

# Neo-Orientalism and the Poetics of Insecurity in *Bodyguard*

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## Abstract

By examining how securitisation, racialisation and classism intersect in Neo-Orientalist representations of the Islamicate Other, this article shows that the discursive formations of security and difference are inextricably linked – and that they can only be understood in conjunction with questions of inequality. Through an analysis of the widely received BBC mini-series *Bodyguard* (2018), this article does not only illustrate what function a Neo-Orientalist poetics of insecurity fulfils in neoliberal societies, it also argues that aestheticised and racialised security discourse is complicit in refracting systemic problems into questions of ‘culture’ (or ‘civilisation’). As such aestheticised and racialised security discourse projects insecurities triggered by social inequality into reductionist figurations of the dangerous Other, it breaks down sociopolitical and socioeconomic complexities into a decidedly Western-centric and ahistorical logic. Not only is a racialised poetics of insecurity thus complicit in masking pressing systemic problems, but – what is more – it normalises the existential insecurity of its gendered and racialised Others.

The bearded bomber, the burka’ed woman (cf. Morey/Yaqin 2011, pp. 2–3), the jihadi bride, the sexually aggressive Muslim refugee (cf. Dietze 2018, p. 226), the radicalised Islamist criminal or the Islamist rage boy – these are only some epitomes of Neo-Orientalism widely circulated in the media. In a very condensed form, such reductionist figurations starkly illustrate a more general tendency: in Western political and media discourse, people from an Islamicate background are often sweepingly framed as a threat.<sup>1</sup> Not only are they frequently stylised as undermining Western liberal-democratic values (cf. Morey/Yaqin 2011, p. 1), but – especially since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 – they have mainly been portrayed in terms of danger, terrorism, fanaticism and Islamism (cf. El-Sayed El-Aswad 2012, p. 39). In view of such predominantly negative figurations and framings, it seems hardly surprising that topics declared as ‘Muslim’

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1 When using expressions such as Western/the West, the Orient, bearded bomber, burka’ed woman, jihadi bride and so on, I refer to such social constructs, representational structures and figurations, not to any specific geographical regions or people. For reasons of better readability, however, I do not use scare quotes.

evoke associations of backwardness, gender inequality, violence or danger, and that they cause concern in great parts of the so-called majority society. Due to this bias, however, what goes mostly unmentioned is that those who are represented as an alleged source of danger are far from being secure themselves (cf. Botha 2016, p. 783). In fact, and as illustrated by anti-Muslim attacks such as in Quebec City, Christchurch and Hanau, they increasingly become the target of hate and violence themselves (cf. Human Rights Council 2021, pp. 13–15). While Muslims or supposed Muslims are thus often presented as the dangerous Other, the existential insecurity from which they suffer frequently falls through the cracks of a Eurocentric and classist concept of security.

By examining how securitisation, racialisation, sexism and classism intersect in Neo-Orientalist representations of the Islamicate Other, this article shows that the discursive formations of security and difference are inextricably linked – and that they can only be understood in conjunction with questions of inequality. Through an analysis of the widely received BBC mini-series *Bodyguard* (2018), this article illustrates what function a Neo-Orientalist poetics of insecurity<sup>2</sup> fulfils in neoliberal societies. It argues that aestheticised and racialised security discourse is complicit in refracting systemic problems into questions of ‘culture’ (or ‘civilisation’). As such aestheticised and racialised security discourse projects insecurities triggered by social inequality into reductionist figurations of the dangerous Other, it breaks down socio-political and socio-economic complexities into a decidedly Western-centric and ahistorical logic. Not only is a racialised poetics of insecurity thus complicit in masking pressing systemic problems, but – what is more – it normalises the existential insecurity of its gendered and racialised Others.

### *Neo-Orientalism and Insecurity*

Neo-Orientalism is a gendered, racialised and classist system of representation and knowledge production which is complicit in translating global inequalities into affective, ahistorical, homogenising and marketable

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2 In his book *The Poetics of Insecurity: American Fiction and the Uses of Threat*, Johannes Voelz (2018) also uses the expression “poetics of insecurity”. However, while Voelz’ study conceptualises vulnerability as “a prized resource for the imagination” (188), this article focuses on the discriminatory dimensions of neoliberal security discourse as well as on the precarity which it exacerbates or engenders.

