ABSTRACT

REPRESENTING THE TRAUMA OF 9/11 IN U.S. FICTION:
JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER, DON DELILLO AND JESS WALTER

by Bryan M. Santin

This thesis explores the relationship between literary narratives and a more popular mythological American narrative that constructs the 9/11 attacks as a base for cultural regeneration, heroism, or redemption. Popular 9/11 narratives tend to offer a mythic foundation for militant belligerency masked as patriotic heroism and a deeply embedded notion of “regeneration through violence” outlined by Richard Slotkin. I contrast these popular narratives with novels by Jonathan Safran Foer (Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close), Don DeLillo (Falling Man) and Jess Walter (The Zero) that stress the complexity of trauma’s aftermath. The political and ethical value of these literary representations of trauma present nuanced characterological templates for acting-out and working through, which advocate critical self-recognition of post-9/11 American ideology and an emergence from political solipsism.
REPRESENTING THE TRAUMA OF 9/11 IN U.S. FICTION:
JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER, DON DELILLO AND JESS WALTER

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Bryan and Michele
Introduction: 9/11 as Traumatic (Re)Introduction to the Real

The attack on the World Trade Center was the most watched event in human history.

David Friend, Watching the World Change

I stood there, a person in a crowd, was I watching the images, or was something more complicated happening?

Jonathan Safran Foer, Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close

As we approach the decennial anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, many critics have pointed out how these events shattered commonplace assumptions about “American reality”: an increased sense of security and safety since the end of the Cold War, trust in the “efficiency and organization of modern society” and, ultimately, the notion that we share a common frame of reference with the rest of the world, that our values and modes of meaning are “likewise accepted and applied by other people” (Neal 180-82). On September 12, 2001, the American conservative columnist George Will claimed that the United States’ “holiday from history” had ended (quoted in Welcome Žižek 35). Roughly one year after the terrorist attacks, Slavoj Žižek compared 9/11 to a scene in the film the Matrix when Morpheus introduces the hero (Keanu Reeves) to the wasteland of reality with the sarcastic greeting, “Welcome to the desert of the real.” (Welcome 15). The terrorist attacks on 9/11 even recalibrated President George W. Bush’s conception of reality vis-à-vis foreign policy. In a 2000 Presidential debate at Wake Forest University, Bush claimed: “I am worried about over-committing our military around the world. I want to be judicious in its use. I don’t think nation-building missions are worthwhile” (quoted in Morgan 1). But by June 2002, Bush would begin arguing for the necessity of “preemptive” war, the core of what is now commonly referred to as “The Bush Doctrine,” in a graduation speech at West Point: “our security will require all Americans to be forward-thinking and resolute, to be ready for preemptive action when necessary…” (Bush 64). The first line of Don DeLillo’s novel Falling Man also attempts to describe this suddenly new perspective on reality: “It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night” (3). The intense focus on the ostensibly reality-altering power of 9/11 throws into sharp relief one of the paradoxes of that day: it was a glut of photographic and televisual representations that somehow (re)introduced the United States to the “real.” But how can representations of a traumatic event cause such a (re)introduction?

According to Žižek, 9/11 reacquainted the United States with “the desert of the Real” precisely by de-realizing other allegedly accurate cultural representations of reality. As viewers around the world watched the attacks transpire, Žižek claims that “it became possible to experience the falsity of ‘reality TV’: even if these shows are ‘for real,’ people still act in them—they simply play themselves” (Welcome 12). Describing the entire pre-9/11 world as “the ultimate American paranoidic fantasy,” Žižek points out how this de-realization is similar to the 1998 film The Truman Show where the main character (Jim Carry) “suddenly starts to suspect that the world he is living in is a fake, a spectacle staged to convince him that he is living in a real world…” (Welcome 12-13). In his 2002 The Spirit of Terrorism, Jean Baudrillard makes a move theoretically similar to Žižek’s. Since 9/11 “radicalized the relation of the image to reality,” Baudrillard writes that 9/11 disturbed the “uninterrupted profusion of banal images,” thereby dislocating those supposedly accurate cultural representations of reality like “reality TV” (27). But the terrorist attacks on 9/11 did not simply expose the hollowness of kitsch American television; Baudrillard asserts that the attacks actually caused “reality to outstrip fiction” since
reality “absorbed fiction’s energy, and itself [became] fiction” (28). In other words, “reality is a principle, and it is this principle that is lost” (Baudrillard 28). For Baudrillard, the problem is not that images of 9/11 are merely fictions that fail to expose reality, but that “reality and fiction are inextricable, that the fascination with the attack is primarily a fascination with the image…” (28-29). Žižek, also noting the imbrication of reality and fiction, claims that the standard reading of 9/11 should be reversed. Instead of seeing the terrorist attacks as an “intrusion of the Real which shattered our illusory Sphere,” Žižek maintains that “the image entered and shattered our reality (i.e., the symbolic coordinates which determine what we experience as reality)” (Welcome 16). According to this reading of 9/11, our experience of reality was not discounted by a collision with another equally valid reality, but by an impossible encounter with the seemingly fantastic or surreal—as if our reality suddenly merged with the pseudo-(un)reality of a Hollywood film. This reading helps explain the commonplace sense that “9/11 was like a movie”—an observation made repeatedly by pundits, eyewitnesses, and cultural critics. As Susan Sontag points out, this simile “seems to have displaced the way survivors of a catastrophe used to express the short-term unassimilability of what they had gone through: “It felt like a dream”” (22).

Since the attacks on 9/11 were meant to be not only deadly but symbolic, the terrorists sought to appropriate mass media as the primary disseminator of symbolic consciousness. As Don DeLillo writes in his December 2001 Harper’s article “In the Ruins of the Future,” representations of American culture once had the power “to penetrate every wall, home, life and mind” (33). The terrorist’s symbolic appropriation of spectacle recalls a scene in Shakespeare’s Tempest. The island native Caliban tells his colonizer Prospero: “You taught me language; and my profit on’t / Is, I know how to curse” (1.2.437-38). Like Caliban, the terrorists weaponized the hegemonic culture’s own technology against itself. The attacks on 9/11 add another dimension to Margaret Thatcher’s aphoristic assertion that media is “the oxygen of terrorism” (Nacos 27). Baudrillard emphasizes this deeper dimension when he explains how the media become inadvertently complicit in the terrorists’ goals, for the recirculation of images were a weapon in the hands of the Caliban-like terrorists, who understood that representations of 9/11 would not simply present the event again (literally, re-present it), but would take “it hostage” and convert it into a massive spectacle of American helplessness (27). Hence, the impulse to repeatedly view the attacks became a complex fascination with how mediation worked on us—i.e., how we did not consume the images but rather were consumed by them, which challenged our ability to understand and react to mediation itself. In an interview only months after 9/11, Jacques Derrida made a similar observation about how our fascination with the hyper-mediated nature of the event conditioned certain ways of feeling: “…this ‘feeling’ is actually less spontaneous than it appears: it is to a large extent conditioned, constituted, if not actually constructed, circulated at any rate through the media by means of a prodigious techno-socio-political machine” (Borradori 86). In the early 1950s, Martin Heidegger asked an analogous question about the overarching purpose behind “real-time” representations in Introduction to Metaphysics:

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1 It is important to note that Žižek tends to convert historical trauma into structural trauma, a distinction which I flesh out in the next chapter. For instance, Žižek writes that “All the different attempts to attach [the ’perverse’ phenomena of concentration camps] to a concrete image...what are they if not so many attempts to elude the fact that we are dealing here with the ‘real’ of civilization which returns as the same traumatic kernel in all social systems?” (Sublime Object 51). Žižek’s blurring of two kinds of trauma—historical (concentration camps) and structural (an encounter with the Lacanian Real)—can obfuscate analytical specificity (LaCapra Writing History 84).
When the farthest corner of the globe has been conquered technologically and can be
exploited economically; when any incident you like, in any place you like, at any time
you like, becomes accessible as fast as you like; when you can simultaneously
“experience” an assassination attempt against a king in France and a symphony concert in
Tokyo, when time is nothing but speed, instantaneity, and simultaneity…there still looms
like a specter over all this uproar the question: what for?—where to?—and what then?

Many people who watched television on 9/11 also struggled to answer Heidegger’s question
concerning the impetus to relentlessly circulate real-time images. Nikki Stern, who holds a
master’s degree in political science, wondered in an interview: “What’s the truth you’re trying to
show when you keep trotting out the same images?...[It] wasn’t a news story that day. [They
were run] to make a point. What [media outlets] really used it for, in my view, is shock value”
(Friend 73). Jürgen Habermas also takes up this question in an interview with Giovanna
Borradori. Borradori summarizes Habermas’ critique of the bombardment of “real-time”
representations: “the speed involved in mass communication works in the interest of those who
select and distribute the information rather than those who receive it” (57). For Habermas and
Derrida, repeatedly viewing representations of 9/11 constructs affective frameworks that
condition specific political modes of response.

In Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag reminds readers that images are not
rhetorically neutral pixilated pieces of unadulterated reality; photographs “of an atrocity may
give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused
awareness…that terrible things happen” (Sontag 13). She explains how graphic images can be
appropriated by political authorities to generate affective frameworks in order to provoke public
anger and justify retributive violence. Sontag uses a story from the 1990s Balkans wars to
validate her claim that “all photographs wait to be explained or falsified by their captions” (10).
While Serbians and Croatians fought each other, identical photographs of children killed in a
village circulated through Serbian and Croatian camps with different captions for propaganda
purposes. Sontag concludes: “Alter the caption, and the children’s deaths could be used and
reused” (Sontag 10). Sontag illustrates how representations of violence are not innocuous; the
calculated combination of images and captions manufactures structures of acceptable public
feeling. In George W. Bush’s address to a joint session of congress on September 20th, 2001, he
uses representations of 9/11 to justify his “War on Terror.” In the speech’s first paragraph, Bush
utilizes imagistic language in order to figuratively paint a picture of 9/11: “We’ve seen the
unfurling of flags, the lighting of candles, the giving of blood, the saying of prayers” (“Address
to Joint Session”). Bush’s deft rhetorical technique verifies Sontag’s claim that, in “an era of
information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a
compact form for memorizing it” (22). After establishing a common affective framework, Bush
declares that what the United States saw on 9/11 has “awakened [us] to danger and called [us] to
defend freedom. Our grief has turned to anger, and anger to resolution” (“Address to Joint
Session”). A fundamental tension emerges here between the factual truth-value of images and the
interpretation of those images by different individuals within a culture, which is an inherently
ideological activity.

Michael Freeden, founder of the Journal of Political Ideologies, maintains that “political
facts never speak for themselves. [Ideologies] provide competing interpretations of what the
facts might mean. Every interpretation…is one such instance of imposing a pattern—some form
of structure or organization—on how we read (and misread) political facts…” (3). At first
glance, though, it may seem unnecessary to analyze 9/11 through the lens of ideology. As perhaps the most watched event in history, myriad pictures and videos exist documenting that day’s destruction. David Friend writes that 9/11 “was arguably unique as a historical moment. It was not the typical Rashomon-like mist of evidence, misperception, legend, and propaganda that coalesces into an accepted narrative or an out-and-out myth” (242-43). 9/11 even appears to fulfill the epistemological criteria outlined by Susan Sontag, who claims that “[in] the modern way of knowing…there have to be images for something to become ‘real’” (quoted in Friend 243). However, in the several years following 9/11, a variety of conspiracy theories began to surface. Driven largely by the 2005 internet-based film Loose Change, these theories inundated the web. One 9/11 conspiracy theory uses video news clips to “verify” its claim that the World Trade Center was brought down with “pre-rigged dynamite charges” (quoted in Friend 242). The superfluity of these kinds of 9/11 conspiracy theories legitimates both Freeden’s claim that “political facts never speak for themselves” and Sontag’s claim that “all photographs wait to be explained or falsified by their captions” (Freed 3; Sontag 10). Judith Butler also observes that “a frame for understanding violence emerges in tandem with the experience…[and] it seems crucial to attend to this frame, since it decides, in a forceful way, what we can hear…” (4-5).

