the production of ‘common sense’ around terror.

If the dominant imperative suggested by the ‘war on terror’ assumes that terror is an adversary, an Enemy, necessarily outside one’s self, destined to be fought and killed, if necessary over and over again, terror as affect challenges this false Manicheism. Dismantling the objectification of terror, it demands some kind of recognition of how we are implicated in terror, disturbing any false illusions of an implicit, ‘non-terrorist’ goodness or innocence. Terror can be imposed from outside, but it is also secreted from within and affected by our own fears and prejudices. No one can escape terror quite so easily, and certainly not with the pyrrhic assumption that in a war on terror one will necessarily come out alive or victorious, and with one’s sense of moral judgment intact.
INTRODUCTION

Holy Terror

Let me push the drift of associations here by invoking that most seemingly innocent of constructions – ‘holy terror’ – a phrase that involuntarily makes one smile because it calls to mind a troublesome child. In this most popular of associations represented in comics and cartoons, one could say that Dennis the Menace is a holy terror; he’s the detonator of all kinds of household appliances and norms, and the very scourge of Mr Wilson’s life. How does ‘terror’ get linked to a child through the mediation of the ‘holy’? What happens when a holy terror becomes Holy Terror?

Here, with the incursions of the noumenal, the sacred, and the metaphysical, I am reminded of the most divine of child-manifestations in Hindu mythology and religion, Lord Krishna, who as a child is the absolute bane of his mother’s life. Krishna’s pranks are lovingly reiterated in the repertoire of classical and folk Indian dance and performance traditions where he is shown breaking milk pots, stealing butter, and eating dirt from the ground. At one point his infuriated mother orders him to open his mouth so that he can spit out the mud. In a wondrous moment of illumination, she sees the cosmos whirling in her child’s mouth. This is a moment of awe, not Shock and Awe, which is what the American war machine wished to engineer through its bombardment of Iraq during the Gulf War, but another kind of awe coming out of celestial wonder. Later, in the Bhagavad Gita, another more militant manifestation of Krishna in the battlefield of the Mahabharata reveals his universal form (Vishvarupa) to Arjuna, through which he instructs the reluctant warrior how to detach himself from the delusions of ‘false consciousness’ which prevent him from fighting his own kin. Exposed to the terrifying manifestation of Time in Krishna’s omnipresence, Arjuna responds to the call of war and submits to the task of performing his warrior’s duty (kshatriya dharma).

Arguably, in these examples, we encounter different epistemologies of terror from other times which cannot be yoked to contemporary readings of terrorism. Without engaging with these differences, Terry Eagleton in his book Holy Terror (2005) outlines a metaphysics of terrorism by conceptualizing the relationship between terror and the sacred.35 Without quite separating the mythical residues and dimensions of ‘terror’ in the ancient world from the contemporary phenomenon of ‘terrorism’, and without differentiating metaphysics adequately from either theology or religion, Eagleton articulates the complex ambivalences underlying concepts of ‘evil’, ‘the sublime’, ‘sacrifice’, ‘God’, and ‘death’ in order to disrupt deeply embedded secular pieties, particularly on the Left, in relation to the violence of our times. While the categories of ‘sacrifice’, ‘forgiveness’, and ‘evil’ also enter my narrative in the larger context of truth and reconciliation and the ambivalent ethics of suicide-bombing, they have very different significances, as will become evident in Chapters 3 and 4 of the book. Any reading of terror today demands a context-sensitive engagement with these terms, which do not merely have a moral or spiritual significance but
also a performative value in terms of how they are actually enforced in political culture: how, after all, are ‘sacrifice’, ‘forgiveness’, and ‘evil’ activated today within different scenarios of war, genocide, and ethnic violence?

Against the performative force of these concepts, Eagleton adopts a somewhat too fuzzy methodology, his ‘metaphysical’ categories almost tripping over each other, drawing their affinities through an over-hasty analogical thought process. The epistemological fact that the word sacer can mean either ‘blessed or cursed, holy or reviled’ is given the same conceptual weight by Eagleton as the more generalized observation that ‘there are kinds of terror in ancient civilization which are both creative and destructive, life-giving and death-dealing’ (2). Without providing historical evidence for this vast claim, Eagleton builds his argument on the false premise that ‘Terror begins as a religious idea, as indeed, much terrorism still is today; and religion is all about deeply ambivalent powers, which both enrapure and annihilate’ (2). In such conceptual slippages, there are obvious problems relating to temporality and causality: Even if one accepts that terror ‘begins’ as a religious idea (though, perhaps, it would be more accurate to say that terror is one of the many manifestations of religion), it is wrong to equate terrorism in our times with this ‘religious idea’ (in so far as it has remained constant). Indeed, one of the fundamental misinterpretations of contemporary terrorism is to read it as a ‘religious’ phenomenon in the first place.

Contradicting Eagleton’s tendency to illuminate terror through an excavation of past religious, metaphysical, and literary imaginaries, I would argue that these illuminations are potentially useful only to the extent that they can help us to discriminate what is specifically different about the contemporary mindsets of terrorism today. Instead of a continuum between manifestations of terror in the past and present, I would highlight their disjunctions. Therefore, in elaborating on the concept of ‘sacrifice’ (which originally meant ‘to make sacred’), Eagleton makes the important point that not every act of self-destruction in our times – for instance, suicide-bombing – is necessarily sacrificial or transformative (100). This is precisely the kind of discrimination that is needed in thinking about terror today. The myths and concepts of the past, I would emphasize, help us to see the present not because they are being re-lived in an ‘eternal present’, but because they acquire new significances and altered meanings in a simulacrum of what has already passed. It is only by puncturing the counterfeit of similitude that the reality of dissimilitude becomes visible.