projections of the allegedly backward and dangerous Islamicate Other.<sup>3</sup> While also continuing to draw on established stereotypes and country-specific forms of Orientalist representation, Neo-Orientalism has found a transnational common denominator in its strong focus on securitising the Islamicate world – that is, on presenting people from an Islamicate background as an existential threat to Western security, freedom and identity (cf. Morey/Yaqin 2011, p. 1). Although figurations of the dangerous Muslim have a long-established tradition (see for instance Kabbani 2008, pp. 35–40), Neo-Orientalism has not only revived, but also reinforced and refocused the securitised dimension of Orientalism (cf. Said 1978/2003; Amin Khan 2012, pp. 1595–1610). After a long phase in which the Islamicate Other was constructed mainly as a foil in Western colonial identity discourse, frames and figurations of threat have proliferated since the end of the twentieth century. Especially in the wake of the oil and Iranian hostage crises in the 1970s, after the end of the Cold War and – in particular – after the September 11 attacks, representations of the danger which allegedly emanates from the Islamicate Other and jeopardises the so-called Western way of life have become prominent (cf. Mutman 2019, p. 256; Samiei 2010, p. 1152). Following the latest tectonic shifts associated with the Middle East and North Africa region – that is, the Arab uprisings and the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State as well as after the terrorist attacks in several Western cities and migration movements – this securitised dimension of Neo-Orientalism has gained further momentum.

In its sharper and at times almost exclusive focus on the danger allegedly emanating from the Islamicate Other – who, in a process of full identification, is often reduced to their religion (cf. Maani 2017; Biskamp 2016, p. 63) – Neo-Orientalism does not only differ from its predecessor in geographical and topical scope (cf. Altwaiji 2014, p. 313), but it also fulfils a different discursive function. While in its increased attention to the Arab and Islamicate world, Neo-Orientalism is narrower in geographical scope than Orientalism, it simultaneously serves as a transnational discourse. This transnational discourse is no longer propounded by Western Orientalists only, but it can also be found in the writing of “Middle Eastern women and men who use their native subjectivity and newfound agency in the West to render otherwise biased accounts of the region seemly

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3 For other definitions of Neo-Orientalism which appeared prior to this one or have been published after the time of writing, see for instance Behdad/Juliet Williams 2010; Malreddy 2012; Morey 2019, p. 270.

more authoritative and objective” (Behdad/Williams 2010, pp. 284–285).<sup>4</sup> If the geographical focus of Neo-Orientalism is thus clearly influenced by neo-imperial processes of globalisation, the same holds true for its discursive function. By presenting the Islamicate Other mainly as a threat to the West, Neo-Orientalism simplifies neo-imperial complexities according to its own hegemonic interests – and it projects the very insecurities which stem from the increasingly unstable political and economic conditions of Western countries into a fear of the Other. Thereby refracting the psychosocial consequences of neoliberalism into the allegedly problematic Other, Neo-Orientalism serves as a neoliberal proxy discourse. In this way, Neo-Orientalist representations do not only conceal the causes of widespread feelings of insecurity. What is more, as they are both informed by and involved in informing anti-Muslim racism, ethnosexism and securitisation, Neo-Orientalist representations endanger those whom they present as a danger.

#### *Security – Or, Without a Care in the World*

In view of the considerable intersection of Western discourses of insecurity and debates about Islam, claiming that Islam has become a politicised issue is an understatement (see for instance Edmunds 2012, pp. 67–84). Rather, it is a case of instrumentalised fear let loose – or of securitisation, as this process is called in International Relations and Security Studies. Securitisation is an extreme form of politicisation used to justify extraordinary measures in the name of security (cf. Buzan et al. 1998). As a constructivist concept, securitisation – instead of focusing on concrete givens or the allegedly objective existence of imminent danger – describes the ways in which matters are successfully declared as existential threats (ibid, p. 32). First developed by the Copenhagen School around Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, the concept of securitisation attracted great attention when it was introduced in 1998. Especially since the end of the Cold War and the start of the so-called War on Terror, “interest in how political elites and other actors construct security threats and justify coercive measures abroad and at home” (Watson 2012, p. 279) has grown substantially. The concept of securitisation has continued to provide the theoretical underpinnings to many of these discussions up to today.

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4 Lisa Lau (2009) calls this form of Orientalism “Re-Orientalism”.