Butler emphasizes how the experience of violence and the framework for understanding that violence are knotted together. In other words, we cannot emerge from the cave of ideology and glimpse upon the Platonic sun of reality, since this presupposes a false ideology/reality binary. In The Sublime Object of Ideology, Žižek elaborates on this point:

…it is not just a question of seeing things (that is, social reality) as they ‘really are,’ of throwing away the distorted spectacles of ideology; the main point is to see how the reality itself cannot reproduce itself without this so-called ideological mystification. The mask is not simply hiding the real state of things; the ideological distortion is written into its very essence. (Sublime Object 25).

Freeden makes a similar point when he claims that “we simply cannot do without [ideologies] because we cannot act without making sense of the worlds we inhabit” (2). As Norman Fairclough writes, “ideology is most effective when its workings are least visible” (85). But representations of historical events are not necessarily de facto vehicles of ideology. For instance, images of planes flying into the World Trade Center or factual observations like “Flight 11 crashed into the north tower at 8:46 a.m.” do not automatically impose a particular ideological reading. Different ideologies mold these representations into their own interpretative frameworks. Fairclough outlines this complex process of ideological reproduction. He writes that ideologies are invisible and most effective when their “background assumptions…lead the interpreter to interpret [representations] in a particular way” (85). The myriad nonfiction representations—e.g., documentary style segments replayed on cable news programs—can be subtly problematic for precisely this reason. Nonfiction representations of 9/11 do not turn viewers into ideologues or brainwash them into little Manchurian candidates, but rather reinforce viewers’ existing ideological assumptions.

A similar process is at work in popular 9/11 fiction like Joel C. Rosenberg’s 2003 novel The Last Jihad, which weaves together potential nuclear terrorism, evangelical eschatology and American “Wild West” rhetoric. The protagonist Jon Bennett and his stereotypically beautiful partner Erin McCoy must save Israel and the United States from Iraqi terrorists. Published only months after President George W. Bush’s declaration of a “War on Terror,” Rosenberg envisions a future United States that has totally destroyed the perpetrators of 9/11. Rosenberg’s third-person omniscient narrator states that by 2004: “The long war on terrorism had been an
unqualified success. *Al-Qaeda* and the Taliban had been obliterated. Osama bin Laden had finally been found—dead, not alive” (3). The most significant observation is not that Rosenberg’s anachronistic summary of the “War on Terror” now resembles a cartoonish wish fantasy—which is a question of content—but the vocabulary that structures this nationalist fantasy. Like President Bush only days after 9/11, Rosenberg invokes the “dead or alive” rhetoric of the American West, which is freighted with deep background assumptions about vigilante justice. Instead of foisting an ideological position onto readers, Rosenberg aims for a tone of national pathos by triggering ideological assumptions from American mythology and its corresponding themes of redeeming violence. Ironically, Rosenberg’s popular 9/11 “thriller” fiction attempts to fit flat characters into American mythic archetypes even though many people understand that Wild West stories are embellished. Essentially, readers probably know the inherent fictitiousness of Wild West mythology but still decide to act within that framework.

This ideological paradox is best explained by Žižek’s theory of how contemporary ideology functions. Žižek comments on the relationship between thought and action vis-à-vis ideology, stating that “[the] very concept of ideology implies a kind of basic, constitutive *naïveté*: the misrecognition of its own presuppositions…” (*The Sublime Object* 24). This set of background presuppositions can be seen as a source code for computer software. A source code imbedded in computer software structures how information is actualized—i.e., how information becomes coherent enough to understand. Similarly, ideology aims to structure how representations are actualized and understood. To become aware of our own set of background assumptions—our own subconscious source code—is to begin to recognize ways for short-circuiting that ideological teleology. But Žižek recalibrates Marx’s phrase in *Das Kapital*: “*Sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es*”—“they do not know it, but they are doing it” (quoted in *Sublime Object* 24). Žižek maintains that the foundation of contemporary ideology is a kind of cynicism which produces a subject who “knows the falsehood very well, [who] is well aware of a particular interest behind an ideological universality, but [who] still does not renounce it” (26). Hence, Žižek rewrites Marx’s phrase as “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it” (*Sublime Object* 25). The “War on Terror” fleshes out this conception of ideology since the mythic rhetoric of Wild West redemption is obviously fallacious, but the United States knowingly continues to act upon that rhetoric.

In light of Žižek’s explanation, we can gain a deeper understanding of Italo Calvino’s claim that good “literature is one of society’s instruments of self-awareness…” (97). Sophisticated literary fiction provides a crucial foothold for understanding cultural representations of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and their relationship to narratives of American identity. Reading post-9/11 literary fiction is not a simple, didactic activity that produces outward realizations about how ideological systems work “out there” in the world. Post-9/11 literary fiction poses difficult questions that boomerang back toward readers and disrupt their own ostensibly stable frameworks of interpretation and evaluation. Donald Barthelme elaborates on moments of self-critical surprise engendered by literary fiction: “The combinatorial agility of words, the exponential generation of meaning once they’re allowed to go to bed together, allows the writer to surprise himself, makes art possible, reveals how much of Being we haven’t yet encountered” (21). In literary fiction, the combinatorial agility of everything from characters and storylines to symbols and thematic concepts spawns philosophic wonder and an acute distrust of one’s own ideological assumptions. As Socrates reminds Theaetetus, genuine wonder is the beginning of wisdom (Plato *Theaetetus* 155d).
In this thesis, I explore the relationship between literary narratives and a more popular mythological American narrative that constructs the 9/11 attacks as a base for cultural regeneration, heroism, or redemption; specifically, I investigate how literary narratives “short-circuit” the mythological American source code of redemption and regeneration through violence. Drawing primarily on the work of Richard Slotkin, I first summarize how American cultural mythology has incorporated the instrumental use of violence in this pursuit of redemption and regeneration. I then briefly explore how these themes of redemption and regeneration through violence attempt to impose coherent ideological frameworks of meaning onto floating signifiers of violence within the discourse of the U.S.-led “War on Terror.” Utilizing Dominick LaCapra’s distinction between collective “acting out” and “working though,” I analyze how these frameworks tend to manufacture different variations of the “redemptive narrative” in the wake of a “founding historical trauma.” I contrast these popular narratives with three literary novels—Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, Don DeLillo’s Falling Man and Jess Walter’s The Zero—that confront the interpretative ambiguities and contradictions of trauma’s aftermath and advocate a nuanced healing process. I argue that redemptive narratives of regeneration through violence and victimhood tend to represent what LaCapra identifies as a form of self-destructive “acting-out” while my primary texts represent more constructive attempts at “working through.” Ultimately, I conclude by fleshing out the concept of “political solipsism” and integrating the novels into a broader cultural framework concerning the political and ethical value of literary representations of 9/11.
Chapter 1: Theoretical Frameworks

American Mythology and Regeneration through Violence

For the ancient Greeks, two different epistemological modes existed for understanding the world: logos and mythos. The Greeks tended see to these interpretative frameworks as equally vital counterbalances rather than dialectically hostile to one another (Armstrong xi). As a mode of reason, logos represented an instrumental understanding of the natural world, which allowed the Greeks to control their environment. Physically, they survived because of their ability to manipulate external reality—i.e., by fashioning efficient weapons, building sturdy places of shelter and cooking safe food (Armstrong xi). There was a metaphorical connection, then, between logos and seeing. Plato utilizes this metaphorical connection in Book VII of The Republic. When Socrates tells the allegory of the cave, he claims he will show “our nature in its education and want of education” via the symbolic act of seeing the form of Truth (514a).

Conversely, mythos represented a mode of inner psychological understanding, for mythos derives from the verb meuin, meaning “to close the eyes or mouth” (Armstrong 374). Acknowledging that some experiences were beyond language, the Greeks used mythological discourse in order to comprehend those experiences and convert them into a coherent interpretative framework for society (Armstrong 374). According to Joseph Campbell, this act of cultural storytelling is one of the primary functions of myth: to “support and validate a certain social order” (39). In a modern political sense, the “mythology of a nation is the intelligible mask of that enigma called the ‘the national character’” (Slotkin 3).

In his groundbreaking Regeneration through Violence, Richard Slotkin aims to understand the complex mythological national character of the United States. The “American myth,” Slotkin claims, “draws on the content of individual and collective memory, structures it, and develops from it imperatives for belief and action” (7). In order to begin understanding the source of American mythology—what Slotkin calls America’s “mythogenesis”—one must analyze the first colonists’ individual and collective memory of the “captivity narrative” (6). As an “archetypal drama,” the captivity narrative tells the story of an individual, almost always a woman, who is kidnapped by symbolically “evil” Native American Indians and rescued by the grace of God (Slotkin 94). Early colonial captivity narratives, according to the literary critic Roy Harvey Pearce, were “simple, direct religious documents” (2). The most popular captivity narrative from the colonial period was The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson. Captured in 1675 during King Philip’s War (the first Indian War) by Narragansett Indians, Mary Rowlandson’s book shows her smoking tobacco and eating the “black Eucharist” of Horse feet, which would cause fellow Puritan readers to accuse her of resembling her “savage” Indian captors more than her own colonial kin (Slotkin 110; 112). Holding true to the conventions of the genre, after her ransom, Rowlandson asserts that God intervened to save her soul:

I remember in the night season, how the other day I was in the midst of a thousand enemies, and nothing but dead [was] before me. It was then hard work to persuade [sic] myself, that ever I should be satisfied with bread again. But now we are fed with the finest of Wheat and, as I may say, with honey out of the rock. (quoted in Slotkin 111-12)

Due to her captivity and rescue, Rowlandson is “initiated into a new state of being” and undergoes a “figurative rebirth” (Slotkin 101). Through the rubric of religion, Rowlandson’s narrative works as a theodicy: God allows her to suffer precisely in order to draw her closer to him. Significantly, acculturation occurs between Puritans and Indians in the captivity narrative.
through acts of violence that are ultimately regenerative. From this mythopoetic perspective, God oversees a metaphysical economy of violent punishments and rewards where the Indians are permitted to inflict violence on the Puritans. When Rowlandson hopes that she “can say in some measure, as David did, It is good for me that I have been afflicted,” she interprets her Indian captors as instruments of regeneration and redemption (quoted in Faludi 218). Since Puritans saw their afflictions in the new world as God-granted opportunities to become closer to him, the captivity narrative mimicked the ur-redemptive narrative—i.e., the fall of humanity, the apocalypse, and God’s judgment—at the core of Puritan Christianity itself. The structure of the captivity narrative symbolizes “the [Puritan] experience of personal conversion…as well as the pattern of the traumatic experience of emigration that had brought the Puritans to New England in the first place” (Slotkin 101). Within this structure, the weakness of the typically female captive embodies heroic agency before God; “helplessness and heroism were one” (Faludi 221).

For the Puritans, the captivity narrative provided theological answers to problems generated by real-world traumatic experiences. However, once the complexity of the new world began to threaten the viability of the captivity narrative as the central means of transmitting Puritan mythology, the Puritans began to change their perspective on the divine instrumentality of the Indian Other.