One additional problem with Eagleton’s attempt to meld different trajectories of time and culture in reflecting on terror could be the non-reflexive Eurocentric context of his analysis in accounting for ‘the otherness at the core of the self’ (13). This attempt fails not least because Eagleton has no engagement with Islam or Hinduism or, for that matter, any ‘non-Western’ religion, philosophy, or aesthetics. For all his cosmopolitanism, his reading of terror is, in the final analysis, very English. I would argue that if one wishes to present a counter-cultural political imaginary of terror for our times through a reading of, say,
INTRODUCTION

Dionysus's sensual and spiritual force – Eagleton regards Euripides’ charismatic protagonist as one of the ‘earliest terrorist ringleaders’ (3) – it is necessary to invoke other eschatologies and metaphysical frameworks of the divine force. If, for example, I wished to highlight the relationship of terror to the ‘sacred’ as it lives in India today through diverse material, social, religious, and ritual practices, I would necessarily have to reckon with the fact that these practices are not merely textual (as in Eagleton’s literary and philosophical examples presented in Holy Terror) but embodied and fleshed out in actual performances.

To provide just one example from my own home-city of Kolkata, I would invoke, for instance, the complexity and enduring contemporaneity of the goddess Kali, at once terrifying and maternal, who exists in a multitude of figures and forms. Unlike Dionysus, who is, at best, a mythical figure invoked in the Euro-American canon of classical art and literature, Kali is actively worshipped in India today as diverse manifestations of the Divine Mother. Earlier she was invoked as the patron deity of numerous revolutionaries and terrorists during the Swadeshi movement in Bengal at the turn of the last century, and to this day her divine force carries a political legacy from the ancient period through the colonial struggle via the ambivalent articulations of modernity. To invoke Kali as a destructive manifestation of ‘terror’ necessitates an engagement with her power in an affective dimension.

To experience something akin to the force and danger of Kali’s power, one possible site of transformative energy would be the ritual performances of Theyyam in Kerala, where low-caste actors incarnate multiple manifestations of the Divine Mother in the form of ferocious local deities. In spectacular, all-night performances, involving spirit-possession, trance, and worship, these embodiments of energy in raw and yet highly charged ritual contexts are not readily appropriated for academic political purposes. In contrast to the subaltern sacred power of Theyyam, Eagleton’s idea of the ‘sacred’ comes across like an ideologically driven, post-Marxist trope, ultimately yoked to the wish-fulfillment that moribund leftwing politics can be reanimated through ‘metaphysics’. The terror of the sacred, as it is lived and experienced in performances like Theyyam, is made of sterner stuff, and I don’t see Eagleton surviving it.36

If I have dwelt at some length on Eagleton’s attempt to force a relationship between terror and the sacred within the contemporary context of terrorism, it is to highlight why I do not deal with the sacred in this book. Not only does it demand a different conceptual and discursive framework, but, more critically, it cannot be used to explicate the terror of our times. Terrorist global agencies like Al-Qaeda may invoke the language of Holy War, but this is less about the sacred, or even religion, than it is about a particularly perverted form of megalomanical violence and anti-Western hatred. Even as the misappropriation of the sacred by the contemporary phenomenon of terrorism is not part of this book, I have found it necessary to inscribe it in this introduction in order to clarify what this book is not trying to do.
INTRODUCTION

Terror through a literary lens

Neti neti neti (‘not this, not this’ or ‘neither this, nor that’): this philosophical premise found in the Upanishads, among other ancient Sanskrit texts, would seem to be mirrored in my own attempt to understand ‘terror’ through the path of via negativa. While ‘neti neti neti’ has been used at metaphysical levels to account for the Brahman or the divine force, which cannot be adequately described through its positive attributes but only in terms of what it is not, it has also been used by philosophers in the Buddhist school to work against any notion of grounding the meaning of words in a particular essence. Deploying this rhetorical strategy for my own purposes, I find it useful to strategize how this book begins to enter the conceptual orbit of terror by outlining what is not an integral part of its discussion. The exclusions do not amount to a denial of what is less important to the larger discourse of terror; they simply contribute to highlighting what is integral to the argument of this particular book.

With this premise in mind, I feel somewhat more at ease in acknowledging that I am not attempting, for instance, a detailed reading of the aesthetics of terror in this book. Certainly, ‘aesthetics’ figure and resonate in the narrative at several points – for instance, in the debate around the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen’s controversial claim that the destruction of the Twin Towers can be regarded as a magnificent ‘work of art’ (Chapter 1), or in the rhetoric of the ‘beautiful terrorist’ in the Urdu popular press (Chapter 2). These insertions, however, are best read as fragments that punctuate the larger political analysis of terror presented in this book; they cannot be said to constitute a larger reading of the aesthetics of terror replete with a theory of the sublime, which demands the writing of another book.

Nor am I concerned with the literary imaginaries of terror, on the lines indicated by Terry Eagleton, even as their tropes are suggestive and even provocative in pushing the limits of terror beyond the sequestered confines of the social sciences. Keeping this qualification in mind, it is nonetheless useful within the strategic framing of this introduction to address the Indian poet and literary critic Rukmini Bhaya Nair’s book on Poetry in a Time of Terror (2009), which draws heavily on the concept of ‘ambivalence’ from Eagleton. Nair affirms that terror in the literary or poetic mode destabilizes the unitariness of terror as we understand it, via the real world events such as 9/11 – terror as an inexplicable bolt from the blue – by infusing it with ambivalence or interpretability that is the defining character of a literary text.

Countering this position, one could argue against the presumed ‘unitariness’ of events like ‘September 11’ by calling attention to the torrent of contradictory emotions that it has elicited from almost the very moment that it struck consciousness at a global level. Indeed, can it be said to exist in the same way across political locations and constituencies? Questioning the privilege of the
global cosmopolis in which the discourse of terrorism is most eloquently read and explicated, outside the actual killing fields of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan or drug-infested cities like Juárez, Mexico, we need to ask: Are events like ‘September 11’ as omnipresent as they are made out to be? Can one assume their translation and political intelligibility across all cultural contexts? Arguably, even if they do exist for rural and indigenous communities in the cultures of the South, as Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay has suggested through his description of a ‘9/11’-inspired pat, a folk-painting performance practice in rural West Bengal, the task would be to question how global states of emergency get transformed within the struggles of everyday life on the margins of the rural South. If there is a ‘global village’, then how do local languages and forms of cultural expression incorporate and talk back to the Empire, or appropriate its state of emergency for their own material purposes?

