ALEKSANDRA RÓŻALSKA

THE DECADE OF *HOMELAND* (2011–2020):
CRITICALLY ANALYZING THE (GENDERED) NARRATIVE
OF THE WAR ON TERROR

INTRODUCTION

Drawing from the recent postcolonial and feminist scholarship and critiques of ethnocentric and orientalist narratives of the war on terror that informed popular culture within the last two decades, in this chapter I look critically at the television series *Homeland* (2011–2020), whose eighth and concluding season aired in early 2020. The main methodological framework for this study is critical discourse analysis of the selected themes and problems (such as the state od exception) related to the US war on terror.

I have analyzed elsewhere (Różalska 2016a, 2016b) various aspects of the series, such as depictions of urban landscapes with regards to terrorist threat, the representation of women in the show with the special emphasis on the relationship between the leading female protagonist and Muslim women as well as the ways in which the show justifies "the state of exception" (Agamben 2005, 86) and torture in the name of (national) security. I agree with Griffin (2009) that the state of exception should be analyzed also as a cultural paradigm and "the reason is that in very obvious ways culture and politics are inter-formative" (77), so *Homeland* as a cultural text is interrelated with and shaped by the changes in the American domestic and foreign politics.

Since *Homeland* concluded three years ago and there are no plans for its renewal, in this chapter I want to have a look at the series retrospectively—

ALEKSANDRA RÓŻALSKA, PhD, University of Lodz, Faculty of Philology, Department of Cultural Research; aleksandra.rozalska@filologia.uni.lodz.pl; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7725-3573.

not in a fragmented way and at the selected seasons and episodes, but rather I intend to approach the eight-season show as a whole. My aim is to investigate the changes *Homeland* has undergone with regards to (gendered) depictions of the war on terror and the Muslim Other as well as the show's contributions to, impacts on, and reevaluation of the notion of national (in)security, the politics of surveillance, the failure of securitization of American life, and the (toxic) masculinity that dominated the post-9/11 political and media discourses. In this context, I am particularly interested in how the representation of enemy (both internal and external) has changed throughout this decade-long television series and in differences in approaching the terrorist threat (both home and abroad) taking into consideration the corresponding socio-political circumstances in the United States.

Furthermore, I would like to use this opportunity to investigate the ways in which *Homeland*'s main protagonist, Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes)—a genius CIA (rouge) agent and one of the most important fictional warriors of the war on terror in American television after 9/11—developed as a character, in each season having to deal not only with extremists, terrorists, and enemies, but more often with incompetent, arrogant American politicians and fellow agents.

1. STATE OF EXCEPTION/EMERGENCY IN *HOMELAND*

Television dramas that tackle war on terror (e.g., *24*, *Sleeper Cell*, *Homeland*) have a few things in common: they are built on the discourse of the state of exception (Agamben 2005, 2–3), their narratives use the "ticking bomb" scenarios,[1] and they create the situation of catastrophe or crisis in order to justify extraordinary measures and suspend ethical/legal norms and regulations. As Griffin (2009) underlines, "In the state of exception … the breakdown of norms creates a situation in which violence [and other unlawful practices] escapes management" (92).

Using the notion of the state of exception as a narrative strategy in these shows allows for legitimizing violence and anticipating torture as measures to manage and contain catastrophes and crises (77) and defuse "the ticking

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[1] Griffin (2009) links the ticking bomb scenario with the urgency of acting within a given period of time: "In structuring the plot onto the irreducible duration of time, and structuring the actions of [the main protagonist] within a 'disinhibiting ring,' the state of exception is given over to the moral world as an object of perception" (99).

bomb". It also makes surveillance and racial profiling acceptable (I will discuss this in what follows).[2] They are continuously inscribed in the plots, which guarantees "the 'moral' coloring", "necessity" (Griffin 2009, 95), and the sense of acting in a justified and lawmaking manner.

Violence, torture, suspension of civil rights, surveillance, and so on are often considered justified responses to the threat of terrorism, which "constitutes an exceptional and destabilizing threat that [should be] countered with an exceptional response" (84). Similarly, racial, ethnic, and religious profiling "serves as an exemplary representation of the way in which non-white, non-Western, and non-Christian subjects are othered in the discourse of violence. In this frame—the dominant frame adopted in depictions of non-state violence—political violence broadly, and terrorism specifically, becomes something external; something the subaltern does to the colonial power, hegemon, power holder, and/or nation-state" (Loadenthal 2019, 78).