The Salem witch trials in the early 1690s represent one of the nodal points in this changing perspective. According to American historian Mary Beth Norton, “the witchcraft crisis of 1692 can be comprehended only in the context of nearly two decades of armed conflict between New England settlers and the New England Indians…” (12). By the third year of King William’s War (or the second Indian War) in 1692, colonial militias had already suffered several years of disgraceful defeats (Faludi 231). Although it would be hard to argue that a direct causal relationship existed between King William’s War and the witch trials, the war “created the conditions that allowed the crisis to develop as rapidly and extensively as it did” (Norton 298). Cotton Mather, the tendentious pseudo-historian of the Salem witch trials, took advantage of these conditions and inflamed Puritan hatred toward the Indians by claiming that “devils in Indian shape” were fighting a “spiritual war” against the colonists (Slotkin 131). Mather asserted that “this inexplicable War might have some of its Original among the Indians…[who] have been horrid Sorcerers, and hellish Conjurors such as conversed with daemons” (quoted in Slotkin 131). For people like Mather, it looked as if the Indians had switched sides in the metaphysical battle for Puritan souls; once seen as instruments of God, the Indians were now instruments of the devil. When Mercy Short, a seventeen-year old Boston servant, began having “fits” and identifying women in Salem as “Old Servants of the Divel,” Mather saw her accusations as proof of a connection between Indians and the devil (Norton 181). Mather explicitly chronicled Short’s drama within the genre of the captivity narrative, claiming that she was held in a “Captivity to Spectres” (quoted in Slotkin 132). Mather transformed the captivity narrative by raising the metaphysical stakes. Whereas Mary Rowlandson’s captivity transpired in the external wilderness of the physical world and pointed out Puritan vanity, Mercy Short’s captivity occurred in the internal wilderness of the spiritual world and rejected “all sacred words” of Puritanism (Slotkin 133). Mather’s appropriation of the captivity narrative supplied the spiritual linkage between good and evil, between the pious light of Puritanism and the demonic darkness of Indians. Evil, Indian-like wraiths engaged in spiritual warfare required the spiritual weapon of prayer.

Even though Mercy Short’s fits would eventually reappear, Mather claimed that she was healed by “the multiply’d prayers of His people” (Norton 179).
later, once it appeared that actual Indians were engaged in real-world warfare against colonists, spiritual weapons would be transformed into real weapons of violence. Essentially, the Puritans encountered a problem when the psychology of captivity—i.e., the willful submission to God’s violent grace—began to appear suicidal, for submission signaled defeat and maybe even extermination (Slotkin 145). The archetypal myth of the captivity narrative permitted only two responses to the “demonic” Indian threat: “either passive resignation or violent retribution in the name of a transcendent and inhuman justice” (Slotkin 141). Since the captivity narrative had always legitimated violence as a regenerative instrument, the notion of violent agency would be modified to accommodate the ever-present physical threat of the Indian “other;” colonial agents of violence would be justified and their Indians victims further demonized.

The transfer of violent agency—from God to humans—caused a shift toward heroism in American mythology in the eighteenth century. As a “hero-centered vision” began to define the American national character, “heroic agency [replaced] divine agency in historical causation” (Slotkin 164). In 1784, during the expansion of the Western frontier, John Filson published The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boone, which became the first heroic myth of the frontier to resonate with Americans (Slotkin 269). A crucial difference between Rowlandson and Boone illuminated this shift toward violent heroic agency: where Rowlandson “believed that her captivity represented God’s intention to chastise her…Boone [claimed] that he is ‘an instrument ordained by God to settle the wilderness.’ Even in suffering, Boone is essentially the hero, the man of power” (Slotkin 293).Eighteenth-century captivity narratives, according to Roy Harvey Pearce, became explicit “vehicle[s] of Indian-hatred…[while] religious concerns came to be incidental at most; the intent of the typical writer of the narrative was to register as much hatred of the French and Indians as possible” (4; 6). The demonization of Indians within the genre of the captivity narrative would manifest itself in the Boone myth. After Boone was captured by Shawnee Indians in 1778 along with twenty-seven other men, he stayed with the Indians for four months and was adopted into the tribe (Faludi 261). Later writers of the myth would portray Boone’s captivity as a time of redemptive violence, where Boone became more skilled in killing animals and taming nature than the Indians 3. Boone’s ability to “out-savage” his Indian captors was reflected in Timothy Flint’s 1833 The Biographical Memoir of Daniel Boone (Faludi 261). Inverting the heroic helplessness of Rowlandson’s Puritan-influenced captivity narrative, violence for Boone functioned as heroic verification since “the real hero was one who could beat the Indians at their own game, live on less food, kill more animals, and even take more scalps” (Slotkin 403). An ideological problem emerged, though, as Boone seemed to resemble the dark demonic savages more than his own racial kin. Ultimately, Boone’s exaggerated acts of violence needed ideological justification that would resolve this apparent contradiction.

American feminist Susan Faludi writes that in order for Boone—and other heroic men of the West—to “prove himself more than a degenerate desperado, the vulnerability and need of the weaker sex had to be placed front and center…” (262). 4 The captivity narrative became intertwined with the myth of the heroic male hunter and created what Slotkin calls the “captive-hunter myth,” which forms the foundation for his concept of regeneration through violence. The

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3 In his 1898 biography of Boone, S.C. Abbott claimed that “In the knowledge of wood-craft, and in powers of endurance, no Indian surpassed him” (quoted in Faludi 261).

4 Interestingly, Boone disputed the heroic stories told about him: “Many heroic actions and chivalrous adventures are related to me which exist only in the regions of fancy” (quoted in Faludi 256).
Indians, emblematic of the mysterious powers of the wilderness, became, “under the aspect of the [captive-hunter] myth, enemies and opponents, who captivate and victimize us and against whom we must be revenged” (Slotkin 557). This myth justified the male hunter archetype’s use of “savage” violence since he was not an aggressor but a righteous avenger, a mythological righter of wrongs. As writers like James Fennimore Cooper appropriated this violent archetype in American literature, the “implicit ethic” of masculinity in the captive-hunter myth would demand “that the wilderness be made safe for the white woman and the civilization she represents” (Slotkin 554). Early Americans sought to regenerate their material and spiritual hopes by purging the terra firma of the new world and its symbolic native inhabitants; however, “the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience” (Slotkin 5). American mythology legitimated violence against land and people as a means of domestic protection and regeneration. In political terms, the captive-hunter myth morphed into a broader myth concerning the security of the United States and the “archetypal enemy of the American hero [became] the red Indian, and to some degree all groups or nations which threaten us are seen in terms derived from our early myths” (Slotkin 558). In order to understand the United States’ response to 9/11 and the ideological “War on Terror,” it is essential to understand this regenerative role of violence within American cultural mythology.

Mythic Foundations of Post-9/11 Ideology and the “War on Terror”

At first glance, myths and ideologies ostensibly share a complex Wittgensteinian family resemblance. Their overlapping functional similarities are evident in Joseph Campbell’s outline of the four functions of myth:

1.) Mystical: “Myth opens the world to the dimension of mystery, to the realization of the mystery that underlies all forms” (38).

2.) Cosmological: This dimension shows “you what the shape of the universe is, but [shows] it in such a way that the mystery again comes through” (39).

3.) Sociological: Myth “supports and validates a certain social order” (39).

4.) Pedagogical: Perhaps most importantly, myth teaches you “how to live a human life under any circumstances” (39).

Embedded in Campbell’s list are two implicit premises connecting myth and ideology: not only is the world incredibly complex, but this complexity generates uncertainty within humans who, in turn, seek to impose order and meaning onto the world. Although they do not function in an exact, one-to-one ratio, myth and ideology are foundational discourses for understanding and acting in the world. From this perspective, it seems nearly impossible not to live within a matrix of intersecting myths and ideologies in the modern world. But explicating the dissimilarities between myth and ideology is a much more challenging procedure. Terry Eagleton attempts to understand this relationship when he asks: “Are myths the ideologies of pre-industrial societies, or ideologies the myths of industrial ones?” (88). In his essay “‘Myth’ and ‘Ideology’ in Modern Usage,” Ben Halpern uses broad historical time periods to draw a distinction between myth and ideology. He claims that myth is the “characteristic form of belief of antique or primitive man and ideology [is] the characteristic form of belief of modem man” (135). Halpern suggests that myths are concerned with the birthplace of cultural beliefs while ideologies are concerned with the maturation or sociopolitical development of those beliefs. Eagleton elaborates on this crucial distinction by pointing out that myths revolve around
…the great ‘metaphysical’ questions of birth, sexuality and death, of sacred times, places and origins. Ideologies are generally more specific, pragmatic forms of discourse, which may encompass such issues but bring them to bear more directly on questions of power...[Myths] are also typically pre-historical or dehistoricizing, fixing events in some eternal present or viewing them as infinitely repetitive; ideologies, by contrast, may and often do dehistoricize, but the various nineteenth-century ideologies of triumphal historical progress hardly fit this bill. (Ideology 88)

Eagleton’s analysis of this fundamental difference between myth and ideology reveals another difference related to trauma theory. In History and Memory after Auschwitz, Dominick LaCapra distinguishes structural trauma from historical trauma. Structural trauma refers to different existential encounters that people go through in almost all societies: “the passage from nature to culture, the eruption of the pre-Oedipal or pre-symbolic in the symbolic, the entry into language, the encounter with the Real, the inevitable generation of the aporia, and so forth (LaCapra History and Memory 47). Conversely, historical trauma “is related to specific events, such as the Shoah or the dropping of the atom bomb on Japanese citizens” (LaCapra History and Memory 47). From this perspective, certain aspects of myth and ideology can be conceptualized as collective psychological responses to different kinds of trauma. LaCapra’s notion of structural trauma bears striking affinities with Campbell’s description of the human thirst for myth: “Living a human life in New York City or living a human life in the caves, you go through the same stages of childhood, coming to sexual maturity...marriage, the failure of the body, gradual loss of its powers, and death” (44). Moreover, the notion of historical trauma aligns with Eagleton’s claim that ideologies tend to be more specific, “pragmatic forms of discourse” (88).

One of the most significant differences between myth and ideology appears to be their unique treatments of time vis-à-vis structural and historical trauma. The lessons of myth tend to be postulated as universally transhistorical, rendering the categorization of past, present and future less vital than the “spiritual potentialities of human life” (Campbell 5). By contrast, ideology attempts to categorize time in order to mimic the “eternalizing” effects of myth. In The German Ideology, Marx and Engels contend that “each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled...to represent its interests as the common interest of all the members of society...it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones” (quoted in Eagleton Ideology 56). Even though myth and ideology have similar universalizing ends, their taxonomies of time tend to be different because myth deals with pseudo-universal structural trauma while ideology deals with specific historical trauma. As collective psychological responses to structural and historical trauma, myth and ideology play complicated, though vital, roles in the American response to 9/11.

