Trauma and Beyond: Ethical and Cultural Constructions of
9/11 in American Fiction

by

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

My dissertation focuses on a set of Anglo-American novels that deal with the events of 9/11. Identifying thematic and stylistic differences in the fiction on this topic, I distinguish between novels that represent directly the jolts of trauma in the wake of the attacks, and novels that, while still holding the events as an underlying operative force in the narrative, do not openly represent them but envision their long-term aftermath. The first group of novels comprises Lynne Sharon Schwartz's *The Writing on the Wall* (2005), Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). The second one includes Lorrie Moore's *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009), John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008). Drawing on concepts from trauma theory, particularly by Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, and combining them with the ethical philosophies of Levinas and Heidegger, I argue that the constructions of 9/11 in Anglo-American fiction are essentially twofold: authors who narrate 9/11 as a tragic human loss in the city of New York turn it into an occasion for an *ethical* dialogue with the reader and potentially with the "Other," whereas authors who address 9/11 as a recent sociopolitical event transform it into a goad toward a bitter *cultural* indictment of the US middle-class, whose ingrained inertia, patriotism and self-righteousness have been either magnified or twisted by the attacks.

Considering processes of meaning-making, annihilation, ideological reduction and apathy that arose from 9/11 and its versions, I have identified what could be called, adapting Peter Elbow's expression from pedagogical studies, the "forked" rhetoric of media and

politics, a rhetorical mode in which both discourses are essentially closed, non-hermeneutic, and rooted in the same rationale: exploiting 9/11 for consensus. On the contrary, in what I call the *New-Yorkization* of 9/11, I highlighted how the situatedness of the public discourses that New Yorkers constructed to tell their own tragedy rescues the Ur-Phaenomenon of 9/11 from the epistemological commodification that intellectual, mediatic and political interpretations forced on it. Furthermore, pointing to the speciousness of arguments that deem 9/11 literature sentimental and unimaginative, I claim that the traumatic literature on the attacks constitutes an example of ethical practice, since it originates from witnesses of the catastrophe, it represents communal solidarity, and it places a crucial demand on the reader as an empathic listener and ethical agent. Ethical counternarratives oppose the ideological simplification of the 9/11 attacks and develop instead a complex counter-rhetoric of emotions and inclusiveness that we could read as a particular instantiation of an ethics of the self and "Other."

As much as the 9/11 "ethical" novels suggest that "survivability" in times of trauma depends on "relationality" (J. Butler), the "cultural" ones unveil the insensitivity and superficiality of the actual US society far away from the site of trauma. The binary framework I use implies that, outside of New York City, 9/11 is narrated neither traumatically (in terms of literary form), nor as trauma (in terms of textual fact). Consequently, on the basis of a spatial criterion and in parallel to the ethical novels, I have identified a category of "cultural" fiction that tackles the events of 9/11 at a distance, spatially and conceptually. In essence, 9/11 brings neither shock, nor promise of regeneration

to these peripheral settings, except for Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, a story in which we are returned to a post-9/11 New York where different ethnic subjects can re-negotiate creatively their identities. The cultural novels are ultimately pervaded by a mode of tragic irony that is unthinkable for the ethical novels and that is used in these texts to convey the inanity and hubris of a politically uneducated and naïve America – one that has difficulties to point Afghanistan on a map, or to transcend dualistic schemes of value that embody precisely Bush's Manichaeism. The potential for cultural pluralism, solidarity and historical memory set up by the New York stories does not ramify into the America that is far away from the neuralgic epicenter of historical trauma. This proves that the traumatizing effects and the related ethical calls engendered by 9/11 remain confined to the New York literature on the topic.

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Dedication

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Introduction

This dissertation focuses on a set of Anglo-American novels that deal with the events of 9/11. Identifying thematic and stylistic differences in the fiction on this topic, I distinguish between novels that represent directly the jolts of trauma in the wake of the attacks, and novels that, while still holding the events as an underlying operative force in the narrative, do not represent them directly but envision their long-term aftermath. The first group of novels comprises Lynne Sharon Schwartz's *The Writing on the Wall* (2005), Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). The second one includes Lorrie Moore's *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009), John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008). While it would be reasonable to assume that such partition is based on a chronological criterion (reflecting an evolution from traumatic figurations of the events toward steadier scenarios of recovery), the novels' almost coterminous dates of publication do not exactly sanction such claim. The rationale of the disjunction between harrowing and seemingly composed narratives that I adopt here is not temporal but rather spatial, since, in the history of literature after the tragedy, traumatic representations of 9/11 are only set in New York City, whereas its "non-traumatic" effects are confined to more dislocated and "peripheral" areas, such as New Jersey or the Midwest. This suggests that traumatic fiction interweaves an indissoluble bond with the place in which such trauma occurs, and that the significance of the traumatizing event is shaped differently according to its geographical reception.

Much as this claim may sound intuitive, it nonetheless entails important consequences at the literary and cultural levels. Provocatively, I argue that the constructions of 9/11 in

Anglo-American fiction are essentially twofold: authors who narrate 9/11 as a tragic human loss in the city of New York turn it into an occasion for an *ethical* dialogue with the reader and potentially with the "Other," whereas authors who address 9/11 as a recent sociopolitical event transform it into a goad toward a bitter, critical indictment of US *cultural* habits. In distinguishing between traumatic and "non-traumatic" fiction, I reflect on the novel as an ethical and cultural form of aesthetic discourse. While the novels openly dealing with the trauma of 9/11 are dominated by ethical concerns, beliefs and communicative strategies, the non-traumatic novels offer a subtle cultural critique of the American middle-class, whose ingrained inertia, patriotism and self-righteousness have been either magnified or twisted by the attacks. If this double framework crystallizes the difference between the two groups of novels, it is actually used here as a flexible and functional categorization, which means that the ethical and critical keys of interpretation are not restricted to, but only prevalent in, each group of novels about 9/11. Indeed, I do not want to sever ethics from cultural criticism, nor tie ethics exclusively to trauma; rather, I posit distinct novelistic modes that reflect the core design of each 9/11 novel without making them the only criterion for analysis. Through this double framework, my research consequently investigates the ways in which the genre of the novel in US literature has given ethical and critical significance to these unprecedented terrorist attacks: what it has retained of them, how it has shaped American responses, expressed identity and imagined alterity after them, and in what ways it has used them to rearticulate long-submerged fears and/or introduce new concerns and hopes in American culture.

In chapter one, I will begin by discussing some of the most significant readings of 9/11 that intellectuals and scholars have given over the last few years and that especially focus on the idea of nihilism, spectacle and death. The purpose is to engage in the discussion of the novels not with a full knowledge of the facts but with the understanding of a range of issues and interpretations surrounding 9/11 that the novels under consideration specifically eschew or contrast. I will also discuss how the instrumental connection between media and politics returns a sense of fiction and oversimplification, whose purpose is to crush complex and dissenting readings of the catastrophe and to enable the fake and reassuring (anti-) narrative of Manichaeism (US vs. Them, Good vs. Evil, and so on). These considerations will help me make a case, in chapter two, for the role and importance of the New York community in the public discourses after the tragedy. In what I call the *New-Yorkization* of 9/11, I aim at underlying how the situatedness of the public discourses that New Yorkers constructed to tell their own tragedy rescues the Ur-Phaenomenon of 9/11 from the epistemological commodification that both intellectual and political interpretations forced on it. Their voices are essential in the formation of a Habermasian "public sphere" and a collective historical memory that distinguishes itself from the image of the invulnerable US that the "sphere of Authority" intended to exploit.

The third chapter focuses on the relationship between trauma, ethics and fiction, and it attempts to prove that narratives of trauma can be divorced neither from ethical purposes and demands, nor from place. Via recent theories of trauma narratives by Laurie Vickroy, Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartmann, and Dominick LaCapra and formulations about ethics in

literature by Adam Zachary Newton and David Parker, I highlight forms of relationship between authors, characters and readers that pursue integration and empathy between all these "actants" (structural agents of all stories). Ethical fiction places a call upon the reader to listen and share the other's pain and expresses a bond with the place of trauma in ways that only witnesses of trauma can do. Pointing to the speciousness of arguments that deem 9/11 literature sentimental and unimaginative, I claim that the traumatic literature on the attacks constitutes an example of ethical practice, since it originates from witnesses of the catastrophe, it represents communal solidarity, and it places a crucial demand on the reader as an empathic listener and ethical agent. Ethical counternarratives oppose the ideological simplification of the 9/11 attacks and develop instead a complex counter-rhetoric of emotions and inclusiveness that we could read as a particular instantiation of an ethics of the self and "Other."

Chapter four examines the Levinasian imagery and the theme of isolation in Schwarz's *The Writing on the Wall*, along with the novel's affective vocabulary of resistance to the Administration's warmongering slogans. Chapter five analyzes motifs of traumatic disembodiment, mis(sed)-communication and individual agency in DeLillo's *Falling Man*, considering the falling man's staged suicides as an ethical performance. Chapter six proposes that Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* uses contradictory emotions to build a powerful intergenerational encounter among traumatized subjects at the Hedeggerian *Lichtung*/Ground Zero of 9/11.

As much as the 9/11 "ethical" novels suggest that "survivability" in times of trauma depends on "relationality" (J. Butler), the "cultural" ones unveil the insensitivity and superficiality of the actual US society far away from the site of trauma. Moore's *A Gate at the Stairs* cynically shows how the Midwestern petty bourgeoisie strives to maintain a politically correct milieu while repressing fear, racial prejudices and revanchism, without realizing that 9/11 and its implication will "retaliate" against the amnesiac individuals. Updike's *Terrorist*, in my view, questions the cultural imperialism of "whiteness" by making the ethnic gaze of the young Arab American protagonist the polarizing vision we side with throughout the story. Finally, O'Neill's *Netherland* brings us back to a post-9/11 New York where the resurgence of a "white" cultural supremacy after 9/11 does not foreclose the possibility of multicultural and cosmopolitan negotiations as a vital alternative for a traumatized America.

The "cultural" novels stigmatize the social habits and cultural resistances of white, middle-class America to engage with memory and public life after 9/11. If cultural theory and criticism currently tend to uphold a hybrid and multilateral conceptualization of "America" that encompasses both the worldwide, pervasive ramifications and the internal, networked social patterns of the nation, recent US fiction registers the difficulty of keeping up with the multicultural paradigm in the aftermath of 9/11 and describes a society that is self-referential and oblivious to the larger global concerns and cultural demands. In this sense, these non-traumatic novels, except for O'Neill's story, which returns us to a city swarming with productive social contradictions, do not seem to live up to the potential for

socio-cultural regeneration set out by the "New Yorkers" of the first group through their

discursive practices.

Chapter 1

September 11, 2001: intellectual nihilism and the forked rhetoric of media and politics

Eleven years after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and the White House (this latter only potential, since passengers and flight crew managed to reroute the plane to Pennsylvania), there still remains a problem of interpretation regarding the historical and cultural nature of those events. Nowadays, in 2012, only mentioning and thinking back to that day still unsettles and puzzles us, as that date conjures up many shocking images and facts: deaths of thousands of civilians, the collapse of "symbols of the West," the surprise factor, the precision by which the terroristic scheme was executed, the vulnerability of what was thought to be the strongest military power in the world and, not surprisingly, the conspiracy theories about the attacks. Since then, a considerable amount of disciplinary scholarship has highlighted the pivotal consequences of these events, such as the re-articulation of the Cold-War geopolitical scenario and the demand for a stronger international governance, an increased reliance on the Republican government and its demagogy in the immediate aftermath (Shapiro), and a set of interlaced responses balancing hatred and solidarity, fear and hope, isolation and affinity in the fabric of American society. The attacks have come under careful scrutiny in different sectors of academic inquiry, from social sciences to political theory, from history to media studies and

have generated a body of work that is immense with respect to the timeframe in which it was produced.

Yet in more recent years, as philosopher René Girard pointed out in a 2007 interview for *SubStance*, 9/11 has become the "unspoken norm:" if a great "spiritual and intellectual tension" dominated public discourse and private lives in the immediate aftermath, a period of "slow relaxation" followed, in which people have become inured to violence and avoid dealing with its perpetuation through war (Doran and Girard 20, 29). According to Girard, we tend to look at 9/11 as a continuation of the violence of the twentieth century, but we should realize that there is now a religious and non-rational element that goes beyond traditional ideological violence and that proves Western civilization weaker than everybody thought. As Doran further elaborates in his introduction to the special issue of *SubStance*, 9/11 has been "normalized and politicized," becoming an ideological item on the agendas of different particular groups: those who want to minimize it in order to put an end to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and those who use it as the main motive to justify the necessity of those wars (Doran 5), or "the just war."

Describing the manipulative effects that media pursued with 9/11, Jean Baudrillard actually confirms Girard's "unspoken norm" by stating the opposite, i.e. that the Western technological system that was attacked came out stronger than before. Whether exceptional or by now "normalized," 9/11 pushed the US to respond to the attacks with war, an ongoing operation that media flatten and "normalize" in the everyday reports: media simplify scenarios and repeat half truths; they struggle to create accounts that avoid

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spectacularization; and they ultimately make death a commodified value by ideologizing it. Baudrillard had already theorized in his 1976 post-Marxist work *Symbolic Exchange and Death* that modern cultures no longer recognize significant value in death as older cultures once did. He argued that the capitalist system reciprocates everything within its own code and does not let anything exist outside of itself. In its own logic of "energy, calculation, reason and revolution" (36), where every move of the economic and social forces is predictable and functional to its own survival, the system colonizes the real and the imaginary – essentially, it gives us the "gifts" of life, of a self, of an identity, of consumerism, of death. Labor force has no exchange power, no autonomy, no revolutionary hopes and merely feeds back into the system itself. Only death as both a real and symbolic "gift" could challenge this self-referential (phony) dialectic of power based on a commodity exchange. When he talks about the "gift of death" as a response to the system (a concept he borrows from Marcel Mauss, also addressed later by Derrida), Baudrillard means a practice that belonged to pre-capitalist societies where "exchange" was not utilitarian but symbolic and representational (poetic, cultural, ethical) and so it denied the pure instrumentality and simulation of capitalist production. In the modern age, such a model finds correlation in the acts of terrorism, suicide, hostage taking, all political actions that belong to the alternative realm of the symbolic, that break the purely semiotic, and that imply the "impossibility of responding or retorting" (37) if not through the death of the system itself.

Baudrillard's reflections gain new dramatic relevance in the light of 9/11, when he talks about "death" as an effectively symbolic weapon in the hands of Islamic terrorists

against a system that does not value death at all. In his 2002 essay "The Spirit of Terrorism," Baudrillard replicates the same key concept from *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, writing: "[symbolic] *death can be met only by equal or greater death*. [Terrorism defies] the system by a gift to which it cannot respond except by its own death and its own collapse" (*Symbolic Exchange* 37; "Spirit of Terrorism" 17 – henceforth "ST"). Commenting on the Twin Towers collapse, he indeed adds that "it is all about death, not only about the violent irruption of death in real time – 'live', so to speak -- but the irruption of a death that is far more-than-real: a death which is symbolic and sacrificial – that is to say the absolute, irrevocable event" ("ST" 16-17). In Western societies, then, we do not value death because we tend to dismiss what cannot be consumed, sold or commodified and we value "life" as the supreme metaphor of the continuation of the system.[1] When terrorist suicidal death is forced on us, it magnifies the violence of the system that we normally do not see (the system that silently kills us) and it adds to it the archaic, symbolic layer (the gift, the sacrifice) that the system is unable to regulate or master. In other words, what 9/11 terrorists did, in Baudrillard's view, was to bring back the real through the symbolic in a world that just lived on simulacra and amnesia.

However, this dose of reality (the realization of a break into the ideological structure) is only temporary since the system, which in Baudrillard's theoretical discourse comes to coincide with technological media and politics, is a totalizing dimension that is conniving with, if not substituting, the capitalist code altogether. Through US media, the system

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[1] See Butterfield, Bradley. "The Baudrillardian Symbolic, 9/11, and the War of Good and Evil." *Postmodern Culture* 13.1 (2002): 27 paragraphs. 19 Oct 2009. Web. "Modern Western cultures have largely ceased to exchange with the dead collectively, partly because we no longer believe in their continued existence, and partly because we no longer value that which cannot be accumulated or consumed" (10).

disembodies the traumatic real and transforms it into a model of unreality or simulation, where our perception of objects, facts, acts, is continuously turned into a depthless spectacle that overpowers us. He writes that "the image [of the Twin Towers] consumes the event, in the sense that it absorbs it and offers it for consumption. Admittedly, it gives it unprecedented impact, but impact as image-event" ("ST" 27). Baudrillard closes the circle by saying that media are actually "part of the game," that terrorism would be "nothing without the media" and that "we would pardon them [the terrorists] any violence if it were not given media exposure" ("ST" 31), as if to say that only what is broadcast assumes moral relevance, or "reality," and can actually be judged. Similarly, in the political sphere, Baudrillard argues that the system reciprocates the terrorists' gift of death through an obsolete model of war that merely foregrounds the hollow core of current politics. Devoid of any resolving power, the war waged by the US against Afghanistan becomes in Baudrillard's view a propagandistic and pathetic discourse of "technological deployment" ("ST" 34), a "rehash" of the past that clearly does not constitute an equivalent response, a reciprocal symbolic exchange, but just a mise-en-scène of a "safety shield" ("ST" 25). Ultimately, then, media and politics converted 9/11 into an occasion for US propaganda.

On at least two points Baudrillard's vision of 9/11 intersects with Slavoj Žižek's and his conceptuality linked to nihilism, media and indifference. Firstly, Žižek slightly capsizes Baudrillard's idea that the terrorist attacks have injected a real event into the system of "our illusory Sphere" of existence (*Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, henceforth *WDR* 16). On the contrary, according to Žižek, we were safely cocooned in a material, secluded reality of

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banal everyday consumerism and we thought that, since the "Third world horrors" could not touch or reach us, they were "spectral" until the "fantasmatic screen apparition" of 9/11 "entered our [social] reality" as an image (*WDR* 16). Secondly however, far from being an event that we could not imagine, the WTC attacks have always already inhabited the Hollywood popular imagination, as movies such as *Independence Day* and *Titanic* demonstrate, so that the space for the catastrophe "had already been prepared in ideological fantasizing" (*WDR* 15). Žižek writes:

> [n]ot only were the media bombarding us all the time with talk about the terrorist threat; this threat was also obviously libidinally invested… That is the rationale of the often-mentioned association of the attacks with Hollywood disaster movies: the unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise. (*WDR* 15-16)

Although I find this line of reasoning a bit flawed, since it does not unravel the knot between imaginary and real and seems to sanction the "fantastic" dimension of the attacks to the detriment of the material one, Žižek's analysis does account for the psycho-social libido towards the system's destruction that film culture has ideologically perpetuated in a mixture of paranoia and fear of the "Other." Still, he seems to address the archeography of social imagination rather than the political problem of the attacks in itself, which he situates more historically further on in his book. Baudrillard perhaps is clearer on this point about the relationship between real and imaginary in the 9/11 economy when he argues that "we can say that they *did it*, but we *wished for* it" (ST 5). Signaling our "deep-seated complicity" with

the event – i.e. the desire of overthrowing of a "definitive order," a fantasy of *invincibility* – he points out that the 9/11 terrorist attacks would not have achieved such a global, comprehensive effect if they had been just an "arbitrary accident" carried out by fanatics (ST 5-6), whereas it is clear that the Islamic terrorists exploited "our" fantasies and technology (if not the elite money and the CIA agents) to shatter "our" cultural superstructure.[2]

Girard, Baudrillard and Žižek's thoughts about 9/11 stress the idea that, under material external threats, Western culture normalizes and deprives violence and death of their meanings through mechanisms of opinion control, spectacularization and desire manipulation that are strongly associated with media. It is surprising to observe the gap in the quantity and scale of information between the ceaseless "live" accounts of the tragedy, the prying cameras lingering on the site of Ground Zero filming people grieving their loved ones, the heroization of firefighters and policemen *and* the current assimilation of all that panic and tragedy into a punctual memory lacking explanation and yielding an "Enduring Freedom" operation. As Bradley Butterfield argues in his commentary on Baudrillard's essay, "[d]espite the terrorists' successful attempt to put death back on stage in a symbolic exchange with 'the system,' the majority of Americans have by now assimilated its violence into the broader narrative of a war against terrorism and Evil, one of the many things on TV" (16).

This certainly has to do with memory and the television's ability to disengage it from its historical context. According to Thomas Elsaesser, "the media are the very opposite of history and memory, if we think of them along an axis of a temporality that goes from the

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[2] Radstone, Susannah. "The War of the Fathers: Trauma, Fantasy, and 9/11." Judith Greenberg, ed. *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*. University of Nebraska Press, 2003, 117-23.

flash of the instant (breaking news), via the embodiment of lived experience (memory), to the documented evidence interpreted by a reflexive intelligence (history)" (406-7), a dynamics that media are unable to fulfill. Television's real-time temporality (Elsaesser refers to newscasts) allows

> neither for interiorization nor for reflection. Such a temporality, while apparently simulating the flow of perceptual self-presence, subjects the viewer to a perpetual state of anticipation, at the very edge of anxiety, alternating with its opposite, the boredom and lassitude of the *déjà-vu*, of the eternal recurrence of the same… (408)

Whether we are talking about the shocking images of the planes hitting the Twin Towers or the ongoing images of the war, Elsaesser argues that the "discourse of media memory" is traumatic, "always ready to return, always capable of jumping at us, fundamentally uncanny, never to be forgotten, but also never quite remembered, because interfered with, blurred, or overlaid by other images, other memories, other possible combinations and associations" (409). Presentifying everything, television reports, talk-shows, political analyses, newscasts efface the past and, despite the enormous potential of storage and inscription of historical facts that we are now able to achieve on audiovisual support, in the case of 9/11 media seem to have unsettled our notion of reality and the cognitive nature of our memories.

I therefore argue that the normalizing and hollowing effect here outlined may be associated not only with Butterfield's comment on war as "one of the many things on TV" (amnesiac normalization), but also with the media's resistance to reflecting the complexities of the attacks. Media's façade of pluralism turns into a confusing relativism that fails to offer

a believable, i.e. authentically historicized account of their genesis and aftermath ((hi)story and accountability). Indeed, it is the media intersection with politics that returns a sense of fiction and oversimplification. We perceive the attacks as encircled by a virtual nihilism when thinking to their media representation and, simultaneously, we get a sense of ideological misrepresentation when thinking of their political treatment. In fact, despite the massive television coverage of the attacks, as Jeffory Clymer synthesizes, we were missing

> historically informed, contextualized analysis of terrorism, of America's complicated history in the Middle East, of our "drug war's" paradoxical relationship with the Taliban, or even America's earlier covert military training and outfitting of the mujahideen's [sic] resistance to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan during the 1980s. (215)

Describing it as an example of annihilation and ideological forgery through media, Clymer alleges that no one claimed responsibility for 9/11. Although Osama Bin Laden praised the attacks without laying his complicity open (perhaps expecting to be the target of retaliation for his 1998 fatwa on America and for his extremist sedition from Saudi Arabia), the "narrative" of Good against Evil was readily set up, along with a surrounding cluster of "projected meanings onto the tragedy" that commentators had to devise in this void of accountability (Clymer 216), such as the US as the linchpin of global capitalism, the particular target of the Twin Towers as a metonymy of this assumption, the backward conditions of the Islamic world and their hate towards Western consumerist society, the end of American innocence, and so on.

Commenting on the proliferation of non-explanatory fictions, or half-truths, Alain Badiou identifies nihilism and indifference as the interpretive ciphers of 9/11. He argues that, despite the "paralyzing stupefaction" that the view of the collapsing towers brought about, 9/11 has been a huge, "lengthily premeditated, and yet silent" murder for which no one really 'has claimed responsibility:'"

> All the formal traits of the crime of New York indicate its nihilistic character: the sacralisation of death; the absolute indifference to the victims; the transformation of oneself and others into instruments ... but nothing speaks louder than the silence, the terrible silence of the authors behind the crime. For affirmative, liberating, non-nihilistic political violence is not only always claimed, but finds its essence in claiming. (44-45)

We will return to "silence" as an element that propels narrative and ethical demands, but here we can notice that, while Baudrillard blames nihilism on the system that was attacked, Badiou signals that nihilism is reciprocal and that the 9/11 attacks have proved that "there is no world," no globalized entity (a fiction, indeed) except the political world of "'Western'" governments and billionaire "'terrorists'" (47-48).

Disregarding the interdependence between media, politics and capital, then, prevented hermeneutic endeavors and the search for logical complexity in the interpretations of the tragedy. It is as though media deliberately increased confusion while holding up the dichotomy sponsored by the Bush Administration for its own self-preservation. As Robert W. McChesney points out regarding the war campaign that followed 9/11, CNN President

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Walter Isaacson balanced war coverage to make the network *and* the American government credible both in the eyes of international audiences, who are notoriously more sarcastic about any pro-war discursive allusion, *and* in the eyes of domestic viewers, who would be outraged to listen to blunt criticism about the military reaction pursued by the US. In this way, CNN provided "two different versions of the war: a critical one for the global audience and a sugarcoated one for Americans" (116). McChesney reports that Isaacson "instructed the domestic CNN to be certain that any story that might undermine support for the US war be balanced with a reminder that the war on terrorism is a good war" (116). Along similar lines, Douglas Kellner relates that, during the war on Afghanistan, CNN "executives circulated a memo telling reporters that if they showed news unfavorable to the United States, such as civilian casualties from U.S. bombing there, they should remind viewers that thousands of Americans died in the 9/11 attacks" (*Media Spectacle* 37). However, far from providing interpretation, media advanced a faux pluralism that ultimately shifted interpretive grounds and only endorsed the "US" versus "them" Manichaeism propounded by the Administration.

Considering these processes of meaning-making, annihilation, ideological reduction and subsequent apathy that arose from 9/11 and its versions, I identify what we could call the "forked" rhetoric of media and politics, in which both discourses are essentially closed (or falsely open) and rooted in the same rationale: exploiting 9/11 for consensus.[3] I conjecture a semi-circular rhetorical movement between the two systems, from politics to media back to

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[3] For example, in her *NYT Review* article, Joan Didion pointed out how the word "hero" began to circulate massively in order to sentimentalize and ignore "the meaning of the event in favor of an impenetrably flattening celebration of its victims." This point is expanded upon by Judith Butler in her book *Precarious Life* (2004). Didion, Joan. "Fixed Opinions, or The Hinge of History." *New York Times Review of Books*, 16 Jan. 2003: 54-57 (54).

politics through the pivotal node of 9/11: this model imagines no space for alternative rhetoric and admits no input from recognized external sources such as international political organizations or non-mainstream media. Peter Elbow defines "forked rhetoric" as a "noncivic" language, such as the language of the religious parables, which is "designed *not* to be understood by part of the audience – designed to divide the audience into 'us versus them' – designed to foster conflict, not cooperation – designed to help us *beat* the enemy who won't understand our rhetoric" (264). Religious parables provide normative and moralistic teachings by ruling out ways of conduct and by upholding other exemplary ones through allegorical narratives. While the "forkedness" of religious language may be questioned (although it is legitimate to contrast faith and *exempla* to dialectical methods of reasoning), the dichotomy and speculations more or less consciously fabricated by networks and government's representatives indicate that both parts offer intertwined, closed and balanced readings of 9/11 and the US war to avoid open political dissent. Even more so, religious vocabulary is one of the major rhetorical appeals that Bush relied on in his speeches immediately following the tragedy.[4]

This variously manifested "forkedness" is embodied, for example, by the way media played up "war fever." As Kellner states in his book on media spectacle, the right-wing

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[4] See Graham, Phil, Keenan, Thomas, and Dowd, Anne-Maree. "A Call to Arms at the End of History: A Discourse-Historical Analysis of George W. Bush's Declaration of War on Terror." *Discourse & Society* 15.2-3 (May 2004): 199-221. The authors point out the substitution of God by the American State/Nation in a Bush's Speech five days after 9/11: "We're a great nation. We're a nation of resolve. We're a nation that can't be cowed by evil-doers. I've got great faith in the American people. If the American people had seen what I had seen in New York City, you'd have great faith, too. You'd have faith in the hard work of the rescuers; you'd have great faith because of the desire for people to do what's right for America; you'd have great faith because of the compassion and love that our fellow Americans are showing each other in times of need" (208).

media machine made up by the *Wall Street Journal*, the Murdoch-owned Fox TV and the extremist Republican websites were the main propaganda vehicles for the Bush-Cheney military and industrial program of world hegemony after 9/11 (Bush with the Carlyle Group and Cheney with the Halliburton). At the same time, "the mainstream corporate media [stood] in the middle between hard-right conservative and liberal-progressive discourse" (*Media Spectacle* xi), with a clear bias toward the Bush administration during his Presidency.[5] After the beginning of the war in Afghanistan in October 2001 – which had already received ample justification through the (non-unanimous) comparison of 9/11 with Pearl Harbor (Denzin and Lincoln xiii, xvi) – an explosion of patriotism inflamed public opinion in a way that, Kellner writes,

> the country had not seen since World War II. Media frames shifted from 'America under Attack' to 'America Strikes Back' even before any military action was undertaken…the networks generated escalating fear as the mouthpieces of the military-industrial complex demanded military action… The media, especially Fox TV and the cable news networks, hyped these reports and helped foment growing mass hysteria that made the public susceptible to political manipulation. (*Media Spectacle* 36-37)

In this way, media and politics branched out from 9/11 as sustaining the same reality-making design, which was basically propagandistic and misleading. The same happened with the Iraq

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[5] Kellner calls mainstream corporate media "print, broadcasting, and digital media owned by the big corporations, or media conglomerates, of "NBC/RCA/General Electric, Murdoch's News Corporation, ABC/Disney, Viacom/CBS and AOL/Time Warner," this latter also owner of CNN, though he treats Fox as a specific case of propaganda dissemination (*Media Spectacle* xx).

war that began in March 2003. As Edward Herman writes, when 9/11 occurred 3 per cent of the American population believed that Saddam Hussein had had a role in the attacks, but when the Iraq war campaign started 45 per cent believed he was actually involved: "[t]his was the disinforming result of the coordinated effort of the war-makers and the media" (178). These dynamics clearly prove how an intertwined opinion manipulation not only legitimates military actions through misinformation, but plants wicked ghosts in the narrative of the events to foster consensus around their chasing and killing (a plot recently brought to an end by Bin Laden's elimination). Implicitly, such contrived design necessarily establishes the "enemy of evil" as the good, faultless party.

Recalling Baudrillard's simulacral ontology and Seymour Hersh's statement that George W. Bush "believes that the mere utterance of [his] phrases makes them real" (qtd. in Bronfen 21), Elizabeth Bronfen backs the idea of a political reality literally produced by media; yet, she also points to the weakness of such process. Again, within a forked, bifid rhetorical pattern, politics claims control over images, statements, events that flow in the public sphere through media. Bronfen argues, however, that, "while mediatized images and political realities are mutually implicated" (23), the suppressed, alternative narratives return and unmask the hypocrisy of the system through the system itself. Bronfen makes the example of Condoleezza Rice (National Security Advisor at that time) who, during the 9/11 commission hearings (held between 2003 and 2004) "announced that the invasion of Iraq had removed a source 'of violence and fear and instability in the world's most dangerous region,'" but the split television screen also showed the headline that "Iraq's interim interior

minister Nuril Al-Badran" was resigning and practically leaving police forces out of control (24). This "disjunction of information," or "incommensurability," shows the "fundamentally self-contradictory nature of the reality production and reality management perpetrated by our media networks," being an "uncanny moment" where the system is de-mythologized by the fissures it exposes (24).

Bronfen's argument supports the idea that, despite the media and politics' efforts to sustain each other (in that semi-circularity I conjecture), to create a coherent fictional reality is impossible. Her quasi-psychological interpretation of the return of the repressed in television broadcasts signals that "the American government's claim of sovereignty over all representations of political reality" (36) cannot always be met. Bronfen discusses the Abu Ghraib pictures that shocked public opinion as another example of such loss of control.[6] Quoting Susan Sontag's *New York Times* essay on these infamous pictures, "Regarding the Torture of Others," Bronfen writes that, according to Rumsfeld, "the soldiers are rogue not for having abused prisoners, but for not following protocol: for being tourists out of control" (33). Sontag used this image of the tourist to synthesize Rumsfeld's comment that, nowadays, soldiers overseas are "running around with digital cameras and taking these unbelievable photographs and then passing them off, against the law, to the media, to our surprise" (qtd. in Sontag), so that censorship has become harder to apply with respect to the

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[6] The Abu Ghraib scandal began in 2004, when military police personnel of the United States Army perpetrated physical and psychological abuses on prisoners held in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The pictures of such tortures were then released to *The New Yorker* and the CBS network, which talked about them in its primetime news magazine. Following the shock of the public opinion, a criminal investigation was started by the US Army Criminal Investigations Command, which led to remove seventeen soldiers from duty and to convict eleven of them for dereliction of duty, prisoner abuse, and aggravated assault among other charges.

past – since soldiers circulate their experiences not through letters anymore, but through widespread technological means. Rumsfeld also added that other videos and photographs from the Abu Ghraib prison existed, but they were not going to be "released to the public" because it would have made "matters worse" (Sontag). As Sontag points out, things would have been worse for the Administration and not for the victims of those brutal tortures. Indeed, even though no member of the US armed forces was ever charged with supplying these photographs to the media, Rumsfeld and the Administration made every effort to keep everything under control in the form of denial and media silencing. Nevertheless, this case appears as a clear "loss of control" over the forked scheme media/politics since the media ultimately did not self-censor and exercised a right of pre-emption on information release.[7]

The Abu Ghraib scandal, then, represents a horrifying example of a leak in the management of the post-9/11 political aftermath, a moment when the worst imaginary about war materialized into pictures that hurled a brutal "alternative narrative" at the good vs. evil dichotomy upheld by the Administration. If politics lays claim to the world picture that media build, media tacitly shield the incumbent political class and its interests. Still, unpredictable events may suddenly expose the fragility of such an alliance and its forked rhetoric. In my discussion of 9/11 novels, the importance of alternative narratives is crucial not only because they challenge the reliability of information systems and political bodies, but also because these narratives provide a space for truth and authenticity, regardless of whether they are unpleasant, uncivilized, or positive and ethical. Unfortunately, the Abu

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[7] One could think about Wikileaks as the extreme example of uncensored information that circulates freely with a clearly subversive potential against official political and media systems.

Ghraib pictures became a narrative of the violence and sadism of US military forces in Iraq; yet they contributed to destabilizing the specious overarching scheme of Manichaeism advanced by the government's representatives. David Simpson even argues that they prompted a type of negative identification with the US soldiers as "prankster," refuting their idolization as 9/11 victims or war heroes (133). Of course one would hope such outrageous acts would never happen and we might be so cynical to think that those pictures were instrumentally used to strike a blow against the Iraq war campaign. Nevertheless, that moment of authentic brutality forced public opinion to mull over alternative narratives to "just war" and one-way victimization.

My interest here, however, is not to examine US war campaigns and their shocking images or reports, nor the role of technologies in spreading uncontrolled information, but rather to parse the specific counter-narratives (or alternative narratives) of 9/11 in the form of novels. I consider those counter-narratives as constructive and challenging responses to the reductive and moralistic scheme of "us" vs. "them," a scheme I am even resistant to define as "narrative," since it sounds more like a series of endless variations of the same Good/Evil master trope (civilization/barbarism; West/East; Christianity/Islam; freedom/orthodoxy; democracy/dictatorship and so on) – a trope that precisely reminds us, again, of the atemporal, normative structure of religious parables rather than of dialectical historical processes. As we can infer from the elements we have examined so far, the oversimplification of 9/11 produced by the partnership of media and politics is rather sterile in terms of "knowledge," which is the sense of the etymological origin of the word

"narrative" (from the Latin *gnarus*, "knowing" – initial consonant "g" fell). I assume indeed that a narrative, regardless of the medium that conveys it, would produce forms of knowledge in the author and the reader/spectator, i.e. a change of their cultural horizon and reality perception through the development/apprehension in time of characters and actions (whether fictional or historical). In the context of 9/11, then, I suggest that, while media packaged a ready-made "fictional scheme" of the event by rehearsing dramatic binaries (thus failing to create a persuasive narrative, if any at all), the genre of the novel employed "fictional" tools to fashion "true narratives" of real experiences of suffering, engendering an experiential, authentic knowledge as I will discuss in the next sections.[8]

So far I have looked at how major intellectuals read the attacks of 9/11 as a historical occurrence that generated nihilism, spectacle and semantic void. An event that was always already there in the popular American iconography of disaster and collective repressed desire for annihilation of capitalistic symbols, 9/11 was a strong symbolic act of death against a system that denies death its value. While media momentarily amplified the terrorists' gesture (especially by rerunning the Twin Towers video over and over), they also silenced its meanings and memory through the flux of images of war that followed, leaving the witness/spectator in a cognitive limbo with respect to 9/11 and its contextual implications. Unable to provide a reliable interpretation that was also a complex explanatory narrative, the mediatic-political machine worked to exploit the attacks to fulfill the Administration's

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[8] For a thorough discussion of Manichaeism, dramatic presentation of moral conflicts through television, and 9/11 see Andrew Norris, "'Us' and 'them:' the politics of American self-assertion after 9/11" in *The Philosophical Challenge of September 11* (eds. T. Rockmore, J. Margolis and A. Marsoobian), where the author also discusses Zygmunt Bauman's vision of the personalization of politics.

agenda of expansionism and ended up perpetuating for the audience a series of déjà-vu without critical depth. In the effort to combat such nihilism and unilateralism, the narratives of the tragedy at a personal and literary level did what other genres or media could not do: they gave the national catastrophe complexity, perspective and substance and they contained ideological readings of 9/11 by opening up an ethical and critical narrative space that is both situated and utopian.

Chapter 2

What public discourse after 9/11? Positioning Trauma in New York City

I have hinted at the fact that 9/11 was an event that generated multidisciplinary discourses and I have discussed above some of the most relevant intellectual and political reactions to the attacks. Such readings consider the terrorist attacks an unequivocal historical occurrence, an external aggression against a Western system of values that has had, and still has, cultural and epistemological consequences for our interpersonal relationships, lived experience and beliefs. However, both the intellectual and political reactions to 9/11 tend to construct polarized and conceptual interpretations of the catastrophe, thus obfuscating the level of material, private experience of those who experienced the attacks *in situ* − or even exploiting private bereavement for propaganda purposes in the case of the media-political machine. On the one hand, these two arenas of public rhetoric stand in reciprocity: while the intellectual discourse aims to dismantle and demystify the political one, the corporate media and political apparatus abridge intellectual complexities to convenient moral values. On the other hand, in this mutual networking, both *facies* of "high culture" distance themselves from the private sphere of the individual, where the traumatic effects of 9/11 grew and took up a tangible, unsettling dimension.

However, dominant intellectual and political positions do not constitute the only "public" dimensions of the overall reaction to 9/11. The actual traumatized victims and New York witnesses (those who lost family members in the attacks and those who live in the city,

considering it their "home") worked through their own grief in communal ways that, in their externalization, stayed deeply rooted in individual psyches and languages of suffering and mostly remained separate from "upper" public spheres. In this way, the provisional historical subject of the families of 9/11 victims did not claim that tropes of innocence, patriotism or "golden isolation" had been broken, nor did they expect that "justice" or repairing actions had to be undertaken. Their hopeful and composed vision(s) of the tragedy grew from "below," from a "lower" level where cultural and political superstructures had been shattered by the pure, structural truth of death at home. A fracture immediately opened in the selves of these victims, whose private and public positions in the economy of the events demanded a reconfiguration. This suggests that ethical formulations of conflicts, communal strategies of psychological survival, hopeful scenarios of integration and narratives of consolation and solace that arose from the group of 9/11 families (and from New Yorkers more generally) went on unacknowledged or dis-integrated from the mainstream coherent picture of a clash of civilizations.

It might be useful to complement and expand on our observations through some concepts that Jürgen Habermas developed in his theory of modern societies, from *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) up to *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (1990). According to Habermas, the private sphere of existence is the arena where beliefs and behaviours are formed but are not necessarily meant to stay. The aspects that characterize such private existence (affection, morality, human relationships, leisure, exchange of goods, freedom from law among others) affect the way an individual

enters the public sphere: what s/he brings to it and how s/he decides to establish and transform its status and functions. In Habermas' view, the public sphere was created in the Eighteenth century with the rise of the bourgeoisie, whose newly gained class consciousness, educational tools and socio-economic independence afforded original cultural and existential spaces such as the literary cafes, the press, and any other social *loci* where meanings and opinions were articulated and debated collectively (at present, the Internet may be in many ways considered the technological metaphorization of such sphere). Within the Enlightenment culture, the public sphere became the domain of *rational thought* where individuals, through "communicative action" and critical discussion, took account of multiple voices and contributed for the first time in history to form a "public opinion".[9] As Habermas puts it:

> [t]he bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason. (*Structural Transformation* 27)

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[9] Habermas, Jürgen. *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990. "Communicative action" is a form of social understanding and promotion of well being that descends from a public discourse where language exhibits a purpose of integration and solidarity. Social action can never be individualistic for Habermas, as it gets thwarted by systems above it (hierarchies, ideologies, economies); instead, it is always guided by a sense of collective reconciliation and harmony.

Without any individual particularism and regarding themselves as a body, private citizens became equals in the public sphere, where they promoted disinterested reflection and outlined common concerns regarding civic life together. Public opinion reflected a common consensus (emerging from free discussion on public matters) on how citizens should relate collectivity to the "Sphere of Public Authority" and its political decisions (the government as a third separate sphere) and how they could "vehicle" the "needs of society" to such Authority (*Structural Transformation* 30-31). In his volume on diverse citizenry and legitimate polity, Habermas writes, "[t]he opinion-formation uncoupled from decisions is effected in an open and inclusive network of overlapping, subcultural publics having fluid temporal, social, and substantive boundaries" (*Between Facts and Norms*, 306).

In Habermas' theory, then, the ideal public sphere is regulated by a rational use of communicative linguistic strategies that nonetheless welcome private ethical considerations (instead of cutting them out) in the management of social complexity. In the ambiguous trajectory of modern capitalist societies, however, the ideal of a rational public sphere has been transformed, if not dismantled, into a world of domination and exclusion by the same rational method (in its ideologizing technological and scientific embodiments) that claimed to liberate it. The discussion of values within a self-legitimated civic public sphere has been superseded by the instrumental and ideological "reason" of contemporary elites, who pretend to secure the liberal constitutional social order but actually weaken the democratic participation of autonomous subjects in the civic life.

Assisted by Habermas here for the purposes of our analysis of how different public subjects responded to 9/11, we then distinguish the public sphere in which the "victims" have spoken authentically and without mediation about their own individual trauma, pouring their suffering and fears into a shared ethical language of hope – a Habermasian "communicative action," where human agency is marked by participation and use of "reason" in the service of the common good; and the public sphere of Authority (Habermas would probably not define it "public") in which both critical intellectuals and political leaders have developed unequivocal diagnoses of the terroristic aggression, either omitting or misconceiving the "common good" altogether and failing to see interdependency as the basis for a global political community.

As a matter of fact, it is undeniable that these administrative-executive, scholarly and popular-public reactions, although separate for analytical convenience, may depend upon each other in various ways. As in any traumatic occurrence, political strategies and cultural schemata may impinge on individual behaviours (episodes of racial profiling and discrimination against Arab Americans, who were more or less openly identified with the enemy by the government, multiplied in the wake of the attacks); and individual behaviours, in their public communicative action, may induce changes in the collective stance of the population, or affect the official decisions of the administration (for example, the struggle of the survivors and victims' families to participate in the US national security investigation and

the demands they placed on the Victims' Compensation Fund).[10] However, the victims' public sphere of 9/11 rarely penetrated or contributed to shape elite discourses. On the basis of the manipulative rhetoric that we have identified in the previous chapter and of the scarce permeability among the spheres here outlined, private grief (as externalized/rationalized in its own self-referential sphere with ethical intent) remains the most authentic, ineffable, and unquestionably "real" aspect of 9/11 that clashes with a specific set of reductive and confused public discourses in the immediate aftermath.