Each season of *Homeland* is built on "ticking bomb" scenarios, however —unlike in other shows on the war on terror—the bombs are actually exploding. In other words, the state of emergency and using exceptional methods to deal with terrorists often fail or are ineffective. What I consider the most novel contribution of *Homeland* to the genre of political drama is its contestation of the state of exception by showing the consequences and end results of actions undertaken without the official sanction (violence is constantly reproduced, contained terrorists are immediately replaced with new ones, hatred and distrust between the countries is not diminished, short-minded politicians are still in power). Unlike other shows, such as *24*, violence is not localized onto a single character of Carrie Mathison (in fact she rather avoids using violence in her individual pursuit of terrorists) and, importantly, she is not removed "from the ethical, legal, or moral responsibility" (96).

In fact, Carrie—who uses non-standard ways to deal with terrorist threats and internal political conspiracies—throughout the eight seasons is gradually more and more disillusioned by how the war on terror with its notions of state of exception and securitization is waged. As she is an *enfant terrible* of the CIA, in and out from service, she follows her own instinct (driven by mental disease) and chooses completely different ways to solve complicated mysteries and second-guesses terrorists' plans and intentions, often using personal contacts and getting engaged in intimate (also sexual) relationships with her targets, suspects, informants, allies (Nicolas Brody in seasons 1–3,

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[2] Read more about the use of torture and racializing the enemy during the war on terror in Philipose 2007, 1048–71; Roberts 2008, 229–47.

Aayan Ibrahim in season 5, Yevgeny Gromov in seasons 7–8). It is she, rather than her superiors or coworkers, who leads to averting terrorist attacks, exposing enemies within the American institutions and outside the US, disclosing dirty secrets, etc.

2. JUSTIFYING SURVEILLANCE AND TARGETING ENEMIES

Except for justifying different kind of violence, including torture, the state of exception introduces other measures and solutions otherwise unacceptable and limiting people's freedoms, such as racial/political profiling or widely understood processes of surveillance.

Television in general and *Homeland* in particular have accustomed viewers to various forms of surveillance: "Over the decades of the television era, hundreds of millions of people have engaged in anonymously watching others closely … [that] may be the most shared cultural experience on the planet" (Meyrowitz 2009, 47). Surveillance in the name of national security and aiming at "protecting" some people by "monitoring" others has been the subject of scholarly and media debates for more than two decades after 9/11. As Bevan (2015) points out, "public knowledge about the security state raises significant questions about what exactly constitutes surveillance in a digital era, post-9/11 America, and to what extent submitting to surveillance is a fair compromise for possibly deterring a terrorist attack" (147).

Homeland addressed Panopticon-like situations in every season (Letort 2017, 153) starting from Carrie Mathison's illegally watching Nicolas Brody, a war hero whom she suspects of preparing a terrorist attack against the US (seasons 1–2). Secondly, intelligence agents from different countries (the US, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Germany, Russia, among others) are constantly watched and listened to using traditional espionage methods as well as sophisticated techniques of surveillance, which, for instance, allow Majid Javadi, Iranian intel chief, to coordinate a bombing of the CIA headquarters in Langley (seasons 2–3). Terrorists are also equipped with advanced technologies and their spies are able to infiltrate any governmental or military agency, and reach people in power (Abu Nazir, a high-ranking leader of al Qaeda in seasons 1–3, and Haissam Haqqani, a Taliban leader in season 4).

On a regular basis, Carrie unofficially cooperates with a team of professional wiretappers (Virgil and Mark) who help her reveal terrorist plots as well as national and international conspiracies throughout the eight seasons.

Constant observation of both enemies and allies becomes at times a very intimate activity: Carries watches Brody hanged in Iran (season 3) and closely observes via transmission from drone the execution of her ally, Aayan, by Haqqani (season 4). Wiretapping is a popular method used to get information about different targets, to blackmail them, to monitor their actions, while television, fake news, social media (and its often fake users) contribute to the widespread culture of surveillance. As Meyrowitz (2009) contends, "After living through a half century of the television era … neither the watching of others nor the act of offering oneself up for watching by others can be perceived of as an odd or perverse activity" (47). *Homeland* does not present surveillance as odd or perverse, however, it oftentimes shows its defectiveness and ineffectiveness: "Like other crime programs, *Homeland* centralizes surveillance as its key information gathering tool, yet surveillance here does not yield knowledge, or rather, the knowledge it yields is partial. There are both literal and metaphorical blind spots in the CIA's surveillance apparatus" (Steenberg and Tasker 2015, 134).