Several journalists and writers have commented on how the abruptness of the 9/11 attacks seemed to have overpowered the cultural narrative structures in the United States. Three months after the attack, Don DeLillo claimed that since the narrative of 9/11 “ends in the

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5 LaCapra highlights the need to “explore the problematic relationship between structural and historical trauma without reducing one to the other” (History and Memory 48). To this end, he cautions against generalizing “structural trauma so that is absorbs historical trauma, thereby rendering all reference to the latter merely illustrative, homogeneous, allusive...or, on the contrary to ‘explain’ all posttraumatic, extreme, uncanny phenomena and responses as exclusively caused by particular events or contexts” (47). Hence, the ability to differentiate structural and historical trauma parallels the ability to differentiate not only myth and ideology, but also absence and loss, which I explicate later in this chapter.
rubble…it is left to us to create the counter-narrative (“In the Ruins” 33). By 2004, Judith Butler would aver that a new kind of narrative form was emerging “to compensate for the enormous narcissistic wound opened up by the public display of our physical vulnerability” (7). Susan Faludi laments the narrative form of the Bush Administration’s “counter-narrative” because it merely reactivates the captive-hunter myth which animates the post-9/11 “War on Terror.” Since 9/11 left Americans without an “ennobling narrative,” Faludi asserts that a new redemptive narrative emerged that existed “in the realm of American archetype and American fantasy” (64). Faludi suggests that myth is the mitochondrial power source of ideology, the deep-rooted cultural illusion that structures what many people experience as reality qua reality. This intersection between mythic thinking and ideology produces what Žižek calls the “ideological fantasy;” it is not “the reality but the illusion which structures [our] reality, [our] real social activity” (Sublime Object 30). The captive-hunter myth, the illusory fantasy of tendentious American history, impels the “War on Terror” as a particular manifestation of post-9/11 ideology. Since this myth not only legitimates but requires that a hunter figure (usually male) rescues a captive (usually female), arguments for the “War on Terror” tend to be couched in terms of masculine liberation of the feminized Other.

For instance, in the run up to the Afghanistan war, Faludi points out that “Afghanistan was a metaphor for the girl, the nation as female captive abducted by molesting desperadoes and waiting passively for virile America to save her from degradation” (44). A year after 9/11, President Bush would affirm that the United States had “raised this lamp of liberty to every captive land” (quoted in Faludi 44). A few years later, President Bush would employ the same gendered mythological narrative when he argued for the invasion of Iraq. He declared that the United States would not leave Iraq until that country “was capable of defending herself” (quoted in Faludi 45). Dan P. McAdams notes how the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were framed as wars “in the name of regeneration and redemption—[wars] aimed at wiping out the old so that we can start fresh anew…[wars] aimed at rescuing them from their own badness, to make them good, like us” (216). Conceptualized as a quasi-mythic crusade, the “War on Terror” appoints rigid gender roles in order to animate a fantastic narrative which uses war as an instrument of regeneration. Hence, the “War on Terror” recalibrates Carl von Clausewitz’s maxim “war is the continuation of politics by other means,” which postulates that war is an instrument of policy (quoted in Paret 378). According to the logic of the “War on Terror,” war is the continuation of regeneration by other means. As a kind of figurative psychological rebirth, the mythic motif of regeneration underpinned the Bush Administration’s ideological response to the collective trauma of 9/11, which obfuscated the real nature of the terrorist attack and advocated “acting-out” vengeance over “working through” it in the form of critical understanding.

**Acting-out and Working Through: Responses to the Collective Trauma of 9/11**

On a societal level, Slavoj Žižek claims that perhaps the deepest assumption shattered on 9/11 was the tacit notion that “the real horror happens [over] there, not here” (Welcome 13). This chimerically stable dichotomy between “there” and “here” exemplifies the ideological belief that

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For Faludi, the American political right’s invocation of this captive-hunter myth is not without irony. The same conservative politicians who were advocating war in Afghanistan, and later Iraq, partly on the grounds of gender equality were also railing against “the baleful feminist influence [that] had turned [the United States] into a ‘nanny state’” (Faludi 24). In other words, conservatives seemed to suggest that women should be free but not too free, which is a form of ideological circularity that precludes criticism.
violence in developed “First World” countries is somehow more important or “real” than violence in developing “Third World” countries. The narrator of Moshin Hamid’s novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* illustrates this collective ideological response to 9/11: “As a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority” (168). Hamid’s use of the words “difference” and “superiority” is more nuanced than readers may initially realize. What looks like a simple critique of American Exceptionalism by Hamid is also a deeper critique of the foundational assumptions of the different ways we conceptualize “shared pain.” At first glance, the concept of “shared pain” may seem like a contradiction in terms. Elaine Scarry claims that when a person is tortured, “all the psychological and mental content that constitutes both one’s self and one’s world…ceases to exist” (*Body in Pain* 30). Pain also obliterates language: “as the content of one’s world disintegrates, so the content of one’s language disintegrates” (*Body in Pain* 35). By its very definition, then, pain appears to be a localized phenomenon that destroys community because it destroys language, which is the primary medium of communication. But Hamid invokes the notion of communal pain not in this strictly literal sense, but in a more figurative one. Working on a metaphorical plane, he illustrates how the United States’ response to 9/11 is symptomatic of a deeper assumption about how the country—the allegorical “body politic”—believes it experiences pain differently than the rest of the world. The “shared pain” that united the country after 9/11 was similar to the pain of metaphysical solipsism, the exclusionary philosophical idea that existence of my world and existence of the world are the same (Fierke 478). Hamid broadens Scarry’s aphoristic phrase “To have pain is to have certainty; to hear about pain is to have doubt” by mapping it onto the United States as an emblematic body in pain (*Body in Pain* 13). The solipsistic notion that we experience pain differently sustains the ideological distance separating “there” from “here.” As one character in Jess Walter’s *The Zero* puts it: “You’re always convincing yourselves that the world isn’t what it is, that no one’s reality matters except your own” (222). But after discovering that the domestic United States was not exempt from horrific violence on 9/11, an opportunity for critical reflection was created. This brief pocket of time for truly insightful self-investigation, as Žižek states, allowed the United States to either

> persist in—even strengthen the deeply immoral attitude of ‘Why should this happen to us? Things like this don’t happen here!’, leading to more aggressivity toward the threatening Outside—in short, to a paranoiac acting out […] Or America [could] finally risk stepping through the fantasmatic screen that separates it from the Outside World, accepting its arrival in the Real world, making the long-overdue move from ‘A thing like this shouldn’t happen here!’ to ‘A thing like this shouldn’t happen anywhere!’”

(*Welcome* 49)

Žižek’s use of the term “acting-out” is significant. When Žižek invokes “acting-out,” he describes a collective response to trauma with a technical psychological term that is usually applied to individuals. Like Žižek, Dominick LaCapra uses the terms “acting-out” and “work through” as broader concepts referring to Freud’s original distinction between melancholia and mourning, respectively. In Freudian psychoanalysis, melancholia is characterized by “an arrested process in which the depressed and traumatized self, locked in compulsive repetition, remains narcissistically identified with the lost object” (*History and Memory* 44). In “Remembering, Repeating and Working Through,” Freud states that the melancholic “patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory, but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it” (150,
original italics). In other words, the melancholic or traumatized individual “has a mimetic relation to the past which is regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription” (History and Memory 45). Conversely, Freud claims that the purpose of mourning is “to fill in gaps in memory…[and] to overcome resistances due to repression” (“Remembering, Repeating” 148). In mourning, the traumatized individual recognizes the past as past and “enacts a specific performative relation to it that simultaneously remembers and takes at least partial leave of it, thereby allowing for critical judgment and reinvestment in life…” (History and Memory 45). As a mode of mourning, “working through” describes the process in which a traumatized individual achieves critical distance from the past, since the individual is “able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future” (LaCapra Writing History 22).

Within these two modes of acting-out and working through, a dynamic tension exists between repeating and remembering, between impulsive action and critical thought. For the French psychologist Pierre Janet, melancholic “traumatic memory” destroys the traumatized individual’s critical “narrative memory” and inhibits conscious action: “To forget the past is in reality to change behavior in the present” (quoted in Leys 115).7 Judith Herman summarizes the overarching goal of mourning (Freud), working through (LaCapra) and narrative memory (Janet): “the fundamental premise of the psychotherapeutic work is a belief in the restorative power of truth-telling” (181). However, Herman is careful to note that psychotherapy does not simply “get rid of trauma. The goal of recounting the trauma story is integration, not exorcism” (181).8 LaCapra shares Herman’s metaphorical understanding of trauma as a cluster of intrusive psychological phenomena that cannot be simply ejected from the mind. LaCapra maintains that the need to continually struggle with trauma’s aftermath disrupts the binary relationship between acting-out and working through.

For LaCapra, acting-out and working through are not totally separate psychological functions; they are “intimately linked but disguisable processes, and it may be argued that…[acting-out] [is] a requirement for working through problems” (History and Memory 45). Acting-out and working through are intimately linked primarily because both processes require one to continually return to the site of traumatic memories. If acting-out is essentially compulsive repetition, LaCapra claims that working through is “repetition with a significant difference…[working through] requires going back to problems, working them over, and perhaps transforming the understanding of them” (Writing History 148). When these processes are conceptualized as strict binaries, “the result is a paralyzing kind of all-or-nothing logic in which one is in a double bind: either totalization and the closure you resist, or acting out the repetition compulsion, with almost no other possibilities” (LaCapra Writing History 145).

In a 2003 interview with Bob Woodward, George W. Bush imposes exactly this kind all-or-nothing logic of working through onto the Iraqi people in particular and the entire twenty-first

7 Janet’s conception of “traumatic memory” and “narrative memory” corresponds fairly well to Freud’s melancholia and mourning, respectively. Janet defines “traumatic memory” as the repetition of the past and “narrative memory” as the ability to narrate the past as past. For Janet, therapy aims to “convert ‘traumatic memory’ into ‘narrative memory’” (quoted in Leys 105).
8 It is important to note that Herman criticizes Janet’s occasional attempts to “erase traumatic memories or even alter their content with the aid of hypnosis...this image of catharsis, or exorcism, is also an implicit fantasy in many traumatized people who seek treatment” (Herman 181).
century in general: “What matters is the emergence of a free society where people realize their lives are better off. And where they work through their traumas so they can seize the moment. It’s the story of the 21st century” (424). The Pollyannish notion that trauma can be fully mastered has two profoundly deleterious implications. First, the acting-out/working through binary sustains the individual/society binary as the latter is “based on mistaken individualistic ideological assumptions and gives rise to misguided questions” (History and Memory 43). An example of one such misguided question LaCapra may have in mind is: How can individual psychotherapeutic processes be applied to collective trauma? This question accords with Freud’s understanding of mourning and melancholia as individual processes occurring in a clinical context, which he believed only “applied to collective processes only through analogy” (LaCapra History and Memory 43). The problem with this question is that it presupposes a false binary between the traumatized individual and society. LaCapra contends that the intimately linked processes of acting-out and working through “undercut the binary opposition between individual and society” (History and Memory 43). He claims that concepts of repression and working through “always involve modes of interaction, mutual reinforcement, conflict, censorship, orientation toward others, and so forth, and their relative individual or collective status should not be prejudged” (History and Memory 43). Judith Herman echoes this idea when she writes:

The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can only take place within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation. In her renewed connections with other people, the survivor re-creates the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience. (Tauma and Recovery 133).

The sociologist Kai Erikson’s definition of collective trauma is analogous to Herman’s definition of individual trauma, just on a larger scale: “By collective trauma, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (quoted in Alexander 4). Since individual trauma is characterized by disempowerment and isolation, it always already has collective implications. The fluidity of the acting-out/working through binary illustrates a similar kind of fluidity concerning the individual/collective binary. LaCapra and Herman suggest that we cannot comprehend the isolation of individual trauma without already comprehending the communal shock to interpersonal relationships.