Despite this strong interest in matters of security, however, most Western discussions of security remain limited to hegemonic and ahistorical analyses of a defence against terrorism and immigration (cf. Barkawi/Laffey 2006, p. 329).<sup>5</sup> In fact, most approaches to security – which, etymologically speaking, derives from Old French “*securité*” or Latin “*securitas*” (*sine cura*) and means “without care” (cf. Security; Agamben 2015) – focus on the security of the few while not caring about “most of the world” (Chatterjee 2004). Although it treats security as a universal category (cf. Laffey/Nadarajah 2016, p. 123), Security Studies relies “on histories and geographies which reproduce Eurocentric conceptions of world politics” (Barkawi/Laffey 2006, p. 331) and follows the “‘Westphalian commonsense’ of IR as a discipline” (Laffey/Nadarajah 2016, p. 128). Having emerged in the greater context of colonial expansion, Security Studies consequently fails to account for phenomena which transcend its own imperial epistemology:

“[t]he taken-for-granted historical geographies that underpin security studies systematically misrepresent the role of the global South in security relations and lead to a distorted view of Europe and the West in world politics. [...] The politics of Eurocentric security studies, those of the powerful, prevent adequate understanding of the nature or legitimacy of the armed resistance of the weak” (Barkawi/Laffey 2006, p. 331).

Not only does Security Studies thus misrepresent postcolonial experiences (cf. Laffey/Nadarajah 2016, p. 123), but – as the concept of security relies on the construction of difference through racialisation and gendering – the concept itself is “inherently gendered and racialized” (Stachowitsch/Sachseder 2019, p. 110). Therefore, both from a feminist and “a postcolonial perspective, conventional understandings of security, even critical ones, are problematic” (Laffey/Nadarajah 2016, p. 123).

In addition to this blind spot regarding its own role in the creation of racialised and gendered difference, Security Studies also mostly ignores the implications of security in its socio-economic sense. Without the ongoing profound changes in the economy of insecurity, however, the functions of securitisation are hard to fathom. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, “an era that has been marked by the US-led war on terror and the emergence of security as the *raison d'état*” (Morton/Bygrave 2008,

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5 For further critiques of the hegemonic bias and blind spots in the process of securitisation, see also: Bertrand 2018; Hansen 2000.

p. 1), security has become the dominant political principle. According to Giorgio Agamben (2015), it has become so established in Western political discourse that security reasons have replaced reasons of State.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, security nowadays features mainly as a visible absence: in the modern-day security state, the relationship between fear and the state as famously described by Thomas Hobbes in his social contract theory has been reversed. Hobbes designates the state as the instance which ends the state of nature, that is, a situation characterised by fear and the war of all against all. The state, to that effect, is the only option with which to achieve security. In the present day, however, because fear functions as its prime legitimation, the state has a vital interest in upholding a permanent sense of insecurity. It does so, for instance, by means of declaring a state of emergency or, more generally, by the securitisation of certain collective identities. The aim of these measures is not to increase security but, in contrast, to instrumentalise fear in a way which benefits the government (cf. Bauman 2016, pp. 17–18).

Thus harnessing fear, the security state does not only instrumentalise insecurity – it exacerbates the insecurity both of those whom it pretends to protect and of those who are securitised. In fact, albeit paradoxical at first sight, the security state’s reaction to perceived external threats to so-called Western values often consists of a progressive internal erosion and self-restriction of the very democratic liberties purportedly endangered by the perilous Other. While full-body scanners, video surveillance or telecommunications data retention are examples of how the logic of the security state operates at the cost of civil liberties and rights, the case of France illustrates how considerable elements of its emergency measures – such as the “near absence of the judiciary and the lack of tangible evidence required in police decision-making” (Chassany 2017) – have been transformed into ordinary law. In the name of security, the security state thus endangers civil liberties such as the presumption of innocence. At the same time, it neglects other, less readily instrumentalised and less easily solvable potential risks such as climate change or the risk of a nuclear disaster (cf. Beck 1986, p. 9). In short, infringing on civil rights while ignoring other potential risks, the security state does the opposite of what it promises to do – and capitalises on it (cf. Agamben 2015).

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<sup>6</sup> The following line of thought is also by Agamben (2015).

In this economy of insecurity, securitisation functions as a

“conjurer’s trick, calculated to be just that; it consists in shifting anxiety from problems that governments are incapable of handling (or are not keen on trying to handle) to problems that governments can be seen – daily and on thousands of screens – to be eagerly and (sometimes) successfully tackling” (Bauman 2016, p. 30).