I analyzed elsewhere (Różalska 2013; 2016a) the representations of the Muslim (and Arab) Others as terrorists planning to demonstrate their cause by killing many American citizens, destroying US institutions and agencies, disrupt the functioning of American democratic system, etc. After 9/11, orientalist narratives and geographies dominated popular culture: "Despite frequent instances of terrorism in Western Europe, and despite protracted armed conflicts in a variety of [European] locales…, when Hollywood chooses to use non-state political violence as a backdrop, it continually draws upon the exotic landscapes of an imagined Arabia" (Loadenthal 2019, 74). Indeed, this was the case in the first few seasons of *Homeland* when the action took place mainly in Muslim countries (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Lebanon, Syria) imaginatively constructed as the sites of dangerous "terrorist nests" and battlespace of the war on terror (Graham 2006, 255).

Later on, however, beginning from season 5, the enemies Carrie Mathison has to find and eliminate become more and more diverse—representing different motivations as well as religious, national, and/or political affiliations, operating within and outside the US and American institutions, gradually raising doubts and questions about the US war on terror and the ways it is waged. The enemies have no longer particular traits and characteristics (Middle-Eastern, Arab, or non-white); they can hide anywhere and anytime, often in plain sight (like the Berlin station chief, Allison Carr, in season 5, who is a mole working for a Russian spy, or Simone Martin, a lover of a

presidential chief of staff and a covert Russian agent working for Yevgeny Gromov).

Throughout the ten years of airtime of *Homeland*, the show's villains are often US leaders and CIA officials (depicted as narrow-minded, power-seeking, incompetent, unfamiliar with foreign policy and diplomacy, arrogant politicians, who would rather satisfy their political and career goals than work with experts to end the war on terror or minimize its negative geopolitical impact). Among them there are William Walden, the Vice President of the United States and a former director of the CIA, who is responsible for killing many civilians, including children, during the war on terror (seasons 1–2), as well as Dar Adal, the CIA Black Operations Director—cunning, manipulative, and powerful figure perceived as the dark side of CIA, who takes part in plotting against the newly elected US president and engages in her assassination attempt (seasons 6–7). Interestingly, the President herself—Elisabeth Keane, the first American female commander-in-chief, whose son died in the war in Iraq—after nearly getting murdered in season 6, in season 7 she changes into a revengeful leader, driven by grief and anger, unable to lead the country and manipulated by her coworkers.

The last two examples of *Homeland*'s enemies and villains resonate with recent real-life events and contemporary challenges for both domestic and foreign politics. The first one is Brett O'Keefe—a far-right Christian conservative media mogul who runs a shadowy company and a massive network of fake social media accounts (connected with Dar Adal) (seasons 6–7). Notably, television series, as Loadenthal (2019) points out, usually inscribe themselves into "the oddity of the state's insistence that its largest enemy is an Arab, Asian, or brown/black-skinned, Muslim; as an examination of the historical record shows the patterned lethality of white, Christian, American-born, males" (92). In this context, *Homeland* offers a novel take on the internal, white American extremists, clearly inspired by real supporters of Donald Trump and the media outlets promoting him. The second example is Yevgeny Gromov, a Russian intelligence officer specializing in conducting disinformation campaigns to destabilize political situation in different countries and creating a conspiracy to take down President Keane. Interestingly, Gromov—after kidnapping Carrie and taking her off her meds—becomes her ally, friend, and eventually lover.

3. CARRIE MATHISON: FROM ROGUE AGENT TO TRAITOR

The main protagonist of *Homeland*, Carrie Mathison, is an excellent, intelligent, but also unpredictable CIA operative who is unappreciated by her superiors. She has a serious history of mental illness (bipolar disease), which complicates her life (both professional and private) but at the same time is her "blessing"—it gives her unique, genius-like intuition as regards the "war on terror" mysteries and out-of-the-box thinking. Because she is considered unstable and irrational by her coworkers, she has trouble convincing people to her version of the truth: "The problem is that, like the classical figure of Cassandra, nobody believes her, and this has everything to do with her presentation of feminine excess" (Hagelin and Silverman 2022, 95). At first, it is, indeed, doubtful whether Carrie is a character reliable enough to push the plot forward, especially as far as dealing with such "serious" issues as the war on terror and national security in a troubled time of the state of exception are concerned. But soon it becomes clear that Carrie is very effective and sees connections, contexts, and variables that nobody else notices, which allows her to successfully identify and understand terrorist plots. In an interview for the British *GQ* magazine, Claire Danes summarizes Carrie in a terse way: "She's like my kinky superhero alter ego now. Because as disturbed and troubled as she is, she's always fucking right" ("Homeland Uncovered").