The second destructive implication concerns the way in which strict binary oppositions are “very closely related to the scapegoat mechanism and that part of the process of scapegoating is trying to generate pure oppositions between (self-identical) self and (totally different) other…” (LaCapra Writing History 149). The distinction between “us and them,” coupled with the desire to totally master trauma, is a perfect formula for regeneration through violence. Slotkin’s trenchant claim that the “archetypal enemy of the American hero is the red Indian, and to some degree all groups or nations which threaten us are seen in terms derived from our early myths,” relies on the pure binary opposition of us/them (558).In early American mythology, this formula was manifested in particularly violent ways. The need to master the traumatic experiences related to the Indian Wars morphed into the need to violently master the Indian as the emblem of that traumatic experience.

This violent manifestation of acting-out, which is partially reactivated in the aftermath of 9/11, displays a fundamental confusion of the complex dichotomy between absence and loss. Like structural trauma, LaCapra understands absence as transhistorical since “absence is not an
event and does not imply tenses (past, present, or future)” (Writing History 49). Conversely, LaCapra’s notion of loss aligns with historical trauma since “losses are specific and involve particular [historical] events” (Writing History 49). Even though both concepts indicate that a physical or psychological object is missing, the reason it is missing differs significantly: whereas loss presupposes that one possessed the object and thus could lose it, absence presupposes that one never possessed the object in the first place. A potentially dangerous problem occurs when one tries to convert absence into loss, for “one assumes that there was (or at least could be) some original unity, wholeness, security, or identity that others have ruined…and thus made ‘us’ lose. Therefore, to regain it one must somehow get rid of or eliminate those others…” (Writing History 58). When the Indian Wars shattered the fantastical Puritan, city-on-a-hill idyllic-ness of the new world, the result was an anxious confusion between absence and loss. Slotkin illustrates Puritan anxiety about a lost “Golden Age” in American myth: “The hunters and the redeemed captives return from the forest to find the people still only restively pacified, still mourning the passing of a Golden Age of complacency…” (564). Slotkin’s description of persistent mourning for the lost Golden Age is supported by LaCapra, who maintains that “when absence, approximated to loss, becomes the object of mourning, the mourning may (perhaps must) become impossible and turn continually back into endless melancholy” (Writing History 68).

A variety of responses to 9/11 converted absence into loss, including the endless mourning of the “War on Terror.” Before 9/11, many Americans saw the United States as possessing a kind of mythic protection which made the country invulnerable from outside attack. Elder George, the director of website mensaction.net and a former military officer, conflates absence and loss when he graphically claims that “the phallic symbol of America had been cut off and at its base was a large smoldering vagina, the true symbol of American culture…” (quoted in Faludi 9). George ironically illustrates the loss of a Golden Age of American security with a gendered metaphor reminiscent of the oedipal drama, which LaCapra specifically highlights as a classic example of absence being converted into loss (Writing History 51). George W. Bush also harkens back to a similar mythic understanding of American security in his address to a joint session of congress eight days after 9/11:

Americans have known wars—but for the past 136 years, they have been wars on foreign soil, except for one Sunday in 1941. Americans have known the casualties of war—but not at the center of a great city on a peaceful morning. Americans have known surprise attacks—but never before on thousands of civilians. All of this was brought upon us in a single day—and night fell on a different world, a world where freedom itself is under attack. (“Address to Joint Session”)

President Bush converts “ontological absence into historical loss,” in LaCapra’s terminology, and engenders “a redemptive quest to reinstate the lost origin in a revolutionary future” (History and Memory 47). Seen from this mytho-ideological perspective, the “War on Terror” repudiates mourning—i.e., it is melancholic—because it attempts “to reinvigorate a fantasy that the world formerly was orderly” (Butler 30). The “War on Terror” assumes two strict binary oppositions—us/them and acting-out/working through—and gives rise to an all-or-nothing redemptive

LaCapra is careful to note that absence and loss could not “form a binary in that the opposite of absence is presence and that of loss is gain...The problem...is the mutual interaction and marking of presence/absence and gain/loss in what Derrida terms a larger economy” (Writing History 48, footnote 6). Elsewhere, LaCapra claims that the binary opposition break downs because the distinction is too problematic and fluid (Writing History 47, footnote 5).
narrative. In other words, President Bush misunderstands working through as a redemptive quest aimed at total mastery over the outside Other who triggered the traumatic loss of security.

According to LaCapra, the binary oppositions that arise in wake of a collective trauma like 9/11 are far from spontaneous. LaCapra argues that significant traumatic events can become so intensely cathected that an aura of “negative sacrality” surrounds them (Writing History 161). This mystical “sublime-ness” of traumatic events precludes critical distance by becoming part of a kind of civic religion and provides the basis for a “founding trauma.” As an inherently paradoxical concept, a founding trauma addresses a radical crisis of cultural identity by producing a myopic understanding of that traumatic event which, instead of triggering critical self-reflection, merely becomes the ideological foundation for a new, equally myopic, cultural identity that is simultaneously “personal and collective” (Writing History 162). The new hermetic personal and collective identity generates the exact kind of us/them binary opposition found in President Bush’s address to congress: “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (“Address to Joint Session”). As a founding trauma, 9/11 enhances the solipsistic us/them binary underpinning the assumption that the United States should have a unique exemption from violence. Popular political and entertainment narratives produced as a result of this founding trauma attempt to impose coherent frameworks of meaning onto floating signifiers of violence by converting the absence of impenetrable national security into sudden loss. These frameworks tend to manufacture different variations of the “redemptive narrative,” which is a “narrative that denies the trauma that brought it into existence…and seems to redeem the past and make it wholly meaningful through present uses” (LaCapra Writing History 179; 154). Since the factual truth of redemptive narratives is just as important as the interpretative frameworks they establish around the founding trauma, these kinds of narratives either willfully ignore or capriciously gloss over ostensibly meaningless suffering that threatens to reveal absence as absence. Although Žižek does not use the term “redemptive narrative,” he condemns the same simplistic narrative framework where traumatic events “have a deeper meaning through which they contribute to the harmony of the whole” (Violence 180). Essentially, this teleological justification of historical violence results in a crude, feel-good Hegelianism that desperately seeks to assert that “what is real is rational” (Hegel xix). Juliette Brioche typifies the Hegelian component embedded within the redemptive narrative: “when we learn to understand that tragedy is a treasure in disguise, then we will begin to understand life” (quoted in Sweet Violence Eagleton 23). According to this view, historical violence is animated by a transcendental rationality which eventually reveals, and thus confers, meaning onto ostensibly meaningless violence. In a political sense, redemptive narratives represent the United States as an ideologically dehistoricized victim searching for the object of “imperial loss.”

Oliver Stone’s 2006 World Trade Center is the quintessential redemptive 9/11 narrative in U.S. popular culture. In the film, Žižek notes that Oliver Stone does not show the planes actually hitting the World Trade Center. Instead, Stone shows the shadow of the first plane passing over the policemen just moments before impact. Once the policemen are trapped in the rubble, Žižek points out that “the camera, in a Hitchcockian move, withdraws back into the air to a ‘God’s view’ of New York City,” a zoomed out angle which suggests “a strange theological reverberation—as if the ‘terrorist’ attacks are a kind of divine intervention” (Violence 182). By

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10 Categorically similar to Freud’s ‘loss of a more ideal kind,” Madelyn Detloff defines imperial loss as “the loss of the idea of British rule (or American world dominance) as an object of love, or admiration, or pride” (10).
starting the historical narrative of 9/11 *in medias res*, the film bears out Judith Butler’s claim that “in the United States, we begin the story by…telling what happened on 9/11. If someone tries to start the story earlier, there are only a few narrative options” (5). This narratological move not only plunges the United States into righteous victimhood, it also establishes parameters for cultural regeneration by recasting the “Biblical structure of Paradise, Fall, History—history as a period of trial and redemption—and then redemption” (LaCapra *Writing History* 156). By the final scene, the film exemplifies the redemptive narrative since it negates the trauma that brought it into existence. Affirming the simple yet supposedly profound “lesson” of the film, Nicholas Cage’s character John McLoughlin narrates: “9/11 showed us what human beings are capable of. The evil, yeah, sure. But it also brought out the goodness we forgot could exist. People taking care of each other for no other reason than it was the right thing to do. It’s important for us to talk about that good, to remember. ’Cause I saw all of it that day” (*World Trade Center*). Ultimately, the film portrays 9/11 as an initially horrific but ultimately good “blessing in disguise, as a divine intervention which has served to waken America from its moral slumber and to bring out the best in its people” (Žižek *Violence* 183). The affective thrust of the redemptive 9/11 narrative parallels that of ideology in the face of historical trauma: “to disguise the impact of the trauma with a symbolic semblance” (Žižek *Violence* 180). As an illusion of imperial loss, this symbolic semblance reinforces the “negative sacrality” of the collective trauma, which pulls it into “a kind of theological matrix” that legitimates violence in that trauma’s name (LaCapra *Writing History* 161). Žižek fleshes out this legitimation when he explicates how 9/11 inverts Dostoevsky’s famous warning against nihilistic atheism in *Brothers Karamazov*: “If God doesn’t exist, then everything is permitted” (quoted in *Violence* 136). For Žižek, 9/11 recalibrates this declaration to: If God does exist, everything “is permitted to those who claim to act directly on behalf of God, as the instruments of his will, since clearly a direct link to God justifies our violation of any ‘merely human’ constraints and considerations” (*Violence* 136). While this circular logic clearly applies to the barbarism of the terrorist attacks on 9/11, it also applies to the U.S.-led “War on Terror.” At the end of his address to a joint session of congress, President Bush says that while many Americans will carry memories of the attacks …I will carry this: It is the police shield of a man named George Howard, who died at the World Trade Center trying to save others…This is my reminder of lives that ended, and a task that does not end. I will not forget this wound to our country or those who inflicted it. I will not yield; I will not rest; I will not relent in waging this struggle for freedom and security for the American people. ” (“Address to Joint Session”) The police shield symbolically deputizes President Bush to recover the mythic lost security of the domestic United States just as 9/11 legitimates the controversial tactics employed in the “War on Terror.” For instance, in September 2002, director of the CIA’s Counterterrorist Center Cofer Black addressed the House and Senate Intelligence Committees, saying that “all you need to know is that there was a ‘before 9/11’ and there was an ‘after 9/11.’ After 9/11, the gloves come off” (quoted in Mayer 43). As a coded phrase for an array of interrogation techniques—from sleep deprivation and forced nudity to water-boarding—“taking the gloves off” implies that the United States had the *gloves on* before 9/11 in the form of international law like the Geneva

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11 Žižek adroitly explains that the use of “God” as a legitimatizing signifier is not restricted to traditional organized religious discourse. Any idea that claims to transcend human ethics is potentially dangerous. The best example of this deadly secular sublime is Stalinist communists, who saw themselves as “instruments of their divinity, the “Historical Necessity of Progress towards Communism” (Žižek *Violence* 136).
Conventions. As journalist Mark Bowden claims, the “gloves off” metaphor suggests that we once “had the luxury of following these legalistic norms,” but not anymore (“The Question of Torture”). From the perspective of the Bush Administration, 9/11 permits the United States to reinterpret international law in order to recover its national security through indefinite detention of the emblematic, Indian-like Other.  