In particular, securitisation often serves to project fears stemming from internal systemic problems onto the allegedly problematic and dangerous Other. In the so-called refugee crisis (German *Flüchtlingskrise*) in 2015, this translation of fear became particularly visible. According to Zygmunt Bauman,

“[c]apitalizing on the anxiety caused by the influx of strangers – who, it is feared, will push down further the wages and the salaries that already refuse to grow, and lengthen yet more the already abominably long queues of people lining up (to no effect) for the stubbornly scarce jobs – is a temptation which very few politicians already in office, or aspiring to an office, would be able to resist” (Bauman 2016, pp. 17–18).

Transforming the fear of social decline into figurations of the securitised Other, the securitisation of refugees illustrates how an economy of insecurity is created in which the framing of Islamicate alterity as threatening the population both from without and from within facilitates “the production of a biopolitical body” (Agamben 1998, p. 6). While ignoring the extreme distress of those whom it excludes from the realm of security, the production of this biopolitical body can then be instrumentalised in culturalising discourse about the alleged clash of civilisations.

In societies inwardly torn by inequality, such culturalising discourse serves to create appearances of social cohesion. As especially in societies without much socio-economic justice and security in its wider – social – sense,<sup>7</sup> one deprived group can easily be played off against the other, culturalising discourse can be used as a means of delineating alleged ‘core cultures’ against the foil of the Other. Ambalavaner Sivanandan calls this kind of entanglement “xenoracism”, that is a kind of racism which is no longer merely “colour-coded”, and which

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7 For the relationship between fear and social status, see for instance Bude 2015; Nachtwey 2016.

“is not just directed at those with darker skins, from the former colonial territories, but at the newer categories of the displaced, the dispossessed and the uprooted, who are beating at western Europe’s doors, the Europe that helped to displace them in the first place” (Sivanandan 2001, p. 2).<sup>8</sup>

In the greater context of the neoliberal system, securitisation thus is not only attendant on a pronounced emphasis on identity politics, which activates diversity as an economic resource while obfuscating inequality (Michaels 2011), but it also relies on a pronounced Othering. Projected onto the Other, the reasons for well-founded fears of social decline are consequently left unchanged. As a result, the insecurity of those most affected by social inequality is exacerbated, and – what is more and as the rise in anti-Muslim racism illustrates – the processes of Othering and racialisation on which securitisation relies endanger those who are construed as a threat.

### *Bodyguard and the Gamble with Fear*

One particularly popular fictionalisation – and instrumentalisation – of the intricate Neo-Orientalist intersection of identity, insecurity and inequality discussed above is the BBC mini-series *Bodyguard* (2018). Consisting of six episodes, *Bodyguard* is set in 2018. Its protagonist, the series’ eponymous bodyguard, is David Budd. David is a British war veteran who conceals his post-traumatic stress disorder in order to keep his job as a Police Sergeant. After he foils a terrorist attack on a train heading toward London, he is reassigned as the bodyguard of the Home Secretary Julia Montague – an ambitious politician who has not only consistently voted in favour of British military action in Iraq and Afghanistan, but whose plans to infringe on civil liberties by updating the British Surveillance Act spark strong protest.

What makes *Bodyguard* such an interesting case study when considering what role a Neo-Orientalist poetics of insecurity plays in disseminating a Western-centric, classist and gendered notion of security in mainstream society is both the series’ widespread but ambivalent reception and its dual stance on securitisation. Written by Jed Mercurio, *Bodyguard* achieved record viewing numbers and was nominated for numerous awards (cf.

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8 See also: Yamaguchi 2012, p. 248.



Bodyguard: Awards). Its main actor, Richard Madden, won the Golden Globe Award for Best Actor (cf. Golden Globe Awards 2019). While the series thus gained critical acclaim – amongst others by an institution which is notorious for its own hegemonic conduct (cf. Lee 2021) –, it also faced charges of Islamophobia (cf. Nazeer 2018). This mixed reception can be attributed to the series' dual approach to securitisation. Whereas the series' main plot critically portrays the – in particular, classist – instrumentalisation of fear in the economy of insecurity, *Bodyguard* at the same time has recourse to a highly gendered Neo-Orientalist poetics of insecurity itself, especially in its frame story.