This is a large question that extends beyond Nair’s scrupulously honed argument which centres around the premise that ‘terror becomes emotionally available via the literary’. How then, one could argue, is terror perceived in (non-literary/non-literate) everyday life? Is it a spectre drained dry, divested of any emotion, or is its reality simply too horrifying to be processed and transformed into poetry in the first place? Inflecting her own valorization of poetry which ‘offers an ambiguous verbal space in which terror flowers without physical danger but disturbing verisimilitude’, Nair offers an insight into the actual psychophysical immediacy of terror as she imagines its corporeal affect: not through the deadening impact of its lightning-like ‘bolt from the blue’, but through a more tense conflict of sensations.

Unlike the state of horror which encounters terror in the present – beholding it ‘face to face’, eyes bulging, transfixed – terror, in Nair’s imaginary, has an opposite effect: the terrorized victim’s eyes tend to remain “willfully and staunchly shut”. This compels Nair to question what such a ‘deliberate voiding of vision’ could suggest:

To open her eyes would be to behold what is too awful to bear. This is what makes the emotion of terror temporally as well as emotionally ambivalent – the victim at once anticipates the dreaded event, by placing it in the future tense, and knows that it has ‘already happened’, but were she to ‘open her eyes’, her reason tells her that she would see right before her the very thing that she so fears. This is the essential paradox of terror.

Questioning this paradox, I would argue that the problem does not lie in the vacillation between ‘seeing’ and ‘not seeing’ terror; the reality is that we have no other choice but to see and re-see the same images of terror over and over again through their relentless circulation in the media, which does not figure in Nair’s reading at all. Instead of ‘to see or not to see’, the dilemma of our times is compulsive seeing, repetitive seeing, with a vengeance.
With the rampant mediatization of terror on television, cable networks, YouTube, and other electronic sites, we have no other option but to see what the media wants us to see, strategically sanctified by the powerbrokers of terror, through an almost infinite referral to ‘the same images’, which begin to acquire an archetypal power. Along with the usual charge of the ‘deadening impact’ of images, can one totally deny the voyeuristic pleasure derived in the compulsive act of ‘seeing’ terror ad nauseam? A pleasure that is, indeed, terribly ambivalent, in so far as it is both oppressive and yet irresistible. While, arguably, there is no specific visual code or apparatus which enables one to see the terror of our times with global uniformity, our eyes themselves have been subjected to a new phenomenology of reception in which we are more participatory and complicit than ever before in the actual reproduction, interpretation, and circulation of images of terror.

Visual overkill

Precisely because images of terror can no longer be assumed to terrify, the task of theorizing the larger visual culture of terror is a complex undertaking best approached by specialists like W.J.T. Mitchell whose book on Cloning Terror (2011) is a masterful analysis of image production relating the ‘war on terror’ to the simultaneous incursions of biotechnology in the public sphere. If I tend to minimize the analysis of images in this book, it is because I resist the valorization of the ‘visual turn’ in cultural studies, which has been over-determined and consolidated over the years. Even so it would be disingenuous to deny that images hit the eye, capture the imagination, circulate, and serve as reference points for conversations, discussions, gossip, rumour, and propaganda, more readily than words. How many people after all have read the detailed investigative reports on Abu Ghraib? On the other hand, millions have seen the sadistic and torturous acts inflicted on the Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib. While the random access of the Abu Ghraib images at a global level cannot be denied, it is much harder to assess how they are being read and endorsed in the ‘war on terror’. Indeed, how do images of terror get produced in the first place, and does their distribution have any tangible effect on the larger quest for justice and the exposition of truth?

Part of the seduction of the images of terror could lie in the fact that, once exposed in our electronic and digital visual culture, they spread like a virus, stimulating a torrent of interpretations, which, in the final analysis, would seem to take us farther and farther away from the actual political content of the images. Almost with an adrenalin rush, one can get high on visualizing terror. I was witness to one such experiment at the Hebbel-Theater in Berlin, where W.J.T. Mitchell ended his lecture on terror by soliciting responses from the audience to the widely circulated image of all the key members of the Obama team in the White House watching Osama bin Laden killed in ‘real time’.56 I will not go into the many possibilities of reading this image, with
INTRODUCTION

Obama sitting in a corner in shirtsleeves, Hillary Clinton covering her mouth with her hand, the White House staff sitting with solemn expressions, others standing with concentrated attention, everyone's gaze fixed on what cannot be seen.

What stunned me at the Hebbel-Theater event was the virtuosity with which this image was interpreted by members of the audience in an unconscious spirit of hermeneutic one-upmanship, each interpretation outdoing the other in its brilliant, surely-I'm-right reading. While one spectator claimed that the image called to mind the arrival of the Messenger in Greek tragedy, another saw a hydra of heads in the White House office, while a photographer-friend sitting alongside me had no difficulty in claiming that the White House team was 're-living' the moment of the destruction of the Twin Towers. Without undermining the creative intensity of any of these intuitive readings, I would question to what extent these interpretations had any relevance to the actual killing of Osama bin Laden and its virtual witnessing within the sanctum of the White House. Perhaps, what needed to be inserted in the discussion was not just the mise-en-scène of the image itself, but the very deliberate process of its framing, shooting, and ultimate selection by the White House. Indeed, without the green signal from the White House, this particular image could not have been seen in the first place, indicating the monitoring and backstage politics of image-production that demands much closer analysis. Such analysis could open up unfashionable questions relating to the propaganda of state departments in projecting images of power, control, and civility in managing the 'war on terror', in an ostensibly democratic, free-thinking public domain.

Instead of what gets seen – or 'cloned', as Mitchell would argue, in endless variations of the same image – it is what gets invisibilized which should be an equally urgent source of critical concern. The erasure of images in the 'war on terror' is as much a part of its deadly visual culture as the bombardment of specific images in global mediaspace. Following the surfeit of images by which Osama bin Laden was demonized on television and the media, it is telling, indeed, that he has ultimately been whitewashed. Ostensibly for 'security' reasons and on the dubious grounds of honouring basic human 'decency', we have almost no images of the dead Osama, his brain shattered, even as Obama watches the operation leading to his death, intently, and with a look of determined, quiet, controlled concentration, rather like a coach watching the final moments of a ball game. The job is done, the demon allegedly 'buried' in the sea with strict observation of religious rituals (for which there is no evidence), and life goes on at the White House.