Carrie is completely different from other anti-terrorist warriors in television (such as Jack Bauer in *24*)—she is brave, spontaneous, and efficient, but unlike men in her position, she hardly ever carries a gun and does not depend on sophisticated weapons and technologies. Instead, she relies on her personal contacts (often with other women[3]) and informants, carefully chooses assets, and quickly enters into relationships (also intimate or sexual), which help her obtain information. Of course, she is not an easy character to like and accept as TV viewers are not accustomed to such female protagonists. She is often depicted as a mad, hysterical, emotional woman, often shouting and crying (especially when she is off her medications). She also transgresses many stereotypes and socio-cultural expectations about female behavior and lifestyle—she likes random and risky sex (for example with Brody, whom she suspects to be a traitor turned by terrorists), she seduces a teenager to make him her informant, she takes her anti-bipolar disease pills with wine, she does not take her meds regularly, neglects her mental health, and, finally, she can be really mean and bossy. What is more, she struggles as a

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[3] See also Różalska 2016, 279–92.

mother—she cannot establish a maternal bond with her daughter, Franny, and regularly leaves the child with her sister. In season 4, Carrie briefly considers letting her child drown while taking a bath.[4] Although trying hard to be a mother, in season 7 she "accepted the fact that she is incapable of taking care of her child, because of her bipolar condition and her CIA profession. In psychological and organizational terms, Carrie is not fit to be a mother and she knows it" (Baer 2022, 86). Clearly, she is a complex and multidimensional character; she is in power thanks to unconventional thinking and exceptional abilities, always ahead of fellow CIA agents and terrorists. Interestingly, her biggest weakness (her mental illness) is at the same time her most important strength. In a way, she is depicted in opposition to male characters who are rational, good with technologies, sometimes ruthless, whereas Carrie is attributed with characteristics that are traditionally perceived as female and not positive—she is irrational, hysterical, oversexualized, often relying on her intuition. In my opinion, *Homeland* manages to change the meaning of these undervalued, emotion-driven traits which are effective and push the plot forward.

The uniqueness and exceptionalism of *Homeland*'s lead female character were appreciated by many critics (Steenberg and Tusker 2015; Hagelin and Siverman 2022. For example Baer, who also analyzed all eight seasons of *Homeland*, praises Carrie acknowledging both her "superpowers" and flaws: "Carrie Mathison is the female savior of the world. Carrie is Superwoman. Blond, attractive, and young, she is … emotionally shattered, psychologically unstable but pursuing the good for mankind while being authentic" (91). However, the depiction of her bipolar disease was also criticized for emphasizing craziness and erratic behaviors. In this context, Wondemaghen pointed out that "Mathison's depiction has significantly shifted toward more realistic portrayals and away from trends of the past that emphasize this group as primarily violent or dangerous.… However, emphasis on recklessness, an unstable mind, lack of agency and autonomy, and disturbing images of involuntary detention in psychiatric facilities in the subsequent seasons is damaging" (141).

As the show progresses, Carrie Mathison gradually starts to question the key aspects of the post-9/11 American war on terror (i.e., the surveillance technologies, the dehumanization of the [real or imagined] enemies, the orientalist and ethnocentric ways to gain political influence abroad). After years of dealing with internal and external threats and enemies, "Carrie, an

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[4] An interesting analysis of this scene from season 4 can be found in Hill 2014.

insider, turns into an external threat to the US and the CIA because of her defection to the Russian Federation" (Baer 2022, 61). Thus, in the series' finale, Carrie becomes herself a traitor and enemy of state. Her book about CIA operations, published in Russia and titled *Tyranny of Secrets: Why I Had to Betray My Country*, constitutes an act of high treason (86), however, Carrie will continue her espionage actions as a double agent and a valuable asset to her long-term friend and a fellow agent, Saul Berenson.

CONCLUSIONS

Homeland, as other shows of the post-9/11 era, has contributed to and reflected public debates about the war on terror, fears connected with security, as well as political and socio-cultural aspects of the state of exception (Alsultany 2012, 15). In my opinion, *Homeland* changed the political drama genre by introducing a multidimensional and unconventional female lead character and by questioning "the still-presumptive masculinity of quality crime TV" (Negra and Lager Wey 2015, 131). Carrie's character—operating at the intersections of gender, politics, and nationhood—certainly inspires feminist investigations of ethnocentric and orientalist narratives of the American war on terror (Bevan 2015, 146).