This is not to say that the political management or the intellectual community ignore private suffering, or that they have only produced unacceptable readings of 9/11. Still, these cultural provinces transfer individual grief to an abstract level, where it evolves into a collective, archaic fantasy of pain and offence (that is extended to the entire Western world) and into a dramatic scenario of belligerent factions (that provides an outlet for what they pretend be the survivors' and the nation's feelings of revenge) where alternative discourses of social integration based on communicative action/reason are smoothed over. In the shift from private/public to public/authoritative that is mediated by hegemonic discourses, the

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[10] See Read, Jen'nan Ghazal. "Discrimination and Identity Formation in a Post-9/11 Era." Amaney, Jamal, and Nadine Naber, eds. *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008. 305-317. In his essay, Read provides evidence that after 9/11 Muslim Arab Americans were more subject to racial profiling and (self-)marginalization than Christian Arab Americans, whose religious identity, steadier immigration history and lighter skin offered a bridge to mainstream American Culture. For the opposite case of private citizens affecting the administrative decisions, see Bean, Hamilton. "'A Complicated and Frustrating Dance:' National Security Reform, the Limits of Parrhesia, and the Case of the 9/11 Families." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 12.3 (Fall 2009): 429-459. As Bean explains, the families of victims and survivors of 9/11 were not afraid of developing public and interpersonal forms of grief communication, which translated into a rhetoric of destabilization of the political elites and into attempts at shaking the exclusionary institutional rhetoric that suppresses the citizens' voices.

accountability and authenticity of 9/11 as a traumatic experience told directly by victims or witnesses may get lost, repressed, or commodified.

To acknowledge the public discourse of witnesses and victims (categories that we will discuss more at length further on) means to consider it an essential contribution in the construction of the cultural memory of 9/11. While two days after the attacks George W. Bush proclaimed Friday, September 14th a national day of remembrance, in which he invited Americans to "mourn with those who have suffered great and disastrous loss" and to take time off from work to attend memorial services throughout the nation, he also made remarks on September 16th about how "the American people must be patient" in the war on terrorism as it may take a while. He also added that "[p]eople will be amazed at how quickly we rebuild New York; how quickly people come together to really wipe away the rubble and show the world that we're still the strongest nation in the world." "There will be times when people don't have this incident on their minds."[11] Regrettably disassociating the rhetoric of mourning from that of remembrance, yet confining both to the realm of ancillary practices in the larger military and economic effort, Bush implied that memorials per se do not shape history and are only incidental in the cultural memory of, and reaction to, 9/11. The quick removal of the rubble coincides in the end with the removal of the "incident" itself from public consciousness and its substitution with a fantasy of domination and a reality of war.

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[11]See the discourse and the remarks at http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/homeland/index.html and http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html, respectively. In her 9/11 novel, Lynn Sharon Schwarz quotes Bush's remark about "forgetting" 9/11 as if it were a shameful thing to remember.

On the contrary, I contend that historical narratives and memory generated by trauma contributes to instil deeper ethical and cultural sensitivity into individual and collective consciousness, such that human beings and the institutions that grant those human beings rights and respect will always be valued. In his defence of biographical witnessing against forgetfulness in the context of many recent histories of traumatization (South-African Apartheid, American slavery, Balkan War, 9/11 and others), Allen Feldman illustrates this point. He states that individual biographies always need to be "re-audited" to attain an ethical "anamnesis" of the actual perpetrated violence (164), so that the historical present may always re-authenticate them in their own context.[12] Feldman writes:

> [i]n many zones of political emergency, the normalization and routinization of violence was accompanied by structures of deniability built into the very strategy of violent enactment. In other words, political terror not only attacks the witness but also the cultural capacity and resources needed to bear witness, particularly if we consider cultural memory as a performative medium requiring agents, spaces, and reserved temporalities for anamnesis. These social institutions disappeared in the general attrition of social securities achieved by political violence. The impetus for biographical visibility and its public presentation was precipitated from the

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[12] In the Platonic philosophy, *anamnesis* was an epistemological concept that described the "recollection," the "rediscovery" of knowledge through the Socratic Method of midwifery. The teacher aids the student to uncover, to give birth to the knowledge that, unlike the learning that comes from sensory experience, has always been inside her and that she had forgotten through the shock of coming to life. Therefore the superior form of knowledge is not a proper "learning" of notions, but a recollection of what is innate in us. Here Feldman employs the term to invoke a history of critical memory that includes those "fragments" of violent experiences that are not integrated in the structured narratives of nation progress, either because curtailed, or jettisoned.

militarization and erasure of the structures of the everyday, through which personhood was once sustained. (172)

Feldman argues that political violence, and thereby the violence of the political narrative discourse, may efface biographical accounts of suffering since it can transform them from ethnocentric or topographic (material) experiences into a "symbolic capital" (184) that serves the purpose of enshrining a national epic of redemption (he looks in particular at the South African Apartheid case). However, while the performative display of private suffering by witnesses may be fundamental in determining the significance of the traumatizing experience – for example, the post-apartheid South African hearing processes about the violation of human rights were held in churches, schools and other local venues to let victims truly speak from (and for) their own community – such "collective authentication" (176) may be easily reduced by media and political economies to a ceremony of "cathartic trauma exposure" (184) that functions both as a therapy for the collectivity and as a precedent for war, or social revolt. It is therefore imperative to re-examine and keep alive the local contexts of suffering and avoid using them to justify further violence. With reference to 9/11, Feldman states that

[a]ny exhaustive ideological appropriation of history's survivors should be an occasion for political wariness because of its potential to legitimate new victims and new excuses for assault and harm—to commit violence "in the name of." No ideology of just war can function without the biographical totalization of the victim — the exhaustive ideological appropriation of the victim by moralized concepts such as trauma, the fact that the term "victim" or "trauma" permits definitive representations,

propels the stranded historical survivor into a condition of fiction and fetishism, and

bars the discovery of other truths and other subjects. (194)

Many public representations of traumatic histories, then, run the risk of usurping

suffering discursively and thus promoting its ideological standardization. This is what

happened with 9/11, where intellectual, mainstream media and political debates often

distorted, commodified or neglected the private, emotional trauma and devised a "proper

victim" and a "proper culprit" of history, advancing a revengeful, government-orchestrated

plan in which concepts such as "trauma" and "victims" were instrumentalized. We want

instead to acknowledge here that there have been ways in which private experiences of loss

and bereavement following 9/11 have not only transcended the victim/perpetrator symmetry,

but have also become "public" without necessarily being cannibalized by simplifying

schemes. It is indeed imperative to insist on the fact that New York citizens experienced the

terrorist attacks specifically as a "private" traumatic shock that either led them to losses of

family members, friends and acquaintances, or forced them to be material witnesses of the

disaster, either in its epicentre, or from various places within the nation. Most of all, the

experience of New Yorkers is specific and situated, as they continued to "inhabit" that space

even if they were not in the city when the tragedy occurred. Along with New York citizens,

the non-American families who lost members in the attacks constitute part of this 9/11 community.[13]

Of course, their "private," intimate way of experiencing 9/11 morphed into a "public display of suffering" that was often not reflected by institutional rhetoric. Immediately after the attacks, for example, images of destruction were not the only ones in the city, since photographs and posters of missing persons inundated streets and covered up walls and debris. These private portraits, Marianne Hirsch observes, were "the only smiling faces in the city" (73), quickly shifting from signs of hope to paraphernalia for funerary memorials as time went by. Such pictures were signifiers of intimacy and of happy familial contexts that were not originally intended for public use, but that were charged with tragic irony and awareness when publicly exposed amidst the ruins. Occupying a liminal space between *oikos* (household, the private realm) and *polis* (the city, the public sphere), then, New York citizens and victims' families claimed (in the first person plural) *their own* collective identity as victims by virtue of their private psycho-social wound and intimate hope to find their next of kin alive and to see ceasefire enacted.[14] Their communal, public language of loss stemmed

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[13]Notoriously, the number of casualties is still a matter of debate. The CNN maintains a memorial and a list of the victims of 9/11 at http://edition.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2001/memorial/lists/by-name/ where, however, does not provide a synthetic fact sheet. We know that the memorial at Ground Zero that opened on the 10th anniversary of the attacks features 2,983 names (nbcnewyork.com). The fact sheet at http://www.wtc911.us/wtc_911_facts.html reports that 2,749 death certificates were filed relating to the WTC attacks, as of February 2005. Of these, 77% of the dead were male, 23% female. The median age for the victims was 39. About 12% were foreign nationals.

[14] *Oikos* and *polis* are concepts addressed again by Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). In ancient Greece, he writes, such spheres of action were interdependent. Citizens were allowed to enter the public life only if they had proved to be dependable "masters" of their household (by looking after other family members, having an income and, possibly, owning slaves). Much as these formulations of private and public interdependence may sound outmoded for their content or not strictly applicable, they still represent useful categories of analysis for a traumatic instance.

closely and justifiably from their private bereavement and therefore authentically transformed grief into historical and cultural memory. Whoever spoke in their place in the symptomatic aftermath could only do so in a postured, vicarious way, describing the attacks as the conspiracy of an enemy, or a terroristic event of unprecedented effects, rather than as a human tragedy within a designated material space. The local affective reaction is important in establishing the truth that New Yorkers and victims' families wanted to narrate about themselves, all the more so because the towers, with their massive death toll in such a narrow space, became the "official sign of the tragedy" (Morrione 161) under which the Pentagon and the missed White House attack were subsumed.

Consequently, although intellectual, political and private/public discourses may intersect, they play different and often antithetical functions in the interpretations of 9/11. In terms of scholarly positions and personal reactions, for example, Ann Kaplan has noted that the collapse of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon failure unleashed different worldwide orders of critical discourses, whose specific hermeneutical nature is determined by the distance from, or closeness to, Ground Zero (*Trauma Culture* 15-16). She argues that from Europe mostly came the symbolic interpretation of the terrorist attacks as a political "bath of reality" for the Americans, who had hitherto felt invulnerable from the spectacular iconography of possible – but ultimately unlikely – external invasions that we have previously outlined with Žižek. On the other hand, according to Kaplan, the fresh national wound elicited the more "emotive" American response, which was the result of the physical and psychical closeness to the trauma of the obliterated towers. After all, the skyscrapers did

not just represent brilliance, technology, phenomenal architecture and Western socio-economic success, as the metaphorical interpretation of the attacks would suggest. For New York residents, the towers were a specifically inhabited spatial universe, a living body rather than simply a stand-in symbol. In this sense, the individual commemoration of missing people, along with pictures, poetic images, personal accounts by New York citizens have no less cognitive insight and epistemic value than the critical perspective on the political implications of the attacks and they constitute the truth of the events as much as, if not more than, their official interpretation does.[15]

Expanding briefly on Kaplan's argument, I would like to remark that, in particular, the intellectuals' and victims' voices in the hermeneutics of 9/11 are at odds because of the different epistemological and ethical perspectives they embrace about what happened to US citizens on that day. Yet, both discourses carve out complementary interpretive angles on the disaster, so that larger, symbolic, critical gazes, on the one hand, and individualized responses of concrete pain and sorrow, on the other, equally underpin the cultural significance of the disaster from different points of view and perhaps in the same subject. Furthermore, both scholarly commentaries and private expressions of grief oppose, if not discredit, the political "narrative" set up by the Administration, as we have seen, and they can

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[15] I borrow the term "cognitive insight" from psychological studies of mental disorders and I apply it loosely to a context of traumatic experiences, in which victims may display "the impairment of objectivity about the cognitive distortions, loss of ability to put these into perspective, resistance to corrective information from others and overconfidence in conclusions." Cognitive insight is achieved when victims in narrating their experience use "distancing, objectivity, perspective, and self-correction." See: Beck AT, Baruch E, Balter JM, Steer RA, Warman DM. "A new instrument for measuring insight: the Beck Cognitive Insight Scale." *Schizophrenia Research* 68.2-3 (2004): 319-329. I argue that forms of private, direct narration of 9/11 helped to provide cognitive insight not only to the traumatized individuals but also to the community of listeners/readers. See also http://schizophreniabulletin.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2010/08/06/schbul.sbq085.full

be aligned in their common purpose to uncover and advance alternative "truths" to it – i.e. counternarratives. That is, while philosophers and pundits appeared as the "critical Other" of political pragmatism and media connivance with it, victims and witnesses filled a third, asymmetrical cultural space, in which their multifaceted individual narrations resisted formulaic explanations and represented an authentic plurality of conciliatory, non-dualistic views about 9/11.

More specifically, as a New Yorker, Judith Greenberg asserts that many of her fellow citizens refused to claim the position and identity of victims unless they had really lost someone they knew in the attacks. This was a respectful way to grant the particular status of traumatized subjects to the citizens who had actually suffered family losses directly at Ground Zero and could be the only ones to claim the right to "tell." While 9/11 blew up the equation home=safety for New Yorkers ("the city felt 'unhomey,'" Greenberg, 22), it generated feelings of vulnerability, unity, intimacy and support strongly connected with a sense of location. Another example of such "public intimacy" can be seen in the "Portraits of Grief," a series of more than 2400 short biographies of missing persons at Ground Zero published by the *New York Times*, starting from September 14, 2001, for fifteen weeks.[16] Using the above mentioned flyers and purposely avoiding the genre of the obituary, a few *NYT* reporters wrote down an entire imagined, and at the same time missing community that revealed itself to be varied in term of race, gender, religious credo, class, national origin, and

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[16] See the publication New York Times, Raines, Howell. *Portraits, 9/11/01: The Collected 'Portraits of Grief' from the New York Times*. New York: Henry Holt-Times Books, 2002. The "Portraits of Grief" are also archived online at <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/national/portraits/>.

that came to be identified with the wounded post-9/11 New York City. This indigenous operation of cultural memory elicited a huge reader response and moved the entire American nation because it effectively made each individual trauma public and "domestic" in the broader sense of the words. Kaplan further testifies that

> [t]he catastrophe may have forever changed New York City qua city, and New Yorkers as well. The trauma produced a new collective subject within the city; it created a kind of togetherness such as perhaps the city had never experienced before. It changed my personal relationship to the city, as a new subjectivity as a *New Yorker* emerged from the ruins. (*Trauma Culture* 23)

In light of these considerations, I argue that the multiple ways in which New Yorkers and victims' families spoke up and continued to narrate, interpret and live their own trauma could be defined as the *New-Yorkization* of 9/11. Conflating private bereavement with public memorialisation and, later on, questioning the US official activities (the investigative projects and petitions promoted by citizens about the role of CIA in 9/11, or about the lapses in the Kean Commission Report)[17] – this set of discursive practices could only be enabled from within the city by the "victims" of the tragedy to safeguard the specificity of their historical trauma before it was invested with distorted, heroicized, vicarious, or abstract value. Even though citizens of seventy-eight countries died in the Twin Towers attacks, their spatial and cultural relation to New York shaped their identities as victims (as well as their families'

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[17] See the websites http://www.911truth.org/ and http://www.justicefor911.org/, where various collectives of New York City express their dissatisfaction with the way the official investigations have been conducted and disclose information about the connections of Secret Services and US executives to international terroristic plots, oil-companies and markets.

responses to their deaths). The domestic disfigurement of New York certainly engendered empathy throughout the Western world and was overcharged symbolically, but it was a lethal occurrence that deserved subjective voicing and remembering beyond national belonging and within that specific space. This *New-Yorkization* of 9/11encompasses any counter-discourse coming from the survivors in New York City that refuses to silence the mourning and finds in ethical openness, memorialisation and constructive dialogue with institutions its most distinctive cipher – from religious appeals (the imam's at the Al-Abidin mosque in Queens told his congregation to pray for the killed and injured fellow Americans), to charitable donations and civic engagement (the Red Cross raised $3 million through Amazon.com in just two days), from extemporaneous and permanent memorials, to journalistic and public initiatives such as the *NYT Portraits* and the Victims Compensation Fund we mentioned above. All these forms of ethical and cultural working through are important and critically productive in the formation of US national historical memory, since they possess the truth of the proximity to the tragic Ur-phenomenon of 9/11. We share Walter Davis' point on 9/11 according to which, rather than reasserting "adolescent myths" of innocence and progress,

> [h]istorical memory must become instead the process of creating a tragic culture: one for whom memory is conscience and not hagiography; one for whom the past weighs like a nightmare precisely because it has not been constituted. (Davis 130)

To claim that voices rising from the wounded New York played a significant and often neglected role in the construction of 9/11 means that the traumatized subject always exists at a place in a particular time. Without denying that many types of postmodern

subjectivities may thrive in non-physical, uprooted environments (the internet, the media, the market), the victim or witness of trauma is anchored to a chronotope, to a space-time that functions both as a reminder of the shock and as a therapeutic landmark. This also goes against the idea that the whole nation was "traumatized" in the same way as the New Yorkers were; indeed, this kind of generalized (again, simplistic) assumption may foster the idea that the nation is a fully constituted subject, a mythical whole shaken from the outside rather than a symbolic framework that collapses in different ways and for its own deficiencies. As we will discuss shortly, Ground Zero represents the specific place out of which novels of trauma flourish. While recognizing that outlying reconstructions/interpretations of shocking events may also be legitimate, the people prompted and entitled to narrate 9/11 not simply as a cultural symptom or offence but as a material shock are those who suffered the injury *there*, as we said, *in situ*. DeLillo himself, for example, in his essay "In the Ruins of the Future" writes: "[p]eople running for their lives are part of the story that is left to us," as to lay claim to the process of recording the event of 9/11 through personal, situated storytelling.

Considering then the attacks primarily as a wound experienced by those New Yorkers who witnessed them and/or by those who (New Yorkers or not) lost their beloveds in them, we then aim here at discussing the narratives of the events as the result of such bond of identity with place. Working within the realm of narrative and verbal language, I distinguish between oral, immediate testimony and written, fictional accounts of the tragedy of 9/11. While I will be looking tangentially at the former, my study wants to emphasize the importance of trauma fiction as a genre that produces ethical knowledge and offers a space

for political and cultural imagination beyond the horizon of the "authorized" discourses we have identified above. New Yorkers (and New York novelists in particular) created narratives that are fundamental in the semantic economy of 9/11, since they help to form a body of counter-responses in alternative to the purely abstract (intellectual) versions of the events and against the simplified (political) ones. Along with the witnesses' first-hand, direct narrative accounts, novels of trauma constitute a genre that, by merging dialogism, narrative and fiction, and by prompting empathic interaction among author, characters and readers, enables productive experiences of affective knowledge and ethical understanding. These novels also envision a space within, and about, a tragedy that was previously unthought-of, opening up zones where characters act out their trauma and explore doubts, emotions and expectations – as it happens, for example, in instances of disinterested solidarity, like when Renata rescues and consoles a teenager she confuses with her niece in Lynn Sharon Schwartz's *The Writing on the Wall*.

Furthermore, I choose to look at written accounts of the tragedy and not at visual renderings of them, as I assume verbal language to be less obtrusive and diversionary than television formats for the particular ethical engagement it demands from the listener/reader. We will see how language, specifically in its novelistic form, defines and interprets 9/11 as a socio-historical event by fictionalizing and reprocessing loss and cultural shock in ways that real-time videos cannot. Written testimonies and accounts of trauma do not break into the houses and the minds of people distracting and confusing them, as newscasts and spectacularized reports of 9/11 most often did, but rather they allow their audience to form a

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contextual bond with the story they read about.[18] Instead of playing on empty voyeuristic desires, fiction allows for a vicarious experience of the narrated trauma, a trauma that, conversely, only witnesses are able to narrate due to their sense of consonance with, and vicinity to, the core of the tragedy.

However, it must be acknowledged that photography, as opposed to streaming videos, complements the exploratory and aesthetic functions of literature by providing a similarly vicarious experience of trauma suggested by the temporal and spatial dislocation of the still picture. Photography allows for a mournful meditation on its subject precisely because it gives the viewer time to fathom the circumstances it refers to. In Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, for example, Oskar turns to photography to make sense of his father's death at the WTC on 9/11. His surreal quest is constelled of pictures that complement it by locating particular subjects or details that help him to assimilate and process information about his father. Finally, the genre of traumatic fiction also allows the reader to re-inscribe herself as an empathic subject into her own world through the world of the narrative. I will look at the importance of language in articulating memories and hope, and at the value of narrative as a process of post-traumatic personal and cultural reconceptualization.

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[18] In *Trauma Culture*, for the more specific televised coverage of the wars in Iraq and Rwanda in 2003, Kaplan coins the expression "empty empathy" referring to the fleeting response anyone undergoes when looking at war or massacres' pictures on TV, whose historico-cultural background is unknown, unfelt and merely mediated.

Chapter 3

On the Relationship between Trauma and Ethics in 9/11 Fiction

> We are on the verge of imagining something else, aren't we?
> Can you feel the sentence forming?
> Marie Howe, "Tower Two"[19]

In traditional psychological terms, "trauma," which comes from the Greek word for "wound," refers to the "blow" one endures in a physical as well as psychical violent situation (Erikson 184). In the scientific literature on the topic, the range of potential traumas is wide and hard to pin down in a taxonomy: traumas can be private or collective, "sudden" or "sustained," direct or virtual, "dangerous" and "overwhelming" (Schein, Spitz, Burlingame, and Muskin, 114-15) and susceptible to encompass more than one of these definitions at the same time. Modern studies on trauma began in the 19th century in Paris, with the work of Jean-Martin Charcot in the field of neurology and mental illness, and continued with the systematization and formalization of psychoanalysis by Charcot's most brilliant student, Sigmund Freud. While Freud had studied extensively the origin and the forms of the concept, his definition of trauma was never stable or definitive. Jean Laplanche has summarized Freud's view of trauma as "[a]n event in the subject's life, defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization" (Laplanche 465). This commonly accepted

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[19] Poet Bob Holman put together two graphically-twinned poems with as many lines as the floors of the Twin Towers (110). He wrote "Tower One" rearranging the contributions submitted to his call for poetic lines on 9/11 advertised on the website www.peoplespoetry.org, whereas "Tower Two" is formed by lines invited from established poets such as Adrienne Rich and Robert Creeley. See http://www.peoplespoetry.org/pg_spotlighttwr.html.

generalization implies that, in spite of the breadth of their range, traumatic occurrences involve such a threat to one's physical and psychical integrity that they seem to trigger universal human responses. Feelings of confusion, terror, helplessness and vulnerability are some of the most frequent reactions to any trauma, along with sensations of spatio-temporal displacement, guilt and failure.

In the twentieth century, medical and scientific discourses about trauma boomed after the two World Wars and the abominable experience of the Holocaust. During these wars, soldiers were confronted for the first time with a massive technological warfare and with experiences of the battlefields that were long and exhausting. For example, as Ben Shephard asserts, one of the most common symptoms of the war trauma evident in the soldiers of the First World War was the Combat Stress Reaction (CSR), also known as "shell shock" or "battle fatigue." This was defined by the APA (American Psychiatric Association) as a series of behaviors resulting from the stress of battle, which jeopardizes the combatant's readiness to fight back when surrounded by bombarding shells or grenades. The most common symptoms were slower reaction times, hesitancy, amnesia, paralysis, and disconnection from one's surroundings. Most of all, combatants experienced identity and role crises when sudden explosions, repetitive military attacks, and comrades' deaths "destroyed the illusions on which a soldier's self-control was based" (Shephard 31).

With the Second World War, psychiatric schemes of soldiers' rehabilitation had been implemented in the US and therefore much more attention was placed on the psychological traumatized individual returning from the battlefield (and not forced to reenter it, as it had

often happened during WWI). These public plans were offered not only to help the actual veterans recover, but also to contain and placate public concern about war, so that military actions could be framed negatively by public opinion (Shephard, xxiii). As to the Holocaust, no customized therapy was ever implemented after the post-Nazi Diaspora of the Jews and their genocide was instead followed by an uncanny, unspeakable silence through which the victims themselves kept the wound open and refused to enter a phase of mourning and working through. As we will discuss shortly, silence is a common reaction that underlies traumatic aftermaths and it concerned the reaction of the New York population as well after 9/11.

Based on these antecedents in medical history, trauma studies proper emerged after the Vietnam War and the recognition by APA of the diagnostic category of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD, 1980). In line with the objectives of previous APA rehabilitation plans, the creation of the PTSD pathological category of mental disorder was meant to foster public awareness about the effects of war and to support soldiers through specific counseling and therapy. PTSD entails symptoms of re-experience (flash-backs, frightening dreams or thoughts), avoidance (numbness, depression, faltering memory), and hyperarousal (irritability, anger, insomnia) in ways that were not present before the trauma.[20] While PTSD included the long-term effects of combat exposure among US veterans of the Vietnam War, it soon came to identify the symptomatology of victims who had suffered a particularly dangerous event, not necessarily a war-related injury or combat (as it was with CSR). This

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[20] See the American Psychiatric Association *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Washington, D.C., 1980.

category of mental illness is now widely applied to chronic psychopathological stress, which is normally treated employing the therapeutic principles of "proximity" and "immediacy."[21]

Over the last twenty years, trauma studies transcended the medicalized therapeutic discourse and migrated to other fields of inquiry that have made trauma a central concern of their disciplines, among them literature, history and cultural studies. In the Nineties, Cathy Caruth among others began to analyze representations of trauma in literature and to transform literary criticism combining tools derived from ethics, philosophy and psychoanalysis. While trauma theorists have insisted on different dimensions of the traumatic experience, they all seem to identify some common structural characteristics of historical trauma. Firstly, trauma is unrepresentable because it can be experienced only belatedly, in the future. As Caruth has written,

> [t]he pathology consists … solely in the *structure of experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. (*Trauma* 4–5)

According to this definition, a traumatic event unsettles the logical-chronological structures of a lucid narrative. Caruth's words suggest that trauma is a haunting presence governing the mind of the pathological subject, who experiences the original "image" or "event" only later on, in a temporally shifting cognitive framework. The traumatizing "image" or "event"

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[21] Dobson, Matthew. "Combat Stress Reaction." *The Encyclopedia of Stress*. Ed. George Fink. San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 2000, 495-501. According to these principles, "[p]sychiatric casualties should be treated on or near the battlefield [proximity]" and "as soon as possible after symptoms onset [immediacy]" (495).

possesses the subject and not the other way around. As we will see for example with Foer, trauma for Caruth implies that shocked subjects will have difficulties in weaving their history together as they will never be able to possess it "entirely" (*Trauma* 5). On the other hand, though, the fact that trauma resides not in the event itself but in the experience of it means that different traumatizing events may be shared and understood in the same way by different traumatized subjects. It also means that, to narrate trauma, we need other traumatic stories: trauma is what we make of it using a cross-fertilizing blending of experiences. The structure of trauma as a "pre-(hi)storical" experience (non-linear, symptomatic, partial) offers a common ground on which disparate (hi)stories may come together to serve as figurative resources for representation. In his appreciation of Caruth's perspective, Michael Rothberg observes that Caruth's notion is particularly relevant in the context of 9/11, as it provides a "link between cultures" (149), not only because it elicits the recognition of universal suffering, but because it detects a (cultural, anthropological) mode of reception that surpasses particularities. However, he also points out that such approach may exonerate those responsible for the attacks, as it may overlook the "social and political contexts that help to foster … acts of extreme violence" ("There is no Poetry" 151). Admittedly, the power of Caruth's definition of trauma is also her weakness, as it might tangle up traumatized subjects in the pure process of recognition of what they share instead of looking at their "differences" productively and dialectically.

Secondly, Caruth and others at the same time argue that "silence" is a common reaction to trauma. In times of shock, one of the first faculties to be impaired in the

traumatized victim is that of speech and verbal explanation of what it meant and means to suffer. In remembering what triggered her project of oral histories collected on the streets right after 9/11, Mary Marshall Clark says:

> [t]he next day, I remember noticing what a deep silence had fallen over New York — this city that was always filled with voices, that was never quiet. It was so unnerving, I immediately wanted to fill it back up with voices. I also began to worry that the media would distort the meaning of 9/11 — that the government, through the mass media, would impress the collective memory of 9/11 on people in a way that might not be true to individual memory or even to the diverse and collective memory that would grow from the ground up.[22] (Coe and Furl, "Interview")

Similarly, David Eng theorizes that "silence is not the opposite of speech but, indeed, its very condition of possibility" (86). In his examination of 9/11 and, in parallel, the AIDS pandemic of the Eighties as two examples of impoverished "public and politicized language of grief" (89), Eng insists on the importance of a melancholic phase for the traumatized individual, a moment in which her relationship with the past remains "open for continual re-negotiation" and permits the elaboration of an individualized discourse of identification that will transcend the silence without embracing the official language of mourning. Discussing indeed the post-9/11 language of nationalism as an inadequate form of mourning, Eng claims that minorities, working-class and immigrant groups were excluded from the "narrative of

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[22] Clark, Mary Marshall. "The September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project: A First Report." *The Journal of American History* 89.2 (Sep., 2002): 569-579.

white heteronormativity" (90) of unity and protection from the Islamic enemy sponsored by the government. Their histories were disavowed because they were not aligned with traditional notions of family and kinship promoted within such full citizenship in the nation-state. Therefore, their silence contains, Eng concludes, an "ethical call," an "ethical demand to provide another kind of language for loss, another story, another history" (94).

It is then clear that, if traumatic silence persists or the language of mourning is inadequate, psychological survival is at risk. In explaining how silence is necessary and yet it must be temporary for the trauma to be narrated and worked through, Dori Laub affirms that, when a collective trauma occurs, we are divided between "the imperative to tell" and the "impossibility of telling" (78-9). Recalling the historical tragedy of the Holocaust, he explains that it was an event "without witnesses" because its reality was denied by the Nazis, and therefore it remained "silent" for decades. By this he means that the Nazis convinced the victims that the truth was that they were actually subhuman. In this way, Jews had to maintain silence and accept their position, therefore denying any form of testimony. A witness is a witness to the truth of an event and the truth was that Jews were subhuman. In this way, to think of an outside of things was impossible, there was no outside. The very imagination of the other was no longer possible. This also means that a listener was not conceivable, and that both the Nazis and the Jews performed an obliteration of the audience. Laub says no one could step out of the totalitarian and dehumanizing frame to occupy the place of the witness.

Without making inopportune connections with the Holocaust, we might however use Laub's considerations to point out that many testimonial/memorial projects about 9/11 were instead centered on traumatic narrative, especially oral histories projects and short stories collections.[23] It was an event where testimony became an almost instantaneous obsession, not only in narrative but across media. The desire and the need to tell, record, represent what had happened became a form of paroxysm, given the unexpected nature of the event. Silence was indeed temporary and this suggests that the melancholic phase led to an even excessive working through. However, traumatic fiction as a form of working through testifies to the impossibility of containing the event in any story or approach. In his introduction to the volume *110 Stories: New York Writers after September 11*, Ulrich Baer writes that the author's stories "explore the possibilities of language in the face of gaping loss, and register that words might be all that's left for the task of finding meaning in – and beyond – the silent, howling void" (1). Whereas it is difficult not to sentimentalize an event of the magnitude of 9/11, as Ann Kaplan points out, it is also true that literature seared "the event into the collective imagination" (Baer 3). But "[i]nstead of providing solace, the work of fiction cauterizes the wound with uncomfortable questions and unflinching reflections" (Baer 3).

If we have said that the commonly acknowledged characteristics of trauma are, then, its non-representability as a belated event and its silencing, theories on the concept also argue that traumatic fiction has the power to establish meaning through a "language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 5, hereafter *UE*). It

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[23] See the volumes: Murphy, Dean E. *September 11: an Oral History*. New York: Doubleday, 2002, and Baer, Ulrich, ed. *110 Stories: New York writes after September 11*. New York: New York University Press, 2002.

correlates in complex and surprising ways what is known with what is unknown at the moment of trauma. Additionally, the literary experience bears "witness to some forgotten wound" (*UE* 5) because it allows readers to listen to what can be told only fragmentarily and it enables them to think critically through the disarticulations that trauma engenders. Key literary tropes of trauma that populate literature are for Caruth figures such as "departure, falling, burning, or awakening" (*UE* 5): they reappear insistently throughout the reconstruction of traumatic experiences and they continuously suggest new interpretations of them that exceed the text and the theory alike. Applying Caruth's arguments to novelistic modes, I suggest that each traumatizing experience, or even each one of the literary tropes she refers to, is a small form of death (physical, psychical, cultural, subjective or communal) that impairs the conscience of the narrating subject. Therefore literature comes in as a constructive resource for the shattered voice, whose everyday values and schemes of judgment call for a post-traumatic reorganization and reconception. Indeed, as Kai Erikson has noted, if "trauma" refers to a stress one endures, it is also the condition "produced by such a stress or blow" (Erikson 184). Therefore, trauma is also the story that the victim weaves around that blow, or wound; it is the way s/he fantasizes about it on a mental level and acts out on a practical level, a "poietic" mechanism that resonates in the word *Träumerei*, dreaming activity.

If trauma is unrepresentable per se, it may engender silence and it may become a testimony when reconstructed in a narrative, it also posits the conditions for an ethical practice in literature, or for traumatic literature as ethical practice. In the ethical novels here

analyzed, I specifically examine the relationship between "narrative" and "ethics" as the hallmark of traumatic fiction and evaluate how 9/11 blurs the distinction between private and public domains of experience in manifold ways. Caruth, along with Laurie Vickroy, fundamentally argues that the *ethical* nature of such narratives lies in the reciprocal positions that both the author and the reader take within the literary exchange. To Caruth, the "'crying wound of trauma represents an ethical call or address of the other to the self that 'demands a listening and a response'" (*UE* 9). For Vickroy, trauma fiction makes the reader experience "emotional intimacy and immediacy, individual voices and memories, and the sensory responses of the characters" (xvi). Therefore this type of fiction in particular is "ethical" because it "absorbs readers into personal and historical trauma" and it contributes to understand, on both private and public levels, the workings of "complex psychological quandaries that continue to haunt us all in more or less disguised forms" (xvi). In his argument against "redemptive narratives," i.e. narratives that provide closure without granting that the traumatized subject has actually healed, LaCapra affirms that, for traumatic fiction and working through to be "ethical,"

> certain wounds, both personal and historical, cannot simply heal without leaving scars or residues in the present; there may even be a sense in which they have to remain as open wounds even if one strives to counteract their tendency to swallow all of existence and incapacitate one as an agent in the present. (144)

LaCapra is preoccupied that traumatic historical phenomena may undergo facile explanations and provide convenient categorization in which the reader or listener of the traumatic

experience may easily find identification. Instead, he suggests that the ethical challenge for the subject is to find her own positioning even within a "strong" grid like that of the Holocaust.

The listener then plays a crucial role in the reception of the traumatic experience and in the ability to process it ethically. In a similar way, but in a context of a pedagogical analysis that invites role reversal, Geoffrey Hartman states that

> [i]f we superimpose the interactive relation of teacher and student on that of reader and text, literary study loses some of the chill which cognitive or constative theories have cast on it, and reading is restored as ethical (or metaepistemological). Ethical, because the readings are *addressed*, and not only formally (through an explicit or implicit dedication, or an analogy of literature and letters) but to the other as a responsive, vulnerable, even unpredictable being. (549)

In other words, in traumatic fiction ethics needs to be assumed "negatively" and not prescriptively. As David Parker points out in his study of ethics and fiction, the experience of modernity has made ethical issues "irrelevant" due to its vocation of liberalism, as it jettisoned altogether any code that could be "repressive, coercive, power-seeking, life-denying" and so on (30). Such rebuttal presupposes that ethics is prescriptive and, as Parker synthesizes, "categorical," "binary," "judgmental," and "reactionary" (31). An alternative to this ethical "anxiety" (Parker 35) was configured by the advent of pragmatism and the affective turn in literary and philosophical studies, whereby literature becomes a buttressing discourse of ethics (Rorty) or a form of moral philosophy itself (Nussbaum). Therefore, far

from embedding a normative ethical paradigm in the story, the author of fiction invites the reader to unravel the multiple ethical implications that any sudden rupture of the socio-historical order entails. In this sense, ethics dispels its prescriptive connotation and becomes a framework, a condition for literary imagination and historical confrontation.

While I welcome this ethical revisionism and the idea that shaping conflicts and resolutions through narrative imagination may constitute a philosophical activity, and while I stand by the claim that ethics *is* an activity, I am resistant to assigning ethical value to the literary enterprise *tout court*. Adam Zachary Newton proposes a similar totalizing ethical project for literature. Instead of relying on "ambiguous" formulations such as "ethics of reading," "ethics of fiction," "ethics of criticism," he simply theorizes "narrative *as* ethics: the ethical consequences of narrating story and fictionalizing person, and the reciprocal claims binding teller, listener, and reader in that process" (10-11). However, as the methodological framework of this study suggests, I rather believe that the definition of "ethical" should pertain solely to traumatic fiction, since I believe that ethics is invariably associated with narratives of testimony, of actual witnessing of, and accounting for, situations of profound suffering, and, finally, with the powerful call for listening placed on the reader that, for example, Caruth and Hartman conceptualize. In other words, ethics is linked to the narrative perception of the affective structure of trauma, and not with other particular "claims" that author or characters may put forward. On this point, I share Gayatri Spivak's considerations about 9/11 and the ethical potential that such traumatic historical occurrence might generate beyond specific intellectual or cultural claims. Spivak writes:

[w]hat seems important today, in the face of this unprecedented attack on the temple

of Empire, is not only an unmediated intervention by way of the calculations of the

public sphere— war or law—but training (the exercise of the educative power) into a

preparation for the eruption of the ethical. I understand the ethical, and this is a

derivative position, to be an interruption of the epistemological, which is the attempt

to construct the other as object of knowledge. Epistemological constructions belong

to the domain of the law, which seeks to know the other, in his or her case, as

completely as possible, in order to punish or acquit rationally, reason being defined

by the limits set by the law itself. The ethical interrupts this imperfectly, to listen to

the other as if it were a self, neither to punish nor to acquit. (93)

In looking at the value of narrative and fiction (two distinct and yet complementary

processes in the novels here considered), I then contend that, along with other media and

genres that use those processes, the novel can be a privileged means to make sense and move

beyond the shock and impasse that trauma generates. The novel specifically employs the

discursive power of verbal language along a temporal axis to process trauma, or imagine it

anew, accomplishing the labor of working through that necessitates a tension towards

verbalization, logical order and time. Since the actual chronotope of traumata remains

unrepresentable, the novel displaces traumatic reality onto fictional and acceptable scenarios

(acceptable to the writer and to the readers) and initiates through narrative a regulated

process of critical awareness about the psychological and historical dynamics of private and

public crises. Such awareness is made possible, then, by practices of story-telling and

symbolization, or metaphorization, or "figurative displacement" (Caruth, *Empirical Truths* 33) that, in the case of the novel, find in verbal language ways towards cognition and conceptualization. When offered to the reader, in fact, fragmented narratives of trauma invite reconstruction and reformulation and, while traumatic fiction may not provide resolution, it posits the conditions for it.

In particular, Foer, Schwarz and Delillo as novelists are themselves traumatized subjects who imbue their narratives with their own experience of 9/11 as New York citizens and "territorial" witnesses of the attacks to the Twin Towers. From this specific positioning, they envision New Yorkers who grapple with a redefinition of both their private and public selves, with the enactment of communal forms of mourning and mutual support, and with the cultural resistance to convenient master-narratives of consolation (such as the superiority of American civilization, the metaphorical re-territorialization of the violated space, the branding of heroism as a form of national pride, and so on). At the same time, by imagining ways to cope with trauma, the writer of traumatic fiction bestows on the listener the role of active witness, engaging his/her empathy and critical thinking (Vickroy) about the suffering that follows experiences of shock, loss or failure. In traumatic fiction, then, readers gauge their set of beliefs and expectations onto the narrative through a mechanism that LaCapra calls "empathic unsettlement," which involves "being responsive to the traumatic experience of others" (41) while maintaining a disciplined, detached reception of such experience. Resisting "full identification with, and appropriation of, the experience of the other would depend both on one's own potential for traumatization… and on one's recognition that

another's loss is not identical to one's own loss" (LaCapra 79). Only this mechanism, where the position of the reader/listener is clearly carved out, allows a hermeneutics of the traumatic narrative and an evaluation of its ethical implications. In the case of 9/11, then, American novelists accomplish an ethical project on various levels: they give voice to the victims of New York through their own, they use literary language to complicate the characters' voices and positions as they struggle to speak, or repress, the unspeakable, and they establish a "moral" structure within which those voices and ours reverberate reciprocally on issues such as guilt, knowledge, forgiveness, pity, solidarity.

If the post-traumatic novel is a system of signification that establishes through fiction the conditions for moral truths to emerge, it clearly must challenge the reader with a literary aesthetics that not only breaks down conventions of story-telling and narrative design (i.e. questioning itself), but it must also address the connection between the psychological and the political in subtle and provoking ways. While the link between private and public spheres may appear tortuous or even tenuous in the traumatic novels about 9/11, which offer us portraits of shattered domesticity and emotive individuals, it is indicative of the struggles of the protagonists to revitalize old bonds, to open up new ones and to reposition themselves in an often unrecognizable social arena. What these narratives evoke about the specific traumatic events of 9/11 is their unpredictability, singularity and elusiveness. For instance, these readings mostly grapple with the multiple significances of the events, whose historical singularity and novelty make them unreadable through existing epistemological and representational codes, especially the codes of war that were instead taken up right away by

the Bush Administration to justify military intervention in Afghanistan (and later Iraq) to quickly erase the "pathological" condition of victims of the US. Literature on its part has no fear to register the self- and communal alienation that 9/11 brought about, and it shows the difficulties of inscribing in the narrative a desire for change, whereby individuals want to elaborate their own new narratives of identity and inclusion.

In this opening up to possible social and historical reconfigurations beyond predictable narratives of idealized national self-image and cultural imperialism, literary authors, then, plant the seed for a future moment of potential ethicopolitical renegotiation with the "other," who is presented in the forms of the familiar. The process of narrativization of historical trauma from the victims' points of view speaks the truth of it and forces us to come to terms with suffering and pain that we can only read about vicariously, but that nonetheless we feel empathic with. At the same time, being other than the victims we read about, we develop an ethical awareness about consequences and expectations that may follow historical trauma within a culture. I am not talking about ethical preoccupations about the opportunity of doing art in the wake of trauma, which is a concern raised by many critics, most famously by Adorno when he declared that "to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric" (34). I am referring to the experience of witnessing, listening and learning from the pain of the other. Reading traumatic literature prompts questions such as: how do we suffer? Why is suffering important? What does historical trauma tell us about our being human? Is then ethics ultimately a dimension of a narratively shared suffering?

I would like to finally argue here against the idea that 9/11 traumatic fiction is sentimental, as many believe it to be, and against the conviction that such literature had to channel a new image of US culture after the catastrophe. Indeed, one of the most famous arguments "against" post-9/11 fiction is that the novels weaving stories around the fall of the Twin Towers were not able to represent the tragedy with a critical angle, sufficient openness, or imaginative force. According to these arguments, novelists did not manage to employ successful, adequate storytelling techniques that conveyed the complexity of the event of 9/11; also, they failed to imagine and narrate the "other" of America and did not propose convincing, alternative scenarios to the national catastrophe; finally, they dished out sentimental slop, romanticizing and domesticating the far-reaching crisis of the US in an increasingly globalized world. In other words, this line of criticism has dismissed post 9/11 literature as a discourse where the US crisis fails to become an occasion of dialogue with the "other" and it is, instead, "domesticated" and turned into "a little more than a stage in a sentimental education" (Gray 134) or a "melodrama" (Gessen 72). Here is an example of such criticism by Andrew O'Hagan, who attributes the "failure of the imagination" (Rothberg) of novelists engaging with the subject of 9/11 (his target is DeLillo) to the power of media images, which portrayed the reality of the shock more powerfully than words:

The hallmark of those novelists who have tried to write about the attacks is a sort of austere plangency—or a quivering bathos —that has been in evidence almost from the moment the planes hit. Those authors who published journalistic accounts immediately after the event failed to see how their metaphors fell dead from their

mouths before the astonishing live pictures….September 11 offered a few hours when American novelists could only sit at home while journalism taught them fierce lessons in multivocality, point of view, the structure of plot, interior monologue, the pressure of history, the force of silence, and the uncanny. Actuality showed its own naked art that day. (37)

With a similar critical slant, Richard Gray argues that 9/11 novels interiorize the cataclysm rather than urging the private individual toward social action, so that their stories (DeLillo, McInerney and Updike's among others) inevitably focus on private mourning rather than on specific articulations of otherness. Gray writes:

[t]he crisis is, in every sense of the word, domesticated. All life (…) is personal; cataclysmic public events are measured purely and simply in terms of their impact on the emotional entanglements of their protagonists. (…) The link between the two is tenuous, reducing a turning point in national and international history to little more than a stage in a sentimental education. (134)

Gray critiques this allegedly "sentimental" literature for not having used 9/11 as the occasion to develop the true cosmopolitan, multicultural novel of the 21st century by creating a de-territorrialized fiction that could bring new historical perspectives to, and about, the United States. The lack of imagination of these stories, according to Gray, is ultimately, as O'Hagan claims, formal, since they "assimilate the unfamiliar into familiar structures" and fail to provide an "alteration of imaginative structures" that could reflect the contemporary crisis (134). Robert Eaglestone extends this critique of 9/11 fiction by paradoxically seeing its

failures as productive for a Western rethinking of values. His point is that their formal failures reflect essentially the cognitive collapse of the Western world in the "age of fury" (21), whose narratives cannot enunciate "the terror" and instead hold on to a "rhetoric of attempts" (20). Terror is therefore domesticated into tropes of generic "evil," like in Foer's novel, or of sickness, like in Martin Amis' story "The Last days of Muhammad Atta," where the terrorist is made "safe" as he is imagined bodily and psychologically sick. In this sense, then, according to Eaglestone, fiction should learn from its own mistakes and recognize that it has produced another hegemonic discourse in the folds of its stories about 9/11.