Performance/performativity/theatre

At this point the reader of this introduction might justifiably express deep impatience because all I have done in this chapter is to indicate what my book is not focusing on. To recapitulate: I cannot claim to be a 'terror expert' by assuming any expertise in military studies, or war studies, or 'torture studies'.

18
INTRODUCTION

Neither does my book offer a religious studies perspective on issues of the sacred in relation to terror; nor does it provide an elaborate reading on the aesthetics of terror, or a media studies approach to terror. While I have been inspired by the different languages and conceptual approaches of these various disciplines, in the final analysis, I have to tell my story on terror through my own affinities to the language of performance, accessed through the fields of theatre and performance studies, which enable me to see and engage with terror in the first place. More precisely, it is through the rhetoric of performativity that I am able to read terror in relation to its dominant discourses. Let us turn now to these discriminations of ‘theatre’, ‘performance’, and ‘performativity’ by emphasizing that they all play a role in this narrative, at once independently and through strange collusions.

Against the larger spectrum of performances in everyday life, to which the examination of terror in this book is inextricably linked, there is a more narrow, yet familiar, understanding of performance in the theatrical sense as ‘a tangible, bounded event that involves the presentation of rehearsed artistic action’ for a specific audience in a particular time-and-space bound continuum, as in ‘a performance of a play, a dance, or a symphony’. In such a reading of ‘performance’, which is inextricably linked to aspects of ‘acting’, ‘directing’, ‘dancing’, ‘playing’, and all the elements that go into the shaping of a mise-en-scène or choreography or the conducting of a concert, there is a symbiotic linkage of ‘performance’ to the artistic practice of theatre and the performing arts. This understanding of ‘performance’ necessitates a critical engagement with the constituents of training and rehearsal, skill and virtuosity, trained reception and spectatorship.

Tellingly, this book does not focus on theatre through ‘cutting-edge’, masterpiece, ‘out-of-the-box’ productions by tracing the theme of terror through Aeschylus’s Persians, Shakespeare’s Macbeth, Büchner’s Danton’s Death, Brecht’s The Measures Taken, and Dorfman’s Death and the Maiden, to mention just a handful of warhorses representing the Theatre of Terror. Nor am I attempting to inventory avant-garde performance art or visual installations of ‘September 11’ or ‘Abu Ghraib’ or ‘Guantánamo’, to name a few of the notable tropes that exemplify the ‘war on terror’, even though they enter my narrative as performative events in their own right. Far from addressing terror at a purely dramaturgical level of theatrical representation or through the immediacies of the mise-en-scène, this book prioritizes those instances of terror which are unscripted, unplanned, undetermined, and which are nonetheless performed, at times explosively, or, at other times, so unobtrusively that one may not even be aware that terror has already been unleashed.

My reading of ‘performance’ in this book, therefore, is less conditioned by the ‘artistic’ orchestration of a corporeal, ‘live’, rehearsed, time-and-space bound event, framed within the cultural norms of civic institutions like state theatres, than by a much wider understanding of ‘performance’ inextricably linked to social interactions, behaviours, strategies, deceptions, manipulations,
and negotiations of terror in the public sphere. The epistemological thrust of this wide understanding of 'performance' is well captured in the primary definition offered in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, where 'performance' is defined not, as one would expect, in the context of theatrical enactment; rather, it is defined as 'the accomplishment or carrying out of something commanded or undertaken; the doing of an action or operation'. With keywords like 'commanded' and 'doing', it becomes clear that there is nothing nebulous about this 'performance': it is inextricably linked to social action on a specific order and set of instructions.

In this context, there is a close theoretical linkage with the axiomatic assumption made by J.L. Austin in his seminal text on *How to Do Things with Words* (1975), where he challenges the notion that 'language simply “constates” or reports on reality': rather, 'performatives' (Austin's neologism, a noun rather than an adjective) are 'not informational reports, but actions, events, doings. Today, performative utterances are understood to be crucial to the construction of reality, a construction that is sociotechnically *ordered*'.

It is this 'sociotechnical' understanding of 'performance', and its relationship with 'performativity', that enables me to structure and make sense of the evidence on terror presented in this book particularly in dealing with the political and juridical processes relating to post-genocide Rwanda and post-apartheid South Africa addressed at length in Chapter 3. Even as the 'post' in 'post-genocide' and 'post-apartheid' is used more as a shorthand for a description of events following the 'official' ends of genocide and apartheid in Rwanda and South Africa, respectively, the performative analysis of these processes will reveal that the residues and crimes of genocide and apartheid continue to persist and mutate in diverse ways.

Given the predominantly discursive nature of my critical enquiry in dealing with states of transitional justice, where words are catalysts which make acts of terror tangible and significant, I draw on Judith Butler's eminently succinct understanding of 'performativity' as 'the power of discourse to produce what it names'. The discourses of terror, and *against* terror, which are represented in a wide range of registers in this book through the rhetorics of American exceptionalism, Islamophobia, communalism, torture, genocide, truth and reconciliation, and non-violence, are what *make* terror. Instead of merely describing or reporting on the excesses of terror at a purely descriptive level, capitalizing on first-person narratives of excruciating pain and suffering, I am more concerned to understand how terror actually gets implemented through the speech-acts of the state, among other authoritarian and terrorist agencies.

In this regard, one of the most chilling demonstrations of performativity comes from Khallid Sheikh Mohammed, the alleged mastermind of the 'September 11' attack, who in response to George Bush's declaration -- and activation -- of the 'war on terror' declares in his own right: 'we are doing *the same language*'. The fact that performative statements in their very 'uttering' also 'perform a certain action and exercise a binding power', in Butler's
INTRODUCTION

exacting words, is evident on both sides of the terror divide. Bush and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed are both users of 'war as a language' — arguably, a 'common language' that enemies share with each other. In a testimonial, which has been transcribed verbatim, without any grammatical or stylistic corrections, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed says:

I don’t like to kill people. I feel very sorry they been killed kids in 9/11. What will I do? This is the language ... I know American people are torturing us from seventies ... I know they talking about human rights. And I know it is against American constitution, against American laws. But they said, every law, they have exceptions, this is your bad luck you been part of the exception of our laws. They got have something to convince me but we are doing the same language.