But controversial CIA interrogation tactics are only part of the larger redemptive quest known as the “War on Terror.” The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq typify much more virulent examples of acting-out in the name of redemption. Since the United States is already seen as violent and militaristic in the Middle East, its decision to respond with even more violence resembles a self-destructive form of melancholic repetition. A parallel exists here between the melancholic repetition of both the United States and Al-Qaeda and the cyclical violence of the Oresteia. Judith Butler claims that the United States should “remember the lessons of Aeschylus…[and] refuse [the] cycle of revenge in the name of justice” (17). As advocates for this endless cycle of blood vengeance, the Furies in Aeschylus’s trilogy utilize violence in order to enact their tribalistic conception of justice. On his way home from the Trojan War, Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia and takes Cassandra as a concubine. Eventually, Clytemnestra avenges her daughter’s death by killing her husband and his concubine, and claims that her act of violence will put an end to all violence in Argos: “…I swept from these halls / the murder, the sin, and the fury” (Agamemnon 1575-76). However, this death puts Agamemnon and Clytemnestra’s son Orestes in a tragic bind: avenge his father’s death by killing his mother or spare his mother and leave his father’s murderer unpunished. In other words, Orestes must decide whether his mother’s act of violence was legitimate (killing the murderer of her child) or illegitimate (regicide against a rightful king). After he kills his mother, Orestes claims to be in lawful accordance with what “destiny has wrought” (The Libation Bearers 911). But the chorus laments the fact that all the aggressors see their acts of never-ending violence as justified: “The truth stands ever beside God’s throne / eternal: he who has wrought shall pay; that is law / Then who shall tear the curse from their blood? The seed is stiffened to ruin” (Agamemnon 1563-66). As symbols of localized clannish revenge, the Furies demand that Orestes “feel against his head / another murderer rising out of the same seed” (Eumenides 176-77). The Furies understand violence according to the same us/them binary opposition that Žižek outlines after 9/11. Like the United States, they persist in the claim that violence should not happen to them or their clan since their pain is more ontologically legitimate than the pain of others. Furthermore, the Furies see violence as an instrument of regeneration and redemption, but fail to recognize how the ideology of blood vengeance perpetuates the very self-destructive system they have been wronged by. The failure to understand the recurring chronicles of bloodshed resembles the traumatized individual who cannot integrate the trauma into narrative memory and gain the critical distance necessary for working through it.

One of the primary steps in working through collective trauma is a kind of empathic awareness that rejects the notion that one group’s experience of pain is “realer” than another group’s. For Butler, this type of awareness is not achieved by private, depoliticized grief; on the contrary, she claims that grief should furnish “a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility” (22). Instead of the Bush administration’s “rhetoric of autonomous retribution as a response to nationalist grief,” Butler brings to mind

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12 See the U.S. Supreme Court Decision Hamdan v. Rumsfeld, 548 U.S. 557 (2006).
LaCapra’s conception of working through as an inherently interactive communal process (Detloff 169). This healthier, non-violent idea of working through destabilizes both the individual/society and us/them binary oppositions in a way that prompts us to question our own political and ethical responsibility. LaCapra goes so far as to claim that working through is “intimately bound up with the possibility of ethically responsible action and critical judgment on the part of someone who strives for the position of an agent…” (History and Memory 186).

Critical distance from victimhood is essential in becoming a political and ethical agent if we seek to contest the rhetoric of nationalist retribution. As a product of non-Pollyannaish working through, this type of critical judgment eschews violence as an instrument of regeneration and redemptive narratives of total mastery. Paradoxically, we may have to accept that, “in the face of severe trauma, a requirement of working through may be the active recognition that not everything can be worked through” (LaCapra History and Memory 205). This kind of acceptance would also encourage us to recognize absence as absence in the wake of 9/11, and not convert absence into the loss of mythic security or historical exceptionalism.

As self-aware representative inquiry, literature is one of the most effective modes for investigating non-lethal responses to trauma’s aftermath. In particular, literary fiction challenges the ideological appropriation of trauma by short-circuiting the political arrogation of collective grief for purposes of redemption. Madelyn Detloff’s notion of “resilient writing” shows us how literature combats this nationalist misuse of grief by illuminating the implications of two different poles on the spectrum of trauma theory: redemption and resignation. Whereas narratives of redemption seek to convert absence or loss into ideological gain, narratives of resignation postulate that trauma is inherently “unspeakable” and thus “refuse categorically the possibility of consolation, of living on in the wake of trauma” (Detloff 14). Essentially, the latter type of narrative rejects the possibility of working through and can even convert loss into absence, which carries profound ideological consequences. While the “unspeakability” of trauma may seem intrinsically a-political and solipsistic, this position can be exploited in such a way as to bend the spectrum of trauma theory so far that it comes to resemble narratives of redemption. For instance, Detloff claims that the total incommunicability of trauma can be “resignified” for ideological purposes, which parallels Elaine Scarry’s outline of how torture constructs fallacious political power. Scarry outlines how incommunicable pain is translated into misleading political authority: once pain is inflicted, the “subjective attributes” of that pain are objectified and translated into “the insignia of power” (51). Similarly, if a subjective attribute or symptom of collective trauma is “unspeakability,” political ideology can objectify it and thus render it “speakable” through an insignia of power that is myopically nationalistic and retributive. Here as always, the effectiveness of ideology is inversely proportional to its visibility. But Detloff, using the fiction of Virginia Woolf as a theoretical catalyst, identifies “resilient writing” as a rhetorical strand in literary fiction that successfully navigates between the Scylla and Charybdis of redemption and resignation. Detloff notes that resilient writing differs from redemptive writing in its refusal to make loss into a metaphor for something else…[and it] diverges from the ‘unspeakable’ hypothesis by recognizing the attempts of survivors to invent, if necessary, new methods for recognizing and communicating suffering, without suggesting that those methods are always and only symptoms of trauma’s inescapable hold (14-15).

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13 Bessel van der Kolk and Cathy Caruth, both of whom are among the theorists who maintain that trauma is either unknowable or unspeakable, are dealt with at greater length in the next chapter.
Detlof implies that narratives of redemption and resignation represent two distinct—though potentially dangerous—forms of acting-out, while resilient writing represents a nuanced form of working through. It is no coincidence that the critical site of such resilience is literature, a mode of imaginative investigation that John Gardner claims “is a laboratory experiment too difficult and dangerous to try in the world but safe and important in the mirror image of reality in the writer’s mind” (115-16). In psychoanalytic terminology, literature provides “a relatively safe haven…for exploring the modalities of responding to trauma” (LaCapra Writing History 185). Literature is a vital conceptual space for intersecting discourses in regards to 9/11 since, according to Art Spiegelman, “World History and Personal History” collided on that day (“The Sky is Falling!”). This kind of conceptual space, of which literature is only one component, aims to generate the critical judgment necessary for becoming a responsible ethical and political agent in the face of the first founding American trauma of the twenty-first century. In The Eumenides, the Oresteia’s concluding drama, Athena succinctly summarizes the responsibility of halting the mimetic violence of acting-out when she tells the Furies: “Do not / in too much anger make this place of mortal men / uninhabitable” (824-26). In the following chapters, I will explore how literary fiction attempts to heed Athena’s ancient counsel and work through the collective trauma of 9/11.
Chapter 2: Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*

Jonathan Safran Foer’s 2005 novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* represents the interlocking processes of acting-out and working through with subtle political and ethical complexity. While the nine-year-old protagonist Oskar Schell, his paternal grandfather and grandmother all undoubtedly exhibit signs of posttraumatic stress, the exact political thrust of the novel is much more ambiguous. By alluding to such large-scale collective traumas as 9/11, the Allied firebombing of Dresden and the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Foer has been accused of everything from glib thematic overextension to narcissistic delusions of literary grandeur. For instance, Foer could be implicitly advocating mawkish redemption by suggesting that when historical traumas are “extremely loud,” these are precisely the moments when we grow “incredibly close,” as if by way of magnetically communal compassion. However, many of these criticisms and myopic readings miss Foer’s larger artistic point since they tend to be underpinned by the notion that acting-out and working through are strict binary terms. When a reading depends on this false acting-out/working through dichotomy, one-dimensional questions about simply “overcoming trauma” produce one-dimensional answers, like the unequivocal “yes” or “no” tattooed on Thomas Sr.’s hands, which symbolize the failure of clear-cut, referential language. The inherent ambiguity of Foer’s novel, spawned in part by equivocal linguistic slippages in the face of violence, disrupts relatively stable systems of organized thought and binary oppositions like acting-out/working through, individual/community and us/them. I argue that Foer refuses to deodorize 9/11 with a simplistic redemptive framework of collective identity; instead, he constructs a complicated, posttraumatic framework by stressing the partial inaccessibility of three characters’ traumatic experiences—Oskar, his paternal grandfather and grandmother—and the failure of referential language for historical reconstruction in order to problematize redemptive narratives and critically question the political and ethical dimensions of working through the trauma of 9/11.

The central plot of the novel revolves around an intelligent, nine-year-old boy’s unsatisfying quest to find out how his father died in New York on 9/11. Two years before the novel begins, Oskar Schell comes home from school early during the terrorist attacks to find several messages on the answering machine from his father, who is trapped in the World Trade Center. After Oskar fails to answer his father’s last call, he is traumatized by an overwhelming sense of guilt and betrayal. While talking to his grandmother over walkie-talkies, he thinks about how he cannot explain to her why he misses his father more than she does, since he cannot tell her what happened on what Oskar can only call the “worst day.” Oskar thinks: “That secret was a hole in the middle of me that every happy thing fell into” (71). In codified prepubescent slang, Oskar wears “heavy boots”—a metaphor for melancholic immobility—gives himself “bruises,” and invents ridiculously implausible devices in order to cope with his devastating guilt. For example, he invents a “birdseed shirt” to save people who fall from deadly heights, which reveals a fantasy of paternal recovery since Oskar claims “there are so many times when you need to make a quick escape, but humans don’t have their own wings” (Foer 2-3). These two

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14 See Harry Siegel’s mordant 2005 *New York Press* review “Extremely Cloying and Incredibly False.”
habits of self-bruising and invention exemplify the “repetition compulsion” identified by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Oskar engages in repetitive, self-destructive self-bruising while also replaying the traumatic event in order to “invent” ways to anachronistically change it. Oskar’s inventions are futile attempts to master the original trauma and are similar to the *fort-da* game (German for *there* and *gone*, respectively), in which Freud’s grandson would deal with the painful disappearance of his mother’s leaving for work by creating a game where he throws a spool and recovers it, thus controlling disappearance and absence. When analyzing Oskar’s inventions, neither their obvious ridiculousness nor their naïve efforts to reverse a painful event should be emphasized. Instead, as Freud himself says, one should emphasize how “the child might have repeated a disagreeable impression in play only because with the repetition was bound up a pleasure gain of a different kind but more direct” (15). With these inventions—like an elevator skyscraper, which Oskar says “could be extremely useful, because if you’re on the ninety-fifth floor, and a plane hits below you, the building would take you to the ground, and everyone could be safe”—Oskar does not really expect to erase or reverse the original trauma (note the conditional “could” in the last sentence). Since his father’s death structures Oskar’s own identity within his narrative of selfhood, Oskar exhibits a melancholic desire to stay close to his father by remaining within the traumatic experience.