Directly addressing the viewer at the affective level by means of its soundtrack and contrasting visual dimension, this frame story foregrounds the material dimension of terrorism. It opens with David Budd, who is on a train heading to London with his two children. In the first minute of the series, David, likely to win the viewer's sympathy, is indirectly characterised as a loving father. Then, a man whom David – through the train window – sees throwing away a mobile phone at the train station arouses the protagonist's suspicion. At that moment, the film score begins. Mostly abstaining from Orientalising tension, the film score in this scene translates David's suspicion of the man into a musical tension which results from the dissonant clustering of long notes. When David's suspicion is confirmed and he learns that there is a terrorist threat, he intervenes. However, instead of the man from the train station, David finds the man's wife, Nadia Ali, wearing a suicide vest inside the train toilet. David, blue-eyed and broad-shouldered, manages to dissuade the frail and frightened-looking Nadia from detonating the bomb. He saves her from being shot by the police and promises her protection from her husband, who David assumes to have pressured his wife into perpetrating the attack: "You don't want to do this. You don't look like you do" (S1.E1; 9:55–10:00) and "you're being brainwashed" (ibid, 13:31–13:32). (fig. 1)

So as to conclude the tense opening sequence, this depiction of how David saves both Nadia and the entire train resorts to naturalised frames as an ambivalent means of resolving acute suspense while at the same time upholding a more general sense of danger. In its contrasting visual language, the scene relies on a pattern which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously describes as "[w]hite men [...] saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 1994, p. 92). The scene thereby caters to ethno-sexist and anti-Muslim stereotypes about oppressive Muslim husbands and their victimised wives whose gender roles pose a threat to 'Western liberal values'. While Nadia is thus introduced as a victim who appears to be in need of

saving from her husband, she is then relegated to the background of the main plot.



Fig. 1: Still from *Bodyguard* (2018, S1.E1; 16:30)

Against the backdrop of several other terrorist attacks, this main plot focuses on the discursivity of security discourse; in particular, it concentrates on the increasing political instrumentalisation of these attacks and the concomitant media response. To highlight the role of the media in the negotiation of security, but also to create an effect of reality and to provide the viewer with the necessary background information on the Home Secretary's politics, the series relies on a constant modulation between direct depictions of Julia, the Home Secretary, as a person and her representation in various media. For instance, after Julia is introduced through different media only, her professional demeanour is quickly contrasted by her first appearance in person. This first appearance depicts her as an arrogant and cold-blooded employer who treats her employees without any respect. Moreover, while voice-over media snippets allude to Julia's plans to enhance surveillance powers by updating the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) – an agenda with the potential of dividing the government – her appearance on Andrew Marr's talk show (featuring a cameo of Marr himself) merges the different diegetic levels and media filters which constitute Julia's representation. Through the pronounced use of *mise en abyme* which captures the filming of the talk show, this scene illustrates how intertwined these representational levels are. In addition, with regard to content, this scene presents the different stances on how to handle issues of security. Not only does Julia's discussion with Andrew Marr explicate

her own stance on national security, but it also includes a critique of her plans of monitoring communication channels without judicial review.

Furthermore, by also depicting David's physical reactions while watching the interview, *Bodyguard* contrasts Julia's security discourse with its concrete consequences. While David's disapproval of Julia's policies is already visualised during the recording of the talk show, it becomes even more obvious when he re-watches the interview in his bleak apartment, where – as a result of his post-traumatic stress disorder – he lives separated from his wife and children. On loop, he re-watches how, asked about the lessons to be learnt from Afghanistan and Iraq, Julia stresses that building a secure future “doesn't require apologising for the past” (S1.E1; 39:20–22) – an answer which, voiced over, continues to haunt David on his way to work the next morning. Thus juxtaposing Julia's rhetoric with David's continuing suffering from his experiences in Afghanistan, this scene does not only allude to Julia's ahistorical view of security, but it also prepares the series' critique of a concept of security which follows the lines of class.

Before *Bodyguard* begins to demonstrate the discriminatory dimensions inherent in the concept of security, the series focuses on how those in power instrumentalise the state of emergency after the terrorist attacks. To highlight how Julia uses securitisation as an instrument of power, various scenes give a voice to different people accusing Julia of exploiting the issue of counterterrorism to “heighten fear, to destroy debate and to seize power” (S1.E1; 51:30–35). Interestingly, however, all of those who voice their criticism of Julia's securitising politics have privileged and self-interested positions themselves. So although, as the main story unfolds, Julia indeed builds her bid for leadership on security discourse, she herself also becomes the target of not just an Islamist attack, but also of an internal scheme. In the economy of insecurity which *Bodyguard* depicts, security is consequently a scarce commodity which is threatened not only by Islamist terrorism, but by a dangerous internal gamble with fear: besides the terrorist threat, the series presents both the instrumentalisation of security and a corrupt leak in the state's own security apparatus as the potentially most substantial security risks. Thus demonstrating how various factions capitalise on fear, *Bodyguard* does not only foreground the ulterior motives which often inform security discourse, but it also shows how such a gamble with fear in fact exacerbates the insecurity which the elite pretend to alleviate.