A chilling exposition of How to Do Terror with Words, regardless of which side you’re on: Language is not just 'speaking'; it is 'doing', 'torturing', 'killing'.

Needless to say, despite the force of performativity, performance does not disappear even as it becomes necessary to maintain some theoretical distinctions, as Butler so rigorously delineates in her exposition of these terms:

performance as a bounded ‘act’ is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s ‘will’ or ‘choice’; further, what is ‘performed’ works to conceal, if not to disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, unperformable. The reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake.

If ‘performance’, for Butler, is something akin to ‘an act in the here-and-now’, implying ‘a presence ... bounded in the will of the performer’, performativity is fundamentally discursive and always already anticipated and succeeded by the regulatory norms of socially established meaning. And yet, despite Butler’s caution against ‘the reduction of performativity to performance’, she does attempt to suggest a possible permeability of these terms in so far as she makes space for the ‘promising deregulation’ of performance to resist being fully subsumed in ‘the compulsory character of certain social imperatives’. This permeability could be read as a ‘convergence’ as Jon McKenzie suggests, drawing on Butler’s ever so slight hint in this direction. However, I would argue that it is more productively viewed as a tension in the larger context of a queer refusal to submit to norms that define and constrain attempts to trouble regulation through acts of dissidence.

Balancing his role as performance analyst with a mischievous ‘take’ on his own colleagues in performance studies, McKenzie imagines them responding to Butler’s ‘misuse’ of language with consternation – a misuse that he correctly
chooses to read as a 'tactic of resignification, of queering'. In the process, he performs some of the fictional responses of his colleagues: 'Performativity'] is linguistic rather than embodied!'; 'It means normativity as much as subversion!'; 'Could she use another term?'58 Joining the chorus, I cannot deny the temptation on the part of any theatre or performance practitioner to reclaim 'performativity' in favour of a more sensuous embrace of the body's infinitesimal secrets and enigmas, against Butler's arguably non-corporeal, if not anti-visceral, reading of 'the body', which is far too socially constructed. Indeed, I should prepare the reader of this book for a very perceptible tension in my use of the word 'performativity', which is, on the one hand, read as a noun, following the linguistic and discursive models set by Austin and Butler, but, on the other hand, I also use 'performativity' as an adjective in a non-discursive, expressive, histrionic sense, as in 'performativity of energy' or 'performativity dynamics', in describing the actual process and somatic impact of a particular performance.

Is it 'too late to reclaim performativity for the nondiscursive realm of performance', as Diana Taylor (2007) suggests, in her scarcely concealed impatience with the 'false cognates' of 'performativity' and 'performative' for 'performance'?59 My own view is that we may have no other choice at this point in time but to embrace the tensions of 'performance', 'performativity', and 'performative' not least because these categories are so deeply imbricated, both within and beyond performance practice. To seek clear distinctions across the larger terrains of 'performativity' and 'performance', on Butler's terms, is theoretically useful, but only to the extent that the ambivalences, enigmas, and secrets of corporeal performance are not undermined or eliminated.

Against all these theoretically challenging considerations relating to 'performance' and 'performativity', what happens to theatre? Is it of no relevance in explicating the discourses and massive events surrounding terror? If one assumes that theatre appears somewhat archaic in an age of 'virtual war', where weapons designed to kill long-distance with minimal deaths (and unaccounted collateral damage) have become the most deadly 'performers' of our times, it is worth keeping in mind Giorgio Agamben's (2009) deeply insightful reminder on what constitutes the 'contemporary'. For Agamben, the twist in the argument is that only those who perceive 'the indices and signature of the archaic in the most modern and recent can be contemporary'.60 If there is a 'secret affinity' between 'the archaic and the modern', it is not because 'archaic forms' like theatre continue to exercise a 'particular charm' on the present; rather, 'the key to the modern is hidden in the immemorial and the prehistoric'.61 Contemporariness cannot be reduced to a singular relationship 'with one's own time'; on the contrary, the contemporary is more meaningfully grasped through a 'relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism'.62

Theatre, I would argue, should be regarded as precisely this kind of 'disjunction' and 'anachronism' that challenges the hegemonic common sense which assumes that only the language of 'performance' (as defined by performance

22
studies) can legitimately address the terror of our times. This bias is only too evident in John Bell's pitch for 'Performance Studies in an Age of Terror' (2007) which asserts that 'the idea of performance offers concepts, means of analysis and methods of action which can help us figure out where we are and what we ought to do — certainly better than concepts of "art" or "drama" or "theatre". While fully accepting that 'performance' is the broadest and most flexible category available to encompass the multiple acts, actions, reactions, movements, and after-effects of terror recorded in this book, I would not rule out the lurking presence and interruptive power of the languages and concepts of theatre in making sense of the diverse 'performances' of terror.

Circumventing the assumptions of which discipline or field is 'better' than the other, W.B. Worthen has argued against the unproductive dichotomy between 'performance' and 'theatre': 'to define this "new paradigm" [of performance studies] in opposition to theatre studies ... is, finally, to reinscribe performance studies with at least some of the analytical hierarchies its practitioners would contest'. Focusing more minutely on Richard Schechner's opposition between 'reading' and 'doing', the former associated with dramatic literature and a rather narrow understanding of 'the text' as opposed to 'textuality', the latter connected with the contingencies and hands-on practices of engaging with other cultures in all their corporeality and density, Worthen points out that to sustain 'a simple opposition between text and performance is to remain captive to the spectral disciplines of the past'.

What emerges from Worthen's rigorous, yet subtle, position is that reading is an act, a performance in its own right, involving a critical engagement with multiple textualities in all their worldliness. The text is not just a passive or virtual appendage to the 'real' of performance; textuality is even more fluid a category in so far as it can exist only in the state of a text being textured — or, more precisely, performed — in specific ways. Far from upholding the purism of immutable categories stuck in the past, Worthen seizes 'this moment of undisciplined, interdisciplinary flux' to offer the eminently sensible view that 'No simple opposition between text and performance', or the 'paradigms' constituting them, will be sufficient to capture 'the rich, contradictory incommensurable ways that they engage one another'. If anything would qualify as 'archaic' in my view, it would be the rather tired and redundant disciplinary war between 'theatre' and 'performance', as affirmed by their respective academic constituencies in theatre studies and performance studies. Fortunately, through the formative research of many scholars crossing the divide, it is now somewhat more axiomatic to assume that the 'genealogies' of these 'disciplines', as Shannon Jackson has indicated, may be more interwoven and hybridized than their die-hard supporters would care to admit.