Oskar’s partially sub-conscious desire to stay connected with his father accords with what LaCarpa calls a “fidelity to trauma” (*Writing History* 22). In order to retain an identity that is intimately bound up with the idea of being “the son of Thomas Schell,” Oskar feels like he must stay faithful to the memory of his father and, by extension, the traumatic experience. From Oskar’s semi-conscious perspective, traumatic memory allows him not to betray his father or his own identification of selfhood. This desire to remain connected with his father leads Oskar to pursue a quest that ultimately ends in disappointment because he fundamentally misunderstands the nature of his journey. When the novel actually begins roughly two years after his father’s funeral, Oskar finds a strange key inside an envelope labeled “Black” inside a vase inside his father’s closet. These metaphorical, onion-like layers of circumstance compel Oskar to think of the key as a portentous discovery, launching Oskar on the quixotic quest through New York where he tries to meet all New Yorkers with the last name Black in order to find the lock for his key. Of course, as Philippe Codde points out, Foer establishes “a transparent metaphor for the [lock or] door that will presumably give access to his father’s past” (244). But the key does not lead Oskar to any answers about his father’s death; “the key only divulges someone else’s bereavement, as it really belonged to someone else’s deceased father” (Codde 244). Unaware of the key inside, Oskar’s father Thomas had simply bought the vase from a man whose father had just died. Therefore, Oskar’s dissatisfying quest has no deeper external meaning, which reveals one of the novel’s truly traumatic motifs: the tragic realization that “suffering is an essential part of life, even when the suffering has no ultimate meaning [or] benefit […] Suffering is to be endured, but not necessarily redeemed” (McAdams *Redemptive Self* 266). It is no coincidence that, once his quest ends in disappointment, Oskar is finally able to articulate what happened on “the worst day” to a man he barely knows. Oskar says that he could hear glass breaking during his father’s last message, which makes him “wonder if people were jumping” (301). Oskar goes on to say: “I’ve timed the message, and it’s one minute and twenty-seven seconds. Which means it ended at 10:28. Which was when the building came down. So maybe that’s how he died” (302). Oskar is upset not only because his quest fails to yield external answers, but because it terminates the internal connection with his father. The key Oskar wears around his neck, a metonymy for his journey through New York, unlocks Oskar’s ability to narrate his trauma,
ultimately making his quest an inward one. This ironic conclusion also inverts the traditional role of Oskar’s comical detective work; instead of discovering the truth of external reality, he discovers the truth of his father’s death, which he always knows but fails to admit until the end of the novel. Oskar’s investigative detective journey boomerangs inward and becomes a psychological self-investigation. The forward trajectory of his quest is an illusion since he hopes to stay within the static traumatic experience. Oskar tells the “renter,” who is really his grandfather, that he wishes he never found the lock because “looking for it let [Oskar] stay close to [his father] for a little while longer” (304). In other words, Oskar desires a journey that never ends but manages to hold onto the lost paternal object, like a paradoxical wish fulfillment that, due to its impossible satisfactory closure, itself becomes a source of negotiated satisfaction. Acting-out and working through are inextricably tied together here, and Oskar’s delayed ability to move from traumatic to narrative memory—in a way that avoids maudlin redemption—must be understood within a broader context of aggressive acting-out in the novel.

Before Oskar can truly mourn his father’s death, he acts out in ways that are self-destructive, solipsistic and ethically irresponsible, but also ironically helpful as a first step in working through. Aside from his self-bruising, Oskar either acts out aggressively toward his mother and grandmother or imagines directing his uncontrolled anger at others. When his grandmother throws away a plate block of stamps, Oskar feels himself “starting to spaz, even though [he] was trying not to” (105). During a school performance of Hamlet, while Jimmy Snyder plays Hamlet and Oskar plays Yorick’s skull, Oskar imagines physically assaulting Jimmy because Oskar thinks that “the only thing that makes any sense right then is [his] smashing JIMMY SNYDER’s face” (146). Later in the novel, the intensity and temporary malice of Oskar’s outbursts increases. After his mother meets another man named Ron, Oskar tells her that—given the choice—he would have preferred that she die over his father (171). Perhaps the most illuminating incident occurs when Oskar is being questioned by a therapist, Dr. Fein (pronounced “fine”), whose name links him to the redemptive narrative. Dr. Fein asks Oskar: “Do you think any good can come from your father’s death?” Oskar responds by shrugging his shoulder, even though he imagines kicking over chairs, throwing papers and shouting, “No! Of course not, you fucking asshole!” (203). On the one hand, Oskar’s acting-out is internally self-destructive and exceptionally hurtful toward his mother and grandmother. The painful effects of trauma facilitate narcissistic explosions of anger that occlude empathetic behavior toward those whom Oskar loves most, even though he is aware of not being able to control such anger. On the other hand, though, Oskar exemplifies how acting-out and working through are interwoven concepts. His melancholic daydreams and fantastic inventions offer creative psychological relief from the potentially overwhelming truth of his father’s death. Like a fiction writer, Oskar reimagines reality through stories and scenes that he knows are not real, but which nevertheless placate his recurring outbursts. While it may seem contradictory, the anger embedded in his outbursts is productive in that it disrupts working through as a totalizing concept of mastery and the subsequently dangerous hope of redemption. For Oskar, acting-out and working through are not dichotomous terms, but constitutively idiosyncratic processes in a larger process of simply making sense of his father’s death.

Instead of exploring trauma in a historical vacuum, Foer also applies this complicated process of mourning to the Allied firebombing of Dresden during World War II, a violent event that challenges post-9/11 American notions of victimhood, ethical and political responsibility. Oskar’s grandfather, Thomas Sr., fails to both communicate his experience of suffering and to access his traumatic past. Even though Thomas Sr. survives the firebombing of Dresden, the
woman whom he loves—Anna, Oskar’s grandmother’s sister—dies along with their unborn child. These deaths cause Thomas Sr. to gradually lose his ability to speak: “I lost ‘carry,’ I lost things I carried—‘daybook,’ ‘pencil,’ ‘pocket change,’ ‘wallet’—I even lost ‘loss’” (17). Once the trauma makes Thomas Sr. totally mute, he tattoos YES on one hand and NO on the other (17). After losing his ability for verbal representation, he tries to write a series of letters to his unborn son only to discover the inadequacies of linguistic representation in general. As he attempts to write his life story, Thomas Sr. expresses a wish for the impossible: “I want an infinitely long book and the rest of time” (279). Eventually, his handwriting becomes illegible and the pages turn ink-black. Metaphorically, “this illegible history, this total blackness, is precisely the “Black” that Oskar” fails to find (Codde 245). Foer’s ironic point, then, is not just that one character’s narrative results in the total blackness of too many words while another’s results in the utter blankness of no words, but that both of these are futile attempts to access traumatic pasts through language. This idea seems to underscore trauma theorist Cathy Caruth’s claim that traumatic experiences are beyond representation and, therefore, demand “a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (Unclaimed Experience 5). In other words, traumatic experience requires a paradoxical vocabulary of meaning. For prominent trauma theorists like Caruth, Bessel van der Kolk, and Judith Herman, traumatic experiences are iconic—i.e., they are stored in the memory as indelible images or exact replays of the experience15. As van der Kolk claims about the traumatic experience, “[it] cannot be organized on a linguistic level and this failure to arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organized on a somatosensory or iconic level” (172). According to Caruth, “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Trauma 4-5). Since the traumatic experience is not registered on a linguistic level, firsthand testimonies of horrific experiences tend to be especially contradictory, indirect and untrustworthy. For instance, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have documented how former Auschwitz prisoners recount factually inaccurate stories (59-60). From this theoretical viewpoint, the language of traumatic experience is paradoxical: the memory of trauma is supposedly the iconic location of the Real, but to narrate that experience is to tell a contradictory tale that doesn’t meet basic truth-value criteria.

Foer utilizes this theoretical paradox not because his primary objective is to make an argument about trauma theory—although his representations obviously carry theoretical implications—but because this paradox highlights the ethical problems of acting-out and the resulting inability to narrate traumatic experience. For instance, Thomas Sr.’s use of the phrase “my child” and the second-person pronoun “you” when writing to his son reveals confusion between “the surviving son and the child lost during [the Dresden firebombing]” (Codde 251). Writing about the actual experience of the bombing, Thomas Sr. begins his letter, “To my child,” which does not specify which child he is addressing. He goes on to write: “Sometimes I think if I could tell you what happened to me that night, I could leave that night behind me, maybe I could come home to you, but that night has no beginning or end, it started before I was born and it’s still happening” (208). The most important point is not just a simple analytical one that fleshes out a particular conceptual approach to trauma—i.e., his attempt to directly represent the trauma,

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15 It is important to note that many scholars—e.g., Ruth Leys, Tim Melley, Elizabeth Loftus—either question or outright challenge the idea that the traumatic experience is a literal, unmediated experience stored in one’s memory which is beyond linguistic representation. They tend to view memory not as an encoding of the Real, but as a psychological representation that is subject to the same kinds of adulterations as other representations in memory.
to locate the Real, and “make sense” of it results in a temporal contradiction in the very opening address. The deeper ethical point is that Thomas Sr. fails to recognize the unique humanity of his real son. By apologizing to his real son but invoking his lost child simultaneously, Thomas Sr. illustrates how he has invested his love in a relationship that never existed and walked away from a relationship that did.

Thomas Sr.’s inability to communicate accentuates his own emotions and semi-conscious needs at the expense of his son (Oskar’s father) and his wife, whose real name is, significantly, never revealed. Just as Oskar tries to stay connected with the lost love object of his father, Thomas Sr. tries to stay connected to Anna by marrying her sister. Several weeks before they are married, Thomas Sr. asks his wife to be a model for one of his sculptures; however, after a few sessions, his wife looks at the sculpture and realizes “that he was sculpting Anna. He was trying to remake the girl he knew years before. He looked at me as he sculpted, but he saw her” (83). In his attempt to stay faithful to the traumatic experience of Anna’s death, Thomas Sr. recreates her through art and then acts out this recreation in his relationship with his wife. One week after she discovers who he is really sculpting, they make love, unknowingly conceive Thomas Jr. and get married. But Thomas Sr. fundamentally misrecognizes his wife’s humanity since their marriage is characterized not by an I-and-thou relationship, but by an I-and-it relationship where he engages in a self-centered rapport with an objectified image of the deceased. Two rules outlined by Thomas Sr. reveal the essence of his marriage to Anna’s sister: “no children” and “never talk about the past” (85; 108). These rules attempt to fossilize the traumatic experience since the former rule aims to arrest forward narrative progress while the latter one represses the original trauma. In other words, Thomas Sr.’s commitment to Anna’s living sister masks a deeper melancholic commitment to Anna as a dead image. Thomas Sr.’s real subconscious motive for marriage is revealed when he abandons her and his son. He tells his unborn son: “…it’s not out of selfishness that I am leaving, but how can I explain that? I can’t live, I’ve tried and I can’t” (135). Ultimately, his commitment to Anna is a commitment to “not living,” and his fidelity to her precludes recognition of his own selfishness even as he ironically invokes the concept of selfishness. By marrying Anna’s sister, Thomas Sr. also converts absence into loss in a complex way. In one sense, there is no doubt that he lost the woman he loved, but he also feels like he lost the unconscious fiction of love as an illusory concept of emotional security. He alludes to the anxiety of this absence when he writes: “…that’s all anyone wants from someone else, not love itself but the knowledge that love is there, like new batteries in the flashlight in the emergency kit in the hall closet” (130). Since Thomas Sr. grieves not only for a legitimate personal loss, but also for a psychological wish fantasy, he sees the past as a nostalgic myth that can be neither totally accessed nor worked through.