In this self-reflexive approach to securitisation, the main story uses the character of Andy Apsted as a mouthpiece for an explicit critique of a discriminatory concept of security. A friend of David's and the leader of a “Veterans' Peace Group”, Andy argues that it is politicians who inflict

suffering on the poor and powerless. Not only does he condemn how the dynamics behind terrorism are systematically ignored by those in power, he also criticises the instrumentalisation and the classist dimension of security. For instance, against the backdrop of a TV appearance by Julia, he voices the opinion that the Home Secretary exploits the situation for her own interests while ignoring the dangers which this gamble with fear engenders for others:

Andy: “They’re [the politicians] in it for themselves, they couldn’t give a shit about a bloke like you that takes the risks. You’re the mug that suffers the consequences. How do you reckon she’d feel if she got a taste?”

David: “Taste of what?”

Andy: “Suffering the consequences”. (S1.E2, 21:24–45)

Even if Andy’s critique of the discrimination inherent in the ruling elite’s security discourse is the most convincing contrast to Julia’s opportunistic instrumentalisation of security, the portrayal of his subsequent actions undermines his explicit criticism. Shortly after Andy’s conversation with David, Andy tries to kill Julia in a sniper attack. David manages to protect Julia, who suffers a shock but survives the attack. Her driver, however, is killed and Andy commits suicide. At the level of content, the outcome of this attack thus mirrors the intersection of security and class. In contrast, at the representational level, the real-time, the explicitness and focalisation which the scene uses prioritise Julia’s perspective. As a consequence, although the strategy of granting Andy’s criticism representational space before he attacks Julia could be seen as the series’ attempt to depict terrorist acts not as merely irrational (cf. Boehmer/Morton 2010, p. 7), but to also provide a rationale behind the use of violence as a means of the powerless to stop the powerful, the horror of violence which this scene foregrounds curtails the viewer’s understanding for Andy’s previous statements.

In a typical neoliberal move, Julia, having survived the attack, further capitalises on issues of insecurity by incorporating Andy’s concerns about the classist concept of security into her own argumentation. When she delivers a speech at St. Matthew’s College, she does not only argue that terrorism constitutes the greatest threat since the Cold War, but she also links her bid for leadership to both the issue of home-grown terrorism and to economic prosperity. Shortly before her speech reaches its climax, however, Julia is killed in what later turns out to be an Islamist bombing. Interrupting her mid-sentence, the bomb detonates exactly after Julia utters the words “Together, we ...”. Thereby, it does not only drown her

instrumentalisation of security with a bomb blast, but it also delimits the inwardly torn “we” against the foil of an external threat:

“Frankly, we’ve got to do a better job of stopping a 15-year-old thinking that growing up in Bradford or Birmingham is grimmer than Jihad. And we can only change their minds with the right leadership. [...] Security isn’t just about guarding our citizens from security threats. Security comes from economic prosperity and good education, good jobs. Together, we ...” (S1.E3, 50:21–51:16)

### *Insecurity and Ambivalence*

Because of its critical focus on the neoliberal gamble with fear within British politics – and in particular on its classist dimension – *Bodyguard* could be seen as a self-reflexive critique of securitisation and its socio-political functions – were it not for its frame story which subordinates this self-reflexive critique to a reductionist Othering of the sources of terror. Having been reduced to the highly gendered stereotype of the oppressed Muslim woman without any agency, Nadia, the suicide bomber from the first episode, comes to the fore again in the last of the six episodes of the series. When during an interrogation, Nadia is asked whether she is just a victim, she confronts not only the other characters, but also the viewer with their stereotypes about victimised Muslim women. Completely changing her demeanour, Nadia proudly admits that she was both the mastermind behind the attacks and the engineer who built the very elaborate bombs: “You all saw me as a poor, oppressed Muslim woman. I am an engineer. I am a jihadi”. (E1.E6; 1:08:00–1:08:09) (fig. 2)

So although Nadia’s depiction confounds both the stereotype of the oppressed Muslim woman, whose gender role poses a threat to ‘Western liberal values’, and the figuration of the ‘jihadi bride’ who, without any agency of her own, does her husband’s bidding, it only does so by resorting to another stereotype – that is, that of the duplicitous female Islamist terrorist. While the alleged subversion in Nadia’s depiction consequently switches – without any modulation – from one reductionist figuration to the next, Nadia thus always remains the “utter Other”.<sup>9</sup>

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9 Philipp Sarasin (2003, p. 49) uses the term of the “ganz anderen Anderen”.