Countering academic wars, let us also acknowledge that there are more serious 'wars' deserving our critical attention, like 'the war on terror', and that it is time to forge closer alliances across — and within — each other's disciplines and practices in order to strategize which language is most appropriate for a
particular enquiry in a particular context. If the language of ‘performativity’, for example, tends to be prioritized at particular junctures in this book, it is because of its pertinence in deconstructing the discursivity of official policies and rhetoric relating to, say, ‘forgiveness’ in post-genocide Rwanda or ‘truth and reconciliation’ in post-apartheid South Africa. However, for other sections in my narrative, which are more linked to body behaviours and the habitus underlying particular gestures and improvisations, I have found the language of ‘performance’, as articulated by Richard Schechner, in his much-cited formulation of ‘restored’ or ‘twice-behaved’ behaviour, to be useful in dealing with the repetition of particular performances both within the confines of theatre institutions and in the public domain at large.68

On the one hand, a concept like ‘restoration of behavior’ is particularly effective in dealing with a spectrum of ritual, artistic, and cultural performances across time, which get altered through new technologies and inventions of tradition. But, on the other hand, the epistemology of categories like ‘restoration’ and ‘behaviour’ can run up against huge ethical and political problems when the ‘performance’ in question is linked to specific contexts of genocide and the annihilation of basic human resources and lives. The point is not to undermine the vitality of the concept, but to indicate where and how it resonates with greater intensity in specific contexts as opposed to others. In a broader register, and as a leitmotif that runs through the entire book, I indicate the limits of performance in dealing with the aftermaths of terror, notably the actual deaths resulting from suicide or the killing of religious minorities in a communal atrocity or genocide. Likewise, there are limits to the performativity of social transformative processes built around Truth and Reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa and post-genocide Rwanda. Inevitably, this articulation of the limits of any discourse compels one to acknowledge one’s own unease in finding adequate words or conceptual tools to analyse all aspects of the terror of our times within the same epistemology and methodology of understanding performance.

Along with the capacities of ‘performance’ as a language and a set of tools and practices to illuminate the terror of our times, the practice of ‘theatre’, I would reiterate, continues to be a valuable resource despite its seeming marginality. Theatre’s vocabulary of ‘entrances’, ‘exits’, ‘presence’, ‘energy’, ‘conflict’, ‘transformation’, and ‘repetition’ continues to haunt and catalyze new manifestations of these words. The paradox is that when one least expects it, theatre is always already there. Let me provide a small example here drawn from the formidable fieldwork of international studies scholar James Der Derian, who, without engaging directly with the language of theatre or performance, assumes the role of a virtuoso theorist-performer in his tour de force of a book on Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network (2009a).

Presenting himself as something of a Lone Ranger, Derian infiltrates high-level conferences on security and war, in addition to simulated military war zones

24
INTRODUCTION

within the United States, where the ‘war on terror’, among other earlier wars, is staged and rehearsed in preparation of ‘real’ wars by the US army personnel and military specialists. The chilling ethnography on the ‘theatre of war’ resulting from Derian’s infiltration is nothing short of a bravura performance. Adopting the mode of thick description, he grabs the attention of his readers by exposing the musculature and kinetics of American soldiers re-enacting Rambo, dressed in high-tech, laser-sensitive outfits, accoutered with digital weapons. Their ‘performance’ is symptomatic of a capitulation to a larger ‘military-industrial-media-entertainment network’, as Derian describes it, where the idea of a ‘virtuous war’ is actively rehearsed to test out virtual weaponry and ground fighting tactics in the here and now of make-believe ‘Iraqs’ and ‘Afghanistans’.

In one such experiment, where two groups of marines enact a ‘force-on-force operation’, in which one group’s mission involves the recapturing of an abandoned naval hospital, Derian describes a somewhat ‘eccentric’ scenario, which is worth quoting at length:

The sound of gunfire from the stairway ahead dropped the Bravo company into firing positions, M-16s ready. Just then, a young African-American woman descended the staircase, stepped over the prone marines, and walked out the door. She was dressed in the refugee-slacker look of enemy ‘Country Orange’, but her red jacket and the freeze-frame quality of the movement evoked the girl walking through the grayness of the Jewish ghetto in Schindler’s List. After a long pause and an exchange of befuddled looks, an order was shouted out, and three marines scrambled to their feet to grab her as she left the building. Was she a terrorist, a hostage, or just lost? Adding to the tension – and absurdity – two observers/controllers in colonial pit helmets kept a careful watch from a short distance away. The marines couldn’t tell who or what the young woman was: using some kind of sign language, she appeared to be either deaf, or foreign. Literally dumb-founded, the marines finally let her go. Later, when the battle was over, I spotted her chatting among a group of fellow refugees in the hospital parking lot. I asked her what had happened in the hospital. She laughed, and said that she had been bored and decided on the spot to do some improv.69

For me this moment of ‘improv’ is pure theatre – it is impulsive, irreverent, funny, working against the rules of a choreographed ‘battle’, and totally oblivious to the threat of simulated weaponry. Unlike other high-tech experiments described by Derian, where there are ‘technical fuck-ups’, this impulse to ‘do some improv’ is driven by human agency and creative instinct. The savvy African-American actor counters the possibility of being marked as a ‘terrorist’ or ‘hostage’ by resorting to sign language, leaving her aggressors ‘dumb-founded’.

25
INTRODUCTION

I will resist the temptation to share more such stories from Derian's thoroughly gripping and entertaining journey into 'the war machine', but the point to be made is that even in the most futurist of performative experiments, where one cannot quite figure out the 'real' from the 'simulated', or the 'human' from the 'machinic', there is the subterranean 'archaic' presence of theatre, in Agamben's formulation. It is precisely this 'archaism' which makes the contemporaneity of war games all the more deadly. With this qualification in mind, I would argue that instead of regarding 'theatre', 'performance', and 'performativity' as heuristic and exclusive categories, it is more useful to place them in an interactive context, where there is a certain elasticity in their dynamics, moving in and out, between the personal and the political, the corporeal and the discursive, almost converging at times only to stretch apart at breaking point.