While I can recognize the values and expectations that lie at the heart of all these positions, namely, the postmodern and post-structuralist desires that a literature of "exhaustion" could finally become, in Barthesian terms, a literature of "replenishment" – offering a political alternative through a language that is not merely oppositional or nihilistic, but constructive and liberating – I am also resistant to placing such demands on the novels that deal with 9/11 and Western historical trauma. Gray makes the example of recent US Southern fiction written by Vietnamese and Cuban immigrants, who endow their pages with fresh symbolism about their diasporas and imagine "rhizomatic" (i.e. protean and fertile) encounters with the US territory and with the Other that transcend cultures, spaces and time (developing, for instance, many different relations with their place of origin, or their colonial past). In Gray's view, a hypothetical new, innovative fiction should look up to this kind of "fluid," exploratory narrative (142). Michael Rothberg yearns for a similar brand of multicultural storytelling, but one that comes from outside the boundaries of the US nation

and really brings "extra-territorialized" points of view about the American crisis in and out of the American territory. It seems to me, however, that this critical mixture of multicultural voices cannot be superimposed on, or imagined for the literary output on 9/11 that these scholars are critiquing and that I am considering here, as these novels represent the immediate reaction to 9/11 from New York City novelists and public figures with a white and Western cultural background. Their responses are not (cannot be) conveyed through literary modes, imaginative solutions and histories that do not belong to their "shattered" cultural selves. And even if this were not true, (if certain techniques, attitudes, and literary figurations formed a heritage anyone could draw on, uprooted from context) the fact that the "unfamiliar", the alien and unknown of 9/11 – the violent encounter with strangeness and with otherness –is simply reprocessed into "familiar and domestic structures" should still be read as a function of the genre of traumatic fiction rather than as a missed opportunity for dialogic imagination. After all, the 'play of idioms and genres" (147) that Gray invokes is a linguistic and discursive structure familiar for the immigrant, or the diasporic subject, while this is not the case for the Western white narrator.

The risk here is to blame authors only because they belong to a certain cultural or racial group (namely, white and Western) instead of recognizing the cultural and literary forms by which suffering, trauma and hope are expressed by them in the first place, and why they might sound unimaginative or not in the context of 9/11. If their language is exhausted, frozen or schizophrenic, it should not necessarily be deemed ideological or conservative but evaluated in itself, as a literary strategy to convey trauma. Gray and others' arguments of this

kind seem to insinuate – with the typically politicized habit of detracting from the Western literary canon – that 9/11 novelists should be writing differently because their "imagination," having been nurtured in the wealthy West, could perform better. It could exceed itself by accessing a multiplicity of literary patterns and afford more Pindaric flights and more inspired, dialectical, and progressive solutions to the crisis. This criticism, however, fails to recognize that the meditative, ethical responses embedded, for example, in the narratives by Schwartz, DeLillo and Foer are first of all a testimony of what they felt as traumatized New Yorkers. This does not mean that they are not able to question political ideology or imagine alterity in the 9/11 context, but that they are cautious in representing the "Other" in their novels precisely because they do not want to sound arrogant or patronizing – and perhaps they end up being, in turn, emotionally stunted or "sentimental," offering scenarios of family break-ups and reconciliations wherein the Other, though, whoever s/he is, always fits. My point is rather that 9/11 traumatic fiction "closed the doors," to adjust Gray's expression, to diversified cultural interference and public commitment almost as an "organic reaction" to the cataclysm that threatened the American self, momentarily refusing to engage with any official notion of history – even with a multicultural one – but without necessarily denying future inclusiveness.

Of course, there might be a certain truth to Gray's claims. It is hard to assess whether imagination freezes to sound politically correct, or if it fails altogether. The emotional retreat into the private realm of experience signals, for example, skepticism toward corrupt and official politics and its hegemonic and ideological narrative of the "war on terror," so that the

subject is powerless and unable to counter-respond with an original public strategy of self-representation. However, it seems that we cannot limit ourselves to acknowledging that what we are left with after 9/11 in literature is merely symptomatic melodrama – that is, the registering that something traumatic, perhaps too dreadful for words, unsusceptible as yet to understanding has happened. If the style of many of these novels is excessively mannered and at times sentimental, it is also true that the novels here considered simply refuse to generate critical historical narratives of the crisis, or to imagine a new social politics through dynamic melting pots of races, and they use instead figures of immobilization, schizophrenia and meditation in domestic scenarios that strive to hold themselves together both to exorcize the ongoing dissolution of the public and to resist hegemonic political discourses. The literary imagination of these writers is preoccupied with adequately explaining, representing and memorializing such civic wound, rather than with cauterizing it through digressive and incompatible scenarios.

Analyzing these particular responses, one might wonder with Gray, Eaglestone and others whether these New-York-based stories constitute a local reaction/statement that might only in part reflect the ways in which US culture has coped with shock and bereavement.[24] Do these emotional stories help to build the (hi)story of United States' vulnerability and resilience to trauma, eventually contributing to fashion a softer image of the warmongering country after 9/11? Or do they rather incarnate a set of WASPish responses (white, affluent, urban) that voice the suffering of the cultural group symbolically attacked by terrorists on

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[24] Besides, Foer's, DeLillo's and Schwarz's novels, the fiction that thematizes 9/11 "emotionally" might include Ken Kalfus' *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006) and Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* (2006).

that infamous day? Do these stories claim power over the city's devastated and expropriated territory through narratives of repossession? Or are their vulnerable characters indicative of a traumatized "imagined community" – using Benedict Anderson's concept with an affective nuance rather than a territorial denotation – that speaks from New York but extends beyond its physical boundaries?

While these concerns are justified, I argue that novels such as *Falling Man*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The Writing on the Wall* pursue a reader-oriented dialogism, or a "dialogism of feelings" rather than imagining specific cultures in dialogue. What counts is that 9/11 stories of trauma function as literary testimonies to a crisis hitting a community that happens to be part of a superpower but that cannot be identified with it. Indeed, I do not believe this fiction needs to portray intercultural negotiations to prove its vitality or open-mindedness. These novels – written mostly by white, male American authors who certainly felt their own identity threatened on that day – cast the vulnerable identity of the wounded American subject as universal and trans-historical but not in the creative forms of the *immigrant's tale*. Victims/witnesses in these novels "reterritorialize" their own wounded, traumatized city, then, not to recover a position of power, but rather to share the condition of defeat that comes with violation. The ethics of narrative form, as Rothberg writes, has its roots in "literature's potential engagement with questions of difference, otherness, and strangeness" ("A Failure" 152). However, while I believe the novel as a genre always mobilizes an exploratory dialectics within and outside itself, forcing characters and readers to confront ethical dilemmas about issues of order, positioning and relationship, the ethics of

traumatic narrative form (vulnerable, fragmented) lies in the type of experience it offers to the reader *outside the text*, rather than in the literary representations themselves. This does not mean that the potential for political openness is missing *within the text*, but that the emphasis is placed on the intersubjective exchange that occurs among authors, characters and readers.

My argument is then that traumatic fiction and ethics are closely bound and therefore traumatizing histories speak to the reader in a way that challenges her notions of affect, value and openness to the other. As Dina Georgis has stated in her analysis of Yann Martel's *The Life of Pi* (2002), traumatic fiction offers us a "grammar for how to recognize the voice of alterity in story, be that story real or fictional, and how to be ethical witnesses of the other's story" (167). Confronting issues of representability, silence and language, novelists of the 9/11 trauma perform an ethical practice, since they occupy the place of witnesses, they portray examples of communal solidarity, and they elicit a response from the reader in terms of (dis)alignment with the forces and characters at play in the narrative. Far from being merely sentimental, then, the traumatic novels about 9/11 avoid any kind of master narrative or ethical closure and invite the reader to act on them, forging an idea of traumatic literature as a response and as an act. As J. Hillis Miller suggests talking about ethics and novels, "literature must in some way be a cause and not merely an effect" of our way of being (5). Especially traumatic fiction, I argue, should not remain an epiphenomenon of society but actively influence the way we ethically engage with issues of solidarity, social justice and memory.

Chapter 4

Twinned bodies, Ethical "Faces" and the Politics of Language in Lynne Sharon Schwartz's *The Writing on the Wall* (2005)

The Writing on the Wall (hereafter *WW*) represents one of the ethical narratives we have outlined in the previous chapter for the type of perspective it adopts on the tragedy of 9/11. Similarly to Foer, Schwarz believes that the event enabled the aggregation of a community of New Yorkers that reaches beyond the confines of the city but that ultimately finds its grounds in the particular historical site. The positive tension between locality and transnationality and between private and public dimensions of the tragedy marks the ethical constructions of this traumatic historical event. Despite its multiple violations (the terrorist attacks, the physical disfigurement and the ideological use of the wounded city as a *casus belli* for military activities), New York in Schwartz's novel still proves to be an open space where various kinds of traumata can converge and find ethical significance. Furthermore, *WW* transforms the shocking events of 9/11 into a catalyst that unearths old private traumata, whose emergence helps making sense of the public present. The public is thus figuratively processed by conscious, private working through. Since trauma is "unrepresentable" as such – it is a phenomenon confined to a present tense that needs deferred recognition – 9/11 must be envisioned, interpreted and felt through previous traumatic experiences that simultaneously acquire meaning because of it. While the uniqueness of what happened on that day resists categorization and challenges familiar structures of interpretation (historical trauma, domestic invasion, foreign threat, and so on), it also offers new ways for those structures to emerge, identify and sustain a renovated pattern of solidarity and tolerance.

Stories about present and past tragedies mutually illuminate each other, creating not a causative etiology (a trauma explains another trauma) but rather an ethical, shared one (a trauma is always also someone else's trauma). This means that our entanglement with trauma can only be resolved when we confront and share our pain with others in a diachronic process. Coming to terms with a problematic past or an ominous present necessitates an ethical disposition to reconsider our limits, review our experience and be open to the other. In this sense, the protagonist of Schwarz's book, Renata, struggles to rescind her ties with a complicated past. She is a 34-year-old librarian at one of the branches of the New York Public Library who witnesses the events of 9/11 while she is on her way to work, crossing the Brooklyn Bridge:

> [p]eople around her screamed, so she looked where they were looking, at a huge marigold bursting open in the sky, across the river, flinging petals into the blue. Everyone stood frozen on the bridge, as in a game of statues, gasping statues. Then, like an army suddenly given the order to retreat, they wheeled around and ran in the other direction, back to Brooklyn, back across the bridge … (*WW* 45)

In her tempered and somewhat prosaic style, Schwarz never explicitly refers to the act of witnessing the planes crashing into the towers (only to the media replay of their "drilling" the face of the buildings – 86, 174) and it avoids the type of mimetic representation and schizophrenic characters that DeLillo and Foer embrace, respectively. The author focuses instead on how the events are networked with Renata's life, how they generate communities based on spiritual affinity and how different languages and parlances best serve the purpose

of describing their emotional impact. While the novel is at times sentimental and overwritten, especially the elaborate, sad story of Renata's family that functions as a "forced" analogue with 9/11, it has moments of cynicism and genuine politics of feelings, especially Renata's "imperfect" but "healing" relationships with a girl she meets at Ground Zero and with Jack. Ultimately, Schwartz crafts a powerful, detailed connection between private and public life, mobilizing consolidated tropes of loneliness as self-reliance, resurgence as solidarity, hope as the Levinasian meeting with the unknown "face" of a stranger, and language as a powerful reality maker to convey the complex rebound effects of 9/11 on New Yorkers' lives.

Slightly before the attacks (introduced in the second of eighteen chapters), Renata "the loner" (*WW* 36) walks to work and meditates on her life both as a child and as an adult. We learn that she had a twin sister, Claudia, with whom everything was intimately shared. A group of girls with which they formed a club in junior high once asked them what it felt like to be twins:

> Did each one know what the other was thinking? When did they stop dressing alike? Who was smarter? Who could run faster? Would they get their periods at the same moment, or at least on the same day? … Foolish questions. To Renata and Claudia, being twins meant something of quite another order. It meant relief, immunity, from what they imagined as a painful isolation: living as the only one bearing *this* particular face, *this* body. *They* each knew what it felt like to live behind the same face, and they marveled that others could bear their singularity. (*WW* 32)

Claudia and Renata were fused in a deep symbiotic whole, a *they* that foreclosed vulnerability and superficiality. A transparent anthropomorphic metaphor for the Twin Towers, this archetypal union is doomed from the start. As we learn further on in the narrative, at some point Claudia decides to break this bond because it prevented her from developing her own autonomous identity. While she acts out her decision unexpectedly, in a quite juvenile, vindictive way (she sneaks a twenty-dollar bill from the friends' club dues, thus undermining Renata's ability to act as a treasurer), Claudia bitterly remarks her difference from Renata, insisting that it was becoming "creepy" that they were so amalgamated (*WW* 61). If this might sound like an adult, constructive choice, Schwarz has Claudia succumb to her destiny with a bitter ironic twist. She gets pregnant and is forced by her parents to give her baby up for adoption to a well-off family that her paternal uncle Peter knows. One night, at a very late hour, Renata has an uncanny feeling but does not stop Claudia from going out to walk the dog, with the result that her body is found dead in the lake. Claudia committed suicide, as she could not get over the "loss" of her baby. While united they could stand, they did not survive separate. Once the twin unity is broken, Renata is devastated and rejects any social interaction except for cheap sex with different men in Manhattan, where she moves from their upstate home after Claudia's death.

Claudia and Renata's bond nourishes the mythology of twins as the two parts of one same self, or as two strongly interdependent individuals often proposed by literature and film. For example, famous twins in ancient literature were Romulus and Remus, and Castor and Pollux, who alternatively had the status of semi-gods or mortals according to the sources.

In any case, twins were believed to represent a bridge between deities and humans, carrying out important social functions. The Dioscuri (Castor and Pollux), for instance, were regarded as helpers of mankind and honored as patrons of athletes, travelers and sailors in particular, who invoked them to seek favorable winds. The myth narrates that, in a family feud over two women, Castor was wounded by a cousin and Pollux was given the choice by Zeus of either spending all his time on Olympus or giving half of his immortality to his brother. He opted for the latter, which enabled the twins to alternate between Olympus and Hades. Finally, they became the two brightest stars in the constellation of Gemini.[25] Furthermore, famous modern and popular novels and movies also feature twins/doppelgangers: evil twins, separated at birth twins, warring twins, imprisoned twins, twins that are not twins and so on.[26] The powerful bond between twins lends itself to many fictional treatments, but what seems to be mostly insisted upon in the history of literature is the power of unity granted by this blood tie and the fatal risk that such power may be lost over lies, jealousy, or death of one twin. The case of Renata and Claudia in Schwarz's novel proves that, especially in same-sex twins, identity is problematized and felt as bliss and threat at the same time. Unity is then a form of power or self-defense against external aggressions, but also an anchor to an idealized childhood that one wishes could last forever in spite of the repressed realization that it will not. As quoted above, "this body" and "this face" in Schwarz's free indirect speech signal Renata's unshaken perception of their "singularity." Consequently, because Renata had no

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[25] Cotterell, Arthur. "Dioscuri." *A Dictionary of World Mythology*. Oxford University Press, 1997.
[26] Among the many, see for example Ellery Queen's *The Siamese Twin Mystery* (1933), David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* (1988) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997).

inkling about Claudia's schismatic desires, she remains emotionally struck by them perhaps even more than by Claudia's subsequent suicide.

Recent sociological studies have shown that the suicide rate among twins is significantly lower compared with singletons because they can count on stronger family ties and on a shared childhood experience, if they are brought up together.[27] This would support the idea that twins' unity represents a form of resistance against the adversities in the course of life, since the burden of those adversities, even when redoubled, is repeatedly "split," refracted, and shared in two. When one twin commits suicides, researches have shown that the surviving twin, even if reared separately, is likely to commit or think about suicide as well sooner or later in his/her life.[28] In Schwarz's novel, however, Renata never has such thoughts, but instead seals up emotionally, refusing to express her conflicts articulately and constructively. Yet, she acts out her post-traumatic stress by looking after the family businesses and taking care of her distraught parents after Claudia's suicide. Detailing the death of their drunken father Dan in a car accident that he seemed to crave, and the mental collapse and subsequent institutionalization of their mother Grace, the author aggrandizes the character of Renata and her ability to cope with a repeated history of trauma. In this way, Schwartz points to the inner strength a caring female character may develop in traumatic circumstances, even when her own survival and identity as part of an original whole are

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[27] See Tomassini C, Juel K, Holm NV, Skytthe A, Christensen K. "Risk of suicide in twins: 51 year follow up study." *British Medical Journal* 2003; 327:373-4. (16 August). Even though mental illness remains the strongest risk factor leading to suicide and a factor more common among twins, it is not a significant factor in linking suicide and twinned childhood, as twins are less prone to commit suicide than singletons, which calls for other explanatory factors such as the stronger family ties.

[28] Lester, David. "Twin studies of suicidal behavior."*Archives of Suicide Research*, 6 (2002): 383-389.

tragically impaired. Most of all, as hinted above, if we consider the subtle reverberations of Schwarz's narrative material on the tragedy of 9/11 – echoes that remain veiled, implicit in the novel – Renata represents an imagined Tower that keeps on standing after the "fall" of the other.

This metaphorical correlation bolsters the idea that *WW* is a counternarrative, a discursive formation stemming from traumatic events that searches for powerful ethical representation of suffering and survival. In reading about Renata's painful existence, we empathize with her condition and we acquire consciousness of what had so far remained in our unconscious substrates about the mediated reception of 9/11: that its significance is constituted by the particular histories of the survivors and their ability to function as signs of communal hope and active public engagement. Bridging the bodies of Renata and Claudia to those of the towers, Schwarz manages to endow the catastrophe of the Twin Towers with human proportion, poetically conflating the mortality of both bodies and buildings. Contrarily to Baudrillard's critique of the Twin Towers in the wake of the attacks, in which he symbolically matches the architectural features of the buildings with the characteristics of global capital and "twins" their destruction to the destruction of the world system they embodied ("Requiem" 41), Schwarz makes them living beings resonating with complex traumatic histories, as Ann Kaplan has also suggested New Yorkers did.[29]

Commenting on their twin-ness, Baudrillard writes that

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[29] As seen in chapter two, Kaplan argues that New Yorkers reacted in a more emotional way to the fall of the Towers with respect to Europeans, for example, because of their close position to the site of the tragedy, and therefore developed a discourse of empathy with the missing building rather than one of criticism about the attacks (*Trauma Culture*).

[t]here is, admittedly, in this cloning and perfect symmetry an aesthetic quality, a kind

of perfect crime against form, a tautology of form which can give rise, in a rise, in a

violent reaction, to the temptation to break that symmetry, to restore an asymmetry,

and hence a singularity. The symmetry of the towers: a double attack, separated by a

few minutes' interval, with a sense of suspense between the two impacts. ("Requiem"

42)

While he admits that there is a "particular fascination in this reduplication" ("Requiem" 39),

he emphasizes how their halted verticality and missed rivalry with other buildings substituted

competition with networks and monopoly. They were the perfect embodiment of a system

that "was no longer competitive, but digital and countable" ("Requiem" 38). In their

"changeless genetic code" ("Requiem" 40) lies, according to Baudrillard, the neuralgic,

nervous centre of "the pure computer image of banking and finance" that the terrorists struck

("Requiem" 41). Refusing this kind of explanatory, polemic rhetoric and commodifying

symbolism, Schwarz relies on tacit metaphors and individual stories to convey the death not

of a system, but of human creatures. Avoiding the literal representation of people's deaths in

the buildings, Schwarz speaks of the present through an anticipated story of twinned traumas

that Renata recalls for the reader while walking to work on September 11.

The 9/11 counternarrative is effectively crystallized in the metaphor of the twins. As

much as Baudrillard advocates the lack of "façades" and therefore of "faces" in the Twin

Towers,[30] Schwarz insists on how Renata could recognize herself in the same "face" of her twin sister (*WW* 32). As much as Baudrillard heralds the positive mirroring of the "glass and steel façades of the Rockefeller Center buildings … in an endless specularity," and invokes the end of "the rhetoric of the mirror" for the Towers ("Requiem" 40), Schwarz has Renata praise her twin sister Claudia as the "faithful," "companion mirror[s]", challenging the acquisition that "mirrors abandon you the moment you turn your back" (*WW* 32). Whereas Baudrillard thinks "singularity" resides in "asymmetry," Schwarz provocatively believes it to be twinned, mirror-like (as quoted above). Clearly, Schwarz's anthropomorphization of the Towers into her characters fosters a sense of identification with the World Trade Center that the architect of the buildings, Minoru Yamasaki, claimed he pursued in his original 1972 design, in spite of his reputation of "not being the most sensitive of designers."[31] It is a known fact that the Twin Towers elicited mixed reactions when they were built and even after. As Neil Leach explains in his article:

> [i]n their architectural language the towers reportedly were inspired by the minimalism of Mies van der Rohe, but somehow lacked any of his sensitivity … [Eric Darton describes] their aesthetic impression as "terroristic," and compares the insensitivity of the design and what they represented in sociological terms to the insensitivity of those terrorists who attempted to blow up the twin towers in 1993. Not everyone took such a negative stance. Indeed the towers had their vociferous

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[30] [T]he Twin Towers no longer had any facades, any faces. With the rhetoric of verticality disappears also the rhetoric of the mirror. There remains only a kind of black box, a series closed on the figure two ("Requiem" 40).

[31] See Leach, Neil. "9/11." *Diacritics* 33.3/4 (2003): 75-92.

supporters, such as Ada Louise Huxtable, and yet it would probably be fair to say that they remained curiously anonymous within the eyes of the general public… Tourist shops … offered relatively few models of the World Trade Center … All this changed, however, as a result of what happened on September 11. The twin towers of the World Trade Center have been suddenly etched into the minds of the world. They have taken on a different status, and lost any anonymity that they may once have possessed. Through their very destruction they have become recognizable and identifiable objects, symbols of the dangers of terrorism.[32] (76)

Even more, as Leach explains, symbolic architectural spaces such as the Twin Towers materialize a sense of identity/identification, a fantasy of national belonging that would not be perceived and mediated outside the terms of the symbolic structure they provide. Also, if identity is forged through objects that articulate it, the loss of such objects also entails a loss of identity:

[h]uman beings can equate themselves with buildings and identify with them. And once a sense of identity has been forged against a backdrop of a certain architectural environment, any damage to that environment will be read as damage to the self. (Leach 85)[33]

However, while I agree with Leach when he claims with Kristeva that "loss, whether it is actual or imaginary, or experienced vicariously [for example the death of Christ], can

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[32] Leach refers to Eric Darton's account of the history of the Twin Towers *Divided We Stand: A Biography of New York's World Trade Center*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.

[33] Leach writes about the dynamic of national identification of our bodies with objects: "I recall an observation made by the author, Douglas Rushkoff, who witnessed the collapse of the twin towers. He recounted how, as one of the buildings collapsed, he felt as if his whole spine was also collapsing (85).

serve to … reinforce an identity" ("9/11" 86) as it happened with the general sentiment of patriotism that swarmed throughout the US nation at the fall of the towers in the 9/11 attacks, I also would like to point out that real traumatization differs from a vicarious one in many ways. In the case of 9/11, real trauma was experienced by those who actually lost family members at Ground Zero. At a second level, it concerned New Yorkers who materially witnessed the attacks within their city, or endured them while away from it, as we have argued in the second chapter. Then comes the whole US nation, whose vicarious trauma affected their sense of identity and belonging, but was never "real." These varying degrees in the nature and position of the traumatized subjects suggest that real trauma could be narrated, even in its fictionalized renditions, only by those who belonged to the place and/or actually went through it. Only material witnessing and/or a special bond to the site of trauma grant that trauma can be ethically and authentically (in an almost juridical fashion) handed down to an audience, as it happened with the three New York stories that I examine here. To assert that losses that are "actual or imaginary, or experienced vicariously" lead to the same reinforcement of national identity is also, in some way, to divorce identity from experience and experience from presence, endorsing – in a Baudrillardian fashion – the view that media created the version(s) of 9/11. In the context of 9/11 and its narratives, I rather insist on the crucial synchronicity of ethical telling with witnessing and place. Ethical narratives occur precisely when the reader is aware of her vicarious position in the narration of trauma, thus recognizing the traumatized other and avoiding overidentification. Additionally, to emphasize the connections among real trauma, place and identity, I believe that the sense of

identification that New Yorkers felt with the Towers was synecdochical with their own city before than with their own nation, so that they formed a transversal community based on their traumatizing local experience (experience comes from the Latin *experīrī*, i.e. gaining knowledge from repeated trials, from exposure to peril).

As Schwarz's narrative testifies, then, the towers have become a material signified, an object of identity, a missing part of the body of New York community that calls for replenishment – a psycho-social void that demands to be filled. As Kaplan indeed notes, "people tried to fill in or recover the absence of the Towers by creating images of them" (13), and Schwarz's story of Claudia and Renata represents one way to provide a literary, human substitute in that empty affective space that was so aching and unique. Even though the author never really compares Claudia and Renata to a twinned architectural body, their self-enclosed system reflects and vouches for that of the Twin Towers. As DeLillo wrote in his Harper's essay, "[i]n its desertion of every basis for comparison, the event asserts its singularity. There is something empty in the sky. The writer tries to give memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space ("In the Ruins" 39). However, rather than dwelling on the traumatism of 9/11 like DeLillo does, offering high philosophical moments of meditation, numbness and authentic displacement to the reader, Schwarz constructs a more straightforward alternative to the culture of fear and anxiety blown up by the attacks.

Such culture, as Corey Robin explains, is the result of the government's and the intellectuals' a-political efforts to fill the *horror vacui* of Ground Zero by providing audiences with a fabricated image of an enemy of the West to hate, or by insisting on the

necessity of loyal behavior in every aspect of social life. For example, Robin writes that "[l]eaders and intellectuals claim that the United States is confronting a shadowy, elusive enemy that has no recognizable political grievances. This enemy uses terror not as a political instrument but as an occasion to vent an inexplicable and inhuman hatred" (Robin). In doing so, however, they heightened rather than assuaged people's fears. Moreover, "political demonology" misleadingly claims that the Middle-Eastern countries are going through a crisis because they are unable to confront or embrace modernity. Robin points out that Western elites make audiences believe that "Allah serves as a substitute for a lost sense of authority, the terrorist cell a replacement for a ruined social solidarity" (Robin). As Robin continues:

> [t]he costs of this self-imposed blindness will be great, for by denying ordinary citizens the conceptual tools to think clearly about complex dynamics of the Middle East and Central and South Asia, the pundits and politicians have turned a political conflict between a powerful empire, local potentates, and the enraged opponents of both, into a theater of existential confrontation. As a result, Americans' understandable fear of terrorist attack threatens to become a virulent panic. (Robin)

This also foments anxious "psychological melodramas" and forecloses political thinking "about international conflicts" (Robin). Finally, such culture of fear and anxiety is manifested at a more inconspicuous level, that of the internal repression of socio-political dissent. As McCarthyism in the Fifties put people in jail for their political views, nowadays

the state has joined private companies in a hierarchical demand of loyalty. Robin asserts that today

> [i]t won't just be political expression in the workplace that is curtailed. Any employee with a grievance against her manager will now find it extremely difficult to voice her complaints. In the best of times, challenging an employer can easily be construed as disloyal and subversive. In wartime, the tendency is even greater. For war demands unity, and unity in the workplace, as in so many other spheres of society, means hierarchy.

Through her literary response, Schwarz opposes such rhetorical and cultural maneuvering and re-imagines a scenario where the *horror vacui* is filled by a resilient human being. More constructively, or perhaps nostalgically, by reenacting the fall of the Twin Towers through the sad story of Renata and Claudia, Schwarz leaves Renata to "stand up" and thus implicitly invites the reader to create what the author calls a "uchrony" in the novel (from u-, non-existent, as in utopia, and *chronos*, time). Schwarz writes that

> [u]chronies are stories that imagine history taking a different course through some small but not inconceivable turn of events. The "what if" theory of history. Or, in the fancier language from the library's recent exhibit on utopias, a uchrony is an "apocryphal historical sketch of the development of European civilization such as it never was, such as it could have been." (*WW* 39)

This very interesting concept Renata learns and fantasizes about at the library (she imagines Hitler drowning on a camping trip as a boy – an example of Schwarz's occasional

and delightful witticism) combines the figure of the hysteron proteron (from Greek "the latter comes before") with a utopian, imaginative desire for a totally different course of the events.[34] In uchronies, in fact, events can either be reversed or imagined anew in order to determine the future. The figure of imagined reversal is a technique commonly used in traumatic narratives to conceptualize the jammed mechanisms of the traumatized mind. Foer uses the hysteron proteron at the end of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* to express Oskar's desire to reverse the death of his father to a "safer" stage through a backward flip-book of pictures that illustrate a man "falling upwards" toward the towers. Rather than merely rewinding history, Renata instead reimagines a different evolution and outcome for many family incidents. She wishes she had gone after Claudia the night her sister went out and died. She wishes that Claudia had taken the twenty dollars from the club's treasury out of carelessness and not out of resentment against her, that their uncle Peter had not run his fingers on her back, and that she had known that he was going even further with Claudia – which meant Renata could have saved Claudia from being raped, impregnated and "killed" by him.

Furthermore, Renata dreams that she had made different choices on the morning on 9/11, so that maybe the tragedy would not have occurred. Summarizing her backward wishes through the desiderative past conditional – the grammatical mode of unreality – Renata thinks how she could have changed some episodes, among which meeting her friend, the

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[34] This is apparently a technique employed in video games to provide alternative enlightening narratives of events that are not understandable in the space-time in which they occur.

black bookseller Nestor dangerously headed for the underground that morning, and finding by chance a twenty dollar bill that brought back excruciating memories.

> She should have made him stay [her partner Jack]; it was within her power she just didn't try very hard. Then he might not have gotten on the subway at all. She wouldn't have been alone that whole morning. Wouldn't have met the bookman (which might have been worse for him), wouldn't have found the twenty-dollar bill. Like a uchrony, what if, what if? But the important facts wouldn't have changed. The planes would still have crashed, the buildings fallen, the kaleidoscope shifted. (*WW* 144-45)

About ten days after 9/11, Renata walks with Jack along the Brooklyn riverbank and observes that "if not for the gaping hole in the scenery – the Manhattan skyline – everything would be perfect" (*WW* 232). While the couple glances at the photos and posters that memorialize the missing, stifling their desire to be drawn into the crowd and into further ache, "what they can't control is gazing every few moments at the blank parallel bars in the sky, like everyone else. Just checking, in case the buildings might suddenly reappear" (*WW* 233). All these small echoes of uchronies throughout the story function as molecular refractions of the major wish Renata has about the death of her sister, which encroaches on the losses of 9/11. Her desire is that Claudia might "suddenly reappear" and thereby the towers be reconstituted, so that she could look at her face again and find in it a piece of her own identity.

In Schwarz's novel, the "face" is a concept that firstly emerges in the description of the specular bond between Renata and Claudia that we have already hinted at and that resurfaces again when Renata meets a familiar stranger at Ground Zero. Besides offering the reader the opportunity to experience an ethical uchrony through the survivor Renata, who helps us framing the events of 9/11 through her hopeful, "towering" figure and through a net of familiar incidents, Schwarz gives Renata the chance to work through her own trauma by presenting her with the possibility of a uchrony and with a "new" face. After Claudia's death, her baby girl Gianna had been given up for adoption and Renata was allowed to visit her occasionally. The family seemed wealthy and caring, so Renata, nineteen years old back then and all by herself, did not worry too much about Gianna's safety. One day Gianna's adoptive mother brought the three-year-old over to Renata, asking if she could take care of her for a few days since the family had to go out of town. As expected, the family disappears and Renata suddenly has Claudia's child, "[a]nd what was Claudia's was virtually her own" (*WW* 126). Receiving Gianna in her stale, decadent Manhattan room, Renata realizes that she needs to change her lifestyle, until then devoted to a reappropriation of her worn out, emotionally deadened body through casual sex, "an arduous victory over inertia" (*WW* 125) in which she was confined by the trials of her life. Four years later, on a quiet Sunday afternoon, however, when aunt and niece are at the fairground enjoying themselves, Gianna disappears. She is kidnapped from the marry-go-round, while Renata deserted her post for a few minutes to get her ice-cream. Police never found her again and Renata accumulates a sense of guilt and sorrow that will destroy and isolate her for the rest of her life.

For the way Schwarz actively networks the events in her novel, 9/11 provides Renata with an occasion for redemption and working through, of whose cathartic potential we learn gradually through fragmentary references to Gianna's abduction. At Ground Zero, in chapter nine, Renata reads the wailing wall of portraits and shrines (themselves a counternarrative) of smiling faces, morphing them into faces now "contorted by fear" (*WW* 148). Suddenly among the wailers she sees

> a skinny, waif-like girl or so in a sleeveless, flowered shirt … her body … has a feline grace, like a dancer suspended between spins. Her hair is brassy blonde, short and uneven … too blonde for her skin, which is olive, Mediterranean … She wears small, thin gold hoops in her ears, the kind Renata got for Gianna when she was seven … The olive skin, the earrings, the lithe body and that elegant Botticelli profile are so eerily familiar that Renata shudders … She must be homeless, a street kid … When their paths cross, her glance falls on Renata and becomes a bland stare. She looks like she's about to speak but she doesn't. Renata acknowledges her with [a] tiny nod … the sign of communal sorrow. The girl stares longer than she should … She almost expects a hand to be extended … She's about the age Gianna would be now, and come to think of it — but truly, the thought has been there from the first instant — it's uncanny how much she resembles Claudia at her age (and me, too, Renata thinks) … a stricken, vulnerable look. (*WW* 148-49)

This passage suspends time and singles out the individual victim of 9/11 amid ruins and signs of hope, conjuring up other formal epiphanic scenes from popular movies such as,

for instance, the little girl in the red coat from Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993). Schwarz's passage irradiates echoes of Emmanuel Levinas' ethical theory of the "face," according to which face-to-face encounter with the Other prompts us to an ethics of responsibility and discloses the Other's weakness and mortality, illuminating ours reciprocally. His vision of ethics as a form of understanding that refuses the rationalist and ontological basis of Western philosophical ethics, which is preoccupied with establishing socio-moral or absolute categories of good and bad, relies on the assumption that the Other is posited as an individual human *primum*, demanding an "obligation of responsibility" (i.e. of a "response") in an irreducible relation. Ethics for Levinas does not "solve," or "explain," it "welcomes" and "feels." This means that the Other can never be the object of traditional knowledge; indeed, he can never be objectified or dominated and remains outside the realm of epistemology, ontology and metaphysics – or better, it partakes of and transcends all these philosophies without being any in particular. Responsibility as a form of wisdom, or love, precedes any objective quest for truth.[35] A French-Jewish philosopher who studied in Germany with Heidegger (whose friendship he later disowned for Heidegger's association with the Nazis), Levinas thought that the epiphany of an unknown face "exposed, menaced" (*Ethics and Infinity*, henceforth *EI*, 86) in the midst of our daily experience always places a demand of attention and love upon the self gazing at her. Because "the face speaks to me and thereby

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[35] Levinas writes: "Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the Other by the Same, of the Other by Me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the Same by the Other, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge" (*TI* 33). See also Attridge, Derek. "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other." *PMLA* 114 (January 1999): 20-31. "[In Levinas, w]ithout responsibility for the other… there would be no other; without the other, repeatedly appearing, always different, there would be no same, no self, no society, no morality. We cannot deduce the obligation to the other from the world; the world-including the means by which any deductions could be made about ethics or responsibility-is premised on an obligation to the other" (28).

invites me to a relation" (*Totality and Infinity*, henceforth *TI*, 198), I am "obliged" to respond by virtue of my humanness ("the humanity of man" *EI* 87) and regardless of the context.

> The face is signification and signification without context… Ordinarily, one is a "character:" a professor at the Sorbonne, a Supreme Court justice…And all signification in the usual sense of the term is relative to such a context: the meaning of something is in relation to another thing. Here, to the contrary, the face is meaning all by itself. You are you. (*EI* 86)

When such response does not occur pragmatically, it seems that, in Levinas, we are outside the realm of human relationships and therefore in an "unethical" situation. The fact that Renata has difficulties in distinguishing the stranger she meets at Ground Zero from her niece Gianna proves her persistent enmeshment with trauma. Certainly the girl is a "face" ("a whole body – a hand or a curve of the shoulder – can express as the face" *TI* 262) and invites response for her vulnerable condition, as her kidnapped niece would probably do ("[t]here is first the very uprightness of the face, its upright exposure, without defense. … There is an essential poverty in the face" *EI* 86). Renata's confusion and conflation of the "face" of the girl with the person of Gianna shows her resistance against an opening up to the fully "different" and her urgency to read in the stranger her own familiar narrative. Renata's troubles in engaging in a differential ethical relationship in the wake of trauma at Ground Zero exposes the necessity of its actualization. Psychoanalytically, she is performing what Scheler, a social philosopher of the turn of the twentieth century, had called *idiopathic identification*, an introjection/incorporation of the other into the self whereby the other's self

is lost, rather than a *heteropathic identification*, the projection of the self outside of his ego and absorption in the otherness of the other, whereby the self is lost in the other's self. These two polarities of the same process offer the opportunity to fathom dynamics of singularity and identity and to find proper positioning in the ethical exchange, which has to grant both empathy and difference. This will mean for Renata to overcome her entanglement with the past and recognize the necessity to let it go, putting her self in the other's place (*heteropathically*) and seeking the other's good.

Renata's encounter at Ground Zero also carries positive Levinasian traits. Indeed, before letting her go, Renata will open the doors of her home to the "face." Initially, Renata annuls the girl, who is mute, into Gianna. She names the girl after her niece and Schwarz conveys the dangerous identification in many moments: "Gianna appears willing to follow wherever she's taken" (*WW* 180); "[she is] not quite a stranger anymore. She's her niece. She is the real Gianna now" (*WW* 181); "[Renata] almost wishes Gianna would never speak, so she'd never have to figure out who's behind the compliant face" (*WW* 181). All these moments signify that Renata is in denial and refuses to inquire about the real "alterity" of the girl, her identity, her origin. However, this also shows that she does not objectify her and merely loves her. The Levinasian "face" is fully realized in this "child who needs help" (*WW* 181), regardless of the motivations or the overidentification Renata acts out to help her.

In this contradictory, strained dynamics of heteropathic and idiopathic identifications, Renata confronts the ghosts of her past (both Claudia and Gianna) and finally realizes that she must "return" the girl to her "otherness," to her family who is looking for her. Before

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getting to that realization, the path is tortuous and allows for a parallel reality to develop. Renata provides her with food, clothes, the keys to her home and many other material gifts an adolescent girl would enjoy (an affective, nurturing aspect that echoes again Levinas[36]). They play the games she used to play with Claudia and they visit Grace, Renata's mother, who tries to convince her daughter that the girl she is carrying around is not the real Gianna:

> [s]he told Grace all about how Gianna turned up after the disaster, how she was found wandering among the Missing posters, herself a poster come to life … It all fit together. It sounded so obvious … "I can see it on her face. I can feel it. She followed me home. She feels it too." "You can feel it. And I'm supposed to be the crazy one… Clear your head. You've been under a lot of strain." (*WW* 246-27)

Renata is afraid to undergo once again disillusion and loss and therefore finds in a 9/11 survivor the only living link to her past but also the key to go beyond its traumatic burden. She transposes Gianna into the girl traumatized by 9/11 and vice versa. She believes that the new Gianna "for over ten years … had been one of the missing" (219) and that she is now born again out of the big bang of the Towers: "if five thousand people [were] killed … one was returned to life" (*WW* 220). Renata wants to cherish and love this life. The "obligation" she performs to "love" her will allow her own self to come out of this symbiotic relationship differentiated and at least partly healed, as though the girl had functioned both cathartically

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[36] "The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity--its hunger--without my being able to be deaf to that appeal" (*TI* 200).

and ethically.[37] Contrarily to the feelings of control she claims she has on the stray girl when talking with Jack ("I got her back," "I've made her mine!" *WW* 266, 267), Renata will learn that "the face is present in its refusal to be contained," that it "resists possession, resists my powers" (*TI* 194, 197), and that "[t]he infinite in the face … brings into question my freedom, which is discovered to be murderous and usurpatory" (*Difficult Freedom*, 294). In other words, "the face presents itself, and demands justice (*TI* 294).

Forced to recognize the disturbing reality of difference in the complexities of her "ethical obligation," Renata surrenders to Jack's insistence that the girl must be returned to her family ("the ones with reason always win" *WW* 268). A few days after Renata had taken the girl in, her bookman friend Nestor, had informed her that he had found a sheet with the picture of the poor young girl grafted on it and a phone number. Initially ignoring this piece of information, Renata then pulls herself together and with Nestor decides to call the family, who is obviously at the same time shocked and enthusiastic at learning that their daughter is still alive. When Nestor and Renata bring "Gianna" (still not speaking) back to her parents, the scene looks like a typical family reunion, in a decent home with honest people. Even though Renata learns that the couple had adopted "Gianna" many years before, she refuses to verify the possibility that she might be the real Gianna and to be drawn again into a delusional dynamic of appropriation of another tragedy.

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[37] Levinas writes that "The Other precisely reveals himself in his alterity not in a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness." Therefore Renata herself, through her "gentleness," will be able to become the Other to Gianna.

As readers, we recognize deep down the wrenching conflict between Renata's desire to love and her subjection to the repeated pattern of trauma that structures her life. However, unlike DeLillo's novel, in which we experience the feelings of numbness and disembodiment that consume the characters, and unlike Foer's story, where we are overwhelmed by Oskar's schizophrenic attitudes, Schwarz's 9/11 story is traumatic situationally but not stylistically. The tragic conditions she describes do not enable a corresponding wrenching power in the narrative style and composition. Schwarz rather presents us with a layered, ramified and meticulous mosaic of situations that mobilizes our ethical sense and participation without any real empathy or identification. Schwarz's novel is descriptive, eloquent but remains rather conventional. Indeed, while we may feel sympathetic with Renata, we hardly empathize with her (she curiously admits she was not "lovable" (*WW* 16)); we perhaps feel emotionally in touch only when she deals with the newfound "Gianna," whose phantasmatic character poetically evokes the ghost-like presence of historical and personal trauma. As Eagleton has further clarified in his work on the idea of the tragic, the gap between engagement and awareness of alterity in the positioning of narrative subjects (reader, narrator, characters) allows us to decide whether we are "feeling sorry for you" (sympathy), or we are "feeling your sorrow" (empathy), two conditions that might, or might not occur simultaneously (156).

This 9/11 story allows Renata to dissect her traumatic past and carve herself out of it. She purges the negative figures from her life (her pedophile uncle Peter, who hospitalized, dies after bitterly confronting her) and welcomes back the positive ones (Cindy, Peter's ex-fiancé, who asks Renata to help her finding her partner missing after the attacks). Using a

comforting pattern – based on fragments that disrupt linear chronology but that nonetheless carefully build up a climactic, resolving picture – Schwarz constructs a tale of redemption and hope out of the tragedy of 9/11: "[Renata's] story is a transformation tale after all, she decided, a before-and-after tale" (*WW* 283). One of the interesting aspects of the novel resides in the numerous bonds Renata develops or reinforces following the infamous day. This is not to say that the tragedy was in any way positive. Voicing Schwarz's opinion, Renata muses that, "[i]f tragedy has improved the national character, the change is not yet evident. We are more somber, yes, and more angry, but those are not virtues" (*WW* 282). Public trauma is furthermore evident in the way New Yorkers carry on every day: "[t]he trauma they have suffered is not evident except for a suspicious, vulnerable cast in their eyes, a tautness in their downturned mouths. Strangers might not notice, but locals do" (*WW* 287).