Fig. 2: Still from *Bodyguard* (2018, S1.E6; 1:08:08)

Presented in the unambiguous extremes of these figurations, Nadia's depiction also stands in contrast to that of the other characters, whom the series marks with a pronounced ambivalence. Whereas *Bodyguard* uses frequent cuts to juxtapose the self-fashioning and actual behaviour as well as the rhetoric and self-interest of the other characters, Nadia marks an exception and a seemingly unsurmountable gap in the series' reliance on ambivalence. This gap is particularly visible in comparison to the representations of Andy Apsted and Julia Montague. Although Nadia's depiction, especially with regard to her gender and to her elaborate bombs and schemes, challenges some of the stereotypes of terrorism as "an irruption of the primitive" (Boehmer/Morton 2010, p. 7) perpetrated by allegedly sexually frustrated men, the depiction of her acts of terrorism differs radically from the representation of the attack committed by Andy Apsted. While *Bodyguard* first invites understanding for Andy by granting him representational space to voice his arguments, Nadia is neither granted any explanatory space, nor is she presented as ambivalent. Moreover, while Nadia's depiction switches from victim to terrorist, Julia – the other most important female character in the series – becomes increasingly approachable: first introduced as cold-blooded, manipulative, power-hungry and hypocritical, her depiction becomes more ambivalent and slightly more favourable when she starts having an affair with the protagonist. By means of the unambiguous reductionist figurations used, Nadia's portrayal thus paradoxically provides a pause from the insecurity of ambivalence: amongst all the ambivalence of insecurity in the series, the external threat is presented as the only unambiguous given.

In contrast to its reductionist representation of Nadia, *Bodyguard* also contains some ambivalent interweavings of securitisation and desecuritisation. In particular, the series demonstrates securitised discrimination against Muslim look-alikes by disclosing how strongly David's perception is informed by racial profiling. Featuring two characters who might have an Islamicate background and who work for government institutions, *Bodyguard* illustrates underlying patterns of racialisation and securitisation, by showing how David continues to suspect one of them, Tahir Mahmood, a political analyst working for the Home Secretary, of being a possible terrorist. In addition to thus demonstrating how risk assessment is filtered through a racialised grid, *Bodyguard* also alludes to the silencing effects of co-opted diversity discourse in the economy of insecurity. Most prominently, it does so by showing how one of Tahir's colleagues tries to deprive Tahir of his agency by reducing him to an emblem of positive discrimination:

Tahir Mahmood: "What the hell am I doing here if you won't let me do my fucking job?"

Rob Macdonald: "Your job is to be visible beside the Home Secretary. The demographic most vulnerable to our counterterrorism policy is ... Doesn't take a genius to join the dots". (S1.E3, 27:14–27:24) (fig 3.)



Fig. 3: Still from *Bodyguard* (2018, S1.E3; 27:21)

In sum, although *Bodyguard* criticises the neoliberal economy of insecurity and also contains desecuritisising elements, the series' critique of a discriminatory concept of security is still framed, quite literally, by the Eurocentric



and Neo-Orientalist securitisation particularly prominent in the series' frame story. In that the series critically explores how the refraction of insecurity into the Other is instrumentalised, *Bodyguard* does not constitute a straightforward case of securitisation. Nonetheless, the series falls short of reflecting on its own Western-centric stance. As *Bodyguard* focuses on the gamble with fear within Britain, this perspective in itself would not be problematic. However, by parenthesising its critique of securitisation with the Neo-Orientalist representation in its frame story, the series dissolves the ambivalence in its main story into a reductionist logic which itself uses gendered racialisation as the main refractor of insecurity: while danger is projected onto the unambiguous "utter Other", the series' representations of terrorism in real-time and its incorporation of media coverage and cameo appearances blur the lines between the diegetic world of the series and its extradiegetic references. Not only do such effects of reality cater to the Neo-Orientalist demand for authenticity, but they also create a greater immediacy of the terrorist attacks presented – while simultaneously, the character of the terrorist is kept at a distance. As a result, even if *Bodyguard* critically explores the insecurity of the West, it does so by disseminating a reductionist representation of Islamist terrorism in mainstream society.