If this book is about terror, it is also about theatre, performance, and performativity, which are the categories, conceptual modalities, and practices that enable me to see, think, and write about terror in the first place. There is no Archimedean perspective on terror which can be examined from any one modality of performance. At a methodological level, therefore, it is necessary to prepare the reader for a certain volatility in my methodology of analysing terror: Chapter 1, which bounces off a production of Jean Genet's The Maids in Manila, within and against the political moment of 'September 11', is almost inevitably coloured by the volatile practice of theatre and its spill-over into the critical and philosophical discourses of 'September 11'. In Chapter 2, I widen my understanding of performances in everyday life within the larger global immediacies of Islamophobia, which impact at local levels in the acts of 'passing' and 'covering' as a Muslim, and of 'queering' the Muslim as 'terrorist'.

As I have mentioned earlier, Chapter 3, on the Truth and Reconciliation process in Rwanda and South Africa, focuses more sharply on the concept of performativity animating political discourse, which draws its analytical logic from Judith Butler's enunciation of 'the power of discourse to produce what it names'. And Chapter 4, on the possibilities of rethinking non-violence in the age of terror, melds together different readings of Gandhi's activist performances and the actual video performances of suicide-bombers presenting their testimonials in front of the camera, among other extremist acts performed by refugees and asylum seekers.

Even within this far too cryptic encapsulation of the entire book, it becomes obvious that the categories of theatre, performance, and performativity cannot be placed in watertight compartments. If, for instance, in Chapter 3, the discourse of Truth and Reconciliation lends itself to being read almost exclusively within the theory of performativity, I have found it unavoidable to juxtapose performativity with the theatricality of the victims' hearings, drawn from my close readings of the rigorous research on Rwanda and South Africa, provided by Ananda Breed (2007, 2008, 2009, 2014) and Catherine Cole (2010), respectively. Indeed, a lot of my 'evidence' on terror in this book is not first-hand, but
INTRODUCTION

drawn from important secondary critical sources, like Arjun Appadurai’s provocateur essay on ‘Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalization’ (1998), which I found necessary to insert in Chapter 2, vis-à-vis my larger reading of the 2002 genocide in Gujarat, where Muslims were marked – and killed – with ‘dead certainty’. Likewise, in Chapter 4, the discourse on ‘just war’ could not have been possible without critical readings of key texts provided by Michael Walzer (2000, 2004) and Talal Asad (2007), which I juxtapose tangentially against Sri Aurobindo’s (1970, 2006) views on anti-fascist resistance in the state of war.

While many of these critical readings of both primary and secondary textual resources can be said to counter the practice-inspired research of Chapter 1, I would emphasize that this is how ‘terror’ has registered for me as a writer: not as one phenomenon demanding a singular approach and methodology, but as a cluster of discourses, affects, sensations, and critical moments of emergency and crisis. While I have responded to these stimulations within my cognitive and hermeneutic capacities – and limitations – as a writer, I do not rule out many other ways in which terror can be performed in the life of the mind.

Dangerous liaisons of terror and performance

Having outlined some of the key theoretical aspects of terror and performance as they impact on the formulation of this book, the actual dynamics and interpenetration of these categories are what constitute the content of the book. Without attempting to spell out how terror and performance interrelate, which I would prefer you to read and interrogate in the course of the book, suffice it to say for the purpose of this introduction that it is the interrelationships between terror and performance that matter to me, and not any illumination of the ontology of terror through a singularized understanding of performance.

My book is specifically entitled Terror and Performance, and not Terror as Performance, for the simple reason that terror itself, to spell out a critical point as bluntly as possible, is not a performance. In my understanding, the performative understanding of terror begins only when one responds to an act of extreme violence, however vulnerably and in a state of acute fear, either through spectatorship or an act of witnessing. Terror can also be performed as one re-lives the act either through an immersion in its representation in the media or, even more precisely, through a critical response to the media and the discourses that have accumulated around the event. The performance of terror, I would emphasize, is built through the accretion of these responses, and not through the act of terror itself, such as the actual demolition of the Twin Towers in Manhattan or the genocide of ethnic communities or minorities in Rwanda and Gujarat. To regard the involuntary deaths of victims as performances in their own right raises troubling issues around the agency, if not the privilege, to name ‘performance’ in the first place. As I will demonstrate at
INTRODUCTION

different points in the book, there are complex ethical issues relating to the
equation of death with performance, which compel one to be wary about
reducing acts of terror to spectacles and images, decontextualized from those
who are killed or liquidated in the activation of terror.

Even as I question the ethics of naming acts of extreme violence as perform-
amance, I could be justifiably asked: Why do I engage with performance at all? As
one of my most astute readers, the philosopher Sundar Sarukkai, has asked
me, ‘What work does “performance” do? What does it reveal about terror that
other analyses – such as the psychological, social, political, and economic –
cannot do?’ To these robust and pertinent questions, I would say, first of all,
that ‘performance’ does not have to work independently of the psychological,
the social, the political, and the economic dimensions of any analysis of terror.
Performance has a capacity to synthesize these different domains of enquiry
within its specific synaesthetic capacities of incorporating ideas and realities.
Second, if I had to specify some key concepts and modalities of analysis that
are distinctive to performance, I would say that its capacities of ‘embodiment’,
‘affect’, ‘corporeality’, ‘kinesthetics’, and ‘reflexivity’ are more palpable than
what is found in the social sciences, enabling a different kind of analysis of
terror from what is available in political or economic theory.

Having made this qualification, I would be reluctant to claim that this difference
amounts to being somehow more ‘enlightened’ or ‘perceptive’ or ‘creative’ about
terror. Rather, as my own dependence on the social sciences in engaging with
the realities of communalism, genocide, truth and reconciliation, and the law
will become only too evident in the course of reading this book, it is perhaps
more productive to ask not what one discipline can do at the expense of the
others, but, rather, what kind of discourse can be arrived at through a dialogic
process of interweaving disciplines at their very limits. Therefore, in response
to Sarukkai’s question, ‘What work does “performance” do?’, I would reiterate
one of Brecht’s favourite maxims by affirming that ‘The proof of the pudding is in
the eating’. I can only hope that the readers of this book will find at least some
insights into the phenomenon of terror through the language of performance that
they might not have realized from other disciplines.