However, the vital interpersonal relationships that flourish out of the towers' debris sustain this overall narrative architecture of trauma as a safety net. For example, for some time after the attacks, Renata takes care of a little mixed-race infant, Julio, whose mother Carmen (one of Jack's employees) died in the fall of the towers. Another "face" to feed and love, Julio attracts the attentions of many apartment owners in Jack's building, where Renata moved for a while after the disastrous morning to live like a "1950s suburban wife" (*WW* 87):

> Renata hears voices in the hall … The neighbors are commiserating and exchanging things – bread, aspirins, towels, milk, a bottle of bourbon, Valium … An Indian woman from across the hall gives Renata an outgrown stroller and bassinet …

another woman gives her a sling for Julio … The man from next door whom she's never seen but knows by his voice … coos at Julio. (*WW* 85)

Throughout the book we perceive the lively bustle of a community that appeals to its impetus of generosity and solidarity. Renata has "[n]o way to go down the street without stopping every half block to talk. For this is her turf, these are her neighbors, and though she's usually reserved … she's transformed as all the rest" (*WW* 92). Also, despite the very bad air, "[e]veryone wants to do something" (*WW* 137). Mocking Jack's naiveté at seeing good signs in any trivial episode, Renata cynically but wisely comments that "soon he may even unearth a good sign from the attacks: besides unrestricted parking, how well-behaved and generous New Yorkers have become in crisis" (*WW* 137). In recalling one life story from her "Transformed Lives" folder, where she has accrued clippings of interesting stories of common people who have meaningfully changed their lives, Renata thinks of Mrs. Stiller who, having travelled decades with her husband on cruises, decided to make the ship her home after his death. This offers Renata a stimulus to reflect on how large, solid communities were once formed aboard of great ships that took a long time to sail the Ocean, whereas current planes only dispense rules and narrow bathrooms. She realizes how difficult it is nowadays, with the acceleration of social time, for a community to hold on together, but still the novel suggests that New Yorkers form a strong and supportive one. As Kai Erikson notes

trauma can create community. In some ways that is a very odd thing to claim. To describe people as traumatized is to say that they have withdrawn into a kind of

protective envelope, a place of mute, aching loneliness, in which the traumatic experience is treated like a solitary burden that needs to be expunged by acts of denial and resistance. What could be less "social" than that? But traumatic conditions are no like the other troubles to which flesh is heir. They move to the centre of one's own being and, in doing so, give victims the feeling that they have been set apart and made special. (231)

Additionally, Renata and Jack's relationship also consolidates after the attacks, although timidly. In spite of her trusting issues and his overrationalizing attitudes, they are on and off and Renata is eager to "love him again" in the end. Jack represents the average American man, with a great heart but with "the mind of a petty bureaucrat" (*WW* 267). He runs a social services agency in Manhattan. Usually helping immigrants to get their documents and jobs quickly while they get settled, Jack now feels compelled to rescue the injured at Ground Zero, distribute food, check hospitals and put people in contact with their survived family members. Jack is unflinching and efficient, but a little dry in private, as it sounds like Renata may as well be one of the many people he helps. What sets them apart is essentially a different sensibility toward language. Schwarz's novel is very concerned with debunking the media verbal and visual rhetoric about 9/11 that did violence to our thoughts and imagination (the video of the crashing planes "drilled itself into the collective memory" (*WW* 174)).

One way this linguistic aspect is narratively organized is through the opposition of Renata and Jack. While Jack questions the value Renata attaches to words and people's

stories ("as if the way people talked were some kind of moral issue" (*WW* 220)), Renata believes that words are the texture of life and a bridge to other cultures and forms of experience. Studying minor indigenous languages, the polyglot librarian has learned that some circumstances cannot be expressed by English words. In her depressive moods, "she liked contemplating a peaceful stretch of blank years, broken only by obscure new languages with evocative new words, often words so subtly shaded that they have no adequate equivalent in English, words for feelings and sensations we have not named" (*WW* 29). For example, the Etinoi and Bliondan languages provide words that could aptly fit into a new grammar of 9/11. In Etinoi, *tanfos-oude* refers to an object that, though, displaced, might still be found; *tanfanori-oude* to a success that was regained, and *tanfendi-noude* to one that is lost for good. In Bliondan, *prashmensti* means a category of "wrong words." With an impressive variety, *prashmensti* may refer "to words used imprecisely or insincerely in order to obfuscate (*prashmmosi*), to distract (*prashimina*), to mislead and thus avoid dangerous truths (*prashmiafy*) or used out of sheer stupidity, or to fill space when words were required – all derivatives of the root word, *mentasi*, speech" (*WW* 7). Renata also claims that in Hawaii, people take in kids or anyone who needs a home and does not have it (exactly what she does with "Gianna"). This old custom is called *Hanai*. At Ground Zero she reads Spanish words on the plastered photos of the missing (*desaparecidos*, *marca corporals WW* 147), talks Spanish with Nestor and Russian with a neighbor woman. Finally, once asked to study Arabic to help translate the foreign press, she accepts what will turn out to be a slow, difficult task, but a rewarding challenge in the end. Renata's linguistic passion and choices suggest

that a metamorphosis of US language, society and culture may be inspired by foreign sources, lifestyles and communicative systems, which need to be treasured and not feared, embraced and welcomed rather than ignored, pigeonholed or combated.

This rich lexical symphony imbues the novel and functions as a disseminated set of multiple verbal weapons that counteract the shallow rhetoric of politics and media, which transform the tragedy into a banal, fantastic chase or a disaster movie. President Bush's speeches flatten reality and sound void:

> "Freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward. Freedom will be defended. Make no mistake, the United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts." There was no point trying to find comfort or enlightenment in the words. It was a public moment, that was all; the occasion required that his mouth move and English syllables emerge.[38] (*WW* 64)

Bush is a puppet whose language is authoritarian but separate from his self. As Renata points out: "[w]asn't someone fired from a TV network for challenging the President's use of the word 'cowards' for the hijackers? … Soon it might be illegal to criticize his prose" (*WW* 141). Other arid bits of 9/11 Presidential rhetoric we are all familiar with puncture the fabric of novel ("This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil," "We hunt an enemy that hides in shadows and caves," "More than acts of terror they were acts of war" *WW* 67, 77, 112). Worse than all, Bush promises that "there will be times when people don't have this

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[38]In her *New Yorker* commentary to 9/11, Susan Sontag ironically points out that "whatever may be said of the perpetrators of Tuesday's slaughter, they were not cowards."

incident on their minds," (*WW* 188), which somehow implies that no collective historical memory will ever be built out of the tragedy.

If Presidential oratory is insensitive and fairytale-like, media's language dulls our critical sense and concentration. Renata notes that

> Several among the glut of newspaper articles have suggested that tragedy will improve our moral fiber, wean us from our addiction to the lifestyles and court trials of the rich and famous, catapult the entire nation into sobriety and adulthood. This notion Renata dismisses. She distrusts those who are so ready, so soon, to assemble and package their thoughts for public delivery. (*WW* 137-38)

Similarly to the President's awkward wish that 9/11 would disappear from private and public memory, the "crawl" of news at the bottom of the screen promotes amnesia: "the crawl doesn't permit thinking. It's designed to fracture attention and ensure that nothing lodges in the mind long enough or firmly enough for thought" (*WW* 133). While Renata grasps all these mechanisms, Jack overlooks them. He does not explicitly endorse Bush's speech but goes shopping, as "ordered" by authorities, to alleviate the pain and sustain the national economy ("[a]lways the useful citizen," Renata mumbles *WW* 290) and he thinks that his girlfriend's "paper-hoarding is foolish, obsessive, irrelevant" (*WW* 82). She is a woman of thought; he is a man of action. While their dichotomy is likely to be sutured in the end, the issue of public interpretation of 9/11 lingers throughout *WW* as a crushing presence and force. As much as New York citizens respond to 9/11 through a traumatic solidarity that shapes a network of energetic contacts, words, gestures and hopes, media and politics

respond by orchestrating a "mechanism of foreclosure" that, as David Cockley has noted, "cuts off ethical engagement by cutting off response and filling the discourse with endless words that all amounted to the same thing … perpetuating a single vision of what America's response should be" (14). If the community of traumatized New Yorkers allows for both unified and individuated responses, the media-political Moloch only allows for a false unified one. As Cockley remarks, "[t]he media exists as a constant reminder of how literature needs to crack the all consuming nature of the spectacle and interrupt its influence in order to allow ethical response" (15). In this sense, Schwarz's novel and Renata's language contrast hegemonic voices and amnesiac attitudes and compensate the tragic spectacularization and crude explanations of terrorism diffused right after 9/11 with their alternative and affective politics of language.

In view of these arguments, I then suggest that *WW* is an ethical narrative for the type of imaginative and linguistic solutions it offers to the reader. Besides being a novel that stems from the place of trauma (for its setting and for the author's origin), *WW* envisions reconstructive scenarios of communal solidarity in the wake of the attacks by transforming the Towers into a bodily metaphor and by imagining a cathartic Levinasian encounter with a stranger. The "humanness" of such narrative imagery lends the novel its ethical dimension and heightens the reader's sensitivity to suffering and to the most palpable, realistic, and critical consequences of 9/11. In this sense, the novel allows the reader to experience vicariously the trauma suffered by New Yorkers, enabling a continuous ethical engagement with the text's world – an engagement that only the narrative experience, through its writerly

and readerly conventions, through its complexity and the time it requires for reading, can recreate. Furthermore, the politics of language suggested by Schwarz promotes affirmative ways of thinking about loss and recovery, as it endows such experiences with nuanced, alternative and unthought-of words that, in their exoticism and variety, asymmetrically undermine the official barbarian rhetoric about the tragedy.

Chapter 5

Numbness, Agency and Missed Catharsis in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*

If Schwarz's *The Writing on the Wall* enables a progressive discourse of self-awareness through the resilient character of Renata, who undergoes a catharsis through her encounter with "Gianna" and resorts to an unusually affective language to contrast the dissolution of the individual in the face of trauma, DeLillo's novel *Falling Man* is, in my opinion, a narrative of muted displacement rather than articulate hope, in which the author's vague and hazy language elegantly reflects the cold atmosphere of ineffability that followed 9/11. In this novel, DeLillo has minimized language and invention to capture the undecidability and slipperiness of existence as imagined in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. While Schwartz's literary *traumata* invites the reader to substitute death with hope and to construct meaningful alternatives to loss, Delillo's story draws its audience into a poetic, almost lyrical contemplation of the displacing and emptying effects of 9/11, at the same time dwelling on the lame efforts of the characters to process the *Unheimlich* of terrorism through listening and storytelling. Both novels, however, continue to stand as examples of imagined survivors' stories to which we bear witness to their pain through the authors' voices. Schwarz and DeLillo witnessed the attacks in New York and channeled their personal, vivid experience by creating fictionalized survivors from the city. In this way, as ethics in traumatic fiction is connected to experience (one might say to "truth") besides openness, their "fictional testimony" ethically merges the value of phenomenological, testimonial experience with the symbolization that comes from telling and imagination. This

double effort inherent in their writing (testimony and fiction) grants that there is an intimate connection between what really happened and what was transfigured into fiction, that is, between history and story. As Jen Webb has suggested in her discussion on the fruitful relationship between testimony and fiction,

> a thoughtful novel that is grounded on observation and experience can offer an account of a life or lives, and a rendering of an historical event that can stand alongside and illuminate the more empirical versions of the same event. (55)

In light of what we have established so far about ethical narratives, I would like to propose that *Falling Man* (henceforth *FM*) is precisely one of these attempts. On account of its low degree of mediation and its profound "affective" structure (a structure of anesthesia, repetition and defamiliarization), the text facilitates for the reader an estranging reception of Keith and Lianne's story and connects her to an intense, "real" experience. This "estranging" reception does not depend only on the story's themes of numbness and catatonia. We do not identify with the characters only because we feel (affectively) sorry for them as the troubled "victims" of 9/11. Nor do we feel estranged (cognitively) only because this is a fragmented story about hypnotic defamiliarization following a traumatic event. The coexistence in the reader of identification with, and estrangement from, the characters also stems from the structure of reception of traumatic narratives in itself beyond the particular thematic rendition given by the author. An ethical reader response to a traumatic narrative implies alignment, association, but not substitution. In this mechanism of "heteropathic identification" theorized by Scheler that we have already examined in Schwarz, the reading subject disassociates from

herself and moves toward the Other rather than assimilating him/her into her own self ("idiopathic identification"). Consequently, the truly ethical response is always a tension, a "holding out" of an embodied reading subject towards a textualized one.

Dominick LaCapra discusses this movement towards identification without assimilation or substitution when he describes the research method of the historian who reads and writes about trauma. He claims that the historian has to undergo an "empathic unsettlement" to be objective and accurate in his enterprise. He has to rely on a hermeneutic technique that balances affect and cognition, engagement and objectivity. Empathy is defined by LaCapra as "an affective component of understanding" that for the historian is "difficult to control" (102) but that is also necessary because it allows for a "tense interplay between critical, necessarily objectifying reconstruction and affective response to the voices of victims" (109). "Empathic unsettlement" is, then, a moment of recognition of the "traumatic experience of others" (41), an "experience of inquiry" (78) that should entail affective interpretation in order to avoid objectification and cognitive closure. Such "responsiveness" (that LaCapra bestows on the reader-historian) must reconcile the contradictions the traumatized subject inevitably produces in his account and must rearticulate them as ethically and uniformly as possible, transforming empathy into "historical understanding" (xiv) – LaCapra emphasizes the reconstructive moment *a posteriori*.

Not dissimilarly from his conception of the historian's analytical attitude, LaCapra's commentary on the processes of writing and reading traumatic fiction highlights the interdependence of empathy and critical understanding. While aporetic, fragmented

narratives may frustrate an empathic response to suffering, they also prevent overidentification with the victim and instead challenge the reader to think outside normative ways of being. In particular LaCapra claims that traumatic literature and art may bear witness and fabricate narratives that, although excessively gripping at times, provide a "safe" place for working "over and through trauma" (105), dialectically mobilizing sympathy and empathy.

Trauma fiction, then, establishes a field of polarized tension that sets the reader in motion towards the experience of her "other," the character in the text, and does not pretend to explain or resolve the contradictions it crystallizes (as the historian does) but aims at providing a real-time "familiarity" with the suffering of others and with their attempts at fathoming the intrusion of alterity in their lives. Confronted with DeLillo's characters, we feel that our reaction of estrangement is dominant and, while we would like to sympathize/empathize with the characters, we find ourselves struggling to connect with them as they are sealed off in an immobilized, individualized and cold suffering. The ethical-affective experience we have is not one of catharsis but one of traumatic repetition. Also, it is one of uncomfortable feeling rather than satisfying cognition.

Entering an empathic unsettlement, we witness (cognitively) the dreadful impossibility of making sense of 9/11 within the private sphere of existence and we are puzzled (affectively) at the bare struggle for psychological survival that informs the characters' lives. What we learn about 9/11 through DeLillo's novel is the sense of impotency we feel through the characters. We learn about the type of feeling survivors may

have felt through the type of feeling we feel reading about them. DeLillo's representation of 9/11, then, accentuates the dangerous paucity of sentiment and connection that may ensue from a shocking historical tragedy and implicitly invites us to engage affectively with the multiple disruptive moments of this New York family, which has a history of missed encounters and explanations that is prolonged into 9/11. Regardless of the larger historical significance of the event, which is tackled by the characters in the novel and which DeLillo leaves deliberately open, what we are left with is an experience of their displacing suffering and of the difficulty to form a proactive post-traumatic community. Also, it is our testimony − fraught with a mixture of perplexity and identification − along with that of the author's that gives ethical value to the characters' "fictionalized" agony. While the novel undermines by definition a historical, definitive version of the tragic events, it allows for an ethical experience in the reader through its performance of the events.

In *FM* DeLillo effectively conveys the defamiliarization and freezing shock embedded in the singular event of 9/11. The novel opens with Keith Neudecker, a 39-year-old lawyer who emerges from the ash and debris of the falling Twin Towers on the morning of 9/11 and tries to clear his way through a city that has suddenly become "dystopian" (Versluys 31). In a state of numbness and alienation Keith, instead of walking home to his apartment in downtown Manhattan where he had relocated about a year before in the hope of "centering his life" after divorce (*FM* 26), accepts a lift from an electric contractor driving his van through the "pulverized matter" (*FM* 6). Keith asks to be taken to the apartment of his ex-wife Lianne, a writer and translator of books whom he unconsciously holds on to in

this fateful event. Aghast at the events, Lianne is nonetheless surprised and intimately pleased that Keith thought of coming to her in this near-to-death situation and takes him in, his face sprinkled with shards of glass and detritus. Lianne's mother, Nina, a retired art history professor and brilliant expert now weighed down by hypochondria, senescence and a wrecked knee, warns her daughter not to take Keith back. But Lianne cannot say no. The couple tries to overcome the shock of the attacks by bonding again, but they soon realize that the gaps between them remain wide: no physical contact, no meaningful conversations, and no projects reanimate their lives in the chilling aftermath. If 9/11 gives them the chance to rethink their marriage, it also demonstrates that complex bonds that were once known and familiar cannot be renewed by counting merely on the shared fear for a public crisis. As the story proceeds, the broken narrative of their marriage cannot be knotted back together again and 9/11 both adds new nightmares and obsession about death, family, memory, meaning, and it amplifies ruptures and misunderstandings that were already there in the first place.

Psychologically dejected by the singular magnitude of 9/11, Keith and Lianne live suspended in a dystopian present that offers few clues to its understanding. Knowledge cannot come from external sources as all the public framework has collapsed into distant rhetorical gestures. Nor can it come from the self, whose fibre is evanescent and inadequate to construct viable patterns of intersubjectivity. Keith and Lianne materialize as thin voices in need of a body, and/or bodiless creatures in search of a story, but one that differentiates itself

from the "deathward plots" so ironic and "dear" to DeLillo and re-enacted by terrorists.[39] Floundering throughout the novel to morph numbness back into feeling after the annihilating attacks, Keith and Lianne are trapped into a perennial movement between "ruminative" (cognitive) meditation (Conte 568) and familial and social re-connection (affective).

Corporeal dematerialization and social disconnection of the characters are dominating aspects in the book. The former explicitly marks the opening and closing of the book and is conveyed through DeLillo's finely wrought style and elusive imagery. When Keith runs for his life at the beginning, enveloped by "smoke and ash" (*FM* 3) and immersed in a stink and noise that he was simultaneously fleeing and entering into, he sees something "outside all this, not belonging to this, aloft" (*FM* 4). It is a shirt coming down "out of the high smoke, a shirt lifted and drifting in the scant light and then falling again, down toward the river" (*FM* 4). This is picked up again by DeLillo at the end of the book, when the initial episode is reiterated in a slightly flash-backward scene, in which Keith is still inside the Towers and holds his dying colleague Rumsey in his hands. DeLillo writes:

> something went past the window, then he saw it. First it went and was gone and then
> he saw it and had to stand a moment staring out at nothing, holding Rumsey under the

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[39] As Hitler Studies professor Jack Gladney famously states in *White Noise*, "[a]ll plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers' plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children's games. We edge nearer death every time we plot" (26). In *Falling Man*, DeLillo seems to confine this apocalyptic idea about plotting to the terrorist Hammad he discusses at the end of each section, and he rather embraces the imperative necessity of meaning in a post-traumatic world of dejection and senselessness. Joseph Conte observes that the characters come together in *Falling Man* through a Burkean "rhetoric of motives," whereby they find identification and common purposes through the suffering they share, as opposed to the antagonistic discourses enforced by the Administration.

arms. He could not stop seeing it, twenty feet away, an instant of something sideways,

going past the window, white shirt, hand up, falling before he saw it. (*FM* 242)

The novel then closes with Keith seeing again that recursive detail of a shirt coming "down

out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in this life" (*FM* 246).

Joseph Conte observes that the shirt "appears to defy gravity [and] serves as an icon of all

those who stepped out into airy nothingness while yearning for an impossible rescue" (577).

Webb on the contrary surmises that Keith "has seen a falling man. It is not a shirt, but a

person; but this is too difficult to absorb and so it is re-narrativised in his memory as an

inanimate object" (63). Regardless of the actual presence of a body wearing the garment, I

argue that the shirt represents a *memento mori* for the survivor Keith. Clearly a Western,

masculine signifier of the white collar class under attack, the hovering shirt might allude to

the fact that 9/11 has assessed a blow to the transnational world of capital of bankers and

managers whose violent implications and repercussions on other cultures are now exposed

to/in the US through the terrorist attacks. As a lawyer, Keith belongs to this falling white

collar class that forms the ramified structure of "empty," disembodied and anomic corporate

organizations, whose members he might have likely defended before 9/11 and who are now

subject not only to fall inexorably, but to literally disappear. If they were present but invisible

before, now they are plainly erased from reality and from imagination. This is a fall Keith

witnesses and participates in, but has difficulties to register as real. Delillo's white shirt in the

opening scene of *FM* testifies to how the real "falling bodies" of 9/11 (surely diverse in terms

of race, gender, religion, and other cultural signifiers) were brutally effaced and sublimated

into the unifying framework of white class by terrorists. The real and symbolic absence of physical bodies at Ground Zero condensed in this powerful image is a constant reminder of their material presence, especially if we think that, out of guilt and/or shame, the Administration was literally so quick to erase and dump human and material remains alike in the landfill of Staten Island.[40]

Furthermore, this circular structure of *FM* indicates that the trauma of 9/11 is still being lived over and over, reiteratively, and both characters and readers are locked into traumatic repetition – that is, not only in the time of the story but in that of discourse, as well. DeLillo uses a disrupted and recursive temporality to shape the overall narrative of Keith's survival, whose end leads back to the beginning. This formal solution indicates that narrator, characters and readers still inhabit the same recursive frame of reference with respect to 9/11. The repetitious nature of Keith's story qualifies trauma as an "ever-present" phenomenon, an experience we can engage with affectively and ethically, but that still holds us adrift cognitively deep down. As Caruth explains discussing the paradoxes of the belated trauma and its latency in the subject: "[w]hat returns to haunt the victim is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known"

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[40] In an effort to avert what was felt as a massive defeat, the Administration promptly reacted attacking Afghanistan and heroicizing various "categories" of US citizens, from the firefighters, to the soldiers, from the New Yorkers to the generic American "victims." This latter category was used alternatively to signify a shameful historical condition and a possibility for heroism. This translated, among other actions, into a quick removal of the provisional memorials and debris that testified the grief at Ground Zero, only to show the positive, reconstructive effort of city officials in moving beyond the catastrophe. As to the removal of the remains, Scarpino explains (citing Melosi) that the Towers fell and formed a 16-story high pile of debris in which human remains were mixed up with concrete, rubble and other materials. This debris was then transported to the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island (a historic "landmark" that had been closed down only three months before 9/11), where it was searched through by the FBI for human remnants. See Scarpino, Cinzia. "Ground Zero/Fresh Kills: Cataloguing Ruins, Garbage, and Memory." *Altre Modernità* (2011): 237-253, 2011.

(*UE* 6). This means that, in traumatic occurrences, it is impossible to separate any event from its temporal structure to look at it retrospectively as an object of inquiry. This process begins only when there is a homodiegetic listener and a heterodiegetic reader who can witness, receive and ethically process the victim's story. Only by endowing events with temporality and with critical testimony can they be turned into (hi)story. It is indeed through the witnessing and acknowledgment of suffering that a possibility for the construction of a meaningful history is laid by traumatic fiction.

Even though he narrates in the past tense in *FM*, DeLillo shows how New Yorkers are still benumbed and imprisoned in the presentness of their own trauma and find it arduous to work it through, as they are unable to remember, comprehend, or critique. The inescapable present dimension powerfully articulates Keith's trauma and forcefully demands a prospect of consolation or future recovery. However, rather than crafting an explicatory, linear, overarching narrative of 9/11 in the way the government did to win US citizens over to their pursuit of war, DeLillo chooses to shun the pressures of logic-chronological order/signification and looks at the life of his characters-victims in slow-motion, by focusing on the existential and cultural impasse in which the American subject unexpectedly found him/herself. Through his fiction of trauma, DeLillo gives us the opportunity to dwell on the events as no one publicly represented them. Instead, the disappearance of bodies and the removal of their remains, along with the prefabricated fantasy of heroic revenge and ultimate success against the enemy, prevented many citizens from developing their own point of view on 9/11. When traces are removed, it is hard to build and cultivate a memory of them. When

ready-made interpretations are provided, it becomes imperative to develop critical counterresponses that consider different sides of the issue, including "the victims'" and the "enemy's."

In this sense, DeLillo's portrayal of the immediate post-9/11 New York represents an ethical counternarrative to the prompt, bellicose response to the Arab-Islamic world, as it uses time in a meditative, existentialist way, narratively deploying the dense image of the suspended-but-falling man which the title refers to.[41] The book captures the frozen immobility and shock that 9/11 generated and invites the reader to partake of the same experience through a highly unified, holistic prose movement. Some critics have found the novel exhausting and poor with respect to DeLillo's usual standards. The novelist Andrew O'Hagan has noted that the novel is marked by DeLillo's "inability to conjure his usual exciting prose" ("Racing against Reality") and Kakutani has highlighted that DeLillo's prose in this novel is "tired and brittle" ("A Man, a Woman"). Linda Kaufmann instead has affirmed that *FM* "contains many moments of mordant, Italian-style black comedy" (140), particularly some descriptions of Keith as a "bad boy" and former drunker with a "twisted guilt in his smile" (*FM* 104), but also the moments in which Keith punches a man at Macy's and Lianne slaps the woman next to her door for playing loud "Islamic" music (*FM* 67). In finding a middle-ground between these critical positions, I argue that DeLillo's style does not

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[41] On September 12, 2001, on page 7, *The New York Times* published the picture of a man falling from the North Tower and taken by Richard Drew of the Associated Press. The picture became the symbol of the despair and death generated by 9/11 at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Next, It appeared only once in the *Times* because of harsh criticism against its use. However, it became the subject for the 2006 documentary film *9/11: The Falling Man* by Henry Singer, who described the story behind the picture and was aired in the US in 2007. The falling man of Drew's picture was then identified through his clothes and body shape by his family and co-workers as Jonathan Briley, a 43-year-old employee of the Windows of the World Restaurant.

differ dramatically from his previous novels and carries the usual cohesive, baffling and ironic tone at the inconsistencies between the individual and the larger, mysterious, enveloping cultural framework in which s/he never fits. Rarefying the imagery perhaps even further, in *FM* DeLillo presents an insubstantial humanity that strives to achieve depth, coherence and motivation in the months following the trauma of 9/11. Even though the novel exhibits a fragmentary narrative, zeroing in, for example, on Lianne's everyday errands and Keith's hospitalization without solution of continuity, DeLillo's literary style and tone are carefully kept fluid and objective, ineluctable and elusive at once, as though the intrusion of 9/11 in the American domestic life had catapulted the characters in a dream-like world of ruins, urging them to reassess their identity on the basis of their own vulnerability. This frozen picture of 9/11, crystallized, as we will see, in the atemporality of Giorgio Morandi's paintings of bare, pointless objects, is meant to stand as a commentary on the death, silence and ethical necessity of abeyance in moments of mourning. As opposed to official discourses, the narrator's voice never refrains from exposing the psychological, physical and social wounds that his characters are enduring.

As a metaphor and material construct, then, the body is continually bracketed and weakened in DeLillo's post-9/11 world, therefore coming across as the first site that calls for reconstruction and respect. If its healing promises recovery, it also posits other challenges that the characters struggle with and do not seem to meet. At the same time, as I have noted, the body is also a necessary *primum* from which recovery can begin. Keith's healing has to

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start precisely from his injured body, as the narrator meticulously suggests when he imagines

the different stages of the treatment Keith undergoes at the hospital accompanied by Lianne.

Initially, the doctor tells Keith that

> [w]here there are suicide bombings … In those places where it happens, the
> survivors, the people nearby who are injured, sometimes, months later, they develop
> bumps, for lack of a better term, and it turns out this is caused by small fragments,
> tiny fragments of the suicide bomber's body. . . . They call this organic 'shrapnel.'
> (*FM* 16)

As Rachel Smith explains, this disturbing literalization of trauma as a physical, invading

explosion of matter that pierces through the boundaries of the body indicates that the force of

a harrowing event such as 9/11 "radically alters the world, and with it the corporeal existence

of its victims" (153). In Smith's view, this also suggests that "we are more permeable to

others than we might think" (170) and that, in a world of dangerous social entanglements and

contradictions, the most powerful connections can take place through the disruption of the

most resistant limit we hold, the bodily constraint. While I recognize the awkward "fertility"

of DeLillo's irritating image, I am not sure that a potential for cultural regeneration and a

new socio-political interaction can be read into this imaginary fusion. Ultimately what stays

with the reader is the violence of the penetration by this "organic shrapnel" and the anomaly

of a bump on the skin. It seems to me that the daring interpenetration of bodily matter that

DeLillo visualizes may allude to the fact that abnormal violence can only generate other

types of grotesque monstrosity. The hybridization with terror and with death is neither

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healthy, nor promising, but abject. As a matter of fact, DeLillo immunizes Keith from being inhabited by violent splinters of alterity and has the doctor say: "This is something I don't think you have" (*FM* 16).

Nonetheless, medical exams and a small surgery intervention show that Keith has no major injury in his body but has a dysfunction in the wrist that he can cure by doing therapeutic exercises. Through minuscule movements in a parcellized temporality Keith struggles to reconstruct a meaningful existence. DeLillo describes his therapy insisting on the significance Keith attaches to the performance of these small gestures:

> He found these sessions restorative, four times a day, the wrist extensions, the ulnar deviations. These were the true countermeasures to the damage he'd suffered in the tower, in the descending chaos. It was not the MRI and not the surgery that brought him closer to well-being. It was this modest home program, the counting of seconds, the counting of repetitions, the times of day he reserved for the exercises, the ice he applied following each set of exercises.
>
> There were the dead and maimed. His injury was slight but it wasn't the torn cartilage that was the subject of this effort. It was the chaos, the levitation of ceilings and floors, the voices choking in smoke. (*FM* 40)

In this initial stage of the healing process, Keith's body becomes the first vehicle toward meaningfulness and the place where he sees refracted and tries to heal all the "maimed" bodies and "voices" that "were choking in smoke." Keith attempts to work through his own trauma by making the other victims "the subject of his effort." His time is marked by simple

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domestic gestures of self-recovery that alone can give him a chance to open up to improvement and memory. Familiarizing with his vulnerability and with the suffering of others while reimagining everyone's trauma through his body, Keith enters a post-traumatic phase of healing that transcends purely medicalized discourses and in which he is supposed to take control of his persona.

Secondly, in order to start recovering fully, he has to go back to his apartment, to the private space of existence where he will be able to confront the remnants of his previous self. This stage of recovery concerns the appropriation of his identity through a repositioning of the body in the traumatic space, from a destroyed home to a home that holds the prospect of human reconnection. In the third chapter of the first section of the novel – the temporal sequence of the episodes is disrupted and Keith's visit to his apartment comes after the visits to the hospital with Lianne – Keith reconstructs for Lianne his homecoming to her apartment amid the ruins and chaos of that infamous morning. We then learn that Keith, presumably a few days after finding refuge at Lianne's, walks back to Manhattan passing numerous checkpoints and obstacles and traversing a literal Hades on earth: "The dead were everywhere, in the air, in the rubble, on rooftops nearby, in the breezes that carried from the river. They were settled in ash and drizzled on windows all along the streets, in his hair and on his clothes" (*FM* 25). To come back to life, Keith has to traverse the public apocalypse and to leave behind his life as single.

Versluys sees Keith's journey through Ground Zero as an attempt to break through a "militarized…landscape [that] has been stripped of all fun and excitement" (31) that is

usually associated with Manhattan and New York City. Versluys argues that the individual is stranded in this waste land, where "the anonymous bureaucracy and the far-reaching tentacles of the state apparatus" (31) rule and he has no chance of developing his own counterdiscourse. However, Keith experiences spare moments of bare self-assertion when joined by one man at a fence who mutters to him through a mask "I am standing here. It's hard to believe, being here and seeing it" (*FM* 25). Similarly, once inside his own apartment, Keith gathers some clothes and locks the door behind himself, aware that "[t]his was the last time he would stand there" (*FM* 27). In the corridor of that garbage-reeking, paper-filled building, Keith "spoke in a voice slightly above a whisper. He said, 'I am standing here,' and then, louder, 'I am standing here'" (*FM* 27). This reconnection with the basic material dimension of existence, i.e. the certitude of presence, suggests that Keith is open to a potential regeneration of his own self and to a rebirth that necessarily ensues from destruction. The pathological self identified by Keith's visits to the hospital, the man whose trauma was only medicalized and not conceptualized as existential, has now a chance to reconnect with his ex-wife, a different social context/community and a new environment.

It is at this point that Keith opens the briefcase he has recovered and taken home to Lianne's on the morning of the attacks, an object he had never dared touching until he felt he could bear its human and emotional charge outside the space-time of trauma. Admittedly, his identity is still unfinished and questioned by the structure of the narrative, as he tries to correct with a pen his misspelled name on the mail he gets at Lianne's: "[h]e wasn't sure when he had started doing this and didn't know why he did it. There was no reason why.

Because it wasn't him, with the name misspelled, that's why" (*FM* 31). However, in the fifth and last chapter of part one, Keith decides to visit the owner of the briefcase without even checking if she was still alive. When he gets to the apartment of Florence Givens, "a light-skinned black woman, his age or close, and gentle-seeming, and on the heavy side" (*FM* 52), she timidly welcomes him in and for the first time she gives someone a detailed account about how she fled the Towers on that morning. In this context of traumatic repetition through the voice of Florence ("[s]he went through it slowly ... She was dazed ... She wanted to tell him everything" *FM* 55), Keith listens and "didn't interrupt her. He let her talk and didn't try to reassure her. What was there to be reassuring about?" (*FM* 56). As she tells him fragments of her terrible morning, the flames, the blood, the stuck elevators and the firemen up the stairs, Keith realizes that Florence could not pull together memories in a clear, logical way and instead continues to repeat them: "[s]he was going through it again and he was ready to listen again. He listened carefully, noting every detail, trying to find himself in the crowd" (*FM* 56).

This encounter between the 9/11 survivors Keith and Florence is fraught with possibilities for regeneration, linked to the characters' gender, to their mutual imbrications in the same traumatic experience, and to their desire to inhabit each other's affective zone. However, this encounter in the end leads to further failure of communication and to the realization of the impossibility of fully working through the trauma, at least for Keith. At the same time, the survivors' relationship is essential since it catalyzes the narrative of trauma through one more suffering voice. Such voice makes acceptable the experience for an

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audience that receives and contributes to shape it. In spite of its inadequate and partial outcome, Keith and Florence's encounter is initially productive. This is the first time in the novel that we see Keith endowed with agency and with a genuine impulse toward socialization. Trying to discard the image of his flimsy texture as a character and as a man, the reader aligns affectively with him when he leaves home and takes the place of the listener-witness to Florence's story. In a self-reflexive embedding, readers had read-and-witnessed Keith's version of 9/11 morning a few pages earlier and now, through Keith, read-and-witness Florence' disconnected narrative. Healing, insofar as it is envisioned to be pursuable, is conceptualized here as a teller-listener relationship. This is important in the context of traumatic fiction and the ethical value I posit for it. In *FM*, Florence and Keith speak not only to, but through each other, and can attempt to work through their own trauma only because there is a witness that testifies to it. The framework for testimony is always dialogic, as Andrea Frisch explains in her discussion of testimonial utterances in medieval legal procedure, where the witness was not summoned to tell his own individual, "lyrical" secret, or autobiography, but to answer a set of questions in the presence of another party he bore testimony to:

> [t]estimony is first and foremost a *response*; it is divided insofar as it is necessarily *shared* with other people. This stress on sharing does not merely mean that the witness always testifies *to* someone, and thus necessarily has an addressee, but also that the addressee of a testimony takes a necessary part in its very construction. The

addressee is an essential *component* of testimony, not merely the eventual recipient of

a discourse whose structure has been determined without regard to him.[42] (Frisch 47)

Frisch points out that the nature of testimony was (and still is, for those who question the

Cartesian centrality of the subject) not epistemic, i.e. based on a shared knowledge of an

event, but ethical, i.e. negotiated as a reciprocal act. Independently from the content matter of

testimony, then, it is the relationship that a listener and teller establish that endows the

narrative with significance, as a performative, relational act, not as a fixed proposition or

monologue. In other words, testimony is not a "purely linguistic structure" (Frisch 46) but an

act of communication, a performance for a recipient who partakes in the construction of it.

The witness "comes to exist only via the call of another" (Frisch 57).

At times in *FM*, only to be in the presence of one another is enough for Keith and

Florence, as when DeLillo writes that "[i]t didn't matter whether they spoke or not. It would

be fine, not speaking, breathing the same air, or she speaks, he listens, or day is night" (*FM*

89). Soon they become lovers. For Keith, Florence is a being he cannot fully grasp but he

pre-linguistically benefits from. When his son Justin walks in the park, "[h]e was still back

there, with Florence, double in himself ... the deep shared self" (*FM* 157). And yet, trauma

needs to be spoken to acquire temporality and meaning, to transform witnessing in bearing

witness, even when signification is undermined and knowledge unattainable.[43] Therefore, the

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[42] Frisch further clarifies that: "[i]n other words, it was not enough for the witness to be present to take the oath as a first person; rather, it was necessary that he take the oath in the presence of the parties on which his testimony bore. Thus, his status as a witness was established on the basis of an act that had itself to be witnessed by others, not simply performed" (48). See Frisch, Andrea. "The Ethics of Testimony: A Genealogical Perspective." *Discourse* 25.1&2 (Winter & Spring 2003): 36-54.
[43] As Shoshana Felman has theorized, a witness has to be posited as the other of what s/he listens to. As previously explained, she affirms that the Holocaust had no witnesses because they were not conceivable

dimension of "semiotic black hole" that Morrione has qualified 9/11 trauma with needs to be transcended.[44] While we recognize that trauma cannot be punctually spoken and words always fall short in its presence, the process of working through is what ought to characterize the ethical relationship teller-listener in the reciprocal testimony that traumatic phenomena call for. LaCapra affirms indeed that

> [e]specially in an ethical sense, working through does not mean avoidance, harmonisation, simply forgetting the past or submerging oneself in the present. It means coming to terms with trauma, including its details, and critically engaging the tendency to act out the past and even to recognize why it may be necessary…desirable or at least compelling. (144)

Keith, as other characters in DeLillo's novels do when they gravitate toward a mystique of names, longs for Florence's words in her unpredictable and exotic alterity: "[l]ight-skinned black woman. One of those odd embodyings of doubtful language and unwavering race but the only words that meant anything to him were the ones she'd spoken and would speak" (*FM* 55).

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outside the totalizing framework that the Nazis had devised. Those who witnessed it failed to see it and could not speak about it. She ultimately theorizes an "impossible testimony," in which the witness of Auschwitz has to ''lend his ear to what is not presentable under the rules of knowledge'' (*Testimony* 202). Her point works for DeLillo, since as readers we "bear witness to the impossibility of bearing witness."

[44] Morrione, Deems D. "When Signifiers Collide: Doubling, Semiotic Black Holes, and the Destructive Remainder of the American Un/Real." *Cultural Critique* 63 (Spring 2006): 158-173. Morrione coins this expression with reference to the "collision of a fatal event and a perfect object" under which all the others are subsumed and annihilated. He discusses in particular the much underplayed attack to the Pentagon that ended up blackened by the major signifier of the Twin Towers.

These acts of listening and co-presence have multiple implications in the narrative. For example, it might be that DeLillo overemphasized Florence's physical aspect, tastes for South-American music, and social rank as a promise of liberation from the traumatic impasse and class ties that Keith is associated with in the novel. She indeed represents one of the ethical options in *FM* besides Lianne's scriptotherapy group and her marriage with Keith. Although she is marginalized, eroticized and exoticized as a character, as John Rowe has noted (127-28), Florence stands as the alternative to trauma and hierarchical discourses about Otherness. A survivor of 9/11, with her light-black skin she stereotypically represents the other of Keith, the opportunity to "penetrate" a territory of sameness and otherness in order for him to find new meanings to read his trauma through. She is the safe, singular, relational other that may allow Keith to reshape his traumatized configuration. With Derek Attridge we might say that Florence is part of an "[o]therness [that] is produced in an active or eventlike relation – we might call it a *relating*: the other as other to is always and constitutively on the point of turning from the unknown into the known, from the other into the same" ("Innovation" 22). In this sense, however, while Keith shares with Florence many desires about his personal life, he never really let himself be transformed by her. She remains a missed opportunity for change and working through, a mirage of depth that he never really wants to fathom. Keith is subconsciously divided between the desires of staying with Florence, discussing together the morning of 9/11, talking about their jobs, and his inability to abandon his self to embrace a new narrative, so her words remain purely "spoken."

Furthermore, their co-presence is constellated by additional traumatization and closure. Conte notes that "the bond between survivors" initiated by Keith and Florence is one part "of the counter-narrative" in *FM*, since they start to think about their place in the tragedy and about "the world narrative in which they are now engaged" (Conte 567). However, while it is true that the bond between them reinforces the notion of counternarrative, it does so for the promise of ethical engagement it withholds. In reality, the lack of discourses that purely transcend Keith and Florence's intimacy signals a rupture with the public sphere and with any other idea of community that they might have developed in the wake of the attacks. The basis for their bond remains traumatic and shuns rational analysis of the current global *status quo*. Their bond also thrives on a range of experiences that are not meant to build anything solid, either through actions or language, but are rather directed to feel the intensity of the moments spent together, as to recuperate the sensation of being alive. This is evident when DeLillo presents us with Keith and Florence starting their affair by dreaming about learning Portuguese and dancing "in slow motion" (*FM* 93) to the Brazilian music she likes, and then going to Macy's to choose a mattress that Keith refuses to bounce on to try it because, he says, she is the one who needs it after all. And then punches a customer who was insistently looking derogatorily at Florence, since "if anyone said a harsh word to Florence, or raised a hand to Florence, or insulted her in any way, Keith was ready to kill him" (*FM* 133). These pre-social, anti-dialogic attitudes simply solidify the impression that the two survivors are still in a primitive phase of trauma and struggle to come out from it fortified. The novel

constructs socialization as problematic and violent, whereas it salvages the private sphere of existence as the only bulwark against the complications of a hostile world.

Finally, their listening falls back into the monologic. While the narrative of their affair endorses the necessity of contact and mutual testimony to one's trauma in order for trauma to be endured and shared, it also painfully undermines itself as a reciprocally fecund experience. Keith and Florence come out in very different ways from their relationship. Although he does not fail to realize that "[w]hat she needed in him was his seeming calm," and that he "was the still figure, watching, ever attentive, saying little" (*FM* 158), he decides to leave her without explanations (silences often dominate their "conversations"). We surmise that Keith apparently wants to follow through with his family commitments, but in the end he remains stuck in sterile thoughts and propositions, as when he decides to tell Lianne about Florence but never does. Linda Kaufmann points out that "on the one hand, he wants to live on the edge; on the other, he needs contact with his family. He nevertheless finds domesticity "stifling" (Kaufmann 139). Lianne also ponders Keith's contradictions, thinking that he "used to want more of the world than there was time and means to acquire" (*FM* 77). Keith is an ambitious man, but inane and ineffectual in the end for his resistance to open up to any person. As Nina comments at the beginning when Keith moves back with her daughter, his style is to "get a woman to do something she'll be sorry for" (*FM* 12).

Most of all, after his affair with Florence he picks up poker again. Poker games are Keith's addiction before and after 9/11 and they represent a large allegory, or fantasy, of masculine power and war. The novel is (ironically) interspersed with descriptions of poker

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games played by many of Keith's friends who take it very seriously. Played at Keith's place every week, the games stop for a while and then continue to be played in various casinos across the nation after the attacks. As Marie-Christine Leps shows, after 9/11 the US Intelligence Defense Agency issued a set of cards that featured the faces of the enemies they had to pursue in Iraq, thereby ironically transforming the military enterprise into a fun game. Like war, poker implies a win-or-lose logic ("[Keith and is friends] used intuition and cold-war risk analysis" (*FM* 97)), a militarized code of behavior ("[h]ow disciplined can we be, Demetrius said, if we are taking time to leave the table and stuff our jaws with chemically treated breads, meats and cheeses. This was a joke they took seriously" (*FM* 97)), predominantly masculine imaginary (they drank beer, talked sports, and smoked cigars), and an association of risk with the sensation of feeling alive. Moreover, poker is for Keith a chronic simulation, in which he comfortably plays and replays his own trauma in the illusion of being safe from it – indeed the risk of the game is contained, never fatal. Versluys writes that "the gambling is a soothing ritual, a powerful symbol of a state of numbness, of withdrawal … every meeting [Keith] has (even with a member of his former poker group) is the occasion for further estrangement and isolation" (39). However, far from being a random, separated environment, the casinos and game tables anchor Keith to his traumatic memories and to a humanity that is perennially anesthetized, with "no stories attached" (*FM* 204).