### *The Poetics of Insecurity and the Danger of Security*

In its attempt to critique securitisation while at the same time relying on Neo-Orientalist reductionisms itself, *Bodyguard* is typical of a broader range of fictionalisations which reiterate an imaginary which purports to overcome itself but which is instead complicit in diffusing racialised and securitised imagery in mainstream society. Marketed as seemingly diverse and cosmopolitan, such fictionalisations often contain subtle forms of securitisation conveyed by a culturalising poetics of insecurity. This poetics often relies on a distancing of danger (Wurr forthcoming). In its dual stance on securitisation and in its depiction of Nadia as the "utter Other", this distancing of danger is also visible in *Bodyguard*. While the series begins to explore some of the discriminatory dimensions of security discourse as well as the instrumentalisation of fear in the economy of insecurity, it does so by delimiting these attempts through the master frame of a reductionist figuration of Islamist terrorism itself.

What the analysis of *Bodyguard* shows in an exemplary way is to what great extent a poetics of insecurity, used to negotiate more widespread forms of fear of social decline, relies on racialisation. While both the use of Othering and the use of security as an instrument of power have been



closely examined in postcolonial analyses of representations of Islamist terrorism (see for instance Boehmer/Morton 2010; Frank 2015), the role of aesthetics in culturalising the intersection of discourses of insecurity and inequality still needs to be more fully explored. In fact, when dealing with the role of aesthetics in the negotiation of security, it quickly becomes clear that those literary approaches to Security Studies which follow in the wake of traditional Security Studies often have the same blind spots as the latter: neglecting to consider the discriminatory dimensions inherent in the concept of security, these approaches neither account for the role of a poetics of insecurity in racialised securitisation, nor do they consider how securitisation often exacerbates the insecurity which stems from the refraction of problems into the Other.<sup>10</sup>

What analyses of a poetics of insecurity should thus more carefully consider is that, in the neoliberal economy of insecurity, security is inextricably linked and co-constitutive with differences of all kinds, and that security consequently runs along the lines of power, privilege and precarity. Instead of disregarding precarity, analyses of a poetics of insecurity need to acknowledge that for most people, insecurity is not a “generative force” (Voelz 2018, p. 15) but a hard fact, and that this insecurity is often aggravated not only by security discourse, but also by the neoliberal narrative of individual empowerment frequently used to mask the very systemic injustice which stands in the way of a security for all. Instead of

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10 The first book-length study on the poetics of insecurity, Voelz’ study is not only rooted in the Western-centric logic of security, but it also follows a neoliberal empowerment narrative. By conceptualising uncertainty as a “generative force” and a “resource for gain” (15), the study neglects to consider the role of securitisation in exacerbating insecurity along classist and racialised lines. As the study’s conception of insecurity relies on economic preconceptions, the blind spot regarding the role of insecurity in the neoliberal economy of insecurity is not surprising (396). A brief caveat regarding systemic injustice notwithstanding (19), *The Poetics of Insecurity* does not consider the connection between discourses of insecurity, structural discrimination and precarity. While the study takes a “post-rank social order” (17) as its starting point and thus backgrounds the classist dimension of security thinking, the “subject of security” (15) whom the book presupposes does not include the many of the world. So although *The Poetics of Insecurity* tries to foreground the issue of agency, it follows the conceptualisation of security in traditional Security Studies in its limited consideration of who acts and is affected by security thinking. Thus ignoring questions of precarity by focusing on vulnerability only, the study conceptualises vulnerability and uncertainty as resources: “Since the imaginary appeal of security arises from the manifold opportunities that grow out of our vulnerabilities, vulnerability itself becomes a prized resource for the imagination” (188).

reiterating the self-referentiality of traditional Security Studies, analyses of aesthetic forms of insecurity consequently need to examine the role which a poetics of insecurity plays in normalising the existential insecurity of its Others in mainstream society. Not only can such an examination reveal how naturalised frames and figurations are complicit in projecting the insecurity engendered by the neoliberal project onto the Other, but by questioning the discriminatory bias of Security Studies, it can also account for the self-referentiality of most research on security. Thus, it can contribute to showing why the existential insecurity of a diverse range of Others frequently falls through the cracks of a Eurocentric and classist concept of security. As it appears to have become more and more difficult to transcend Eurocentric and classist modes of security thinking, a retracing of how economic and political problems are culturalised into questions of difference might serve as a first step in the direction of a reversal of perspectives which raises awareness for the insecurity of those who unjustly fall under general suspicion – after all, there should be caring in the world.

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