Narrative plays a key role here. It is not just the elaboration of concepts that
facilitates a performative reading of terror, but the ways in which these
concepts are juxtaposed and embodied within a counterpoint of autobiography,
testimony, and anecdote, which constitutes a ‘performance’ in its own right. In
the narrative of this book, terror and performance share an intimate spectrum
of relationships, which are not fully determined until their specific circuits of
energy are brought into contact. These points of ‘contact’ have the potential to
ignite suddenly and abruptly, without any adequate cognizance or preparation
on our part as readers. In this volatile state, terror and performance share
what could be described as dangerous liaisons – not one tryst with the
unknown and the diabolical, but a series of compulsive relationships, which
disintegrate only to re-ignite in even more devious ways.
INTRODUCTION

Within the dark and secret intimacies of dangerous liaisons, it would be disingenuous to regard terror and performance as oppositional categories. In other words, I do not assume that performance provides some kind of intrinsic wholesomeness or liberatory potentiality that can serve as a counter to the demons of terror and terrorism in our times. I cannot claim to have written a ‘feel-good’ narrative which provides the false hope that by doing theatre and engaging with performance the world at large will be a somewhat safer and saner place. Rather, in response to the increasingly deviant ways by which terror gets performed, not only by human agencies, but through cyber warfare or bioterrorism, it becomes hard to keep up with the ways in which the performance of terror outwits the existing surveillance systems, which are manifestations of terror in their own right.

Even as I may acknowledge that almost all the practitioners of theatre and performance represented in this book, both voluntary and involuntary, are well-intentioned, in so far as they would like to find ways of resisting violence, or healing wounds, or getting on with life beyond the trauma of terror or genocide, the reality is that these intentions cannot be assumed to result in positive actions or consequences. More often than not, they can backfire, or, worse, they can be attacked, or implode from within. While it would be hard to affirm at an axiomatic level that there is a terrorist potentiality within all performances – one would need to specify which performances are under consideration, and by whom, and how they are performed in specific circumstances – I would not close the possibility of some performances by governments or prison authorities or the judiciary from feeding the narratives of terror, or cashing in on its destructive power in opportunistic and parasitic ways.

At times these performances can backfire as, for instance, when anti-terror rescue missions by state agencies become terrorist operations in their own right. One of the most chilling examples of this volte-face can be detected in the raid of the Dubrovsk Theatre in Moscow in October 2002 by the Russian state police, following the disruption of a high-tech Broadway-like musical when the entire audience was taken hostage by Chechen rebels. Tellingly, it was not the Chechens who killed the spectators, thereby affirming their status as ‘terrorists’; rather, it was a poisonous gas pumped into the theatre by the Russian militia which resulted in the deaths of a majority of the hostages, many of whom choked to death on their own vomit. Worse, the police and its benefactors in the upper echelons of the state refused to divulge the identity of the gas, thereby preventing doctors from using the appropriate antidote to counter its pernicious effects on the survivors. At all costs, state secrets needed to remain secret even as people died in agony, compelling the philosopher Roberto Esposito to acknowledge that faced with ‘the question of the survival of human beings suspended between life and death’, the state inevitably resorts to a brutal final solution: ‘To keep [citizens] alive at all costs, one can even decide to hasten their death’.70
INTRODUCTION

By not elaborating at length on such events like the terrorist attack on the Dubrovskka Theatre, and reducing it in the process to a mere 'example', however illuminating of terror, I am only too aware that my book has some glaring elisions and omissions. All that I can say in defence is that I am not attempting to provide an exhaustive or synoptic perspective on global terror through the lens of performance; rather, all I have tried to do is to open up some of the enigmatic and troubling relationships between terror and performance through specific case-studies, experiments, and improvisations in everyday life. Tellingly, when I started the book fired by the radical politics of Jean Genet, I had no idea that Gandhi would figure so forcefully in the last chapter, but such are the unexpected surprises in reflecting on terror, which is the task that I have set myself to do. Far from surrendering to the dictates of a manifesto or a polemic against terrorism, I have attempted to reflect on terror, which is not just a difficult task, but also one that risks coming across as an indulgent intellectual exercise. Besides, does terror lend itself to reflection?

A necessary clarification: If my narrative engages with terror in diverse geographical locations, it is not because I had any particular desire to be 'comprehensive', but because the specific instances of terror in relation to theatre, performance, and performativity addressed in this book through 'minor' and 'major' events in the United States, Philippines, India, Rwanda, South Africa, Palestine, and Australia have compelled me to think through terror in specific ways. The focus on these critical instances is not meant to imply that terror does not exist in other parts of the world; nor should my concentration on these specific manifestations of terror indicate that they are somehow more lethal or tragic in their implications than their counterparts elsewhere. Such comparative assessments of terror are in poor taste, not unlike the politics that are played around grief and loss, whereby hierarchies are set up in which the grief and loss of some people is somehow worth more (or less) than the grief and loss of others. Avoiding the pitfalls of comparativism, which is best negotiated by 'terror experts' committed to a regular stock-taking of terror in different parts of the world, I prefer to think from the ground up, through local densities which provoke a concatenation of thoughts – disjunctive, processual, and, at times, deliberately left unprocessed and unfinished. To provide an 'ending' to the terror of our times would be a hopelessly optimistic gesture.

Finally, I would acknowledge that writing on terror is a hazardous exercise not only because it is always on the verge of breaking down under the sheer pressure of conflicting discourses; rather, it also has the potentiality of blowing up in your face. Therefore, the statutory warning accompanying any such narrative should be 'Handle with Care'. Like the task of assembling the components of a bomb, all the wires deftly and neatly interwoven without touching, the writing of terror requires as much vigilance and subtlety as the reading of its narrative. With these preliminary comments, let me hand over the book to you for your critical attention, hoping that your collaboration in the act of reading will enable us to think through terror together.