The temporal parenthesis of 9/11 in the national life, as well as DeLillo's novel as an ethical meditation, give all the characters time to exhume and comprehend their past intimate contradictions, providing a bridge toward personal and intersubjective self-exploration.

However, that bridge is never really built in the end by Keith. In spite of the attempts he makes at re-embodiment and re-connection, Keith remains a poker-addicted, confused drifter and irreducible individualist, who wanders through the US supporting himself through gambling, again, a metaphor for the mindless, repetitive, "safe" risk-taking lifestyle he has always embraced (perhaps a tragicomic and transfigured representation of the average American man by DeLillo). Lianne continues to see him as "absent," as a "hovering presence" (*FM* 59) first, and now in the end as someone who "want[s] to kill somebody" (*FM* 214). Sensing the lack of catharsis that affects her ex-husband, Lianne understands that he needs a major turning point in his personal life that 9/11 did not provide him with. He will never be a stable point of reference in her life and in the life of Justin. He himself admits that he is not "set to do anything permanent … I go away a while, come back. I am not about to disappear. Not about to do anything drastic. I am here now and I'll be back" (*FM* 215). While Lianne doubts these words, she also knows that Keith has helped her transitioning out from the anxiety that caught her after 9/11: "listen to me. You were stronger than I was. You helped me get here … You were the one in the Towers but I was the berserk. Now, damn it, I don't know." After a silence he said, "I don't know either," and they laughed" (*FM* 215). Delillo concludes their conversation with Lianne critiquing Keith's gambling habit

> "People sitting around a table going shuffle shuffle. Week after week. I mean catching planes to go play cards. I mean aside from the absurdity, the total psychotic folly, isn't there something very sad about this?"
>
> "You said it yourself. Most lives make no sense."

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"But isn't it demoralizing? Doesn't it wear you down? It must eat away your spirit …Who do you become?"

He looked at her and nodded as if he agreed and then kept nodding, taking the gesture to another level, a kind of deep sleep, a narcolepsy, eyes open, mind shut down.

There was one final thing, too self-evident to need saying. She wanted to be safe in the world and he did not. (*FM* 216)

Interestingly, both Lianne and Florence are "saved" by Keith. To the women who are close to him, he acts as a catalyst without catharsis provoking a change in their existence. Just like Lianne thinks she relied on Keith to "survive" to 9/11, Florence Givens, whose name combines the compassionate founder of the Red Cross, Florence Nightingale, and the idea of a "given," taken-for-granted being that men abandon, feeling no guilt (Kaufmann 139), is transformed by Keith. At one point Keith and Florence have a dialogue that reveals she has become a fully embodied "new story" thanks to him. He says:

"I saved your briefcase." And waited for her to laugh. "I can't explain it but no, you saved my life. After what happened, so many gone, friends gone, people I worked with, I was nearly gone, nearly dead … I was afraid … I didn't want to hear … Then you walked in the door. You ask yourself why you took the briefcase out of the building. That's why. So you could bring it here. So we could get to know each other. That's why you took it and that's why you brought it here, to keep me alive." He

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didn't believe this but he believed her. She felt it and meant it. "You ask yourself what the story is that goes with the briefcase. I'm the story," she said. (*FM* 108-09)

With this evidence, I contend that DeLillo embeds in the narrative gem-like possibilities and occasions for potential recovery that clearly work for the female characters. However, he also frustrates the expectation that recovery can be accomplished for Keith, at least in the space-time of a few months. Simple but meaningful opportunities are scattered throughout the novel (Keith's forays into the park with his son Justin, his conversations with Lianne, a new job for some investors, his relationship with Florence) but Keith either refuses to take advantage of them, or he is not always alert enough to recognize them. The intimate and social relationships he develops are circular, a loop he cannot step out from, and not as fertile as for his female counterparts. We sympathize with Lianne and Florence more than we do with Keith, with whom we can only empathize.

Keith does not function reciprocally but only individually. If he effects change in others, he is untouched by it. Especially at the end of *FM*, it is clear that Keith and Lianne have not recovered as a couple but have evolved separately. She is "in control," whereas he is "away." Countless moments of eerie intimacy between them are captured by the narrator and still occur in silent conversations. DeLillo conveys the inanity of their recovery through his cool, technical style:

She [Lianne] lived in the spirit of what is ever impending. They embraced, saying nothing. Later they spoke in low tones that carried a nuance of tact. They would share nearly four full days of indirection before they talked about things that mattered. It

was lost time, designed from the first hour to go unremembered. She would remember the song. They spent nights in bed with the windows open, traffic noises, voices carrying… Words, their own, were not much more than sounds, airstreams of shapeless breath, bodies speaking. There was a breeze if they were lucky… On these nights it seemed to her that they were falling out of the world. This was not a form of erotic illusion. She was continuing to withdraw, but calmly, in control. He was self-sequestered, as always, but with a spatial measure now, one of air miles and cities, a dimension of literal distance between himself and others. (*FM* 212-13)

If Keith remains monadic and self-absorbed, Lianne is able to find her way out of trauma. She is a troubled woman, with a suicidal father and a sick mother, but she nonetheless shows a resilience, strength of character and conscience that Keith lacks throughout. The most useful strategy she employs to work the trauma of 9/11 through is to attend once a week her "storyline sessions" in East Harlem where people with incipient Alzheimer's disease tell their life stories. She had started this group two years before and now it took up particular significance. As much as poker allegorizes the surreal, numb, desensitized aspect of the 9/11 aftermath, the story-line sessions represent a constructive counternarrative of the difficulties of remembering (9/11 as well) through the body and through language. While the metaphor of Alzheimer's disease may share connotations of incoherence, evanescence and insensitivity with the poker game, it nonetheless figuratively and positively structures the uneasy desire to remember and tell that ensues from trauma. The patients, in groups of six or seven, are monitored by a clinical psychologist but Lianne

conducts the sessions in person. Relating different types of losses, in particular their own personal fall into amnesia and aphasia, these elderly people give Lianne perspective about the personal shocks in her life. Even though the psychologist warns her not to turn their stories into hers, Lianne unravels her multiple traumatic layers within the context of these "fading lives" (Versluys 36). Among them there is Anna, who writes about her discovery of the power of words, eighty-one-year-old Curtis, with an encyclopedic culture and a history of prison, and Omar, a youth from outside Manhattan who does not want to write about the planes like all the others (*FM* 33).

However, even though they are attracted to the subject of the planes, they refuse to imagine the terrorists. Patients would have liked to see who were "holding hands," they wonder how 9/11 can be explained to children and why God is implicated in all this (*FM* 63). Yet, they are unable to write anything about the perpetrators of the tragedy. Lianne encourages them to utter the Other, but without much success:

> No one wrote a word about the terrorists. And in the exchanges that followed the readings, no one spoke about the terrorists. She prompted them. There has to be something you want to say, some feeling to express, nineteen men come here to kill us. She waited, not certain what it was she wanted to hear. (*FM* 64).

Anna, a shy patient, skews the topic and replies by telling the story of a fireman she knew who was lost in one of the Towers and whose memory now is not adequately recognized by the press. Lianne then "suspected what this was. It was a response defined in terms of revenge and she welcomed this, the small intimate wish, however useless in a hellstorm"

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(*FM* 64). This process of Freudian displacement, whereby the unconscious redirects the thoughts about an object perceived as dangerous or intolerable toward another object that is felt to be safe or tolerable, is a defence mechanism that any subject would enact to dispel anxiety.[45]

Lianne correctly values this reaction as an attempt, however small, to engage with a difficult subject and to "respond" in whichever way the subject finds most suitable to herself. Anna blames the fateful death of her friend on the lack of editorial judgment of the press rather than on the terroristic violence. Interpretation and comprehension are not required at this point of the working through process. A similar experience happens to Lianne when, recognizing that "she looked for signs" (*FM* 67) that could help her make sense of the tragedy, she reads the newspapers with no particular interpretation of the facts: "[s]he read newspaper profiles of the dead, every one that was printed. Not to read them, every one, was an offense, a violation of responsibility and trust. But she also read them because she had to, out of some need she did not try to interpret" (*FM* 106). This is an action she performs on another occasion, when she tells Martin, her mother's lover: "I don't read poems [unlike other people do to find comfort]. I read newspapers. I put my head in the pages and get angry and crazy" (*FM* 42). Anna and Lianne's are different but healthy forms of engagement with trauma and testify to the ability of female characters in the novel to contrast the overpowering effects of 9/11 by a countervailing a genuine, positive and effective response.

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[45] Akhtar, Salman. *Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*. London: Karnak Books, 2009 (82).

They cathect (i.e. invest/channel emotional energy) their anger through displaced objects, as their mind is still unable to imagine or process the figure of the Other, the terrorist.

Through this group scriptotherapy, Lianne is able to heal herself. If Alzheimer's disease amplifies the ruptures and lacunae in the process of narrative reconstruction of 9/11, at the same time it paradoxically conveys, outside the falsely harmonious rhetoric of public discourse, the emotions, problems and desires that New Yorkers may have felt right after the attacks. It is a powerful metaphor that crystallizes the "imperative to tell" and the "impossibility of telling" that Dori Laub has theorized and that we have discussed in Chapter 3. In Lianne, we once again encounter in *FM* the figure of the ethical witness, the being that listens and productively invests others' narratives with meaning and action. The ethical nature of this experience lies in the fact that Lianne bears witness to these patients' stories and, while she risks appropriating them emotionally, she is also able to translate them fruitfully for herself. We learn that "it was possible that the group meant more to her than it did to the members" (*FM* 61) because "[t]here was something precious here, something that seeps and bleeds" (*FM* 61-62).

In one of the last sessions, Omar asks Lianne to tell her story of 9/11. Everyone has told his/her own fragments, vision, and memories of that morning but Lianne.

> For nearly two years now, ever since the storyline sessions began, with her marriage
> receding into the night sky, she'd listened to these men and women speak about their
> lives in funny, stinging, straightforward and moving ways, binding the trust among
> them. She owed them a story, didn't she? (*FM* 126)

Abruptly, words start to flow from her mouth with no transition in the text. She tells about Keith, the hospital, the silence, the fear for Justin, the freezing of time, the subway searched for unattended packages, only to conclude that she wanted to "[t]ell them everything, say everything. She needed them to listen" (*FM* 129). If she had engaged limitedly with the emotionally stunted Keith, she is now fully part of the storyline sessions she had contributed to form. Finally, very much like Florence, Lianne becomes "a story."

Not only does she begin to recover emotionally from the trauma of 9/11 through storytelling. She also comes to terms with her past, especially the violent suicide of her father, who shot himself when she was a little girl. The memory of her father is entwined with his Catholic religious beliefs and Lianne has inherited her father's obsession with religion. Evoking his image necessarily entails suffering and intimate fissure in her sense of the divinity. For a long time she "wanted to disbelieve ... She wanted ... to snuff out the pulse of the shaky faith she'd held for much of her life (*FM* 64-5). Art and social involvement may initially appear as interesting, consolatory alternatives. She stares at her mother's paintings, enjoying the cold beauty of Giorgio Morandi's boxes and objects in the *natura morta*, clearly a mise-en-abyme of Ground Zero and its ashen atmosphere, and visits art exhibitions as a way to reconnect ethically and aesthetically with her now dead mother and with politics (*FM* 209). She participates to an antiwar parade with Justin in Union Square, in which she finds herself thinking back to a holiday in Cairo where for the first time she had perceived her "whiteness" and felt different. While art seems to work as an assuaging tool for the maternal

imprint it harbours, the parade makes her "feel remote" and does not "return her a sense of belonging" (*FM* 181-82).

Only after some time Lianne, a falling creature like many others in the novel, manages to find a precarious balance in her conversion to Catholicism, a fantasy of stability, though not of total safety:

> Others were reading the Koran, she was going to church. … She followed others when they stood and knelt and watched the priest celebrate the mass, bread and wine, body and blood. She didn't believe this, the transubstantiation, but believed something, half fearing it would take her over. … It was not something godlike she felt but only a sense of others. Others bring us closer. Church brings us closer. What did she feel here? She felt the dead, hers and unknown others. (*FM* 233)

Her rapprochement with religion and the idea of Church as a community that "brings us closer" sounds a little forced in the economy of DeLillo's narrative. Although many points of the novel anticipate it, the resolution is predictable and leaves the reader wondering if a sharp intellectual like Lianne could have achieved a more convincing self-realization rather than "being stuck with her doubts" seated in a church. After all, Lianne is an editor for a university press and a translator who could have "translated" her experience in a more varied and enriching cultural pattern. What is more interesting is that, in the end, like Keith had done at the beginning but with not much luck, she resumes contact with her body only by the smell of a T-shirt she takes off, in one of those mysterious epiphanies that DeLillo likes to inform his novels with. If at the beginning she felt like a "skirt and blouse without a body"

(*FM* 23), which echoes Keith's falling shirt at the Towers, Lianne now "yanked a clean green T-shirt over her head and it wasn't sweat she smelled ... It was just her, the body through and through. It was the body and everything it carried, inside and out, identity and memory and human heat" (*FM* 236). Less ruminative and more resolving, this passage proves that Lianne, unlike Keith, has embraced change. Even though "she was ready to be alone, in reliable calm, she and the kid" (*FM* 236), DeLillo reveals that she accomplished a catharsis, a working through of her numerous traumas and has grown into a more self-aware woman.

Just like 9/11 uncovers an already existing history of traumatic separation and fractures among the characters and provides them with the chance of renegotiating their own selves, it also shows that "the enemy" was already inside the national borders before the attacks, a home-grown danger represented by Hammad and the specter of Al-Qaida that "the first world, hypercapitalist nations, especially the United States, have created" (Rowe 124-25). While this could be interpreted as a variation of the Puritan rhetoric by which a catastrophe punishes a sin and simultaneously supplies occasions for repentance and salvation,[46] DeLillo's novel subtly alludes to an entanglement of terrorists beyond national belonging, culture, race. Quite provocatively, Islamic terrorists are confined by DeLillo to the *coda* of each of the three parts in which the novel is divided. The novel presents indeed a three-fold structure: each chapter, as Joseph Conte explains, is misnamed after three

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[46] See Däwes, Birgit. "'Close Neighbors to the Unimaginable:' Literary Projections of Terrorists' Perspectives (Martin Amis, John Updike, Don DeLillo)." *Trauma's Continuum: September 11th Reconsidered.* Andrew S. Gross and MaryAnn Snyder-Körber, eds. Special Issue of *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 55.3 (2010): 495-517.

characters that we come to know only later and this reflects the "deferred recognition" of the event of 9/11 itself (569). The first section's title, Bill Lawton, refers to the misspelled name of Bin Laden that Justin, Keith and Lianne's ten-year-old son, "domesticates," adapting it from the media. The second section is entitled Ernst Hechinger, the real name of Martin Ridnour, the art dealer and long-time lover of Nina, Lianne's mother. Of German origins, Martin/Ernst was involved in groups of radical politics in the Sixties and Seventies in Germany. Rowe indeed states that Martin/Ernst "represents the intersection of radical politics and culture" in the Sixties and that his group was most likely "interested in publicity than in political change" (127). The third part bears the name of David Janiak, the performance artist and falling man of the title.

In the three *codas*, then, DeLillo traces a fictional genealogy of 9/11 focusing on Hammad, a peripheral figure of al-Qaeda who occasionally interacts with his master, Iraqi veteran and now baker in Hamburg, Mohammed Atta. While we read about war virtues and military battles (the defeat of the Shah, Atta's role in Saddam's army, his killings of youths, the videos of the Jihad to instruct the cell, and so on), it becomes clear that DeLillo wants us to identify with Hammad, who listens to his master but thinks about women, good food and feels a sense of estrangement from the context. As the author plainly puts it, Hammad "had to fight against the need to be normal," against the homologation that the promise of terrorism pursues: "[t]hey read the sword verses of the Koran. They were strong-willed, determined to become one mind. Shed everything but the men you are with. Become each other's running blood ... He was becoming one of them now, learning to look like them and think like them.

This was inseparable from jihad." (*FM* 83). In this account, what emerges is the normalization of the figure of the terrorist DeLillo wants to achieve. Demystifying the halo that surrounds the nineteen terrorists that blew the Towers and the Pentagon on 9/11, DeLillo insists on depicting Hammad as a normal youth, who then moves to Florida and begins to ask himself existential questions about the validity of al-Qaeda's mission. When in the last part he is on the plane, praying, repeating his mantra, seeing the Towers' silhouette and feeling a crushing pain, Hammad literally merges with Keith as the plane hits the Towers:

> A bottle fell off the counter in the galley, on the other side of the aisle, and he watched it roll this way and that, a water bottle, empty, making an arc one way and rolling back the other, and he watched it spin more quickly and then skitter across the floor an instant before the aircraft struck the tower, heat, then fuel, then fire, and a blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall. He found himself walking into a wall. (*FM* 239)

The violence of this "morphing point of view" (Pöhlmann 57) highlights the necessity of establishing some form of continuity between Hammad and Keith. In an interview, DeLillo admitted that he wanted to write a novel in which the events of 9/11 did not seem distant but real: "I wanted to be in the towers and in the planes" (Binelli 2007). Terrorism is then unveiled as the dark side of our culture, the repressed that returns to haunt us in devastating forms, the same and the other simultaneously. DeLillo compels us to expand our vision and adopt points of view that might be uncomfortable or unpopular. Most of all, he uses this violent imagery to efface any distinction between victims and perpetrators,

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endorsing the idea that the threat of terrorism lies where you would not normally expect, i.e. within the familiar.

This is further confirmed by DeLillo's representation of Martin Ridnour, whom Lianne discovers to be an alter ego for a former German terrorist, Hechinger, from her mother Nina. Nina knows that Martin hides a poster with nineteen names of wanted German terrorists (among which he does not figure) and that he thinks that jihadists have something in common with the radical movements of the Sixties and Seventies that he endorsed. Lianne is at first worried about her mother but then, after a long conversation with Martin about their affective ties, about his life with Nina and the idea that America is becoming irrelevant in the geopolitical scenario (*FM* 191), Lianne puts familiarity before judgment, thinking: "[s]he could imagine his life, then and now, detect the slurred pulse of an earlier consciousness. Maybe he was a terrorist but he was one of ours, she thought, and the thought chilled her, shamed her – one of ours, which meant godless, Western, white" (*FM* 195). DeLillo's identification of the other with the self induces us to put on the same level terrorists and victims, yet in no disrespectful or uncritical way. The author's intention is to make us empathize with people, rather than with the roles they take up in public life, or in history, while at the same time exposing our weaknesses as Western society, which consist mainly in the presumption of thinking to be innocent, superior and therefore untouchable. DeLillo mobilizes questions of ideology and identity through his characters, calling upon us to make sense of the various storylines that intersect in a complex net of conflicts and agreements.

Finally, the falling man David Janiak represents the cryptic figure upon which all these discourses encroach. Lianne sees this performing artist unexpectedly in many parts of the city, and it is a figure that elicits feelings of terror and beauty at the same time. However, far from being an example of postmodern sublime, a combination of pleasure, excitement and fear, Janiak exudes suffering and fatigue, anonymity and disappointment. Fastened to a heavy harness, he always challenges an audience in public places. His replica of the numerous falling men from the towers indicates that he wants to restage their deaths, immortalizing and repeating them through his performance. While the re-enactment of the horrific planned suicides disturbs popular conscience as it represents another *memento mori* in the narrative, it also makes death a still moment, a moment to reflect upon, in other words an ethical performance. As Leps argues, Janiak recreates a "fictional stillness designed to give memory and provoke new modes of knowing ... [B]y remembering and repeating trauma, [his performance] calls for a different form of relation to the other, born of ethical responsibility rather than reason alone" (197-98). His performances also draw attention to the reality of the deaths at the Twin Towers. When Lianne reads Janiak's obituary on the newspaper (died at 39, the same age as Keith), she comments that the performance pieces were not designed to be recorded by a photographer, which alludes to the fact that what he stressed was the reality of the event, the body suffering, the body falling for real. While the mayor and public authorities condemn the figure of the performer ("a moronic" *FM* 222), Lianne browsed the internet and

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tried to connect this man to the moment when she'd stood beneath the elevated tracks,

nearly three years ago, watching someone prepare to fall from a maintenance

platform as the train went past. There were no photographs of that fall. She was the

photograph, the photosensitive surface. That nameless body coming down, this was

hers to record and absorb. (*FM* 223)

This means that the falling man performance had a resonance in Lianne who, through David

Janiak, has had the chance to witness and "absorb" through her body the feelings of loss and

terror that had distinguished the unique deaths of 9/11.

FM tackles issues of mis(sed)-communication, disembodiment, problematic

socialization, artistic representation and Otherness. Silences and fragmentary conversations

between Lianne and Keith imply that 9/11 Habermas' communicative action cannot be

accomplished yet in DeLillo's narrative world. The author captures the contradictory

dynamics of trauma, split between a desire for social reconnection and a lack of individual

agency. Indeed, the recreation of a dynamic communal sphere after a traumatizing experience

may begin in the domestic but must be carried out beyond the family boundaries, even

beginning from simple dialogic experiences – a group of scriptotherapy for Lianne and

occasional visits to Florence, a 9/11 survivor, for Keith. Without these impulses of civic

reconnection, working through and healing cannot occur. The traumatizing Neudeckers'

story is echoed throughout the novel by visual and performing art. Whereas Schwartz

engages critically with the iterative media representations of 9/11, DeLillo removes them

altogether from his narrative and resorts to modern art to convey different aspects of terror as

an experience that needs to be aesthetically apprehended in order to be ethically assessed. Finally, in a certain sense, *FM* insinuates very effectively the necessity to question and recast our own individual identities before pretending to know or master our history. It implies that the crisis of the Western subject is real and comes from sources other than the Islamic terroristic violence; or, better, that such violent political radicalism is already operative within the Western world, as the character of Martin Ridnour demonstrates. Finally, while the performer David Janiak might sanction the idea that trauma is repeated over and over, his painful gesture takes up an ethical dimension in that it is staged for an audience that witnesses it. If he keeps the wound open, he also allows New Yorkers to work through their own domestic trauma by using a narrative of cyclic, performative suffering that is different from the invincible fantasies of might and power spread by politics and media.

Chapter 6

Emotional Texture and Historical *Lichtung* in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

Among the now numerous book-length stories that address the aftermath of 9/11, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (*ELIC*) is perhaps the most intimate and poetic of all, partly because it is the only one that stems from the emotional language of a traumatized child, Oskar Schell, who has just lost his father Thomas in the attack to the World Trade Center, and partly because it merges past and present traumas into a universal trans-cultural space that is affected by inexorable absence. The book's poignant intimacy is, however, complicated by Oskar's precocious compulsions and grotesque adventures, which make him an unreliable character not all readers have been able to sympathize with. His stubborn quest throughout New York boroughs (for a lock that matches the key he found in his father's closet) is larger-than-life and predictably meets a dead end, but it serves as an extreme attempt to reunite with the missing parent and to prolong his existence in the domestic (and American) space. Surprisingly indeed, Oskar's artificial contraptions and gimmicky coincidences spur authentic identification with his trauma in a way that, if the story is implausible and at times caricatural, it remains nonetheless sentimental and moving. Aside from the protagonist's aporias, what really lends a thick emotional texture to Oskar's story is its trans-generational counterpart. On 9/11, his German Grandfather Thomas Sr., who had already lost a former (unborn) child in Germany during WWII, loses Thomas Jr., a son in

the US he had never met. These three symmetrical stories thus identify the central leitmotif of the novel in the visceral experience of repeated historical trauma, raising questions about the connection of victims to memory, history and home(land) definition.

While Foer's novel attracted negative criticism for its stylized treatment of the 9/11 survivors' aftermath and its strained metafictional techniques, "contrived" according to Kakutani ("A Boy's Epic Quest"), or "trite" according to Kirn ("*ELIC*: Everything Is Included"), it nonetheless compels the reader to oscillate between identification and detachment in a provocative way. If we can hardly understand or justify Oskar's contrivances, we also share and get in touch deep down with his sensitive side. This happens not only because the unassuming Grandfather indirectly plays up Oskar's suffering, but also because Oskar encapsulates a North-American response to the fresh global trauma of 9/11. This chapter then argues that Foer deliberately pursues the coexistence of schematism and sensibility in his child-character to highlight the complex contradictions that US society showed in dealing with the uncanny event of 9/11 and its consequences. By compressing a whole range of attitudes in Oskar, Foer develops critical dynamism between different traumatic reactions on that day – from that of the Bush Administration (schematic simplification) to those of New Yorkers and US citizens more at large (despair and shock), up to a combination of both. While Foer's fictional rendering of the aftermath does not explore the specific historical role of Arab Muslims (ethnic *and* religious group) in the tragedy, it paints a dramatic portrait of the self-contained explosion of feelings that occurred

in the US after the infamous day, offering a mixture of narratives and counter-narratives that borders on the schizophrenic and the pathological.

Foer blends a mournful undertone into *ELIC* because he intends to portray the collective, ethical implications of suffering, while not refusing to situate 9/11 into a more public or international arena for discussion. In particular, by connecting Oskar's story to his German Grandfather's exile to the United States after the bombing of Dresden, Foer uses the dialogism proper to the novelistic genre to find historical symmetries between similarly traumatized subjects. Rather than simply yielding to the sentimental or envisioning cultural negotiations in a traditionally political way, Foer's attempt at representing post-9/11 subjects privileges a post-cultural experience of "survival" and omits for many reasons the interracial optimism that Gray would like to see deployed in this type of literature. Even so, if Foer's novel dramatizes the symptoms of national crisis, it also implicates a historical critique of the United States as "culprit," since it frames the Grandfather's traumatic story through the Anglo-American bombings of Dresden in 1945, as Versluys and Hornung have pointed out.

In tracing such historical connections, Foer emphasizes the existence of a particular space and time in which different experiences of suffering can mutually acknowledge each other, more by virtue of their victims' status than by their cultural or national location. Endorsing Giovanna Borradori's claim that 9/11 has obliged us to reevaluate philosophical assumptions about tolerance, rationality and universalism (Borradori examines the Enlightenment legacy) and to invest them with new vigor and subtlety, I believe that philosophical frameworks (more than political or cultural) can be used as critical and

theoretical points of entry in the analysis of trauma literature about 9/11. To narrate the tragic event, indeed, many novelists use dense and layered images that we can decipher in philosophical and ethical terms. For instance, *ELIC* sheds light on 9/11 as a symbolic moment of intersubjectivity, where the dialogic symmetry I previously mentioned functions at the same time as self-critique and compassion-for-the-other in both Oskar and his Grandfather. In the end, Foer's characters learn that their kinship is made stronger by their common condition of modern traumatized victims and such awareness comes as an illumination in front of Thomas Schell Jr.'s empty grave. The grave is used by Foer as a displaced figure for the abyss of Ground Zero and, while it renders the play of dark forces that lingers therein, such figure also suggests a connection with Heidegger's concept of *Lichtung*, a "clearing" that brings about "truth" as "un-concealment," luminous revelation. Oskar and his Grandfather's reunion occurs in a space finally free from secrets, misunderstandings and affective reticence and thus their encounter functions as a *Lichtung*, the act of the revealing of being in history and the neo-humanistic value of such revelation determined in this case by 9/11.

Rather than Enlightenment concepts, then, in our case a Heideggerian framework could be helpful to analyze the conclusion of the novel and some of its crucial implications. Part of Heidegger's philosophical discourse is centered on a theory of being that is not merely an ontology (what constitutes human beings) but rather an ethics of "comportment" for individuals as social and historical beings (how Being becomes visible in time as "ek-sistent," real – "On the Essence" 141). Such realization of being-in-the-world (*Da-sein*) as

"relatedness to beings" ("On the Essence" 145), comes as a "disclosure," "unconcealment" of Being in truth and freedom, two conditions that for Heidegger are the radical origin of *Da-sein* and history.[47] What is of interest to us here about Heideggerian conceptuality is that, as Zimmerman wrote, man has the "capacity to disclose the sense of the world around him" (220), which lies neither in the power to master it (as modern man thinks he can do through technology) nor in the quest for God as the "ground" of reality (as much of Western philosophy has thought before Descartes). Such "sense of the world," for which there is no definite, thematic answer in Heidegger, is accessible only through beings and it is defined by temporality and relation – it is, indeed as we said, an ethics of comportment that is present, situated (*Da-sein* = Being there) and a modality of Being that appears as an "attuning, a bringing into accord" ("On the Essence" 147). The unconcealment of Being occurs in the *Lichtung*, Heidegger suggests in "The Origin of the Work of Art:"

> And yet – beyond beings, not away from them but before them, there is still something else that happens. In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing, a lighting... Thought of in reference to beings, this lighting is more in beings than are beings. This open center is therefore not surrounded by beings; rather, the lighting encircles all that is, as does the nothing, which we scarcely know. Only this clearing grants and guarantees to us humans a passage to those beings that we ourselves are not, and access to the being that we ourselves are. (177)

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[47] In Heidegger's language, truth is not an abstract concept, but rather encompasses the multiple revelations of Being through the historicity of beings; likewise, freedom is not something possessed by beings, but it is originally embedded in Being and determines its possibilities.

While Heidegger is thought of as not having offered an ethical doctrine, bordering on nihilism, his reflections on freedom as the possibility of "letting-be" ("On the Essence" 144), and on truth as a quest for that which makes us all similar, signify a "critique of ethical prescriptivism" (Kellner, "Authenticity" 198) and a bent for readiness and solidarity.[48] In the passage above, *Lichtung* becomes a moment of epiphany that shows beings what they were unable to see, until then, in and out of themselves. Originally, *Lichtung* is a "glade," a space in the woodlands made by lumbermen who cut trees down and carve out areas in the thickness of the forest (*Dickung*) that prevent them from losing their way in it. The etymology of the word is connected to "light," but first of all to the German verb "*Lichten*" (to thin out, i.e. to clear), conveying the idea that a *Lichtung* is an expanse where light enters for the first time – thanks to an erasure that becomes first of all an exposure – a Ground Zero. Such disclosure for Heidegger is a "bringing forth" of a truth related to our being-in-the-world and it concerns itself also with the poetic/artistic act that carries an ethical value ("Work of Art" 181). In concluding the argument that follows, I will show how the concept of *Lichtung* informs *ELIC* both in figurative and pragmatic ways, providing an insightful moment of ineffability and mutual understanding between Oskar and his Grandfather that Foer sanctions with references to the disclosive power of poetry. Therefore, the emotional

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[48] See Kellner, Douglas. "Authenticity in Heidegger's Challenge to Ethical Theory." *Martin Heidegger: Critical Assessments. Volume IV: Reverberations*. Ed. Christopher Macann. New York: Routledge 1992. 198-213.In the mid-Thirties, as already mentioned when we discussed Levinas in chapter four, Heidegger's philosophy will sadly degenerate into a conceptual architecture enmeshed with Nazism, since Heidegger came to identify the "socialism" intrinsic to his philosophy with the superiority of the German nation (and this may explain why Heidegger is still proscribed in many academic circles). Yet, in terms of philosophical analysis, we can still employ productively his hermeneutical tools to detect how the literary imagination shapes "modernity and its discontents" (unsurprisingly, Heidegger has substantially fueled the critical theories of such intellectuals as Derrida and Jameson).

fabric of these characters (either stunted or hypertrophied), their condition of victims that transcends particular political affiliations and the physical, real void generated by the terroristic attacks prompt readers to think about how 9/11 has modified established notions of trauma and how it could represent a heuristic and ethical meditation on our present condition in history.

The issue of emotions is not a paltry one in the semantic economy of 9/11 and its narratives. New-York-based, novel-length stories work through the incommensurability and the uniqueness of the event in American history, creating twisted ordinary worlds that feature intimate dialectics of repression and recollection, of private and public fears, of interrogation and interpretation. While we can draw a distinction between authors that have dealt directly with the jolts of trauma and authors that have kept it peripheral or indexical, we must also acknowledge the inconvenient truth that the subject of 9/11 is still "under construction," and that it is an ongoing, often frustrating enterprise to determine what exactly the event has been, how it has affected American identity, and in what forms it took roots in popular conscience.[49] Not only fiction and literature present kaleidoscopic and overlapping perspectives; academic and professional scholarship on the subject have also been grappling with the multiple "representations" and "visions" of the catastrophe, intertwining political readings with personal reactions in a hopeless effort to "synthesize information" and achieve

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[49] Similarly to DeLillo's anesthesia in *Falling Man* and to Ken Kalfus' cynicism in *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, Foer's neurosis in *ELIC* represents a sensitive and symptomatic response to the 9/11 attacks, whose weight in other novels remains, on the contrary, confined to the background atmosphere and does not develop into a central rearticulating experience or emotion (as in Lorrie Moore's *A Gate at the Stairs*, for example).

a "centered" interpretation, as Ann Kaplan has noted (15-19). In this open process of definition, emotions remain semantically fundamental.

While sorrow may be shared universally in such multilateral polyphony, political interpretations and actions tend to diverge locally. Jonathan Safran Foer, a Jewish-American, New-York based writer, who has a penchant for idiosyncratic characters and magic environments, crafts his own "American response" through the character of Oskar, in which he merges Kaplan's theory of "emotive proximity" and the revanchism of the US political apparatus. In particular, the latter's military design and counterattack strategies following 9/11 are aspects that Foer reworks chillingly into his infantile character: Oskar, then, is not simply a powerless victim of the status quo, but shows a well-trained, overbearing pragmatism in reacting to trauma. By contrast, since his emotions are suffocated by his plotting, it is the Grandfather's spiritual, physical and historical paralysis that lends the novel its deepest emotional *côte*. Foer's novel consists indeed of two parallel stories that, despite their contrastive emotive patterns, reveal their structural affinity all along.

Oskar's central narrative of grief and disappointment follows the death of his father at the Twin Towers. The nine-year-old prodigy boy is the only family member who knows that Thomas Schell left five phone messages on the answering machine from the World Trade Center towers before they collapsed. Arriving home alone from school on the morning of what he calls "the worst day," Oskar, quite indifferent to the escalating chaos around him, suddenly panics when he listens to his father's seemingly reassuring voice calling from Ground Zero. The child unconsciously realizes his own inability to save his father

imprisoned in the smoking towers and, by refusing to answer the phone the sixth time at 10:26:47, he misses the opportunity to speak to him one last time. Such traumatic loss triggers a compulsive behavior in Oskar: he jealously buries the phone in his closet to preserve the last precious instants of his father's life and buys a new identical phone to cover his own fragility. Oskar's gesture is also meant to prevent his mother from knowing about it, since "protecting her is one of [his] most important *raisons d'être*" (*ELIC* 68).

After a whole year full of a "googolplex of inventions" that go untold to the reader (*ELIC* 35), Oskar feels the impulse to search through his father's closet and finds a vase. In the vase, there is a mysterious envelope with the name "Black" and a key inside, a "clue" that he turns into a major enigma to decipher – an objective correlative of his father's sudden death. Consequently, he sets out to visit every single person in New York that goes by that name, questioning each one about the key and bonding with all, showcasing his book of pictures *Stuff That Happened to Me* and distributing life advice and "business cards" (Oskar Schell is an "inventor," "jewel designer," "vegan," among other "professions"). Embarking on rigorous walking tours, Oskar avoids public transportation and high buildings (*ELIC* 87-90), with the exception of his visit to the Empire State Building with his old neighbor Mr. Black (*ELIC* 243-254). There, he imagines a plane hitting the legendary skyscraper and he realizes that, despite being halfway into his project, "[he] misses his dad more now than when [he] started, even though the whole *point* was to *stop* missing him" (*ELIC* 255). Oskar travels through the five boroughs of New York City he had so passionately read about with his father, but his search for the lock proves fruitless as soon as he meets the real owner of

the key, another Mr. Black who has actually suffered a family trauma himself but has nothing to do with the death of Thomas Schell (he had just sold him the vase some time before 9/11). Ironically, in the end, Oskar learns that his mother has had a guiding role in his quest, since all the New York "Blacks" he has visited knew that he was coming, welcomed him by name, and had cookies ready for him (*ELIC* 291).

Foer's story is indeed bizarre for the way it blends postmodernist style with genuine affliction. What strikes the reader of *ELIC* is, in fact, the combination of remorseful and algid traits in the character of Oskar, whose literary texture feels almost "digital" and schematic while it curbs a profound despair for the traumatic loss of the father. Oskar's fixation on the key as a reaction to the parental loss represents his specific enacting of trauma. It is a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder in which the attachment to the object has displaced and substituted the infatuation for the missing father figure. In this condition, the subject develops an anxiety of control over reality, investing all his psychic energy on a single central idea: in Oskar's case, to explore physically every possible urban recess in order to "unlock" alleged paternal secrets. As Sprang and McNeil explain, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder is an anxiety disturbance that presents common symptomatology with Post Traumatic Stress Disorders and it usually manifests in a "repetitive behavior," as opposed to depressive or phobic disorders, which are different types of responses in "traumatic grief" (125). Oskar's totalizing projection into the city space allegorizes the desire of repossessing and healing American territory as it was brutally violated and disfigured by the attacks of 9/11. Through this psychological reaction, Oskar translates US cultural anxieties about the

shock of having to face "lethal alterity" in the American homeland: he constructs a public persona that recreates a connective tissue in the city while hunting down "the truth." In this sense, his behavior might echo the official stance of the Bush Administration we have outlined above talking about schematism and pragmatism. Oskar Schell averts fear and depression (reactions that seem secondary in his character) and becomes a rationalizing agent who feels the imperative of overcoming his weakness and developing positive, concrete coping strategies:

> I decided that I would go through the names alphabetically, from Aaron to Zyna, even though it would have been a more efficient method to do it by geographical zones. Another thing I decided was that I would be as secretive about my mission as I could at home, and as honest about it as I could outside home, because that's what was necessary. So if Mom asked me, "Where are you going and when will you be back?" I would tell her, "Out, later." But if one of the Blacks wanted to know something, I would tell everything. (*ELIC* 87)

However, it seems that Foer mocks Oskar's strategic decisionism just by the choice of entrusting a child with it, as if to admit that it is preposterous to reconstruct a genealogy of 9/11 inside the United States and to re-inhabit the city as if it were a private household under one and only name (Black). On the other hand, as we will see, Oskar also occupies the position of New York citizens and American victims, whose thirst for explanations and bonding is logical and necessary – even though any historical objective truth seems to remain unattainable.

As evidence of such decisionism, in his systematic cathexis (i.e. the Freudian emotional charge of energy, affectively connoted and directed to a target), Oskar is determined to visit in three years all the 216 Blacks listed in the New York City phone book. He calculates that the City produces a lock every 2.777 seconds and that there are 18 locks per person for a total of 162 million locks in New York (*ELIC* 41). A fanatic of numbers, he obsessively counts before falling asleep, he registers times and data such as the 1860 stairs of the Empire State Building he descends, and he tells the old Mr. Black that "in the last 3,500 years there have been only 230 years of peace throughout the civilized world" (*ELIC* 161). The physical and mental hyperactivity of Oskar indicates that his *id* (the instinctual drive of the personality) does not find a balanced pathway in his *ego* (the reality principle) and his emotions are canalized through deceptively intellectual tools, as though the systematic effort of numbering and cataloguing could help him overcome emotionally the trauma of his father's loss.

Recovery is furthermore hindered by the fact that Thomas Schell's body was never found and his death circumstances never retraced. This uncertainty encourages the child to fill the factual gap with imaginative answers. In this sense, Oskar's anxiety is accompanied by incongruous ego defense mechanisms that lead him to hyperarousal, a pathological tension and explosion of fantasies that he did not need when his father was alive: "Being with him made my brain quiet. I didn't have to invent a thing" (*ELIC* 12). When talking to Grandpa (who is still the "renter" at Grandma's house to him) in the chapter *Alive and Alone*, Oskar says:

I want to stop inventing. If I could know how he died…I wouldn't have to invent him dying inside an elevator that was stuck between floors…and I wouldn't have to imagine him trying to crawl down the outside of the building, which I saw a video of one person doing on a Polish site, or trying to use a tablecloth as a parachute, like some of the people who were in Windows of the World actually did. There were so many different ways to die, and I just need to know which was his." (*ELIC* 257)

Actually Oskar, rather than visualizing his dying father throughout the novel, contrives life-saving devices such as skyscrapers that move downwards instead of elevators going up, ambulances that do not need to be driven because they are long like streets and they connect different points of the city, birdseed suits that attach birds to the body, rescuing people who have to jump from burning buildings. His oblique compensatory strategy seemingly consoles him, filling the paternal absence with the work of fantasy that was once modulated by his father's stories; but Oskar's inventions do not eventually remove the *horror vacui* he feels and just wear him and his expectations down.

We might then wonder whether Oskar's compulsions and hyperactivity, as well as the need to create rescuing and reassuring narratives, do not indirectly refer to the positive pragmatism that characterized American political interventions inside and outside US territory in the context of 9/11 and its "war on terror" (literally, the imperative to combat first and foremost "fear," or what generates it). This denial of fear and the consequent unilateral decision undertaken *ab alto* by the Bush Administration – to act out on the *horror vacui* of Ground Zero, looking for immediate causes behind it – can be seen as the prodrome to what

Michael Scheuer has called "imperial hubris." Discussing the early phases of the offensive in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Head of the CIA's Bin Laden Unit until 2004 wrote that the way Americans

> … see and interpret people and events outside North America is heavily clouded by arrogance and self-centeredness … This is not a genetic flaw in Americans that has been present since the Pilgrims splashed ashore at Plymouth Rock, but rather a way of thinking America's elites have acquired since the end of World War II. It is a process of interpreting the world so it makes sense to us, a process yielding a world in which few events seem alien because we Americanize their components." (165)[50]

Scheuer then makes the example of Americans "inventing" familiar images of Bin Laden as the gangster in search of money rather than the Muslim who has endured decade-long US military attacks and economic subjugation in the Islamic countries: whereas the gangster stereotype is known and can be defeated, the Muslim is alien and gets repressed. Such symbolization repeats convenient and reassuring stereotypes that allow political action to occur out of history, erasing not only the "enemy's" specificities but also the responsibility of the United States in having created the present scenario. As Judith Butler similarly argues, condemning the violence of terrorist attacks and understanding the limits of US imperialism

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[50] Scheuer also observes that the pattern of imperial hubris, which concerns elite and popular opinions alike, passes off US foreign politics as undoubtedly benign, only requiring "the purity of its purposes" to be better explained (166).

are two joint processes to pursue insofar as US political elites reduce the self-complacency and the centrality of the narrative "I" in their discourses on 9/11.[51]

If we think in these terms of Foer's literary treatment of 9/11, it is clear that he removes altogether the antagonistic force of Arab Muslims from the novel. Such specific otherness is not even articulable here as "enemy" – because it is still "too soon," as DeLillo would say ("In the Ruins" 38) – and it can only be glimpsed by Oskar on the Empire State Building as a terrifying vision. Alternatively, Foer shows through Oskar how contrived and individualistic the Administration's response to the trauma of 9/11 has been. While Oskar's work of fantasy can only be applied to the father's death and not to the "other," the child systematically performs his mission of targeting "the Black" within US borders. In his most annoying and simplifying attitudes, Oskar embodies cultural and political stances the United States may have taken in acting out ideologically and civically on the attack. In particular, the Administration expressed a will to power and control over domestic reality – and a defense of identity – that Foer mimics in Oskar's organized enterprise of (re)colonizing the space of New York City. At the same time, as I will eventually explain, Foer also provides an oppositional narrative thread, where the "offender" is not "the other," but the United States itself at the time of the 1945 Dresden bombing. This perspective complicates the unilateral vision of 9/11 as absolute evil and points to a more global and trans-historical victimized condition, bringing Oskar and his Grandfather together in the wounded New York. These vulnerable characters are in the end indicative of an "imagined community" – using Benedict

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[51] In *Precarious Life* (2004), Judith Butler also asks how this loss and mourning can be a point of departure for a new understanding of the role of the United States in the global political scenario, especially when reflecting upon the US capacity to promote "global conditions for equality" (14).

Anderson's concept with an affective rather than territorial interpretation, as we suggested in chapter two – that extends itself and speaks beyond New York's territorial boundaries. Anderson theorized that a national community is an imagined, creative abstraction in which many people acknowledge a similar other, for which they are willing to die, in a "horizontal comradeship" (7) and regardless of inequalities and exploitations. Here Anderson's concept functions in an affective and humanistic sphere, where the "imagined community" does not share the territory but the experience of historical trauma.