The show also offers criticism of the dominant rhetoric of the war on terror, complicating the figure of the enemy and questioning narrow-minded and conflict-oriented attitudes of the US leaders and institutions. As Monacelli (2018) contends, "*Homeland* represents a new twist in relation to the spy thriller genre. In all thrillers the main goal is to arouse primordial emotions, suspense and mystery, offering a shot of adrenaline through a sense of vulnerability and a gradual loss of control, but in *Homeland* there is the added element of the producer cashing in on the sociocultural anxiety in the US after 9/11" (257). *Homeland*, as I pointed out earlier, goes beyond narrating the war on terror by turning to more recent threats and challenges for American politics and society, such as polarization of the political elite, populist and nationalist movements, fake news, and conspiracy theories that fuel media and public discourses. What some critics may find problematic is that although the show contests some of the assumptions of the war on terror (schematic enemies, patriotic leaders, invisibility of strong female protagonists), it does not condemn its overall logic, based on the state of exception,

aggressive American foreign politics, racial profiling in the domestic fight with terrorism, and torture as an effective way to deal with extremists.

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Summary

Drawing from the recent postcolonial and feminist scholarship and critiques of ethnocentric and orientalist narratives of the war on terror that informed popular culture within the last two decades, the text looks critically at the HBO television series *Homeland* (2011–2020), whose eighth and concluding season aired in early 2020. It focuses on the following aspects: the state of exception (as coined by Giorgio Agamben), the processes of surveillance and targeting the enemy, and the leading female protagonist of the series, Carrie Mathison. The text aims to investigate the changes *Homeland* has undergone with regards to (gendered) depictions of the war on terror and the Muslim Other as well as the show's contributions to, impacts on, and reevaluation of the notion of national (in)security, the politics of surveillance, the failure of securitization of American life, and the (toxic) masculinity that dominated the post-9/11 political and media discourses. The conclusion is that *Homeland* goes beyond narrating the war on terror by turning to more recent threats and challenges for American politics and society, such as polarization of the political elite, populist and nationalist movements, fake news, and conspiracy theories that fuel media and public discourses. However, it does not condemn the overall logic of the war on terror, based on the state of exception, aggressive American foreign politics, racial profiling in the domestic fight with terrorism and torture as an effective way to deal with extremists.

Keywords: *Homeland*; war on terror; state of exception; gender; enemy

DEKADA SERIALU *HOMELAND* (2011–2020):
KRYTYCZNA ANALIZA NARRACJI O WOJNIE
Z TERRORYZMEM Z PERSPEKTYWY GENDEROWEJ

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest krytyczne spojrzenie na serial telewizyjny *Homeland* (2011–20), którego ósmy sezon został wyemitowany przez stację HBO wiosną 2020 roku. Podejściem badawczym wykorzystanym do analizy serialu jest perspektywa postkolonialna i feministyczna, z uwzględnieniem ostatnich rozważań na temat wpływu narracji etnocentrycznych i orientalistycznych o wojnie z terroryzmem, które zdominowały kulturę popularną po 11 września 2001 roku. Artykuł skupia się na następujących zagadnieniach: koncepcji stanu wyjątkowego na gruncie społeczeństwa amerykańskiego (zgodnie z definicją Giorgio Agambena), procesach inwigilacji i nadzoru osób uważanych za wrogów USA oraz wizerunku głównej bohaterki Carrie Mathison. Celem artykułu jest także prześledzenie zmian, jakie zaszły w sposobach przedstawiania w serialu *Homeland* wojny z terroryzmem (z perspektywy genderowej) i Innego-wroga, jak również refleksja, czy produkcja przyczyniła się do krytycznej oceny takich pojęć jak obronność narodowa, inwigilacja, bezpieczeństwo (wewnętrzne i zewnętrzne) i toksyczna męskość, na których koncentrują się amerykańskie dyskursy polityczne i medialne po 11 września 2001 r. Wnioski z analizy wskazują, że serial *Homeland* wychodzi poza tradycyjne narracje wojny z terroryzmem, skupiając się na innych wyzwaniach i zagrożeniach politycznych i społecznych, np. polaryzacja elit politycznych, ruchy populistyczne i nacjonalistyczne, fake newsy oraz teorie spiskowe popularyzowane przez media. Z drugiej strony, serial nie potępia logiki i retoryki wojny z terroryzmem, która opiera się na koncepcji stanu wyjątkowego, agresywnej polityce zagranicznej USA, profilowaniu rasowym w wewnętrznej walce z terroryzmem i torturach jako skutecznej metodzie postępowania z osobami o poglądach skrajnych.

Słowa kluczowe: *Homeland*; wojna z terroryzmem; stan wyjątkowy; płeć; wróg