Yet before delving deeper into such epilogue, I would like to emphasize how Foer enables emotive contradictions in Oskar to complicate our reception of his experience. As a matter of fact, throughout *ELIC*, Oskar is not only an eerie child involved in a public quest for truth. He also genuinely grieves for his father's death and looks for help, triggering authentic emotional identification in the reader. Foer builds tension between the public and private reactions of Oskar to the attacks and forces the reader to accept the dual characterization of his personality. Such an interpretive grid, however, must not cage Oskar into a firmly split identity and should rather help to highlight the web of reactions to 9/11 that the novel embodies, while at the same time it can assist in analyzing the controversial and ambiguous reception the novel has had. Therefore, what we read therein is *also* a story of a fatherless child who is forced to come to terms with loss and solitude and who communicates with others in total isolation. Namely, on a psychological level, Oskar's personal *grief* for the parental loss does not translate itself into collective *mourning*. If mourning is the explicit manifestation of grief that is directed by sociological expectations and cultural rituals, grief is

managed at a more personal level and it is "multidimensional, reflecting not only the loss of a loved one, but also the loss of identity and purpose" in the self (Sprang and McNeil, 5). Both grief and mourning are components of the bereavement process, but while the former comprises feelings of sorrow, anger, guilt and confusion connected to a loss, the latter adjusts and externalizes such grief for and within a public milieu. Similarly, Rochelle Almeida argues that, instead of establishing a private scenario of melancholy, "mourning enters the public sphere, becoming the performance of a collective historical consciousness" (12).

While Oskar's excursions and connections convey the idea of a geographical and human re-appropriation (i.e. regain intimacy and possession) of the American homeland after 9/11 – and strengthen the desire to transform grief into a shared experience of mourning, knowledge, hope and familiarity – the denouement of the novel is neither promising, nor conclusive. Even though Oskar shares his trauma with the New York "Blacks" for a period of eight months, engaging in exploratory dialogues and even reaching out to their difficult personal situations (such as Abby Black's marriage crisis), he denies himself the exposed and negotiating position of the public mourner. Indeed, no one in the novel seems able to work his/her own trauma through by developing a healthy/healing relationship. Oskar plans to act out his emotional grief through social interaction, but if he succeeds in working *up* a network of hollow zones (the "Blacks"), he does not really work *through* his own trauma. Although his mother tells him in the last chapter that "Dad would have been very proud of [him]" for the way he had tried to be "happy" and "normal" (*ELIC* 323), the backward sequenced pictures at the end of the novel reassert the isolation of Oskar's narrative persona and do not

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signal any emotive progress or change in his individuality. The child's visual fantasy of the man who jumps back into one of the twin towers instead of falling down illustrates his dream of a reversal of history and his inability to imagine a future without the father.[52] This imaginative solution discloses the desire Oskar has been deflecting throughout the novel by putting up a mask of adulthood and pain containment, unable to overcome his loss and begin a new life cycle. His intimate desire is not to cope with history as much as to reverse it to its previous (safer) stage, since, in the end, death is the only truth he really wishes did not happen.

This shows the "regular" side of Oskar-the-child, proving in the end that he is still a little boy in need of affection, whose guilt-feelings channel his actions. Privately, Oskar self-harms to purge his sense of guilt. He has been giving himself bruises (*ELIC* 172) and feeling that his "boots," a symptom of depression, are getting heavier and heavier every day (*ELIC* 142, 182, 251). Publicly, he punishes himself by committing to an aberrant task and adopting a robotic personality pattern. He carries out his meticulous and neurotic quest to solve the mystery of the key, which translates his hope to rationalize and access what appears disorienting and senseless to him, crushing his emotions – but not completely. Foer indeed makes Oskar's true emotional layers surface sporadically, as through a rigid armor, and induces in the reader consonance, pity, and solidarity even within the artificial contours of the child, as when he returns to Abby Black in the end to further inquire about the key:

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[52] As we have seen, the protagonist of Schwarz's novel The *Writing on the Wall* also imagines *hysteron proterons* in the form of "uchronies," fully different stories that might offer the chance to avoid traumatizing events.

She said, "If you want to kiss me, you can." … I asked her, "What if we just hugged?" She held me against her. I started to cry, and I squeezed her as tightly as I could. Her shoulder was getting wet and I thought, *Maybe it's true that you can use up all of your tears. Maybe Grandma's right about that*. It was nice to think about, because what I wanted was to be empty. (*ELIC* 290)

There is a substantial mannerism to Oskar's character, since his mechanical traits, overlapping with "adult" modes of control, coexist with the naïve emotional texture I have just described. The artificial concurrence of "maturity" and sensitiveness, of controlled behavior (that of political leaders) and straightforward candor (that of popular turmoil) in Oskar is deliberately pursued by Foer who, to the disappointment of most reviewers, obfuscates the tragedy of 9/11 with a generous dose of phoniness and bogus sentimentalism. Yet I argue that, although dominated by pervasive unreliability and artificiality, the novel ultimately succeeds in creating empathic identification with the protagonist regardless of his contradictions. Oskar's emotions are believable when he behaves like a helpless child. In other words, his "broken unity" of character plays with the reader's willing suspension of disbelief so that, paradoxically, her sincere closeness to the tender side of Oskar interlocks with her "distaste" for the character's theatrical affectation. This narrative design synthesizes incompatible official positions and psychological states within American society after 9/11, offering the reader a chance to mourn the losses as well as to ponder the political choices and coping strategies enacted by the political leadership shortly after the tragedy.

Foer's literary choice, then, unifies a range of psychological and cultural reactions to 9/11 – polarized around warmongers and victims –into his idiosyncratic child. In this way, he points to the tragic irony that marks the United States' erosion of security and self-reliance after the terrorist attacks, showing how the government's controlled leadership and inflexible rhetoric appear falsely "adult" and forbid (to itself and to the nation) any emotive and spiritual bewilderment or vacillation.[53] To live up to this credo, Oskar readily becomes stubborn, lucid and independent. He denies his vulnerability and substitutes it with a "dominant fiction" of reinforcement of masculine subjectivity and aversion of fear – a process Kaja Silverman has described in her analysis of the "historical trauma" of soldiers returning from Vietnam (*Male Subjectivity* 53). But whereas war veterans resist the re-assimilation into dominant "civilian life," Oskar proactively manufactures his own fiction of stability in no time. His self-promoted normalization is awkward and antithetical to the traumatized childhood he is experiencing. However, it is his incommensurable self-sacrifice in digging out paternal secrets that places the reader in a conundrum. While we are disturbed by Oskar's far-fetched and pompous enterprise, we are also moved by his sincere and larger-than-life commitment.

Essentially, Oskar's whimsical and adultized behavior is inconsistent but "true." Its inconsistency creates a discontinuous empathy within the reader, divided between

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[53] In his September 11, 2001 "Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks," Bush states: "These acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat. But they have failed. Our country is strong. … Federal agencies in Washington…will be open for business tomorrow. Our financial institutions remain strong, and the American economy will be open for business as well. The search is underway for those who were behind these evil acts." Not only weakness is not contemplated as a consequence of the attacks, but alacrity becomes a crucial factor in applying successful strategies of revenge.

idiosyncrasy and affection. As previously explained for Schwarz and DeLillo, authentic "identification" with the narrators of traumatic experiences is not simply a passive-auxiliary response process in which readers become the victims they learn about (*idiopathic identification* – Vickroy 21, 170-73; LaCapra 40, 78). Identification is instead a sentimental participation that demands critical awareness of each one's own position in the economy of the narrative. This critical distance avoids "cannibalization" of contents (Freud) while endowing the reader with the ability to say "it could have been me," as Marianne Hirsch explains unpacking Silverman's notions of "heteropathic" and "identification-at-a-distance" in her discourse on memory and trauma (Hirsch, "Projected Memory" 9). This latter formulation in particular, "identification-at-a-distance," suggests that it is only through an unconscious displacement that we try to align with the other's trauma without fully interiorizing his/her story – yet inscribing it into our own. It is through "discursively 'implanted' memories," which belong to the text/the other we read, that the other's story "introduces the 'not-me' into my memory reserve" and therefore resonates in me as reader (Silverman, *Threshold* 185). The psychic transaction that ensues encompasses both sensitive consonance and conscious, formal respect for the "otherness of the other" (Hirsch, "Projected Memory" 9).

In Foer's *ELIC*, the heteropathic response mechanism – the identification-at-distance – is reduplicated. Oskar goes through a process of literary defamiliarization so that his "otherness" from the reader is not only positional or experiential within the narrative framework. His otherness is also thematic 'estrangement' from what the reader would expect

a traumatized subject to be. At one level, the reader knows that her position is "other" than Oskar's and that experiencing his trauma is a genuinely "virtual" and not a "vicarious" trial, i.e. it is heteropathic identification, consciousness of alterity (LaCapra, 40). At another level, Oskar's fearless and analytical attitude works as an estranging narrative element that thwarts the reader's expectations for a tearful story with a coherent point of view (Oskar=victim). While Oskar's pretended "maturity" may be an orthodox narrative strategy in trauma literature (involving the victim's pretense of adulthood as survivor's guilt, compensation issues, narcissism), it ultimately alienates the reader because it disassociates victimization from pure innocence. By exaggerating the child's artificial decisionism, Foer confounds the expectations about conventional trauma narratives, where the emotional texture is thick and dense, where the heteropathic identification orchestrates the reading experience through an affective interpretation, and where the reader hardly ever vacillates in distinguishing victims and perpetrators (like in the canonical trauma narrative of Morrison's *Beloved*, for example). On the contrary, Foer adulterates the story by balancing hostility and affection for Oskar to the point that emotional engagement and nastiness provocatively intertwine in the character and in the reader, who is forced to maintain a double standard in her open reception of the novel.

Furthermore, Oskar's portentous "cuteness" is unrealistic and yet it does not sound improbable – it is "reminiscent . . . of those annoying child guests on late-night talk shows," Kakutani writes, a peculiarity that keeps the reader rooted in the bizarre but familiar reality she is reading ("A Boy's Epic Quest"). The partial likeliness of his behavior (and the

commonality of his quest with the search for truth and containment of terror following 9/11)

is reinforced by the fact that Oskar is an affluent white male little genius from New York (as

his author is). His privileged world thrives on diverse stimuli (internet, newspapers, contacts

with gurus like Stephen Hawking and hobbies like collecting naturally dead butterflies) and

his mind reflects the desire to combine the cultural contradictions of his own time and the

violent paternal death with order and meaning. It seems that the emotional mixture of

aversion and sympathy elicited by Foer through Oskar may find a rationale in the Western

subject who, underneath his cultural incrustations, pigeonholed passions and prissy habits, is

after all a petrified victim like any other in front of a human tragedy.

Further analyzing Oskar's emotional paradox, some critics have pointed out that, in

ELIC, Hollywood-style melodrama disturbingly arises from a "magic kingdom" (Almond),

and other scholars like Gray have blamed all the novels that engage emotionally rather than

politically with the event of 9/11, as I hinted at the beginning. However, we should observe

that Foer's intent is precisely to avoid any clear positioning with respect to issues of political

alignment at the time of the book's publication (2005), as also Kirn has (though

depreciatively) noted. While Foer's literary *epoché* represents an artistic and perhaps moral

guilt to some, since it allegedly sentimentalizes an international crisis and retreats into an

absurd domesticity, it is hard to imagine that credible or realistic fictionalizations of Western

political scenarios and of "otherness" would even be conceivable in a "symptomatic novel"

of trauma. I argue that novels such as Foer's *ELIC* question the antagonistic binary of "them

and us" professed by the war on terror and its unilateral reading of 9/11, while at the same

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time registering the need for clarity and control. On his part, Foer legitimizes and mocks at the same time the desire for order expressed by Oskar, his hermeneutical drive and his bare reversal of the tragedy in the end. Oskar's counterfeit nature questions the possibility of any master narrative of 9/11 and represents an occasion for ethical debate. He helps the reader to re-live the traumatic experience emotionally and symptomatically (as the child-victim) but not to disentangle and recombine its cultural complexities on a cognitive level (as the detective in search of the lock). These fictions embody alternatives to the simplified rhetoric of anti-terrorism and simply refuse to generate all-encompassing historical narratives of the crisis, using instead domestic scenarios both to exorcize the ongoing dissolution of the public and to undermine hegemonic political discourses. Theirs is not an ideological response to terrorism, as some critics would contend, as much as an ethical and critical one. In *ELIC*, the labored act of articulating pain and sorrow filters through a rigid architecture of survival and self-defense that borders, for Oskar, on obsession. This complicated structure makes the emotional moments that Oskar grants us rarer but even sharper. Foer then succeeds in creating the necessary empathic connection between the character and the reader to share the trauma of 9/11. As Vickroy writes:

> What can be the writer's rights and goals in describing such misery? Can such abjection and disconnection [of the victims] be understood? (…) This is where the greatest value of their [trauma writers'] work lies: in helping readers empathize with and share victims' experience from the victims' point of view, and in insisting via the positions of their narrators that we all must explore our own role in perpetuating

traumatic isolation, whether our guilt takes the form of direct responsibility or complicity. (113)

In this sense, for example, Foer completely reverses the spirit of the source story for *ELIC*, Günter Grass' novel *The Tin Drum* (1959). In Grass' novel, the grotesque protagonist Oskar Matzerath, a mentally ill but brilliant dwarf, decides to stop growing at the age of three and travels throughout Europe during the Nazi years, accounting for the horrors and miseries of World War II while being a rotten criminal himself. No one can possibly identify with Oskar Matzerath's coarseness and insolence and read about the extreme scenarios of incest and poverty in the same way as one feels a mild fastidiousness for the "synthetic" cuteness and the safe adventures of Oskar Schell. One of the aims of *The Tin Drum*, in fact, seems precisely to deny the reader any form of self-projection onto its arrogant narrator, but it rather elicits from her a sense of horror and revulsion from indiscriminate evil (a thick emotional texture, yet without identification). Foer's reader, instead, alternately shares and dismisses Oskar's behavior, questioning his literary consistency but ultimately believing his trauma, in spite of the distance enforced by the character's construction (a light, loose emotional texture, with partial identification). Through the novel's intricate psychological, cultural and literary matrix, Foer synthesizes an "American" response to the attacks (which would fit Ann Kaplan's idea of different – public and private – but complementary interpretations of 9/11), one that hides an ebullient psychic tumult behind a pretense to control history by retrenching into one's own boundaries. However, while Oskar's incongruous actions may in effect highlight national weaknesses in coping with trauma, the novel suggests something larger

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about traumatic experiences and the ability to communicate and share them with other victims.

So far I have pointed out how Foer relies on Oskar's contradictions to craft a complex response to 9/11, pursuing an intriguing circularity between "hubris," agony and desire for clarity. He challenges the reader with different perceptions and interpretations of the national tragedy. The novel places indeed the reader on a contested terrain of reception, where she experiences tension between emotional communion and alienation with respect to the main character. Nonetheless, we must admit that Oskar's tragedy would not be so touching and memorable if it were not for his paternal grandparents' story, whose chapters alternate with those narrating Oskar's vicissitudes. The most authentically moving pages in the novel stem indeed from their trauma – a vivid, profound account of post-WWII sufferings and deluded hopes that sets itself apart from Oskar's disciplined urban epic. We would not feel much compassion for Oskar if it were not for Grandpa's dejected language and progressive psychophysical collapse, which functions as an amplifier of the grandson's grief as the parallel montage of their stories unfold. This part of the novel consists of letters that Thomas Schell Sr. has written and never sent from Dresden to his unknown child in the United States (Thomas Schell Jr., Oskar's father) and these letters complement those that Grandma is now writing to Oskar about her life in Germany and the United States.

Like Oskar, his German grandparents were victims of an external invasion of their own territory, the Anglo-American fire bombings of Dresden in 1945, and they also lost family members, feeling at the same time expropriated and guilty. The grandfather Thomas

Schell Sr. was then in love with Anna, Grandma's sister. Anna died under the bombings just when she had found out that she was pregnant with Thomas' child and he never recovered from this loss. In the mid-Fifties, Thomas Sr. meets Grandma again in New York; despite the lack of love between them, the two expatriated survivors choose to get married as a way to fill the enormous existential void that still gapes in the core of their selves. Grandpa is a sculptor and artist. He likes to mould Grandma, who poses naked for him, only because she reminds him of Anna; all the casts he makes of her resemble his first love. He spends days looking after his animals and repeating empty gestures (that Foer visualizes with blank spaces between sentences), such as collecting US magazines for her, which she does not even want to read anymore. Grandma writes to Oskar:

> I asked him to get me papers and magazines.   At first it was because I wanted to learn American expressions.   But I gave up on that. I still asked him to go. … We tried so hard.   We were always trying to help each other.   He needed to get things for me, just as I needed to get things for him. It gave us purpose.
>
>   Sometimes I would ask him for something that I did not even want, just to let him get it for me. (*ELIC* 175-76)

Grandma accepts being an objectified surrogate of Anna and encourages ritual gestures because she is in love with Thomas and has no other expectation in life than finding stability with him and moving on. She forgives him for being silently enmeshed with their past and with the memory of Anna. Husband and wife do not have anything in common besides their traumatic history – and it is on this legacy that they continue to stand by each

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other, even though they never talk about the years in Dresden (97-98). If Grandma is blind (or pretends to be), Grandpa is aphasic. As soon as he came to New York after the end of the war, his voice faded and he started to use prefabricated sentences jotted down on a notebook to communicate with the world, and a "yes "and "no" conveniently tattooed on his hands for the quickest answers. Their physical impairments symbolize a "spiritual deficit" that progressively separates them from the rest of the world and from themselves. Their relationship is grounded merely on a scarred void, a family loss, and therefore it can never grow enough to become fulfilling.

In his unsent letters that we now read, Thomas Sr. explains to Thomas Jr. how his life with his mother was pedantically laid out and how the betrayal of any rule meant putting in danger an already precarious existential balance. This is evident in the geographical division of the domestic space:

...[E]verything between us has been a rule to govern our life together, everything a measurement, a marriage of millimeters, of rules … Only a few months into our marriage, we started marking off areas in the apartment as "Nothing Places," in which one could be assured of complete privacy … in which one could temporarily cease to exist … There came a point … when our apartment was more Nothing than Something, that in itself didn't have to be a problem, it could have been a good thing, it could have saved us. … We took the blueprint of our apartment from the hallway closet and taped it to the inside of the front door, with an orange and a green marker we separated Something from Nothing. "This is Something," we decided. "This is

Nothing." "Something." "Nothing." …Everything was forever fixed, there would be only peace and happiness. … But I knew, in the most protected part of me, the truth. (*ELIC* 109-11)

The truth is that the demarcation of these hollow zones augments the fissure between the two grandparents, who deceive themselves into believing that a geometric paralysis could be an effective way to survive. This arid mosaic of "Something" and "Nothing" reflects and collects the fragments of their beings, and it is expected to provide a composed state of ataraxia, making them immune from temporality and decay. All their reciprocal interactions are marked by some deficiency and are carefully regulated in order to reset safely their emotional repository to zero. The grandparents' static form of reality control differs substantially from Oskar's obsessive-compulsive drive, since it is applied to the private sphere of existence and it aims at preserving "peace and happiness" rather than at challenging social reality with a "quest for truth."

The first rule that bound them together, indeed, was that they would not have had any children, but after a few years of marriage Grandma got pregnant – the desire exploded in her, suddenly and spontaneously – and Grandpa decided to abandon his wife in New York, returning to Dresden before his child's birth because she "betrayed" their major rule. Narrating this turning point, his wife asks him:

Why are you leaving me?

He wrote, I do not know how to live.

I do not know either, but I am trying.

I do not know how to try.

There were things I wanted to tell him.   But I knew they would hurt him.   So

I buried them, and let them hurt me. (*ELIC* 181)

Grandma's emotional containment is very similar to Oskar's denial of fear and

feelings, a condition the child makes clear at many points, as for example when he answers

his therapist Dr. Fein:

"Why don't you tell me some things you think you can do, things you keep in mind.

And then next week we'll talk about how successful you were." …"I don't know,

maybe I'll try not to ruin things by getting so emotional." "Anything else?" "I'll try to

be nicer to my mom ... I am going to bury my feelings deep inside me." "What do you

mean, bury your feelings?" "No matter how much I feel, I am not going to let it out.

If I have to cry, I'm gonna cry on the inside. If I have to bleed, I'll bruise. If my heart

starts going crazy, I'm not gonna tell everyone in the world about it. It doesn't help

anything. It just makes everyone's life worse." "But if you're burying your feelings

deep inside you, you won't really be *you*, will you?" "So?" (*ELIC* 203)

The defensive strategies that Oskar and his Grandmother adopt are meant to avoid the

reactivation of traumatizing dynamics. Although this disguise of feelings hinders an accurate,

self-conscious analysis of personal trauma (of its genesis and development) and it also goes

to the detriment of the self's integrity/identity ("you won't really be *you*"), it is still geared

towards safeguarding and reconstructive patterns of existence. Their psychological "burial"

does sound future-oriented and it is in contrast with the regressive "desire to remain *within*

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trauma" (LaCapra 23) that haunts Thomas Schell Sr., (a hollow "Shell," indeed) who drifts into a ghost-like existence away from possible sites of rebirth. He in fact returns to Dresden and remains disarticulated from society for about forty years, constantly facing the memory of Anna's unborn child and refusing to incorporate in his life a new, real son, to whom he chooses to deny his love. He calls Dresden "home" and "the place with most rules" where he feels safe (*ELIC* 185). Grandpa "repeats" his loss over and over, turning into a melancholic individual who bonds with the dead loved ones instead of acting out his post-traumatic condition within the social arena, as Oskar clumsily tries to do.

Although Thomas Sr. shares with his grandson a sense of guilt for not having been able to "save" a family member, they fundamentally differ in the way they perceive and communicate their traumatic loss. By resisting working through the death of his sublime objects of love (Anna and their unborn child) in communal modalities, Thomas Schell Sr. lingers in a self-destructive limbo, where writing letters to his second unknown son becomes the only emotional outlet for both traumas. Regrettably, he lost two sons he has never met – a condition that configures itself more like a spiritual absence than a material deprivation. With a life devoid of bodily affective presences, Grandpa is able to come to terms with his bereavement purely on an incorporeal level, i.e. the figurative level of literature, which, in his case, implies writing one-way letters. His son Thomas, in fact, is not given any voice in those accounts, since he has never received them (except for one single letter) and he is now dead. Grandma also writes letters to Oskar, elucidating the structural void and missed verbalizations in her relationship with Grandpa, especially the inane attempt to typewrite her

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life story on sheets that came out blank: "I went to the guest room and pretended to write.

I hit the space bar again and again and again. My life story was spaces" (*ELIC* 176). Grandpa and his wife represent the living and crippled counterpart of Oskar's deceased father – a lineage of traumatized subjects that reasserts the trans-generational repetition of historical trauma beyond issues of culture, nationality and age. In *ELIC*, Foer gives a more believable and traditional narrative configuration to the grandparents' traumas than to Oskar's fatherly loss, a configuration that abjures the schism embedded in the child's self-imposed socialization and focuses instead on a subjective, intimate experience of tragedy that reverberates fluidly with the reader. The occasional moments of consonance with Oskar become permanent structures in our emotional reception of these two characters, whose epistolary accounts offer no margin for unreliability or estrangement, but only for a comprehensible, tragic narrative of psychic interruptions and omissions. Something and Nothing, suffering and silence, intimate rigidities and escapes, idealizations and rule-breaking, most of all inadequacy of language and communicative barriers render the grandparent's story a more absorbable and orthodox trauma narrative (with an emotional "thickness" and consistent heteropathic identification for the reader) than Oskar's picaresque wanderings. I am not talking about stylistic strategies, since Foer intersperses both narrative tiers with pictures, erased lines, blank and black pages, awkward punctuation and other metafictional techniques. I am referring to the different thematic and textural rendering of each one's emotional and historical trauma, a separation Foer designs attentively only to bring the two generations together in the post-9/11 present.

Grandpa and Grandma are unquestionable victims of history and of themselves – as opposed to Oskar who, while being a victim, has the capacity to react narcissistically, self-engrossing his ego. In reading of the love burgeoning between Thomas Sr. and Anna and the touching pages of the Dresden bombing, we "believe" and never invalidate their truthful experience as we do, on the contrary, with Oskar's puzzling adultized reaction. The grandparents' traumatic story is archaic, pre-mediatic, painful *tout court* and cannot be subject to criticism. It has something of the authenticity and originality that Jameson, for instance, referring to Heidegger's example in "The Origin of the Work of Art," assigns to the "old," deep modern experience in contrast with the post-modern logic of flat history and commodified memory reproduction, in which Oskar with his ambiguous manners and "digital" emotional texture seems to partake.[54] Relying on such a temporal displacement, then, Foer employs a well-known past trauma (WWII) to illuminate the still unspeakable tragedy of the present. Indeed, we *re-imagine* and *process* the disaster of 9/11 through the *reading* of the Dresden bombing, since "no solution [to trauma] seems available within the national frame" (Hornung 174).

In her argument on the "belatedness" of historical trauma, Cathy Caruth claims that the "experience" of suffering is "repeated after its forgetting," assuming that oblivion is a necessary phase of the traumatic process that induces a deferred repetition of the emotional

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[54] Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso, 1991. Distinguishing between modern and postmodern artistic production through this exemplificative comparison, and extending his critical reflection on art to the whole cultural field, Jameson maintains that Van Gogh's *Boots* (as Heidegger had explained) contain a germ of depth and originality, a "thickness" that is completely lost in the flat, photographic, and merely reproductive *Shoes* of Andy Warhol. He designates this progressive shift from the utopian and potentially revolutionary "gesture" of Van Gogh's painting to the de-contextualized, commodified monotony of Warhol's photography as the "waning of affect" (10).

experience (*UE* 17). Furthermore, Caruth adds that "it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that [historical trauma] is first experienced at all," meaning that traumatic experience situates itself first of all in a void of consciousness and it requires a temporal dislocation in order to be wholly experienced, as it becomes "fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time" (*UE* 17). In this way, not only Grandpa re-lives in the present of 9/11 what he had experienced in Dresden (Anna and his child's death) and "forgotten" in the United States (Thomas Jr.'s birth). His trauma is, in fact, a repeated and belated realization of absence. In this cycle of recourses, also the reader is invited to decipher and assess the continuity Foer establishes between present and past traumatizing occurrences, of which she may have a direct or indirect knowledge: whether it is causal or contingent, political or symbolic.

Caruth's observations are useful if we think chronologically along what she calls the "temporal structure of the experience [of trauma]" (*UE* 20). In *ELIC*, WWII becomes a subtext grafted underneath 9/11, as if the former were a primary manifestation of historical trauma and the latter were a more exposed layer in a palimpsest of tragedies that define their meaning reciprocally. In her words (perhaps conferring an excessive importance on the role of trauma in history), "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own … history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (*UE* 24). If we read this argument figuratively in the novel, it seems that Foer presents indeed the catastrophe of 9/11 through the Dresden bombing, which acts as a retroactive point of entry into the present. In establishing such a tie, Foer overturns the position of the United States from victims (9/11) to

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offenders (WWII) and promotes a strongly diachronic model of historical understanding, whereby violence and victimization are the two sides of the same coin. This is further sustained by Oskar's school presentation of images and interviews of Hiroshima victims, a moment when he acquires cognitive and empathic knowledge of another WWII victim's abominable sufferings. In particular, we read a transcription of the words of Kinue Tomoyasu, an actual Japanese mother and survivor who witnessed the death of her child during the atomic bombing, where she says that war would never exist "if everyone could see what [she] saw" (*ELIC* 189).

Obviously, the play of forces in the novel is not coarsely genealogical, as Crosthwaite has also pointed out (178), nor does it advocate a superficial historical nemesis for the United States' military politics throughout the last fifty years. Foer thoughtfully aims at shaking consciousnesses and activating *pietas* and commiseration for *all* victims of war, using 9/11 as a global traumatic occurrence that reactivates dislocated memories from other cultures and nationalities without any avenging claims or judgments (as the difference/*différance* between Oskar, his German grandfather and the Japanese mother's stories demonstrate).[55] In view of this anthropological and historical commonality, even Oskar's most contrived actions and abnormal states of crisis become secondary in the end, when the ethical dimension and value of the encounter with his grandfather gives regenerative potential to their suffering. A scholar like Kali Tal would look at Foer's literary operation as Euro-centrically biased, since it denies historical and cultural specificity and it is strongly self-referential, preventing *other*

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[55] Derrida, Jacques. "Différance." *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 17. I mean here both the different types of historical experiences of each single subject and the temporal deferral that separates them.

potential voices to speak directly in the book (such as the Hiroshima survivor or any Arab-Muslim individual). However, by repositioning the "other" and inverting historical roles, Foer insists that trauma is transgenerational and transcultural and cannot be reduced to a political agenda or scheme. While these patterns are important in understanding and dealing with traumatic events, they play a less incisive role in a symptomatic novel of mourning, whose function is to draw the reader into literal/literary empathy and ethical thinking.

At the time of Oskar's story, then, Thomas Schell Sr. is back in Manhattan and lives with Grandma, officially as the "renter" − unknown to anyone but her. He decided to come back to the United States after he learned of the death of Thomas Jr. in the collapse of the Twin Towers. Hiding his identity from Oskar, he secretly watches his grandson performing an inane quest with immense respect and affection and he joins him as a friend when, in the end, Oskar decides to exhume his father's empty coffin at the cemetery at night. In the final chapter of *ELIC*, "Beautiful and True," when asked by the renter why he wants to do this, Oskar replies that he does it "because that's the truth" and because his "dad loved the truth," the truth being that reality checks are needed to overcome confusion (*ELIC* 321). Both of them know the coffin is empty, since the body of Oskar's father was never found. However, they both need to disinter and face "the void," the gap of reality that they have avoided and deferred for so long − the grandfather escaping back to Europe before his son was born (absence), and Oskar constructing an elusive/illusive epic about his father's death (loss). At the cemetery, Grandpa fills the coffin of his son Thomas with two suitcases of unsent letters,

performing a catharsis of his guilt and finally acknowledging, through the negative material signifiers of the coffin and the unread letters, the until-then neglected son(s).

Linda Belau explains how any signifier in psychoanalysis produces a rift in the subject, because it splits an original symbiotic structure and marks the "birth of the human as a [knowledgeable being and] desiring subject" (3). After any traumatizing event (she considers castration and the rupture of the Oedipal bond), the subject is left with the inadequacy of the signifiers s/he must use to enter differential relations in the realm of the symbolic. In the case of Oskar and Grandpa, the coffin articulates precisely the emancipation from a symbiosis with the idealized figure of the father/son (respectively) and asserts itself as the supreme inadequate blankness (the "Ground Zero") whereby the two victims may implant *their own* material signifiers to constitute a new family. The reality principle and material truth in the whole novel is indeed that Thomas Schell Jr. is dead and that this absence/loss is part of the identity of the traumatized survivors. An analogue of the twin towers in terms of shape (rectangular parallelepiped) and common destiny (entombment), the coffin of Thomas Schell Jr. epitomizes the now lifeless space erased by the 9/11 attacks. It is also emblematic of a "Black" (Oskar)/"Nothing" (Grandpa) dyad – i.e. unconscious zone of memory that must be unearthed in order to become ethically productive. The generational symmetry, where the pivotal axis is the dead father and unknown son, indicates that grandson and Grandfather share their trauma and find a commonality in it that is conducive to an ethical space surrounding their condition of victims – a movement towards self-acknowledgment. This space where Oskar and his grandfather meet in the end is a space of uncanny neutrality that,

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when brought into light, allows for their stories to (e)merge and depend upon each other, a symbolic and pragmatic rite of passage that never occurred between Grandpa and Grandma. The epiphanic disclosure of corporeal absence signals a consciousness raising and an opening toward the future. Unearthing that void means to start working through a trauma that Grandpa had frozen in the past and Oskar had dispersed in the present.

The epistemological and ethical horizon that these metaphorical binaries of darkness/light, emptiness/togetherness, and inhumation/exposure create brings us to Heidegger and his idea of *Lichtung* as our being-in-the-world that I have introduced at the beginning. The *Lichtung*, i.e. the mutual recognition of beings in a (physically and ethically) cleared space, underlies Foer's novel and lends it philosophical depth. As previously said, *Lichtung* refers to the act of cutting down trees ("clearing") in the woodlands made by lumbermen in order to create a geography of recognizable spaces where they can dwell or move. Consequently, referring to "reduction, dis-encumberment, elimination," the word comes to signify "illumination," which is the condition that follows the act of clearing since the light can finally filter through (*Licht* as both "lighten, thin out" and its cognate word "light"). In Heidegger's philosophical system, this term points to a condition of being-in-the-world as a moment of "disclosedness, un-concealment." It is the "condition of History rather than 'within' History" (Haar 187). Men recognize themselves as such in the "clearing" and become ek-sistent, i.e. they become part of history, or of a web of relations. Ek-sistence always implies a connection with "truth" and "freedom" as *ur-phaenomena*, which means that truth (essence, revelation, presentness) and freedom (the power of "letting others be")

are original, constitutive characteristics of Being. To Heidegger, relatedness among beings founds all history: "[e]k-sistence, rooted in truth as freedom, is exposure to the disclosedness of beings as such" ("On the Essence" 145). The rediscovering of these original phenomena through experience, then, takes the name and visual form of the "*Lichtung*" in Heidegger's language. Within this conceptual arena, *ELIC* invites connections with Heidegger's philosophical idea that humanity does not exist out of history and that history occurs as a mutual lighting-up, the realization of a condition of "belonging to and with one another," a truth that comes indeed first as a loss, and then as an illumination (Hofstadter *xx*).

To experience a *Licthung* means, in other words, entering a "liberation that grounds history" and starting a movement toward the future that brings beings "into accord" (Heidegger, "On the Essence" 147, 152). The re-grounding of US power and the new course of history that 9/11 has initiated is in fact also determined by how "survivors" are going to reconfigure power relations after the cleft in the forest of Western supremacy and what "ethics of comportment" (as we may call Heidegger's theory of being) they will follow. In this sense, Oskar and Grandpa establish their own idea of "good" (ethical comportment) as the possibility of rebirth from death in mutual support. Although Grandpa remains the "renter" to Oskar throughout the novel, the two characters instinctively trust each other and find themselves sharing their suffering and their final hermeneutic enterprise. Such standing by each other in the momentous task of digging up the coffin suggests that they both have given up part of their individuality and *care* for each other. As Heidegger argues, "[h]uman beings are all the more mistaken the more exclusively they take themselves, as subject, to be

the standard for all beings" ("On the Essence" 149-150). Therefore, the ethical "accord," i.e. the understanding of our Being in history, must be the result of "care" (*Sorge*), another crucial concept in Heidegger that leads to the *Lichtung*:

> We understand the light of this clearedness only if we are not seeking some power implanted in us and present-at-hand, but are interrogating the whole constitution of *Dasein*'s Being – namely, care – and are interrogating it as to the unitary basis for its existential possibility. (*Being and Time* 402)

As Kockelmans clarifies, "because *Dasein*'s being is care (*Sorge*), its dealing with intraworldly beings is concern (*Besorgen*) and its relationship to its fellow beings is solicitude" (*Fürsorge*). Through these philosophical underpinnings, then, we read in *ELIC* an ethics of solidarity, in which national, political or ethnic claims (New York, Hiroshima and Dresden as particular claims) are challenged and substituted with the trans-national, neo-humanistic commonality of victims. As Mullins states, "Foer's novel becomes a space in which to challenge the effects of national solidarity and America's sense of being the lone victim after 9/11 and to promote instead a connection between victimization and identity that breaches existing collective identities" (304).

Not only does *ELIC*, then, hinge on an ethics of "traumatic solidarity" (Mullins) throughout the stories of Oskar, Thomas Schell Sr. and Kinue Tomoyasu (on video), which reciprocally illuminate each other; the novel ends with the complex image of the grave that embodies the concept of *Lichtung* as a philosophical-literary figure of speech. When Oskar states that he is disinterring the coffin because "his father loved the truth," he establishes a

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"clearing:" together with his Grandfather, he excavates an absence, he discloses an empty space where darkness becomes light, where their beings (the Schells) can mutually renegotiate their individualities out of the enmeshment with their past trauma. Still, the encounter with the "clearing" is initially an encounter with "nothing," a thinning out of superstructures that exposes an openness. Here the public and private sides of traumatic experiences are summoned up again. In keeping with the symbolical interpretation of the 9/11 attacks that we have discussed at the beginning (especially Žižek and Baudrillard), according to which the attacks were launched against an imperialistic and capitalistic cultural model, we might say that such openness is made possible by the effacement of symbols of Western supremacy (the towers), which in turn generates the desire of communal empathy crystallized by Oskar and Thomas Schell Sr. The "grave" of Ground Zero in the heart of New York City may thus represent the ultimate glade in the wild jungle of capitalistic and violent dynamics of history, whereby cohesion and equality are made possible through solidarity, memory and mutual comprehension. In Heidegger's rural metaphor, the light would not filter through if it were not for the forest that was there and that remains around. The "clearing" is indeed a place where light and darkness presuppose each other: in looking at the terrorist attacks as a historical *Lichtung*, 9/11 becomes a painful yet hopeful occasion to redefine a civic, trans-national space in the twenty-first century where all the beings involved (victims and offenders, material and indirect witnesses) are given identity, historical location and light beyond economical, religious, ethnic affiliations or superstructures. In front of death, we recognize our vulnerability and mutual care/solicitude (*Sorge*) as a "fundamental structure of

Da-sein itself," of our being-in-the-world (Kockelmans 80) and wonder whether an allegiance of this kind may constitute a political platform for more aware communities worldwide. As Butler argues, "a sympathetic identification with the oppressor" in the context of 9/11 does not mean to build a "justificatory framework" for him, but it rather leads to foster our capacity to make "ethical judgments" for a future of responsibility and alertness to dissent (8-9).

Finally, the *Lichtung* in the novel is, perhaps first and foremost, a poetic and hermeneutic experience. The letters that Thomas Schell Sr. pours into his son's coffin represent the power of literature to narrate trauma and to fill a void that otherwise would have been useless. These stories and words of paternal love replace the material missing body of Thomas Schell Jr. and become agents of remembrance over time and space, a means to perpetuate life in death. Likewise, a few pages before the final chapter "Beautiful and True," the idea of poetic illumination has been handed down to Oskar by his spiritual leader Stephen Hawking. After having sent him over the last two years several letters about his passion for physics and "invention," Oskar eventually receives from Hawking an articulate reply:

> …Oskar, intelligent people write to me all the time. In your fifth letter you asked "What if I never stop inventing?" That question has stuck with me. I wish I were a poet. I've never confessed that to anyone, and I'm confessing it to you, because you've given me reason to feel that I can trust you. I've spent my life observing the universe, mostly in my mind's eye. It's been a tremendously rewarding

life, a wonderful life. I've been able to explore the origins of time and space with some of the great living thinkers. But I wish I was a poet.

Albert Einstein, a hero of mine, once wrote, "Our situation is the following. We are standing in front of a closed box which we cannot open."

I'm sure I don't have to tell you that the vast majority of the universe is composed of dark matter. The fragile balance depends on things we'll never be able to see, hear, smell, taste, or touch. Life itself depends on them. What's real? What isn't real? Maybe those aren't the right questions to be asking. What does life depend on?

I wish I had made things for life to depend on. What if you never stop inventing? Maybe you're not inventing at all… (*ELIC* 305)

Hawking's words reveal that he would thin out cultural and scientific edifices to grasp the significance of Being as dependence on meaningful principles. The (poietic) activity of "inventing" that Oskar finds so tiring and unsuccessful (his quest for the lock and the imaginary rescuing narratives that ensue) loses here the imperialistic connotation we have discussed at the beginning and translates for Hawking into a search for what makes us human, alive and related to one another – which is a mystery, a "dark matter" in the end. The revelation of Being is a historical encounter that we find ourselves in rather than a circumstance we create or discover. It is a form of poetic thinking or adapting to the world. As Ronald Morrison explains, in Heidegger (as well as in Thoreau), the "poetic is fundamentally a *letting*, not a *grasping*." Since man is consumed by his desire to govern the world and casts his own light upon it through an exploitative use of science and technology,

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his dignity and essence are concealed. Therefore, "[i]nstead of deliberate action, we can seek to recover our dignity through the work of art, which brings us closer to the poetic revealing…" (Morrison 159). Such *Lichtung* finds in, and beyond, the physical, material knowledge an epistemological and ethical intuition ("I wish I had made things for life to depend on"), an emergence from concealment that, in the novel, coincides with Oskar's final visit to the cemetery (he will set out to disinter the coffin right after reading Hawking's letter) and with his realization that "the black box" of life and death is a mystery that must become a starting point for building new human connections between supposedly enemy cultures.

Chapter 7

"The Chickens Have Come Home to Roost!" Post-9/11 Revengeful Narratives in Lorrie Moore's *A Gate at the Stairs*

In the previous chapters, we have examined the ethical narratives of 9/11 and the type of figurative discourse they have produced as New York responses to trauma. Essentially, these ethical novels represent the attempt to tackle feelings of isolation (Schwarz), numbness (DeLillo), and loss (Foer) that arose as an immediate consequence of the catastrophe, and to endow the catastrophe with meaning. In their representations of trauma, these stories refuse to engage with an obtuse dynamics of victimization and facile rhetoric of revenge, dramatizing instead the wrenching tension between the acknowledgment of public rupture and the need for reconciliation and communal support that such incommensurable events generated. Disavowing and/or complicating tropes of innocence, homeland, revenge and amnesia, these narratives fostered not the sense of coherence and strength that dominated public official discourse, but a series of individual memories and intimate revelations that, while working through trauma, exposed its painful reality and countered its collective amnesia. In their singularity, the ethical novels occupy, as we said, a third, non symmetrical space with respect to intellectual responses and political appropriations of 9/11 as the occasion for new myths of exceptionalism and as a *casus belli* for war. Through narrative techniques of fragmentation, narrative shifts, traumatic realism and figuration, and time concoction of historical and personal past and present, they posited the question of how private and public shock should be memorialized and opened up history and identity to

continual re-negotiation.[56] In other words, they showed, as art most of the times does, what politics silenced to obviate or forget the tragedy, namely one's vulnerability as a path toward a critical, self-conscious, publicly and globally engaged society.

The space of social experimentation in the wake of 9/11 that these ethical novels imagine, however, does not seem to reach out to the entire US nation and remains confined to the city. While the locality of trauma has produced a community who understands, as Judith Butler argues, that "survivability" in times of trauma depends on "relationality" (*Frames of War* 49), the consequences of the attacks of 9/11 on other places in the US configure a different type of "trauma" – one that does not possess ethical force but rather uncovers the amnesiac tendencies, paranoiac Manichaeism, and elision of difference that were always already ingrained in American society. While trauma and ethical concerns are central to the novels of Schwarz, DeLillo and Foer, in the "cultural" novels of Lorrie Moore and John Updike the events of 9/11 have become an integral part of everyday life and have been uncritically reabsorbed into routine. On the other hand, Joseph O'Neill's novel proves that post-9/11 New York City, even if struggling with the idea of a truly cosmopolitan society, is still a palimpsest where different traumatizing stories can converge and give rise to unexpected communities. The potential for cultural pluralism, traumatic solidarity and historical memory set up by the New York stories does not ramify into the America that is far from the neuralgic epicenter of historical trauma. This proves that the traumatizing effects and the related ethical calls engendered by 9/11 remain confined to the New York literature

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[56] For a discussion on art in times of crisis see Blau, Herbert. "Art and Crisis: Homeland Security and the Noble Savage." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 75 25.3 (September 2003): 6-19.

on the topic. While other novels have captured the post-9/11 spirit of terror and isolation outside New York City (for example the dystopic *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy, 2006), the particular redemptive forms and outcomes concern the novels set in the place of the original trauma.

Certainly, as Vickroy notes, "trauma leads us to examine the human consequences of socio-historical phenomena and the interconnection between public and private, the political and the psychological" (221). However, while the first group of novels envisions scenarios that are more incoherent, figurative, and symbolic, inviting the reader to respond ethically, the second group adopts a more cynical and disenchanted approach to 9/11, inviting the reader to respond critically.[57] The status of 9/11, then, changes from civic, visceral trauma to background historical motif. Moore and Updike especially focus on the amnesia and paranoia that dominate shabby, anonymous places in Michigan and New Jersey, respectively, whereas O'Neill returns us to a New York where interracial bonds have enabled new utopias. In analyzing this fiction, I continue to examine the ways in which the terrorist attacks affect public and private dynamics in American life, and I observe how their legacy often serves to reformulate fears and concerns that have been dominating US culture.

Lorrie Moore's novel *A Gate at the Stairs* (*GS*) follows Tassie Keltjin's journey of self-discovery and emancipation from the small country town of Dellacrosse to the medium-

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[57] As Dina Georgis states regarding traumatic literature, "the longer we sustain the incoherent raw sensations before they are transformed into thought, the better our capacity to bring insight to intuition." (171).

sized university town of Troy. A twenty-year-old college student interested in Rumi's poetry and anthropology, wine-tasting and Sufism, Tassie longs for elaborate and cosmopolitan experiences but meets crudity and shallowness as she crosses the particular chronotope of the story, the algid post-9/11 Midwestern America. Her geographical and existential transition occurs, indeed, at the turn of 2001 and throughout 2002, when the aftermath of 9/11 begins to penetrate everyone's ordinary existence in its many degrees and forms of gravity. Relying on a playful but whipping language, *A Gate at the Stairs* synchronizes bleak echoes of what so far seems to be the historical matrix of the twenty-first century. For example, the major terrorist attack has frozen intercultural and interracial relationships into a façade of fair-play among Troy's petty bourgeoisie. There, conversations and social interactions show prudery but exude racism, as people strive to maintain a politically correct milieu while repressing fear, isolation and hate. At the same time, in Dellacrosse's alienated physical and human landscape, the attack has transformed the war-mongering impulses of US public (and rural) culture into a "distant" participation of youth to the homeland military defense. Furthermore, in this scenario, love is weaker than ever and it may end abruptly because of clashing religious and cultural beliefs that for once prove stronger than sentiments. Tassie finds herself at the crossroads of these three narrative threads, each one of which enlightens a specific tentacle-like extension of 9/11 into society.

On this basis, we must note that 9/11 is not the generative centre of Moore's novel, since her story focuses on such themes as adoption, racism, adolescent turmoil and parents' responsibility. On the contrary, 9/11 relates obliquely to such themes, as it indirectly exposes

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and magnifies the multiple contradictory layers that each of these themes challenges the protagonists with. More specifically, Moore tackles the amnesia, superficiality, brutality and detachment from public life that were always already there in middle-class American society, which appears ignorant of its own history and/or unresponsive to the complexities of a post-terroristic world. Since the people from Troy and Dellacrosse look presumptuous, confused and careless about human relationship, moral values, politics and the world at large, destiny retaliates against them. The author constructs subtle narratives of "revenge" for each narrative thread mentioned above, so that history strikes back against the apathy and self-sufficiency that many US citizens fail to realize they possess. In this design, Moore treats 9/11 as a possible "revenge motif" that occasionally resurfaces and shatters a fragile and inconsistent humanity by triggering disturbing consequences (clearly unimagined by the characters): from the ignorance of the larger world and of the US role in it, to the shallow commodification of Arabic symbols, from the militarization of public discourse, to the fascination with an inaccessible exotic masculinity.

Instead of reading it as a single catastrophic Ur-phenomenon, Moore uses 9/11 as a disseminated and recurring "structure of disaster and revenge" that seeps into the sleepy Midwest, where no one really seems to interrogate the cultural and historical significance of terrorism or behaves any differently than before the attacks occurred. Therefore, the cultural construction of 9/11 in *A Gate at the Stairs* takes the form of a *nemesis* in the lives of people who overlook and minimize it. And even when 9/11 is not an explicit narrative "structure of disaster and revenge," it is used to denounce some limits of Democratic liberal thought on

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issues of intolerance and moral integrity in a Troy that feels like a displaced and desolate post-9/11 New York. Overall, in Moore's novel, "retaliation" is the narrative strategy that connects 9/11 to issues of racism, adoption, adolescent struggles and parenting. The challenging, insidious aftermath of 9/11 manifests itself through subtle episodes of revenge against the deficiencies, inanity and hubris of a politically uneducated and naïve America. In her trenchant account, Moore is always elegant and ironic, never openly judgmental: her story is not a critique *tout court* of current Midwestern middle-class as much as a lucid diagnosis of its illusory alienation after 2001. Tassie's coming of age will mean, indeed, not only overcoming the difficulties of adolescence, but also dealing with the cynical force of 9/11 and its ensuing metamorphoses.

In other words, Moore's novel captures the unpredictable consequences of the tragedy of 9/11 as they intrude upon the characters' experiences and choices in a decentered, suburban America, far away from the big wounded metropolis of New York City and the institutional site of the Pentagon. The verb "intrude upon" is not chosen here at random: it is the verb Moore uses to answer a question about the relationship between her fiction and politics in an interview with Angela Pneuman. Moore explains:

> As for the relationship of my writing to politics—in the broadest sense, of course, everything is political, and I am interested in power and powerlessness as it relates to people in various ways. I'm also interested in the way that the workings of governments and elected officials intrude upon the lives and minds of people who

feel generally safe from the immediate effects of such workings. All the political

things we discuss with our friends are things my characters consider, too. (Pneuman)

The distance between people and politics is nothing new, of course, and many events

just "make themselves known in quiet or not quiet ways" (Pneuman). Yet the "various ways"

by which such distance is deployed tell us something about the quality of the political

communication a country is able to establish among its different subjects. While international

debates on, and interpretations of, 9/11 proliferate, the dull and creepy America of *A Gate at*

the Stairs obliterates both the national bereavement and the political future of the country. As

Moore makes clear in an interview for the *Madison Review*, the role of literature is precisely

to expose the truths about the conflicts and political inadequacies of society: "[f]iction has

the same responsibilities after September 11th that it had before: and that is not to lie"

(Interview 50). Similarly, Alison Kelly seems to conclude in her volume on Moore that the

author looks at 9/11 as another occasion for literature to expose such truths with sarcasm and

precision but without necessarily envisioning "anti-American figures" (143).

In Moore's Midwestern society, then, 9/11 has widened the power gap between

official politics and the lives of common people. Neither the government, nor the people are

able to create sufficient communicative and critical margins to fathom its significance and

impact. "Let's face it. We are all living in a bubble of some sort" a character comments at

one point (*GS* 157). Like in reality, media in the novel have no explanatory function and

clearly have made the spectators inured to violence. We only catch a glimpse of one TV

screen showing the falling towers and images of the war in Afghanistan. President Bush is a

mere decorative, unwieldy presence on a bumper sticker that says "IF GOD SPEAKS THROUGH BURNING BUSHES, LET'S BURN BUSH AND LISTEN TO WHAT GOD SAYS" (*GS* 37). And Tassie herself observes at the beginning that:

> [f]rom our perspective that semester, the events of September – we did not yet call them 9/11 – seemed both near and far. Marching poli-sci majors chanted on the quads and the pedestrian malls, "The chickens have come home to roost! The chickens have come home to roost!" When I could contemplate them at all – the chickens, the roosting—it was as if in a craning crowd, through glass, the way I knew (from Art History) people stared at the Mona Lisa in the Louvre: *La Gioconda*! its very name like a snake, its sly, tight smile encased at a distance but studied for portentous flickers. It was, like September itself, a cat's mouth full of canaries. (*GS* 5)

Tassie's perception of 9/11 occurs through strands of popular culture and language, not necessarily mistaken, Moore seems to imply, (the chickens that roost are the Americans who deserved what they got and have to face the consequences of previous offensive deeds; the canaries in the cat's mouth may be the harbingers of novelty, but most likely dangers, in this case). In her confused reception of the events, Tassie turns them into an enigmatic puzzle like the Mona Lisa's smile that everyone tries to capture and decipher. By analogy, 9/11 breaks the flux of the season, as we learn in the opening of the novel that "[t]he cold came late that fall and the songbirds were caught off guard" (*GS* 3).

However, 9/11 is not an event that rearticulates the routine of Tassie and the other characters in the novel. The young protagonist is careless about the consequences of the

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attacks and bends them to metaphors and jokes, as when she diverts her thoughts shortly after having seen the march towards a conversation with her friend Murph, who compares the fall of the towers to the intensity of her marvelous sexual experience on September 10th, saying: "It was a terrible price to pay for love, but it had to be done" (*GS* 5). And the two girls burst out laughing at the idea that the measure of all things is their personal pleasure – implying that safety (and satisfaction) comes with distance. While the government ignores its own guilt, mishandles the war and abuses its power, most people give up on political agency (with the modest exception of the poli-sci majors) and remain unaware of the larger global scenario, indifferent to change. In this lackluster context, Moore insinuates fateful, scathing revengeful narratives that signal how the terrorist attacks have pierced into the US social tissue notwithstanding a terribly unreceptive political unconscious.

The main narrative thread of *GS* concerns the prospective adoption of a child by the wealthy couple of Sarah Thornwood and Edward Brink, who recently moved to town. Attempting to make some extra money while attending college in Troy, Tassie is hired by Sarah as a babysitter but will end up serving as a full backup in the adoption process. Since Edward is always busy and has no apparent interest in the preliminary selection phases – a fact that spoils right away his paternal instincts – Sarah asks Tassie to accompany her and meet the (both Catholic) "birth mothers." After a first unsuccessful attempt with Amber, a drug-addicted girl on probation who dislikes Sarah's excessive solicitude, Sarah (this time together with Edward) and Tassie meet Bonnie, a stiff young woman from Wisconsin who lets them adopt her Mary-Emma, a "biracial African-American" two-year-old whose father

cannot be traced (*GS* 112). The newly constituted mixed family, then, returns to Troy to begin a new life, yet Sarah and Edward continue to remain as icy and mysterious as the Midwestern "scary fairyland" that surrounds them (*GS* 119).

In the gloomy wasteland of post-9/11 world, these two characters seem open-minded and virtuous, but suspicion arises that they hide a terrible secret underneath a fake layer of strength and amiability. Sarah runs a high-end restaurant in town, is often on the phone giving instructions to her chefs, and buys potatoes from Tassie's father, who is a farmer in Dellacrosse. She knows what quality is. A mild Democrat, Sarah wears long knitted scarves and has a "socially constructed laugh" (*GS* 23) that conceals her nervousness but does not deny her benevolence. As Tassie says when she misunderstands the rules to keep with Bonnie, "Sarah was both pathetic and game. You had to hand it to her." (*GS* 94). Far from Sarah's anxiety is Edward's coldness, although she admits that to run a restaurant "was a science" (*GS* 127). Edward does research on eye cancer after having been for a while "interested in breasts" (*GS* 93). A man completely tactless and ambiguous, he appears a few times in the novel, often making a pass at Tassie that regularly gets ignored. Yet they look a solid couple and, to facilitate a multicultural social life for Mary-Emma, Sarah wants to form a support group with families of mixed ethnic background. She feels that it is necessary to combat the racist attitudes that reign in Troy and that suddenly increased after 9/11.

Notably, Troy is described as a "piece of smug, liberal, recycling, civic-minded monkey masturbation. [A town] that…was gestural, trying to make itself feel good... [A town that] wasn't real. That was the true crime. Its lack of reality. Whatever that meant." (*GS* 153).

As the New York terrorist attacks have literally effaced bodies and produced undifferentiated debris a few months earlier, Troy's "lack of reality" represents its inability to give substance and dignity to the remains of its individuals. While the novel does not explicitly connect Troy with post-9/11 New York, the same sense of death, annihilation and "absence" enshrouds both. The "unreality" of Troy, a mixture of indifference, mystery, violence and paralysis, calls for a reconstruction of human "materiality" and critical agency – of self-awareness, respect and equality, all civic virtues whose lack Moore cynically registers. The atmosphere in the novel is altogether dim and threatening, blending human and natural entities alike into a flat moral landscape. Troy is full of "wintry neighborhoods" (*GS* 3) where "all kink and pretentious evil sprang" (*GS* 102) and it is not dissimilar from "some killing cornfield" (*GS* 3) of Dellacrosse. Out of this sinister backdrop, 9/11-related discourses on war and race surface, revealing tremendous confusion of values, underlying suspiciousness and lack of future-oriented visions.

While babysitting Mary-Emma and the other couples' children on the upper floor every Wednesday, Tassie overhears the guests' conversations and provides us with a portrait of the supposedly open-minded Midwestern middle-class. Faceless voices (except Sarah's one) state that "racial blindness" and "postracial" are "white idea[s]" (*GS* 157, 186) and that black people never really integrated themselves into white northern communities. The group stresses the necessity of acknowledging difference and at the same time wonders whether missed black integration is due to "racism or racial inexperience" on both parts (*GS* 187). And every time the topic moves from African-Americans to Muslims, one guest says "[d]on't

get me started on Islam!" (*GS* 188, 195), implying that this is an even thornier issue to discuss. If Chicago black Muslims and their "goddamn mosques" should by now be accepted, it is incomprehensible why the US engaged with "*honky Bosnian Muslims*" (i.e. whites) in what they call "a fool's game" (i.e. the war against Serbia, *GS* 188), meaning that the US should not look for further alliances with Islamic countries, even if "white." Mixing religion and ethnicity, "blackness" is often dragged in to critique the supposed white arrogance of the establishment, and yet the dialogue is so snobby and hazy that it ends up being apathetic and sterile, with a guest declaring "The rest of the world doesn't understand the ungovernable diversity of this country" (*GS* 197). Tassie confesses that she "didn't know what they were talking about most of the time" (*GS* 197) and that they sounded like "a spiritually gated community of liberal chat" (*GS* 186): in spite of their intention to support a multicultural social praxis, this nonconformist bourgeoisie is self-confined and unable to follow up on the discrimination that racist school teachers, waiters and other petty ignorant people in Troy perpetrate on their children. As Elizabeth Anker observes:

> Beyond being self-indulgent, liberal guilt is thereby condemned for licensing far more egregious derelictions of responsibility, in this case to America's youth. Viewed allegorically, Sarah and Edward's laxity can denote innumerable oversights afflicting American politics; nevertheless, their shortcomings most pointedly rebuke liberalism's blighted vision of multiculturalism not only for failing to abate post-9/11 racism but also for sowing foreclosures that directly warrant such a mindset. (479)

The algid, childless couples that gather at the Thornwood-Brinks' house use their adoptive African-American sons and daughters to critique an unfit social scheme and to expose the umpteenth racial stereotype that became "current" after 9/11, that of the "Middle-Eastern." However, their positions remain speculative. The discursive dynamics of this stuck-up microcosm (rather than a support group) reveal the inconsistencies of liberalism in the aftermath of 9/11. While these representatives of Democratic thought are able to pin down previous historical failures of US politics in dealing with war and cultural diversity, they testify to the fact that small talk will certainly not prevent other failures from occurring. On the one hand, we understand that the attacks of 9/11 stemmed from the past disastrous US cultural politics and only exacerbated already-existing social conflicts; on the other hand, though, we perceive that the future may have more social, economic and racial disarray in store for the country. Cultural interpretations of 9/11 by this supposedly enlightened class are unsatisfactory and, if they suggest a space for critical thinking, they also reveal the inanity and ambiguity of such perspectives.

In the Thornwood-Brink's narrative thread, then, 9/11 is not a narrative structure of revenge per se, but a circumstance that exposes the paralysis of neoliberal thought. However, the motif of revenge is indirectly connected to Sarah and Edward who are despite themselves an example of the "white arrogance" that dominates the physical and intellectual wasteland we described above. In *A Gate at the Stairs*, in fact, their terrible background strikes back on their present lives and tears them apart. The awful back-story they hide is the unintentional homicide of their son Gabriel, when they still were "Susan" and "John." A few years earlier,

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in a hysterical, arrogant "educational" fit and regardless of Sarah's objections, John abandoned Gabriel on the highway in order to punish him for his tantrums. His intention of picking him up a few minutes later did not have the time to turn into fact: Gabriel died crossing the trafficked lanes after his parents' car and this fault ruined their lives forever. Thanks to a good lawyer, their sentence was suspended, they changed their names and moved to Troy. But since all "the chickens *must* come home to roost" in Moore's narrative design, the adoption agency soon unearths the Thornwood-Brinks' gruesome past and eventually takes Mary-Emma away from them – a child that, paradoxically, should have "whitewashed" their conscience. If we look attentively, we learn that Sarah and Edward still have somehow the involuntary "potential to kill," as, by analogy, the neoliberal, overconfident tradition of thought they represent may still hinder society's progress. One of Edward's comments is that "everyone has…stuck a fork in someone's eye or dynamited a perfectly good shed" (*GS* 113); and Sarah gives Tassie a poisonous, unlabelled bulb tapenade for the garden to preserve in the freezer but Murph almost dies after accidentally eating it. Not only, then, does the past haunt the present in ruthless, revengeful forms, but a recurring "structure of disaster" cages the characters in the novel, curbing any utopian potential they may have when trying to redesign their future.

The second narrative thread is more openly connected to 9/11 and its destabilizing effects on the characters' cultural and emotive perceptions. It tells of the relationship between Tassie and Reynaldo, a fascinating mixed-race student she meets in her Sufism class. All the stories in *A Gate at the Stairs* are tales of forgetfulness and superficiality against which

destiny retaliates. However, compared to the other characters, Tassie is quite mature and dependable for her age, a trait that Sarah grasps right away. Tassie has a keen inclination to factual and psychological analysis and is able to show self-confidence even when she does not actually have it. Interestingly, though, there is a linguistic discrepancy between her introspective ruminations and her conversational style. What she thinks, she seldom translates verbally. While her thoughts are fraught with witty observations ("Bonnie was not bonnie…why would she care about the rhetorical mockery of her name?" *GS* 88) and with erudite references ("I made my way through *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Some days grew so bland and barren, I found myself perusing Horace…" *GS* 64), her interpersonal dialogue is laconic, scant ("'Sounds good.' It was the midwestern girl reply to everything" *GS* 40). Amplifying the first person narration, Moore grafts her cultivated language and experience upon the psyche of a blooming female adolescent, making the literary creation of Tassie sound at times hypertrophied and too conceited. The author conflates herself with the character-narrator to a point that we firmly rely on Tassie to understand all the events in the novel: Tassie is reliable (a reliable narrator, for once!) and goes unquestioned. While this literary expedient gets annoying at times – a swarming, adult mind contrasting with juvenile turns of phrases – it also presents a steady female identity wrestling with her socially limited skills.

Within a few months, Tassie overcomes this double side of herself in her story with Reynaldo. She is in love with him head over heels. She takes Mary-Emma to his house and he enjoys playing with the toddler, proving "attentive and appreciative" (*GS* 168). He is an

intelligent and reserved youth who never lets his feelings shine through. "As a brown man" who ran a delivery business in New York immediately after 9/11 (*GS* 192), Reynaldo was constantly checked and searched for by the police, with the result that deliveries were often getting delayed and his business fell apart. Writing about Tassie's encounters with Reynaldo, Moore disseminates bits of information that only later, together with Tassie, we will realize were preliminary signs of another "disaster." Reynaldo says he is Brazilian but knows almost no Portuguese. He teaches Tassie words that she will learn "much later it was actually Spanish with some Italian thrown in" (*GS* 165). She likes his "black-and-white scarf – a print [she] thought of as Middle Eastern, though it could have been a Navajo tablecloth, for all [she] knew" (*GS* 167). Moreover, Reynaldo takes beautiful pictures of Mary-Emma until one day Tassie has one blown up for Sarah as a surprise gift. Trying to decipher Sarah's consternation, Tassie notices that in the picture, "Mary-Emma was sitting on Reynaldo's prayer rug. I hoped it looked like a yoga mat" (*GS* 174). Sarah contradicts her liberal spirit by telling Tassie to avoid future meetings between Reynaldo and Mary-Emma, though it is unclear whether the prayer rug specifically struck her as a potential sign of suspicion and danger. If Tassie unconsciously realizes that Reynaldo may not be Brazilian, she refuses on a rational level to think through the cultural semiotics he displays, later on succumbing to her lack of attentiveness.

Reynaldo is then the fascinating, shifty Other, whose historical specificity is dangerously overlooked by Tassie in times that would demand careful cultural reconstructions of alterity: on the contrary, Tassie is mesmerized by Reynaldo's vague exotic

nature and uncritically abandons herself to it until the truth boomerangs back on her. Interspersing this love-story with a superb dose of sarcasm, Moore has Tassie spray an aromatic oil called "Arabian Princess" that may turn her into "the mascot of Osama Bin Laden" (*GS* 140). "As adorned for a costume party's idea of a terrorist" (*GS* 184), the naïve, oblivious girl from Dellacrosse (the other, vulnerable side of her "adult" mind) wears an Egyptian necklace and a "muslin headscarf," which Reynaldo "thought I'd called…'Muslim' rather than 'muslin'" (*GS* 193-94). All these descriptions indicate that Arab symbols and names are already circulating and transforming popular discourse and taste after only a few months from 9/11. In Tassie's portrayal as a mindless lover, Moore shows that the tragedy of 9/11 may easily become a funny aesthetic repository of exotic images that we commodify in our everyday activities. While these frivolous elements have a comic effect in the novel, they are also ominous since they imply a one-way cultural appropriation rather than a thorough reciprocal dialogue. When Reynaldo tells Tassie that he is moving to London because he is part of an "Islamic charity for Afghan children"– and reassures her that he is not "part of a cell" (*GS* 204), Tassie gets a sudden bath of reality. Out of the blue, in the space of two pages, she articulates with clarity what she had up to then disregarded, i.e. that Reynaldo may be a terrorist for all she knows.

Their farewell is a snip-snap dialogue: "It is not the jihad that is the wrong thing. It is the wrong things that are the wrong things." "Thank you, holy warrior, for the Islamofascist lecture." "As Muhammad said, we do not know God as we should" (*GS* 206). Enraged and shocked, Tassie mocks and provokes Reynaldo at the same time trying to reason with him:

"How about a kinder, gentler jihad?" "One must listen to God." "Well, God should speak up. He mumbles." Calmly, Reynaldo says, "Mankind is the source of all suffering." And Tassie replies, "'And the source of all God.' I had crossed a line" (*GS* 207). The dialogue is trenchant and definitive. As hinted above, Tassie loses Reynaldo but this "disaster" makes her emerge as a clever, vital young woman who acknowledges her thoughtlessness and learns to defend her own cultural position with balance and respect. In the epistemological framework of the novel, Tassie may represent the burgeoning Democratic intelligentsia that could authentically pursue the "post-racial" ideal (embodied by Obama in a few years to come) evoked by Sarah's friends, who on the contrary do not sound clear, nor authoritative enough in their political discussions of 9/11. On the other hand, the elusive Reynaldo throws a cultural challenge to the readers and characters in the novel, as he cannot be deciphered (while Moore implies he should be) but only loved and feared at this historical juncture.

Genuinely in love with Reynaldo, the half-Jewish Tassie tries to see the man beyond the "brown" Arab jihadist but, unfortunately, "[l]ocating the living him would be like finding a miner in a collapsed mine" once he would be gone (*GS* 208). Most of all, Tassie has to endure abandonment for her naïveté – another "chicken that comes home to roost." The trope of "revengeful disaster" connected to 9/11 applies to the sentimental sphere, as well. Had Tassie been outside the aforementioned "bubble" we are all living in, she could have saved herself some suffering, making more informed choices. She learns that to pay full attention to the Other is a rule of life, especially in a world where no "one, it seemed, was who they said they were" (*GS* 226). Tassie's story with Reynaldo coagulates post-9/11 fears of the Other

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and it points at the necessity of cultural understanding before mere romance, even though in 2002 times are not yet ripe for a fruitful intercultural "marriage." Moore suggests that, at the time of the story, the Other can only be conceived as either exotic, or potentially lethal, but should an authentic, deep cultural communication be lacking in future inter-ethnic relationships, our own survival may be jeopardized. While the author "pardons" Tassie, she also presents her story with Reynaldo as a multi-faceted cautionary tale.

Even more painfully than with her Arab lover, Tassie learns the importance of "listening" within the closing thread of the novel, which concerns her brother Robert's choice of joining the army at the outbreak of the Afghanistan war (October 2001). Her overlooking his fragility and his passive choice of giving in to the military configure here a double revenge pattern, which confirms that 9/11 and its implications are not taken seriously enough in the peripheral America that Moore portrays. At the beginning of the novel, in his last year of school, Robert is bored and without a clear life perspective. During the 2001 Christmas holidays, he makes clear to Tassie that he is not eager to take up his father's agricultural business and that Dellacrosse offers no interesting profession. Therefore, Robert has let himself be seduced by an army recruiter at school and he now thinks that joining the military would be a safe choice because "it's peacetime. [He is] not going to get killed or nothing" (*GS* 57). Tassie does not misread the political state of affairs as he does:

> "But it's not really peacetime. There's Afghanistan," I said. These faraway countries
> that had intruded on our consciousness seemed odd to me. It seemed one thing sixty

years ago to … fight for France, a country we had heard of, but what did it mean now

to fight in or at—there was no preposition…for?—a place like Afghanistan? (*GS* 58)

This play of prepositions signals the profound bewilderment that reigns among

common people about the US role in a world that suddenly exists after 9/11, but that no one

can bring into focus. Common people's language is deficient and confused against an

oversimplified political rhetoric that has conveniently split the world into "they" and "us."

Challenging in fact the rhetorical expression "enduring freedom" ("Shouldn't freedom just be

free?" *GS* 59), Tassie is a little more versed than Robert but she still neglects his confusion

and ignorance. Then, the two of them walk away through the snowy prairies and the icy

roads of their hometown, aimlessly tossing stones in the cold stream. Again, this scene

sounds like the prodrome of a disaster. While Tassie ponders over the "intrusion" of 9/11 and

the alienation it has generated in everyone's life, her brother acts on his boredom, pretending

to find a life goal in the orthodox and disciplined field of the armed forces.

In this third story, Moore registers the standpoint of US youths in the immediate

aftermath of 9/11, imagining a particular setting in suburban America where military

recruiters exploit the "favorable" situation to draft ingenuous teenagers and where

hypercritical college students (in Troy) fill up "the Intro to Islam course" (*GS* 58). As it is

happening in other world countries, joining the army becomes either a palliative professional

solution before being a genuine patriotic act, or a possible matter of academic debate within a

crowded multicultural course. With an almost ethnographic approach, Moore crystallizes the

fundamental anti-militarism of younger US generations, who, in different styles and for

different reasons, feel that war is something distant and alien, when not part of an "anti-ecological" inclination. For example, Tassie observes: "[Robert] had never been an enthusiastic hunter. How would he manage in the military?" (*GS* 59).

Once again, in Moore's novelistic design, just when one thinks mindlessly or hubristically to be safe, destiny retaliates. In this case, whenever one believes the war to be alienating and alienated – since it encourages isolation and it cannot hurt because it is distant – its brutal, violent reality intrudes upon one's own life. No one is isolated and every decision has ramified consequences. The day after his graduation in summer 2002, Robert leaves "for the ironically named Fort Bliss" (*GS* 268) and comes back a few months later, his body's parts rearranged and laid out in a coffin, together with a check for twelve thousand dollars. A routine land-mine sweep had killed him in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan – suddenly, a closer place. Tassie remembers their last good-bye at the bus station, noticing that Robert "was desperate for the knowledge and reasoning behind anything. I could see he felt shorthanded, underequipped, factually and otherwise. Just the night before he had said, 'Afghanistan has provinces? Like Canada?'" (*GS* 266).

The novel seems to imply that Robert's "ignorance," a baleful leitmotif for all the characters in the novel, has cost him his life. Moore tackles issues of responsibility and self-awareness and invites reflection on what it means to spread war in a global world that can only repay in the same way at the moment. Furthermore, Moore shows that the personal and the political are always interconnected, since a responsible, informed choice at a personal level may sanction, or obstruct, the course of larger policies and collective decisions. The US

illusion of being unrelated to the world proves catastrophic, even for the last of the soldiers and even more after 9/11, when a sense of cultural alienation and invisible violence frustrates any form of educated and critical agency.

In this tragedy, Tassie feels she is guilty. Many months earlier her brother had sent her an email asking for help with his decision to join the military and she had always postponed the answer, eventually forgetting about it. Mindlessness again appears as a life-changing "sin." Busy at that time with unmasking the real life of Sarah, Tassie felt "she had become vague and unknowable to [herself] in guilt and inaction" (*GS* 262). Earlier, when she had failed to "listen" to Reynaldo, she was the only one who ended up suffering. But now that she has disregarded Robert's distress signals, death and collective bereavement overwhelmed all her beloved ones. With the wisdom of hindsight, Tassie understands that indifference must not dominate interpersonal relationships. She had spent all the summer wearing fake feather wings and running in front of her father's thresher to scare the mice away from the mix. Feeling "like Icarus" (*GS* 270), Tassie had secluded herself from the world in a surreal bucolic dream, until the news of Robert's death high-jacked her self-centered flight. Now, unseen, she lies with him in the coffin for a while at the funeral, in a macabre reunion with the bodily presence of her brother she had previously denied. Reading this somewhat ghastly scene, we fear for a moment that Tassie might not re-emerge from the mortal (and yet regenerative) site in which she confronts her guilt, and that she will be buried with her brother. However, the contact with the reality of "death at home" – figural and real,

at this point – positively prompts the young protagonist to return to her life in Troy more receptive and alert.

In *GS*, then, Moore imagines in retrospect a world only tangentially affected by the terroristic design and yet connoted (if not corroded) by it. Whether symbolic or real, gates are everywhere in the novel: at Mary-Emma's bedroom door, within Troy's mixed community, in the family property in Dellacrosse, in Murph's lyrics. Often, though, they are broken, as if they were just waiting for some flight of stairs to materialize and show a way out of perplexity. Through her sarcasm, Moore then provokes her reader into a less passive stance towards the post-9/11 world, inviting responsibility, compassion and humility in dealing with Otherness, or else a revengeful fate may underpin the narratives ahead of us. Implying through her stories that exceptionalism itself is a dangerous fantasy, Moore captures how 9/11 surreptitiously transforms in piercing ways the lives of common people who think they are immune from history.

Chapter 8

Peripheral 9/11: the Ethno-Religious Manichaeism of John Updike's *Terrorist*

Similarly to Moore, in his novel *Terrorist* Updike is interested in conceptualizing the powerful contradictions that 9/11 has unveiled within the lethargic "peripheral" zones of New York City. The resolutions of the Bush Administration regarding defence policy play a crucial role in the novel and affect its outcome in ambiguous ways. While the Department of Homeland Security is successful at thwarting a terroristic plot that had insinuated itself in the folds of a small New Jersey town, the reader hesitates to take sides in favor of the Western and white societal paradigm that such political instantiation of the Republican Administration represents. Neoconservative alignment was a common reaction in the wake of a historical trauma such as 9/11. In any public crisis, a tension develops between the will to cluster around traditional public figures and values relating to power, nationalism, family, politics and gender, and the necessity to handle the new state of things that is often felt as a threat to their survival. Such values are usually reinforced rather than questioned by popular conscience, and the tragedy of 9/11 made no exception.

As Steven Salaita points out, Rudy Giuliani, George W. Bush and media personalities recommended not engaging in acts of racial violence towards Arab Americans right after the attacks. To manipulate social reactions, political leaders repeated sentences such as "They are American, too;" "They also love this country" and so the expectation was to make "Arab neighbors feel safe and welcome" at home without discrimination, in a tradition of

"imperative patriotism" (151). Yet, contrarily to what it preached (pleas for social peace were occasional in the dominant warmongering rhetoric), the Administration soon adopted the USA Patriot Act (October 2001), which de facto limited civil liberties and endowed police and FBI forces with unprecedented powers of control over aliens, immigrants and all American citizens. These extreme legislative measures, while safeguarding and exceptional in times of national emergency, inevitably delegitimized Otherness, making it a category of civic suspicion and danger and conveying an ambivalent message about ethnic inclusiveness on the American territory.

Against this backdrop, far from offering a cohesive representation of ethnic and racialized individuals after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, recent US fiction on this particular subject navigates Otherness in many contradictory ways, ranging from the resistance to represent, or even think, alterity in literary forms to the desire of exploring, if not mastering it through characterization. John Updike's *Terrorist* (henceforth *T*) deals with the long-term aftermath of 9/11 rather than shaping its symptomatic repercussions in the days following the attacks. Nevertheless, Updike picks up on the dualisms that run across early post-9/11 America and represents the difficulty for the ethnic subject to suture his own identity to the fabric of American society.

Doubtless, conservatism and closure to Otherness are common reactions to traumatic occurrences that literature may construe and dominant culture may control. Doris Brothers is right in arguing that the "search for sameness" is an innate mode of regulating "uncertainty" and unsettlement after a shock (71). One aspect of this defence mechanism is that the more

people *seem* like us, the more we side with them and feel solidified as a community against further manifestations of trauma. We seek and value the same "appearance," places, language, symbols, and beliefs and we tend to exclude from the phases of shock and mourning what is not "like us." After 9/11, American flags materialized outside many homes and declarations of solidarity and of imaginative national belonging to the US proliferated on streets and media. Not only, then, the effect of grief made us say "we are all Americans now," in a sort of "fictitious" and provisionally unanimous feeling. The phenotypic factor in such a search for sameness also appeared as a reductive yet cementing aspect on a familial, social and national scale, especially for those who suffered the attacks directly in the targeted sites, either as witnesses or victims. Arab Americans were feared for their looks and were put in a position where their "Arabness" ended up overcoming their "Americanness."

As Mary Marshall Clark discovered in her series of interviews gathered in New York right after the tragedy, "Oral History Narrative and Memory Project," many racially-connoted Americans were discriminated against and harassed regardless of their actual ethnic origin (Latin Americans, for example). These instinctive forms of exclusionary relations were heavily manipulated by the discursive and political practices mentioned above. While the Administration invited openness, it launched a war campaign, ultimately endorsing feelings of hate, suspicion and delegitimation in the public opinion. The shaping of spontaneous popular fears by rhetorical practices and political choices contributed to make the trope of race even more elusive, rehashing and confusing the already misleading white/non-white dichotomy. Nonetheless indeed, post-traumatic forms of identity assertion

are acceptable ways to cope with trauma until they remain a temporary psychological and cultural device for "self-preservation."[58] As Brothers explains, one of the ominous implications of such "reduction of complexity" (for example the dichotomic thinking of the "them" vs. "us" logic) is the denial of difference and the possible "attempts at its suppression" (71-72), either in the forms of racial exclusion or in the prevention of political dissent. Updike explores precisely the implications of such dichotomic thinking by evolving it into religious and ethnic Manichaeism, whose transcendence however is not completely foreclosed.

John Updike has always been considered the quintessential New England author, a master of middle-class existential doubts about marriage, faith, capitalism and morality, where nuanced but subtly vexing conflicts end in an uncertain hope for a better social and personal equilibrium. In spite of his incursions into African (fictionalized) politics in *The Coup* (1978) and into multi-racial love in a romanticized, trite setting in *Brazil* (1994), Updike has always preferred to unravel the Western anxieties of the suburban Waspish character, synecdochically represented by his Rabbit Angstrom. When *Terrorist* came out in 2006, then, it did not seem a topic that Updike could not deal with, of course, since his imagination was wide and experienced, yet it struck everyone for its unexpected and possibly illuminating subject matter in a time when 9/11 still burned under its ashes and had never been so bluntly addressed. Explaining his choice to Alden Mudge in an interview for

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[58] In Terror Management Theory (TMT), when mortality salience manifests itself and threatens a community, the community itself tend to reinforce and reaffirm their endangered cultural system of values. Greenberg, Jeff, Pyszczynski, Thomas, & Solomon, Sheldon. *In the wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror*. Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association, 2003.

BookPage Magazine, Updike admitted he wrote *Terrorist* out of a twofold fit of entitlement: not only did he happen to be in Brooklyn visiting a relative on September 11, 2001 and directly witness the collapse of the Twin Towers; he also felt that: "I was qualified to speak about why young men are willing to become suicide bombers. I can kind of understand it, and I'm not sure too many Americans can" (Mudge).

This sounds daring as much as odd, considering Updike's strong Christian Lutheran religious and cultural background. Was it perhaps *that* specific background that he felt would help him speak with competence about Muslim suicide bombers? Were his experience and/or knowledge of how intransigent and pure religious morality can be – and of the difficulties in trying to live up to it – that Updike thought could assist him in fleshing out a kamikaze's psychology? My sense is that the religious underpinnings of Updike's poetics were essential in the construction of *Terrorist* and this essay will show how the particular positioning of Updike as an implied author in this 9/11 novel is directly connected to the theistic doubts and struggles that had already unfolded throughout his fiction and that now present a new facet. More importantly for our discussion, Updike's religious discourse occasions the parallel development of a racial one, which appears to some reviewers predictable if not jingoistic (Banerjee). While I partly share this point of view, since some descriptions of the protagonists' complexions throughout *Terrorist* appear at times superfluous or even unsettling, I also ascribe such effect to Updike's traditional voyeuristic indulgence on the material aesthetics of the body, which easily transforms a potentially complex representation of race in the novel to a visual poetics of the surfaces. In this conundrum, where we are left

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wondering whether the author plays pointlessly with racial features or emphasizes their relevance to the protagonists' thinking, I believe Updike has a larger vision in *Terrorist* that questions the cultural imperialism of "whiteness" by making the ethnic gaze of the young Arab American protagonist, Ahmad, the gaze we side with throughout the story. A paradoxically idealized and perhaps implausible character, the young terrorist unmasks the decay of post-9/11 US society through his "moral" mission, which only magnifies and does not change the cultural inertia that lingers in the peripheral underbelly of America.

Capitalizing on the revived discourses about the "clash of cultures" in the 9/11 aftermath (Huntington 1996), then, Updike's *Terrorist* is chillingly Manichean. Set in a lifeless New Jersey industrial town, ironically called New Prospect, where a once prosperous and now stagnant economic development has transformed Victorian "suburban houses" into "housing" (*T* 95) and "inner city fields" into "congested slums" (*T* 96), the story features characters whose ethnic, religious and cultural differences are clear-cut and irreconcilable. The post-9/11 "search for sameness" has here produced social dualisms. By juxtaposing the lives of an Islam-fanatic, self-marginalized, eighteen-year-old Arab American student, Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy and a middle-aged, Jewish-but-atheist school counsellor, Jack Levy, Updike effectively crystallizes post-9/11 American stereotypes about religious and racial identity. Ahmad is a good, irreprehensible high-school student who attends the Qur'an classes of his teacher, Yemeni imam Shaikh Rashid, in a downtown studio fashioned into a mosque. He is the son of an Egyptian father, who left him when he was three years old, and an Irish American mother, Teresa Mulloy, a "trashy and immoral" woman whom his father

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married only to gain American citizenship (*T* 32-33). Teresa has raised Ahmad negligently, day by day, through her job as a nurse and her amateur paintings she occasionally manages to sell. To Ahmad, Islamic religion represents his only reason for life: defining himself as a "good Muslim in a world that mocks faith" (*T* 69), Ahmad thinks that "America wants to take away [his] God" (*T* 39) and that in the US "there are too many paths, too much selling of many useless things. They brag for freedom, but freedom to no purpose becomes a kind of prison" (*T* 148). He has chosen his "Straight Path" (*T*148): headed for Jannah (the Islamic paradise – *T* 238), Ahmad undertakes a jihad against kafirs, i.e. infidels who are "sex-obsessed" (*T* 71) and a "distraction" to combat (*T* 109). Although he says that jihad "doesn't have to mean war…it means striving, along the path of God. It can mean inner struggle," the young Mohammedan will soon become a proud "tool" in the hands of God Himself who, Ahmad thinks, "employs simple men to shape the world" (*T* 251).

When Jack Levy tries to convince him that his good grades and a college education might turn him into a first-class professional on the job market, Ahmad shows no interest in joining the larger society and his greatest ambition is to get a CDL and start delivering for Excellency Home Furnishings, a job the imam has recommended him for. The furniture delivery business is run by a Lebanese American family, whose thirty-year-old son, manager Charlie Chehab, is friend to the imam but actually is a CIA agent undercover. During their delivery trips throughout New Jersey, Charlie tests Ahmad's profound religious convictions through long rants about America's lack of faith, media addiction and imperialist military philosophy – all this in view of luring him into the mindset of the holy warrior against

Western beliefs. Resolutely shaping his own language and determination out of the imam's teachings, and indeed surpassing his master in strength of faith, Ahmad accepts the assignment to blow up the Lincoln tunnel that leads from New Jersey into New York City driving a bomb-equipped truck. The unlikely end sees Jack Levy jumping on the truck, trying to talk Ahmad out of the terroristic scheme and then pressing him to go through with it when he realizes that his own life has also become pointless. Ahmad finally gives up on his plan, persuaded to do so more by the smiles of two black children in the car in front of him than by Jack Levy's empty pleas and desperate resignation.

Updike then weaves a story with thriller overtones, in which Ahmad's self-sacrifice to the Islamic cause represents a kind of innocent and seductive experience for the reader, who romanticizes and exoticizes the boy's unwavering religious zeal as something alien and lost at the same time. When Charlie Chehab compares the jihad to the American Revolution and exalts George Washington as a popular combatant for independence like "Ho Chi Minh," "Hamas" and "Al Queida" to motivate Ahmad to action (*T* 181), our response is duplicitous: while we see the irony in Updike's hyperbolic construction of fundamentalism as a liberating, transhistorical force in a post-9/11 scenario, we also perceive that Charlie touches the sore point of the lack of civic virtues/religion in current US society. Although critics like Kakutani blasted *Terrorist* as "one-dimensional" and "cartoonish" ("John Updike's Terrorist") the story reveals more about ongoing conflicting visions of the world in the US than it may seem at first. Through the character of Ahmad, Updike wants to show that Islam is not only a religion but a practical way of life, a lived credo that ultimately does not

distinguish between private belief and public agency. This credo is juxtaposed with the apathy and superficiality of Western society, which is made up by people who have no control over their lives and mostly carry on in a moral vacuum. As Doran explains, while religion is mainly felt as a "private 'matter'" by Westerners (*T* 9), the *Ummah*, the Muslim community of believers, connects religion and culture in both spheres of existence. In this sense, Hénaff, Lepidus and Doran clarify, Muslims refer to Westerners as *Christians*, therefore employing a religious category rather than a national or even ethnic one to imagine "the other" (*T* 87).

In making Ahmad's fundamentalism admirable for being so pure amidst the pathetic cultural surroundings – until the imam and his terroristic network drive his belief to violence, Updike implicitly reinforces the novel's underlying assumption about the US dearth of public commitment and subservience to the material religion of capitalism. In this way, the novel paradoxically sets Ahmad above the herd through exemplary conduct (attending the mosque, working weekend shifts, loving his job, and so on). At one point in the story Ahmad says to a schoolmate: "All America wants of its citizens, your president has said, is for us to buy – to spend money we cannot afford and thus propel the economy forward for himself and other rich men" (*T* 72). Even though for most of the novel we do not share Ahmad's language, attitudes or path, we endorse his perception of America and get in touch deep down with his religious candour and lucidity of judgment, aspects that the narrative exalts and finds disconcerting at the same time. As Updike confesses in the Mudge interview, "I thought it was important to show how much Ahmad needed to make his own philosophy, as it were,

because the environment wasn't coming up with any" (*Bookpage*). Also, Updike reverses the stereotype that makes kamikazes heartless, as Gregory Orfalea points out when he writes that, throughout the novel, "we hope that Updike's humanity will not desert us" (190), and indeed Ahmad does not kill anyone in the end. The author's strategies of inversion and moral displacement are ironic, yet the overall tone of the novel is not, as it configures a bitter indictment of America's historical amnesia and materialism that 9/11 has once again uncovered. As Richard Gray observes

> the threat here is not in Ahmad but in the world that seems to challenge and imprison him. Updike captures this: the sense, not merely of not belonging but of not feeling safe, of fearing that the world he inhabits is eating away at the very core of his belief and his self. (135-36)

As Peter Bailey explains, faith has always been an issue that Updike himself and his protagonists were grappling with. Examining Updike's literary output, Bailey observes that a streak of nihilism progressively grows throughout Updike's fiction: from the *Rabbit* tetralogy up to *In the Beauty of the Lilies* and *Villages*, characters abandon faith and withdraw from God, becoming secular individuals whose spirituality remains inscrutable – the adulterer Owen McKenzie, the Branch-Davidian Clark Wilmot, Harry Angstrom himself realize that the Kierkegaardian religious experience they had tried in many different ways to pursue (personal, intimate, incommunicable, as we noted above, that Western religious experience is deemed to be – and as Updike thought it should be) comes to a deadlock. According to Bailey, "the chronic unresponsiveness of God has cumulatively darkened Updike's vision"

(243) and he detects in his fiction what he calls "the reluctantly expanding secularism of Updike's aesthetic" (33).

However, if Bailey is accurate in detecting Updike's progressive challenge to his own Christian beliefs and poetics, *Terrorist* comes as a *coup de théâtre* against the grain of such critical evidence. Whereas, as John Leonard puts it, "Rabbit Angstrom explode[d] himself from overconsumption" (1), Ahmad Mulloy's story is the swansong by a spiritually disenchanted author. Indeed, while Updike as a white middle-class, middle-aged male allegedly "identifies" with Jack Levy's faithless acquiescence to the earthly existence (the secularized, atheist character juggling between a fat wife, his lover – Ahmad's mother Teresa – and a dreary job), the author's moral and religious fascination stays with the believer Ahmad. The boy, with his white, well-ironed shirt, his sexual abstinence and his respect for God and his job ("[h]e is pleased to find in the trucking regulations a concern with purity almost religious in quality"— *T* 75) represents the experience of spiritual totality and fullness of life (and afterlife) that the West, Updike and his promiscuous fictional world have missed or at worst never experienced. The dangerous side of Ahmad's choices appears merely a detail that can be worked through in the end. In this way, Jörg Richter argues, "Updike omits any clear-cut judgment of the moral rights and wrongs of terrorism but instead accentuates the paradoxical nature of religious experience within a secular and technologically dominated world" (483). Of course, in this way Updike's literary operation situates itself outside of history, refusing to unravel the specific political implications of 9/11 and blaming them on the hollowness of American "population" for which he expresses "disgust" (Walsh).

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Interestingly though, despite the Manichean and stereotypical organization of the plot, *Terrorist* avoids ethical rigidity, equally distributes strengths and weaknesses among its characters and even finds in the spiritless and cynical Jack Levy the "saviour" who in the end, against all odds, prevents the catastrophe from happening. Levy's gesture disavows the violent ramifications of Ahmad's religion but it also reasserts the boy's spiritual innocence.

In *Terrorist*, these contrasts between Islam, Catholicism and atheism mobilize a no less explicit racial debate. If Islamic fundamentalism is a force that can thrive in the "lake of rubbles" of New Prospect, racial discrimination seems to follow along. However, even the treatment of race in the novel sounds "politically correct," as if Updike aimed at representing a wide range of racially connoted (when not racist) attitudes in connection with a particular faith and within the delicate social equilibrium determined by the terrorist attacks of 9/11. For example, Ahmad thinks of his religious views as inseparable from his ethnicity. While he is proud of his father's "baked" complexion (*T* 13), he despises his mother's mottled white Irish skin color that appears as that of a "leper" (*T* 170). When he walks beside Teresa in stores or around the city, he is "embarrassed by the mismatch of her freckles with his own dun skin," (*T* 151) since, Updike writes, "his taste, developed in his years at Central High, is for darker skins, cocoa and caramel and chocolate" and for dark eyes: "Ahmad regards his mother as a mistake that his father made but that he never would" (*T* 170). Developing his portrait, Updike imagines Ahmad having a crush on Joryleen, an African American schoolmate whose "smooth body" he pictures "darker than caramel but paler than chocolate, roasting in that vault of flames and being scorched into blisters" (*T* 9), as his religious ideas

about "impure" sexuality and damnation lead him to think. Also, Ahmad is almost conquered by the sermon, energy and songs at the Black Christian church where Joryleen invites him one day to listen to her solo.

All these references to "blackness" constellate the novel but they add nothing substantial to Ahmad's character. However, they often sound so sensuous and gratuitous that they seemingly buttress both the exotic looks and the religious strength of the characters. Such ethnic specifications appear like aestheticizing (food) items rather than deeper elements of identity and signal the author's inclination to deal with race as an aesthetic rather than political category (as much as he focuses on the "idealistic" aspects of terrorism). While Updike indulges in those descriptions to remind us that Ahmad is in love with himself, his Egyptian heritage and, *therefore*, his faith, his construction of the character through these particulars is overcharged and artificial, as if every single detail about skin color or every ethnic connotation were relevant to the boy's beliefs and had to be justified or reported. For example, Ahmad's "blackness" is depicted as "superior" to the rough and ignorant "African Americanness" of Tylenol, Joryleen's boyfriend and future pimp. Tylenol's mother picked his ridiculous name out of a commercial she heard on TV: Updike and Ahmad's voices, confused in the free indirect speech, give this piece of information clearly casting a derogatory light on the African American minority and implicitly boosting Ahmad's ethno-religious identity and distance from pop culture. The same undermining logic works for different shades of whiteness. Ahmad twists these shades as he likes: he despises his mother's skin but is intrigued by his imam's "waxy white" complexion that is "shared with

generations of heavily swathed Yemeni warriors" (*T* 13). There are purity and exoticism to this "waxy white" that Teresa's freckles lack and this is what attracts Ahmad's attention.

Mita Banerjee maintains that "*Terrorist* is a novel obsessed with, and not only curious about, skin color" (16). In identifying a sudden increase of the practices of racial profiling after 9/11, Banerjee observes how *Terrorist* and many narratives linked to the cultural climate of the tragic events racialize and denaturalize Arab Americans in order to question their "fit" in American society. Racial profiling implies that certain racial features highlight the predisposition in a person to commit a crime. Arguing that whiteness gained new currency and legitimation in cultural discourses after the attacks, Banerjee declares that biological skin color has become a tool for exclusion and denial of citizenship. However, while Banerjee might have a point in saying that Updike's fiction is reactionary in having Ahmad's gaze "profiling" everyone throughout the novel, astutely inverting ethno-historical roles, I also think that whiteness does not come out as strong and "muscular" as she thinks it does, since indeed Updike wants to be "fair." Ahmad is not the "racist" as long as the white implied author sides with him, otherwise the narrative would undermine itself.

First of all, we have identified Updike's fascination with Ahmad to the point that their two gazes coalesce in the free indirect speech and narrative structure. We see the world through Ahmad's eyes, the eyes of a young Arab American in the wake of 9/11 who mistrusts everyone and reasserts his own cultural tradition in total loneliness: "Ahmad feels his pride of isolation and willed identity to be threatened by the masses of ordinary, hard-pressed men and plain, practical women who are enrolled in Islam as a lazy matter of ethnic

identity" (*T* 177). As we have pointed out above talking about Mary Marshall Clark's street interviews and the elusiveness of the racial trope, Ahmad is a reversed testimony of the confusion and "reduction of complexity" that affect not only the average American, but also (in Updike's view) young Arab Americans. In Ahmad's mixed identity, his "Arabness" inevitably prevails over a decaying American context in which 9/11 has aggravated and re-polarized racial conflicts (at school, for example) but it has also left things untouched. He finds no similarities in the people around himself. When travelling to the suburbs of New Prospect, where immigrants of decades before have by now blended in, Ahmad thinks (through Updike's voice):

> [t]he younger Arab Americans, idle and watchful, have adopted the bulky running shoes, droopy oversized jeans, and hooded sweatshirts of black homeys. Ahmad, in his prim white shirt and his black jeans slim as two stovepipes, would not fit in here. To these co-religionists, Islam is less a faith...than a habit, a face of their condition as an underclass, alien in a nation that persists in thinking of itself as light-skinned, English-speaking, and Christian. (*T* 244)

Insisting on Ahmad's isolation, Updike wants to show that the boy's sense of superiority is the result of a historical situation as much as of an adolescent struggle for identity. Similarly, Updike points to the white, flattening Christian society Ahmad lives in, implicitly condemning its conformity and fragility through his character's behaviour.

Second of all, Updike's narrative imposes connections between skin color and beliefs so that fundamentalism is to ethnicity what atheism, or at best Christianity, is to whiteness.

While there are exceptions to this rule, overall the novel portrays mixed-race Americans as believers and victims of society (Ahmad, Joryleen) and white characters as materialist, overemotional and vain (Teresa, Jack Levy, Beth). Teresa abandoned her Catholic beliefs when she was young and she admires Ahmad for his staunch faith, failing to understand the danger her son is putting himself in. Introduced by a description of her "blue veins" that "wander through the white skin, Irish white skin" (*T* 84), Teresa tells her lover, Jack Levy, – who is concerned about Ahmad's misanthropy – that she has "never tried to undermine his faith. To someone without much of one, who dropped out of the Catholic package when she was sixteen, his faith seems rather beautiful" (*T* 85). In this way, Updike intertwines racial and religious discourses for the reader, who is led to associate the mother's skin color with her inability to be a good Christian. Teresa also comments on Ahmad's father and his ideas about women as servants, saying "[w]hat a pompous, chauvinistic horse's ass he was, really. But I was young and in love – in love mostly with him being, you know, exotic, third-world, put-upon, and my marrying him showing how liberal and liberated I was" (*T* 86).

Teresa pretends she is a liberal, open-minded individual, yet Updike portrays her ironically through juvenile and naive statements, where the combination "white complexion-lack of belief" is emphasized, and ethnicity, in spite of her husband's chauvinism, is branded once again as the fair, politically correct choice. Jack Levy responds to Teresa's confessions by remarking: "I know the feeling. I'm a Jew and my wife was a Lutheran...I shouldn't have said 'was.' She never changed, she just doesn't go to church" (*T* 86). Levy wants to add his own slice of liberalism to Teresa's by stating similar confessional differences between

himself and his wife. However, with Levy and Beth, Updike merely sets up other examples

of white materialists and "pagans" in the desolate landscape of New Prospect:

> He was a Jew. But not a proud Jew... Jack Levy took a stiff-necked pleasure in being
> one of Judaism's stiff-necked naysayers...Beth was a Lutheran, a hearty Christer
> denomination...But after thirty-six years together in northern New Jersey, the two of
> them with their different faiths and ethnicities have been ground down to a lackluster
> sameness. (*T* 23-25)

And further on:

> As Jack Levy sees it, America is paved solid with fat and tar...Even our vaunted
> freedom is nothing much to be proud of...it just makes it easier for terrorists to move
> about, renting airplanes and vans and setting up Web sites. Religious fanatics and
> computer geeks: the combination seems strange to his old-fashioned sense of the
> reason-versus-faith divide. Those creeps who flew the planes into the World Trade
> Center had good technical educations. The ringleader had a German degree in city
> planning: he should have redesigned New Prospect. (*T* 27)

This "lackluster sameness" and "reason-versus-faith divide" is what marks Jack and

Beth's tedious and disillusioned existence which, in contrast to Ahmad's, deploys in a

growing nihilism and in a sententious, mediocre pragmatism ("he should have redesigned

New Prospect"). Rather than compassion, as for Teresa, Updike relies on misery and

disenchantment to portray Jack and Beth, this latter cheated upon, obese and television-

addicted. Through these white, morally shallow representatives of America, it is clear

Ahmad's faith (and the "grandiosity" of 9/11 plan) represent a counterpoint of dramatic irony to such a waste land.

The exception to the rule whiteness-and-lack-of-belief in Updike's novel is Beth's sister Hermione, the assistant to the Secretary of Homeland Defence in Washington (secretly in love with him), who conflates her strong Lutheran ethos with the mission of post-9/11 homeland security, when the "nation remains on yellow" (*T* 43). When asked rhetorically by her boss "[w]hy do they hate us? What's to hate?" Hermione replies "loyally" that "'[Muslim terrorists] hate the light'...'Like bats. *The light shone in darkness*', she quotes, knowing that Pennsylvania piety is a way to [the Secretary's] heart, '*and the darkness comprehended it not*'" (*T* 48). When the Department of Defence ascertains the existence of a terrorist plot in New Prospect, the Secretary, an archetypal bureaucrat with superior career ambitions, is worried that he might not succeed in preventing it and thus he would earn nothing in terms of money and fame from the operation.

Hermione "is shocked" at his words and proclaims: "Mr. Secretary, no man can serve two masters. Mammon is one; it would be presumptuous for me to name the other" (*T* 261). Quoting the sacred scriptures, Hermione, with her "transparent skin" (*T* 45), reasserts the importance of "light" (i.e. whiteness) over "darkness," justice over evil, God over money (she embodies the reversal of Ahmad's fanaticism). Even the Secretary is described with stereotypical "white" American features (in the "light-skinned, English-speaking and Christian" nation mentioned above), "a large man, with a slab of muscle across his back that gives the tailors of his dark-blue suits extra trouble" (*T* 45), having "powerful, rueful

masseters" (*T* 257) and "surprisingly light-blue eyes" (*T* 261-62). While these two characters are merely sketched in the novel and appear only seldom, working behind the scenes for national security, they symbolize ingrained ideas of exceptionalism and territorialization that were consistently revamped in US public policies after 9/11.

In his presidential speeches between 2001 and 2003, G. W. Bush consistently used expressions such as "our country" and "our citizens" (and various other instances of the possessive "our") to stress the active role of the US in propagating freedom all over the world (as the operation "Enduring Freedom" demonstrates, being carried out in different countries). These seemingly defensive rhetorical and political strategies confirm an authoritarian and exclusivist idea of US exceptionalism, where the territorial defence becomes first of all propaganda in the form of a global defence of supposedly American values, e.g. freedom, democracy, capitalism. To these values, Updike's novel provocatively adds whiteness and Christianity through the figures of Hermione and the Secretary, depicting them as orthodox cogs in the political machine of the anti-terrorist cause. Their civic devotion contrasts with the shallowness of other white characters, but it still comes out as uncritical and even racist. Surprisingly, while Updike acknowledges the bona fides of both officers by presenting them in a pathetic and yet benign light, he makes them responsible for perpetuating an exclusionary culture based on religious and ethnic prejudices. Conveying Hermione and the Secretary's way of thinking about homeland security in airports after 9/11, Updike writes:

[t]he dozing giant of American racism...stirred anew as African-Americans and Hispanics, who (it was often complained) "can't even speak English properly,"

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acquired the authority to frisk, to question, to delay, to grant or deny admission and the permission to fly...To the well-paid professionals who travelled the airways and frequented the newly fortified government buildings, it appears that a dusky underclass has been given tyrannical power. (*T* 46)

As Banerjee argues, "[t]he level of national alert, in Updike's narrative, can thus be measured in racial terms" (20). However, contrarily to what she concludes, Updike is far from aligning himself with the position of those who think that a "dusky underclass" is a nuisance in the new national security policies; instead, he effectively captures and emphasizes the silent racism of those who think they are America's ruling class and culture because of their light skin and Christian belief. Robert Stone called *Terrorist* a "didactic" novel and yet appreciated it for the way it combines different views of America, uncovering its "moral exhaustion and reprobation" (Stone). If the attacks brought to light and exacerbated the racist undercurrents of US white society, they also forced ethnic minorities to reaffirm their autonomous role in such a complicated context. As I showed, Arab-American Ahmad is an example of such cultural reaction and resistance to the sleepy, ghostly oppressive atmosphere that Updike embeds in a dull post-9/11 New Jersey. Ahmad fails for the good of everybody by refusing to go through with his terroristic plan, but he does not yield to the surrounding culture; his faith remains untarnished up to the end and he stands out simultaneously as an uncorrupted hero and a citizen with criminal responsibilities.

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Chapter 9

Cosmopolitan Echoes of Displacement and Promise in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*

If Updike's novel thematizes the insidious racial contradictions that run through a small New Jersey town a few years after 9/11 and suggests that a terroristic threat still lurks within the folds of American society, Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* puts a slightly more optimistic emphasis on multiculturalism in the twenty-first-century US. Set in New York City in the years following the attacks, O'Neill's story, like Updike's, tackles issues of difference in a quite idealized way. Racialized subjects seem to occupy a territory that is severed from the "white" historical order of culture and business and they preserve a halo of the *bon sauvage* stereotypical status, an innocence that inevitably crashes against the wall of mainstream cynicism and indifference. Consequently, ethnic characters in the novel point to the resurgence of a "white" cultural supremacy after 9/11, yet they still represent a complex, vital alternative for interpersonal and cultural negotiations in a traumatized America.

In contrast to Updike, who polarizes opposing binary cultures in the 9/11 aftermath, O'Neill's in *Netherland* conceives the wounded city of New York as a regenerative palimpsest where Indian, Turk, Caribbean and Pakistani immigrants try to suture their own identity to the fabric of American society in the name of a new racialized Gatsbian dream (Wood, Kakutani). This novel charts the ways by which 9/11 and its historical and cultural effects persist in New York City, a place where stories of passion, civic involvement and communal solidarity function notwithstanding the fact that 9/11 is not anymore a central

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motif of the narrative. O'Neill paints a portrait of ethnicity that is naive but impure since it turns 9/11 into the umpteenth occasion to generate business. Therefore he chooses to have the ethnic character undergo a "narrative defeat" in a society made all the more uncertain after the terrorist attacks. Contrarily to Updike's Ahmad, who decides to immolate himself for a religious cause, O'Neill's co-protagonist, Trinidad-born Chuck Ramkissoon, a romantic Cricket lover and improvised entrepreneur transplanted in New York City, rises from rags to riches through obscure business dealings and questionable partnerships. He is a puffed up, "talky, street-smart" man (Garner 1) who sells sushi to the Chinese (a cover for something "fishy") and runs Chuck Cricket Inc., a company in a shabby place downtown with his lover Eliza. The US is for Chuck a world of dreams, social emancipation and economic welfare, where he thinks that even his big passion for cricket (noticeably a non-American sport) will find an opportunity for realization.

Hans van den Broek, the first person narrator of the novel, narrates his friendship with Chuck as a memoir for the reader. Hans is a Dutch banker who moved to New York from London with his British wife Rachel in 1998 to work as an equities analyst. After the 9/11 tragedy, they had to leave their apartment and relocate to a noisy Manhattan hotel where they grew more and more apart until Rachel finally decided to leave him and to go back to London with their son Jake – Hans thought, "I felt shame because it was me, not terror, she was fleeing" (*N* 30). When he writes the story, he is back with Rachel in London a few years later and receives the news that "Chuck's 'remains'" have been found in a canal (*N* 5), which is the occasion that triggers the flashback story. Hans' friendship with Chuck developed

when he found himself alone in New York. They met by chance and learned they both shared a passion for cricket, although Hans admits that he did not really fit in: "I was the only white man I saw on the cricket fields of New York" (*N* 10). This sport becomes a terrain of encounter among different cultures that Chuck wants to bring together, marrying passion to business. Hans even thinks: "I sometimes wondered why the respect of these men mattered so much to me" (*N* 173); and we infer that for Hans this cricket experience is an occasion to go back in his mind to his childhood in the Netherlands and to his beloved, recently passed-away mother who supported him during his matches.

Throughout the story, cricket functions as the central aggregating and "saving" metaphor in the novel, an "alien" sport that may bring together otherwise disconnected "aliens" in New York City. O'Neill is interested in merging the underworld of immigrants (a world that is similar to the "dusky underclass" captured by Updike) to that of Hans and the established white capital on the terrain of entertainment and aesthetic sensibility for a world made of rules, fair play and respect. This utopian desire that underlies the novel is deployed not with cynicism but with the genuine belief that sport can be a pragmatic school of thought toward an authentic multicultural society. Of course playing cricket in New York green areas is a challenge, as Hans remarks:

> the outfield is uneven and always overgrown, even when cut ... and whereas proper cricket, as some might call it, is played on a grass wicket, the pitch at Walker Park is made of clay, not turf ... [therefore the bounce] lacks variety and complexity. (Wickets consisting of earth and grass are [instead] rich with possibility...). There is

another problem. Large trees ... clutter the fringes of the Walker Park ... and this

brings randomness to the game. (*N* 7)

Noticeably, cricket cannot thrive naturally on the uneven territory of New York City but, in

spite of its physical configuration, Hans says it is still an "attractive venue" and not without

"charm" (*N* 9) and therefore it can still be molded to accommodate numerous players.

Furthermore, the importance of cricket is essential, as Chuck bestows on it the

ontological status of language, a language that demarcates what is, from what is not. At the

end of one of the first matches where Chuck and Hans met, the Trinidadian comments on the

normative power of "cricket":

"[w]e have an expression in the English language," he said, as silence began to

establish itself among the players. "The expression is 'not cricket.' When we

disapprove of something we say 'not cricket.' But of course 'disapproval' is the very

least of it. This is a tribute to the game we play and it's a tribute to us." (*N* 14)

From Chuck's personal accounts about his life in Trinindad, Hans learns that "[i]t was from

cricket commentators like John Arlott ... that he learned to mimic and finally perfect

"grammatical English," learned words like "injudicious" and "gorgeous" and "circumspect"

(151). In this sense, cricket provides Chuck with a linguistic survival kit that will allow him

to transition in the North American cultural context.

Kakutani observes how Chuck is a dreamer with a "quixotic vision of turning cricket

into a national sport in America, of bringing what he sees as its civilizing and globalizing

influences to the New World and building a state-of-the-art cricket field in New York"
("Post-9/11" 2). His outlandish proposition has the flavor of failure from the start and yet it configures a distinct mode of socializing based on a positive antagonism. In her review of 9/11 novels, Anker fails to recognize that Chuck expresses the conditions under which to form a provocative model of multicultural society and that his death at the beginning condenses the play of obscure forces that counteract vital spirits of social renovation. Anker insists that "[c]leansed of its imperial legacies, cricket is instead heralded to vindicate O'Neill's vision of cosmopolitanism" and it is ultimately romanticized in the novel (468). However, while the unsophisticated desire of Chuck may be a romantic re-enactment of democracy through sport, it is not merely functional to serve the author's vision and instead speaks aesthetically of regenerative, collective desires in times of civic trauma. All the references that O'Neill makes to the value of cricket – as when, for example, he has Hans "wondering whether cricket represents "men imagining an environment of justice" (121) or a "crash course in democracy" (211), or even when the Trinidadian Chuck describes the game as a "lesson in civility" (15) – do not certainly sanitize race, nor "stifle[s] indeterminacy," (Anker 469), but rather invoke a new paradigm of substantial political possibilities based on negotiation and mediation of a "referee" (Chuck is one – an umpire, which even dismantles the colonial resonances in the name "empire" that cricket may have).

Truly, Hans and Chuck could not be more at odds. While Hans is a banker, known for his rationalistic mindset and the "clunking lexical precision" (*N* 39) of his English, Chuck is a combination of "Jay Gatsby and one of Philip Roth's long-winded, comic cranks"

(Kakutani 1). His exotic and creative ethno-cultural baggage informs his personality and actions and sets him apart from many other immigrants who are more interested in the pure money-making enterprise. Chuck's biggest dream is to revitalize New York's cricketing scene by building a cricket stadium in Manhattan Pier 40, an abandoned shipping terminal where, right after 9/11, the Humane Society of New York had opened an animal recovery centre. This rescue project gave Chuck the idea for his enterprise:

> "[a]fter the attacks," Chuck said, "this was where the Humane Society of New York started up an emergency triage, practically from day one." We quickened away. "My God, what a scene. Cats, dogs, guinea pigs, rabbits, pigs, lizards, you name it, they were all here. Cockatoos. Monkeys. I saw a lemur with a corneal inflammation." Chuck volunteered his services and was put to work "rehoming" the pets. "It was a wonderful experience," Chuck said. "I made friends with people from Idaho, Wisconsin, New Jersey, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ireland, Portugal, South Africa. People from out of state came for a couple of days and ended up spending weeks here. Tourists that were vets, even regular tourists, gave up their holidays to help out. And we weren't just looking after the animals. Right over there, you had a feeding area for the rescue personnel, and food and clothing: men would work for days without stopping and their boots and coats would be destroyed." Chuck said simply, "I think for many of us it was one of the happiest times of our life. (*N* 77)

Describing how people from different countries did not just take care of the animals but naturally led an altruistic life as a community for a few months after 9/11, Chuck hopes

that this would continue to happen around the centripetal and attractive game of cricket. While the whole animal recovery center story conceals signs of Chuck's vulnerability and simple-mindedness, it also constitutes another moving counternarrative of how New York City reacted to trauma and welcomed people not only from the States but from different countries, even tourists, to heal the wounded city at its multiple levels – animal, psychical, physical, and human. Refusing the role of "victim," Chuck signals that he does not want to be pigeonholed, nor domesticated or weakened by the catastrophe, and instead demonstrates an uncommon will to reconstruct the shattered remains of his beloved hosting city. Consequently, cricket throughout the novel becomes not only a business venture but a metaphor for a more egalitarian and cooperative society in times of national bereavement. Indeed, after Chuck has finished relating his story, Hans replies, "I believed him. The catastrophe had instilled in many — though not in me — a state of elation. From the beginning, for example, I'd suspected that, beneath all the tears and the misery, Rachel's leaving had basically been a function of euphoria" (*N* 77-78).

Of course, the stadium project Chuck wants to pursue is absurd but fits into Chuck's double nature: to think well, but too big. His frenzied, overconfident mind pretends that the cricket project will be a teleological, exhaustive one for America. As he tells Hans:

> [t]his isn't just a sports club. It's bigger than that. My own feeling - and listen to me on this before you say anything, Hans, this is something I've been thinking about a lot – my own feeling is that the US is not complete, the US has not fulfilled its destiny, it's not fully civilised, until it has embraced the game of cricket. (*N* 210)

A self-made man, Chuck knows what suffering means and wishes to create a true cosmopolitan community in the heart of the most cosmopolitan American city. He is the archetype of the romantic, candid dreamer who nevertheless is ready to take advantage of every person and occasion to get something out of them and advance socially. Through Trinidadian Chuck, O'Neill reactualizes the character of Gatsby and presents ethnicity as one of the shady yet propulsive economic forces coming out of post-9/11 New York.

Clearly, Chuck's "impure" idealism differs from the religious fervor of Updike's Ahmad: if both want their "dream" to come true, Ahmad is uncompromising while Chuck has no qualms about tangling with surly businessmen and exploiting his own friends. His contradictions make him a figure with whom we are invited to engage critically but never align completely. Indeed, he asks the unaware Hans, who is preparing for his American driving test, to drive him around to many places where he exacts bribes and meets potential investors in his activities. When Chuck tells him of his illegal bets and that offering a door-to-door service made people feel "special," Hans realizes:

> I understood, now, the point of my driving lessons. It gave Chuck a measure of cover, maybe even prestige, to have a respectable-looking white man chauffeuring him while he ran around collecting bets all over Brooklyn. Apparently it had not bothered him that he was putting me at risk of arrest and imprisonment. (*N* 171)

Yet his friendship with the Trinidadian is solid: it reflects the cosmopolitanism and promise that one can dream of even in a New York where the terrorist attacks have brought about disillusion and meaninglessness. The cricket pitch that Chuck and Hans begin to

maintain and that shines in the dark Manhattan, with the grass striped to perfection into "dark green and pale green rings" (*N* 147), looks like a new beginning for the city and for the US – a dream that Hans inwardly mocks and outwardly nourishes as an escapist device for himself and his "distractedness" after the terrorist attacks (*N* 89). This shimmering field reminds us of the *Lichtung* that we have discussed in Foer's chapter as an example of a promising "glade" in the midst of the obscurities of history. Just like in Foer's novel Ground Zero and the cemeterial zone become ideal places where different human beings with different personal stories come together only to find out that they are connected after all and that mutual care and support may be the key to their survival, in *N* the cricket pitch is the place that illuminates Hans' and Chuck's diversity, making it one.

As opposed to Updike, O'Neill avoids representing the anxieties and revanchism of mainstream white America after 9/11; instead, he makes Hans, a white émigré from Europe, the interpreter of this "nether-land," with its dim, oneiric atmosphere, and Chuck the potential factor of an effervescent but morally uncertain life. Both characters act as outsiders in a foreign territory where everyone and everything has come to a standstill after the shock of 9/11 and where Chuck is the only one who really embodies the "state of elation" and "euphoria" Hans mentions, setting everything and everyone in motion back again. In contrast to Chuck's zealousness stands the urban and human landscape. Hans relates that he and his friend used to drive to their pitch area at Manhattan Pier 40 and see the majestic immobility of Ground Zero:

> [n]ow we were passing the great downtown vacancy, lit up like a stadium by the faint glow of construction floodlights, and the doomed Deutsche Bank Building on Liberty Street, which, with its mournful, poetical drape of black netting, was the object on which the eye helplessly rested. (*N* 78)

This benumbed atmosphere reminds us of DeLillo's poetic pages about a discolored humanity that got frozen into postures and attitudes, like Keith's poker cards and the uncanny performance of Janiak, the falling man. Similarly in *N*, the effects of 9/11 break familiar structures apart and Hans finds himself going through divorce from Rachel: "[h]er speech arrived at its terminus: we had lost the ability to speak to each other. The attack on New York had removed any doubt about this." (*N* 29) Realizing that she was fleeing him and "not terror" (*N* 30), Hans remembers that they were having a lot of sex but "miserably." "Life had become disembodied. My family, the spine of my days, had crumbled. I was lost in invertebrate time" (*N* 30).

This post-traumatic atemporality is the background onto which minor characters move. In spite of their national origin (Pakistani, Chinese, Indian, Jamaican and so on), people do not seem to belong anywhere but to the "flat," vacant US. They either thrive uprooted in the web of connections of a petty business underworld – Chuck's Jewish associate Abelsky, and other Russian and Chinese hustlers; or they blend in, working at Wall Street like Hans; or they "withdraw" from the disaster of 9/11 into the secluded hotel where Hans also takes refuge. Among them, a white lunatic wearing an angel costume, Taspinar stands out. He is an allegorical figure of trespass, half way between innocence and

unconscious guilt. When his last landlord asked him to leave his apartment, Taspinar commented: "I think he believed I might be a terrorist ... In a sense I can understand him. An angel is a messenger of God. In Christianity, Judaism, Islam, angels are always frightening – always soldiers, killers, punishers" (*N* 35). Taspinar reappears toward the end of the book, where the narrative implies that he commits suicide, but elides any graphic scene. This bizarre angelic figure reminds the reader of the 9/11 "jumpers" from the Twin Towers and suggest that, while they will remain forever in our memory, they will also become tormented, elusive and beautiful creatures that we are encouraged to pity and admire at the same time. Other minor characters and long-term residents at the hotel look like "cheap fish" hesitating in "weed" (*N* 33); or they play, watch and dream cricket like Chuck, coming from post-colonial countries such as Pakistan, Jamaica, South-Africa. This is not Updike's dichotomic America, but a whole multi-ethnic humanity living in a limbo, waiting for something to happen.

This post-9/11 world has either crushed an already evanescent humanity, or exacerbated social contrasts. The quarrels between Hans and Rachel over the recent events and the US reaction to them testify to the political antagonistic climate that ensued from the events. While back in London slightly after 9/11, Rachel tells Hans that she has marched in an antiwar rally a few days before and that she had

> decided not to return to the United States, at least not before the end of the Bush administration or any successor administration similarly intent on a military and economic domination of the world. It was no longer a question of physical security ...

it was a question of not exposing Jake to an upbringing in an "ideologically diseased" country, as she put it, a "mentally ill, sick, unreal" country whose masses and leaders suffered from extraordinary and self-righteous delusions about the United States, the world (*N* 95-6)

While Hans would like to keep things in "perspective" about their relationship, Rachel is more concerned with Jake: "[y]ou want Jake to grow up with an American perspective? ... You want him to not be able to point to Britain on a map? You want him to believe that Saddam Hussein sent those planes into the towers?" (*N* 96). Hans is not politically opinionated and Rachel blames him for his "conservative" and "emotive" statements (*N* 97). Rachel clearly represents the European intellectual "elite" that we have examined in the second chapter, an elite whose engagement with the events of 9/11 was passionately leftist and critical of any of Bush's decisions. Hans, on the other hand, represents the unengaged character, divided between Europe and the US, between the critical awareness that what Rachel says may even be true and the emotive attachment to a world he feels he is beginning to embrace.

Moreover, when Hans tries to repair his relationship with Rachel and is back in London at a dinner with friends, he suddenly finds himself out of place. He quarrels with those who want to minimize 9/11, claiming that it was "[n]ot such a big deal...when you think of everything that's happened since" (*N* 181). While he acknowledges that the Iraqi war and the Administration's deeds that followed were horrible, Hans still wants to grant the catastrophe independent perspective and weight, refusing to be considered a witness/victim

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only because he was there when 9/11 occurred and remarking that "it was a big deal" for those who lost their loved ones. When Rachel points out to these skeptical friends that Hans was actually in New York City when 9/11 happened, Hans comments:

> [o]ut of the best intentions and acting as my loyal wife and Englisher, she wants to accord me a privileged standing – that of survivor and eyewitness. I'd feel dishonest to accept it. I've heard it said that the indiscriminate nature of the attack transformed all of us on that island into victims of attempted murder, but I'm not at all sure that geographic proximity to the catastrophe confers this status on me or anybody else. (*N* 182)

Hans correctly positions himself in the economy of the catastrophe as one of the many vicarious witnesses, who however does not feel entitled to critique or minimize the events because of his "distance" from the place where they occurred. Hans refuses to "flaunt" the fact that he was actually in New York on 9/11 in the same way as his pedantic English friends boast their intellectualist, detached approach to the whole post-9/11 history. As a true cosmopolite, Hans refuses to be entrapped into ridiculous symmetries whereby cultural or ethical judgement may depend on an actual belonging. Indeed, as we have previously argued, while a truly ethical narrative of the events may only arise from New York voices, the alignment it produces concerns and affects whoever the "ethical listener" is. As Hans had previously commented,

> [f]or those under the age of forty-five it seemed that the world events had finally contrived a meaningful test of their capacity for conscientious political thought. Many

of my acquaintances, I realized had passed the last decade or two in a state of intellectual and psychic yearning for such a moment – or, if they hadn't, were able to quickly assemble an expert arguer's arsenal of thrusts and statistics ... I, however, was almost completely caught out. (*N* 99)

These overpoliticized reactions seem to spring from the circle of white acquaintances Hans belongs to, regardless of whether they are rooted in the US or in England. However, while in *N* whiteness implicitly remains the expression of the dominant part of American culture, it is overall under-conceptualized or affected by contradictions. In particular, the white American establishment seems blind to the possibilities for a globalized politics of interdependence that they could pursue from their leading position. It is Chuck who brings Hans' attention to these issues with his naive manners and speech, metaphorizing the current situation into the generalized resistance to cricket. He conflates American whiteness with the current short-sighted and apathetic general trend of the country, whose impulses are misdirected towards war, as he tries to explain to Hans:

Americans cannot really see the world. *They* think they can, but *they* can't... Look at the problems *we're* having. It's a mess, and it's going to get worse. I say, *we want* to have something in common with Hindus and Muslims? Chuck Ramkissoon is going to make it happen. With the New York Cricket Club, *we* could start a whole new chapter in U.S. history. Why not? ...I am going to open *your* eyes. (*emphasis mine*, *N* 211)

In Chuck's interesting slippage between "they" and "we" lies his promising contradiction: as a naturalized citizen and racially-connoted individual, he simultaneously feels at home and alien in New York; and if he ascribes the crisis to the vague political-economic establishment he is living in, he also believes that he can do better for the United States from his insider-outsider's position. Indeed, he is ready to exploit the very establishment he critiques to make his dream come true. Ingenuously, Chuck thinks that the system is limitless and that he could find in it a possible fertile ground where his cosmopolitan dream can blossom. But as the narrative implies by presenting right away Chuck's death, unfathomable forces above him can and will overturn any alternative, ethnically-connoted vision.

As O'Neill tells Katie Bacon in an interview for *The Atlantic*, the character who sparked *Netherland* was Chuck, as he wanted to write a novel about the business world before 9/11 happened. But after the attacks, he felt he needed Hans and his (autobiographical) childhood in the Netherlands as a "foil" to narrate the whole story. O'Neill interestingly calls Hans an "*international*" and "*post*-national narrator," whose roots and past are elsewhere in the Netherlands and whose future, it seems, may happen anywhere. Through the character of Hans, post-9/11 whiteness is given a more primitive connotation and becomes a layered, more complex feature of the narrative, as O'Neill further explains in the Bacon interview:

> [t]o have a Dutch narrator in the context of an American novel is almost to have the original American narrator, because of course the Dutch were the first people here in New York. And there is reference made, from time to time in the book, to New

Netherland, which is old New York. So Hans is the most recent iteration of the original American presence in this part of the world. (2)

In other words, Hans whiteness does not become synonymous in the novel only with the repressive political machine of the Bush Administration, or with a specific nationality, but with one of the many constituents of a multicultural society. In O'Neill's view, the white, Dutch narrator is part of a world that is now more than ever composite, "non-original" and authentically multiracial. The dream of cosmopolitanism thus comes full circle, including both the outsiders Chuck and Hans beyond their national origin and skin color. While the cricket dream forged by foreigners in the United States is crushed by invisible powers (the unresolved death of Chuck) and remains utopian, the cosmopolitanism suggested by such cooperative effort is real, as it is Chuck and Hans' unique interaction in America – a friendship not based on business, but precisely on a post-racial, post-national common vision and passion.

Certainly, Hans in the novel runs the risk of remaining a "voice" or a "framework" for Chuck's indomitable spirit. Although O'Neill's writing is, as Wood argues, "attentive, rich prose about New York in crisis that, refreshingly, is not also prose in crisis: it's not overwrought or solipsistic or puerile or sentimental, or otherwise straining to be noticed" (2), Hans' literary texture is inconspicuous, perhaps too lyrical and evanescent for his banker character to be believable. When he hears Chuck's story about 9/11 and the animals at the Humane Society, he points out that "[t]he catastrophe had instilled in many – though not in me – a state of elation" (*N* 77), revealing his detachment from a life that "had become

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disembodied" (*N* 30) and that was preventing any form of dialogue between him and his wife. However, in his own way, Hans undergoes a change in New York that becomes clear when he is "deterritorrialized" in London, back together with Rachel. There, Hans feels more American than ever. Hearing Chuck's story for the first time when they are notified of his death, Rachel tells Hans that he only wanted to play with Chuck and "never really wanted to know him" or "take him seriously." And she adds: "Same thing with America" (*N* 166). But Hans, who always seems subjugated by his wife, contradicts her and instead reveals how he partook of Chuck's post-9/11 "elation" by becoming more and more a cosmopolitan American and a different type of cricket player:

> I'd hit the ball in the air like an American cricketer; and I'd done so without injury to my sense of myself. On the contrary, I felt great. And Chuck had seen it happen and, as much as he could have, had prompted it...I began to dream in all seriousness of a stadium...this impossible grass field in America...I am at last naturalized. (*N* 176)

In this sense, though, the only significant white character who provides a symmetrical counterpart to Chuck is Hans. While Hans and Chuck are diametrically opposed characters, they find a concrete *and* utopian unity in the sport they play, in the country where – and in the time when – they play it. O'Neill declared that this was his "first novel as an American novelist" in a time of "fantastic confusion and anxiety that, amazingly, was replaced by confusion and anxiety about what the United States was doing" (Bacon 1). Bringing to the attention of the reader marginal urban cultures that rarely find a voice in mainstream American literature and alluding to a global or transnational idea of "America" that

flourished in the aftermath, O'Neill transforms 9/11 into an atypical occasion for business but also for dialogue and cultural renovation. Unfortunately, the ethnic character Chuck fails miserably in his pursuit of happiness (like Updike's Ahmad). Therefore, it is the white voice that tells his story, as though multicultural discourses after the terrorist attacks of 2001 were not yet autonomous enough to convey a fully realized cosmopolitanism. However, in spite of the narrative and existential defeats that both Ahmad and Chuck endure in their historical frame, it seems that the white gazes that witness and tell their struggles show little cynicism and more sentiment than one would expect in a post-9/11 scenario. If ethnicity is still synonymous with exclusion from established social structures, it is also a crucial cultural zone that both Updike and O'Neill endow with dynamism and hope.

N is certainly a story of naiveté and exclusion but at the same time it imagines various occasions for a fecund exploration of conflicting values, ethnicities and identities. On the one hand, racialized individuals are depicted in an ambivalent light and are in the end doomed because of their blind and staunch faith uncritically pinned on the American dream. Also, they are victim not only of their stubborn intransigence but of even larger systemic forces beyond their control that O'Neill does not closely fathom. On the other hand, the provisional friendship between Chuck and Hans and the dream of cricket as a resource for political imagination represents, with all its limitations, a viable alternative to the reactionary and patronizing forces that invisibly control and crush the desires for a genuine multicultural society arising from the debris of 9/11. In this sense, without making the terrorist attacks

central in the novel, *N* represents them as a historical circumstance that New York City, with

all its cultural fertility and ethical promise, may patiently overcome.

Conclusions

This study has attempted to make the point that 9/11 novels should be studied through a binary framework constructed around the notions of trauma and place. The stories of loss and survival in New York City form a specific cluster and differ from any other novel where 9/11 is not the generative centre but only a tangential or suffused motif in the narrative. In the economy of the aftermath, New York novelists have developed an ethical approach to the catastrophe, transforming the brutality and estrangement that disheartened the citizens after the attacks into an effectual motivation to form a community bound by memory and solidarity. Focusing on the psychical ruptures of the anxious self and on her urgent desire to open up to similar stories of imaginary survivors, Lynne Sharon Schwarz, Don DeLillo and Jonathan Safran Foer craft powerful, unresolved narratives of the complex survival dynamics in times of national trauma. Permanently "inhabiting" the wound, New York novelists transformed 9/11 and the *Lichtung* of Ground Zero into a non-ideological and ethical territory for meditation, mourning and historical memory. Their fully constructed narratives of grief, as opposed to decontextualized televised war images or reports, are able to convey a context, a world and therefore a reason for our empathy with victims. In arguing that New York City is the place where 9/11 finds its definition as a historical trauma, I have tried to demonstrate that stories stemming from that particular site bear ethical significance and value. For the writers, such ethical significance lies in the act of witnessing a civic catastrophe and producing a narrative out of it, acknowledging trauma as unspeakable but attempting to crystallize and offer it to the reader for interpretive engagement. For the

readers, traumatic fiction constitutes an ethical moment to reflect on the way they conceptualize, experience, and work through suffering, asking questions such as: are we responsible at all in the perpetuation of historical trauma? What does suffering teach us? Whose trauma is also mine? What does sharing the victims' experience teach me about interpersonal relationships? And what does it unveil about trauma? The contact with psychological and social wounds through the literary text makes readers alert and sensitive to modes of suffering, civic involvement, rhetorical manipulation and historical commonalities among traumatized individuals.

In parallel to the ethical novels, in this study I have identified a category of "cultural" fiction that tackles the events of 9/11 at a distance, both spatially and textually. In essence, these writers set their stories in peripheral worlds with respect to New York City and feature the repercussions of the terrorist attacks as interstitial and not structural to social life. In these settings, 9/11 brings neither shock, nor promise of regeneration, except for Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, a story in which post-9/11 New York becomes the palimpsest where different ethnic subjects can re-negotiate creatively their identities. Lorrie Moore's *A Gate at the Stairs* and John Updike's *Terrorist* construe 9/11 as a catalyst that uncovers an ever-present undercurrent of racism in the fabric of American society, pointing to the apathetic lives of an amnesiac middle class that cannot move beyond the confines of its small world. These novels are ultimately pervaded by a mode of tragic irony, a mode that is unthinkable for the ethical novels and that here is used to convey the inanity and hubris of a politically uneducated and naïve America – one that has difficulties to point out Afghanistan on a map, or to transcend

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dualistic schemes of value that embody precisely Bush's Manichaeism. Of course literary strategies and writers' attitudes toward their stories may be different. Whereas Moore is sarcastic about her priggish bourgeoisie, Updike is more indulgent with his old "white trash" characters and gives them the benefit of the doubt, suggesting that, in spite of the Manichaean cultural superstructure they are imbued with, they might be in good faith and simply culturally unequipped to decipher ethnicity.

Both groups of novels, however, distance themselves from the rhetoric of media and politics I have initially presented in this study, either by mocking it (cultural novels) or by questioning and/or removing it altogether (ethical novels). If an author like O'Neill pokes fun at his taciturn banker in *Netherland* for not being politically involved and passionate about the anti-republican ethos of his wife, whose political traits are also exaggerated, Schwarz fashions a female protagonist who distrusts official politics and media opinion manipulation, and resorts instead to an alternative language of feelings to illuminate the multiple intricate folds of post-9/11 life. In this respect, my research has tried to prove what I deem a central point in the discourses of 9/11: while media, politics and intellectuals packaged a ready-made *fictional* scheme out of *factual* events by rehearsing the infinite trope of US vs. Them (thus failing to create forms of knowledge in a persuasive, explanatory narrative), the genre of the novel employed *fictional* tools to fashion *true* narratives of real experiences of suffering and even of critical and cultural engagement with the self-righteousness and lethargy of a nation adrift in the wake of the attacks. I then conclude my work by borrowing Dina Georgis' statements of faith in the uncontainable power of fiction, according to which "art and

narrative are resources for political imagination and for political recovery: they link us to unthought spaces, to spaces that thought refuses ... The stories we construct are the provisions we need to go on living" (166).

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