While Thomas Sr. clearly has difficulties working through his traumatic experiences, his wife ostensibly employs much healthier, non-lethal means to de al with her similarly traumatic past. A fellow survivor of the Dresden firebombing, she attempts to write her memoir over many years, learns to speak English and even carves out a relatively normative American life for herself and her son after Thomas Sr. leaves. But despite these outward signs of working through, Oskar’s grandmother compulsively repeats self-destructive behavior like her husband. In her very first letter, she explains how she felt “more alone than if [she] had been alone” with Thomas Sr. and even planned to jump into the Hudson River with “the biggest stone [she] could bear and let [her] lungs fill with water” (82). She repeats this suicidal gesture several days after 9/11 when she crosses the street carrying a massive rock. Comparing the size of the rock to a baby, Oskar sees her and thinks about how she usually gives him rocks for his collection, but Oskar says that
“she never gave that one to me, and she never mentioned it” (104). Later, readers discover that she never wrote her life story; she merely hit the space bar without a typewriter ribbon and lied to her husband about her eyes being crummy since she “wanted him to pay attention to [her]” (176). These empty white pages—similar to Thomas Sr.’s totally ink-black notebook pages—symbolize her fundamental inability to convert traumatic memory into narrative memory. Even though Oskar’s grandmother appears to deal with her traumatic past better than her husband, her melancholic symptoms are more subtle manifestations of self-destruction which often take the forms of self-depreciative guilt and self-inflicted injury. While modeling for her husband’s sculpture, she is ashamed of the letters she had collected in her bedroom in Dresden and wonders if they had not collected them, “would [her] house have burned less brightly?” (83). Watching the terrorist attacks transpire on television with her son inside the World Trade Center, she punches the floor and then feels guilty for being “too selfish to break [her] hands for [her] only child” (231). Minutes later, she walks into the bathroom because she wants to “lie in [her] own waste…and be a pig in [her] own filth” (231). Trapped inside a circular logic that mimics the repetition compulsion, she Ironically feels terrible for not feeling terrible enough. This powerful implosion of the meaning of guilt represents the apotheosis of harmful acting-out since her view of reality collapses inward and her actions become self-destructive. But during this moment of extreme act-outing, Oskar’s grandmother manages to begin working through her trauma. Even though she wants “so much for it to be [her] under the rubble [of the World Trade Center],” she realizes that her life “makes sense” when she looks at Oskar (232). In the midst of acting-out, she finds the ability to look outward and recognize how Oskar’s pain turns him into “a wounded animal” (232). She gains critical distance from her own internal pain and invests her love in Oskar as a metaphorical reinvestment in the future.

This deconstruction of the acting-out/working through binary is also manifested in the physical space occupied by Thomas Sr. and his wife at the end of the novel. In her last letter, Oskar’s grandmother reveals that she is writing from the airport and sitting next to Oskar’s grandfather. She writes that the airport represents: “Not coming or going…not something or nothing…not yes or no” (312). They choose to stay in the airport because it symbolizes the exact rupture of binary logic they have been searching for throughout their entire relationship. The YES/NO tattoos on Thomas Sr.’s hands parallels the Something and Nothing spaces that they outline in their apartment shortly after they are married (Foer 110). These strict linguistic signs and physical delineations fail to both express and represent their traumatic experiences. While the Something and Nothing places can be interpreted as ontological categories of being and non-being respectively, they also signify a metaphorical framework for understanding trauma as a memory that is either present or not present in the mind. By staying inside the airport—a space between Something and Nothing—Foer suggests that trauma complicates the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction and its underlying either/or logic. Since trauma operates according to a both/and logic, responses to that trauma tend to manifest themselves in non-binary forms of acting-out and working through. It is telling that Oskar’s grandmother finds the ability to narrate the most painful part of her traumatic past inside the in-between space of the airport, admitting to Oskar that she never told her sister Anna how much she loved Anna before Dresden was destroyed. A more concentrated instance of this kind of critical distance from the past occurs while Oskar talks to William Black, the man who sold the vase to Oskar’s father. As Oskar explains to William Black that another man had been yelling at Black’s ex-wife during Oskar’s discussion with her, Black becomes upset and asks Oskar when he witnessed this scene. When Oskar tells him eight months ago, Black looks like he might cry and says, “That man was me”
Black’s acute judgment of his previous actions approaches a level of objectivity that startles him because his binary understanding of self/other blurs.

The regrettable discomfort Black feels as a result of his critical judgment connects to the novel’s larger inquiry into historical violence perpetrated by the United States. Foer challenges infinite post-9/11 American victimhood by drawing attention to those occasions during World War II when the United States deliberately bombed civilian populations in Dresden and Hiroshima. The disruption of William Black’s self/other binary is a small synecdoche that aims to disrupt the United States’ larger us/Them binary after 9/11. Since the pure binary opposition of us/them—i.e., Americans/terrorists, good/bad, etc.—depends upon the premise that we do not kill civilians, Foer’s incorporation of Dresden and Hiroshima deconstructs this false binary and illuminates some unsettling similarities. Oskar’s classroom presentation of real-life Hiroshima survivor Ms. Kinue Tomoyasu’s testimony poignantly illustrates one of these similarities. After Tomoyasu details how her daughter died in her arms, she claims that it “doesn’t matter what uniforms the soldiers are wearing. It doesn’t matter how good the weapons are. I thought if everyone could see what I saw, we would never have war anymore” (Foer 189). Just as Black becomes retroactively aware of his failure of ethical responsibility, Foer suggests that the United States must become critically aware of its own violent past if it wants to work through 9/11 in ways which do not perpetuate terrorist violence. Thomas Sr.’s description of his appalling journey through the firebombed city of Dresden stresses this mode of critical awareness: “[I] saw my reflection, I was terrified of my own image […] I remember losing my balance, I remember a single thought in my head: keep thinking” (214). Americans should be terrified of their own image within the redemptive 9/11 narrative since a nostalgic a-historicism underpins this type of mythic myopia and encourages violent retribution directed at an ill-defined “evil” Other. By incorporating past American violence at Hiroshima and Dresden, instead of contemporary post-9/11 attacks on Afghanistan or Iraq, Foer implies that the “War on Terror” revitalizes the much older myth identified by Slotkin as regeneration through violence. Powered by the captive-hunter paradigm, this myth attempts to “conceal the reality of painful or perplexing historical situations and to provide illusory but emotionally satisfying solutions to real problems” (Slotkin 561). Foer delivers an anachronistic warning embodying the repetition compulsion: the United States will continue to repeat the violent mistakes of the past if it does not critically confront its response to 9/11 as a complex combination of American myth and ideology. Like Thomas Sr. continually returning to the site of his horrific experiences at Dresden, the United States will continue to mimic its own violent past. Since the legitimation of this violence is rooted in an older fantasy world of total American security, the “War on Terror” morphs into an endless crusade of vengeance against an abstract emotion. Commenting on his play Homebody/Kabul, Tony Kushner explores the political consequences of indefinite war and maintains that only after the “the futile and fatal search for lost originative causes” is abandoned can the crucial distinction be made between justice and revenge (148). Foer aims to outline this distinction by complicating the language of historical reconstruction vis-à-vis the trauma narratives of his characters.

On several occasions, Foer’s characters exemplify Cathy Caruth’s claim that trauma demands “a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (Unclaimed Experience 5). For example, because Oskar is unable to speak about his guilt, he spends nine hours making a bracelet for his mother, a seemingly meaningless piece of jewelry until the audience finds out that the bracelet is actually his father’s last message converted into Morse Code; however, Oskar’s mother fails to understand this non-linguistic form of communication (35). Another muted traumatized character, Thomas Sr. also tries to call his wife and reconnect only to codify
his message by tapping out an undecipherable numerical message, suggesting the insufficiency of a simple, algebraic understanding of psychological pain (269). In perhaps the bleakest example of inexpression, Oskar’s grandmother bears witness to her suffering through dozens of blank pages, a few of which ironically “appear” in the novel. These circuitously codified attempts to access unspeakable trauma mirror the techniques required to locate the elusive, interpersonal Real of history. Caruth asserts that “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, [and] history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (Unclaimed Experience 24). Therefore, traumatized individuals like Foer’s characters carry “an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (Trauma 5). Oskar’s quest teaches him this very lesson: sharing his narrative of trauma does not reveal objective historical answers about what happened to his father, but other subjective experiential narratives of trauma. By the end, capital-\textit{H} History in Foer’s novel resembles a broad web which has been woven by various trauma narratives. Upon closer inspection, these trauma narratives do not necessarily expose factual historical truth so much as expose the falseness of reductive historical narratives generally accepted to be true. To paraphrase Michel Foucault on the need for a genealogical approach to history, Foer suggests that it is impossible to believe that in the rending of the veil of history, the truth about 9/11 remains truthful (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 143-44). To question the redemptive trajectory of history—as it is framed by the Bush Administration after 9/11—inevitability makes one more critical about the “truth” of the narrative content within that trajectory. Here, the \v{Z}ižekian distinction needs to be made between “(factual) truth and truthfulness: what renders a report of a raped woman (or any narrative of trauma) truthful is its very factual unreliability, its confusion, its inconsistency” (Violence 4). Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl succinctly captures the essence of this distinction when, in \textit{Man’s Search for Meaning}, he writes: “I think it was Lessing who once said: ‘There are things which must cause you to lose your reason or you have none to lose.’ An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior” (20). In Foer’s novel, the factual inconsistencies and absurd claims embedded within the characters’ trauma narratives are, paradoxically, the very evidence needed to prove the horrific truthfulness of their traumatic experience, since this evidence testifies to what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub call “the breakage of a frame” that constitutes “historical truth” (Testimony 60). Through his characters, Foer challenges what Hayden White terms the “narrativity” of history. In “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” White claims: “The notion that sequences of real events possess the formal attributes of the stories we tell about imaginary events could only have its origin in wishes, daydreams, reveries” (27). Similar to Slotkin’s notion that American history is impelled by myth, White claims that history is always already imbued with cultural mythologies of moralizing social centers. Slotkin and White suggest that the arc of American history is long, to paraphrase a famous Martin Luther King Jr. statement, but it bends toward self-referential mythologies of redemption (Mieder 210). Foer disrupts these redemptive narratives, and their corollary motifs of regeneration through violence, by demonstrating the fallaciousness of both redemption and regeneration through the traumatic experiences of his characters. At one point in his conversation with William Black, Oskar thinks “about the pixels in the image of the falling body, and how the closer you looked, the less you see” (293). Foer indicates that the paradoxical inverse relationship between trauma and understanding also holds true for the redemptive narrative; the closer one looks at and analyzes narratives that erase the original trauma of 9/11, the less sure one is of those reductive narratives. Just as the image of the falling man haunt Oskar, so too does the Dresden bombing haunt his grandmother, who says:
“Anyone who believes that a second is faster than a decade did not live my life” (181). On the surface, this claim is as absurd as Thomas Sr.’s claim that the night of the Dresden bombing is still happening; but these make perfect sense as claims about the oblique perspectives afforded by traumatic experience. In a 2006 lecture, Žižek outlines the underlying premise of the redemptive narrative with a painting metaphor. To buy into the simplistic narrative frame of redemption is to buy into the idea that one merely needs to step back from a catastrophe just like one must step back from a painting in order to see its beauty, for even the most beautiful painting would seem like a “stain” if one stood too close (“Why Only an Atheist Can Believe”). For Oskar, his grandfather, and his grandmother, this idea of “stepping back” seems to be the exact problem. They cannot step back since the intrusive traumatic experience repeatedly forces them to witness the meaningless stain, and, to paraphrase Oskar: the closer you look at the stain, the less you see. However, if Žižek’s metaphor is taken to its logical conclusion, it appears to contradict LaCapra’s notion of working through as a process of “stepping back” in order to achieve critical distance. The problem is one of zooming out from the traumatic experience so as not to alchemize it into redemption. In terms of trauma theory, a fundamental question is: how can traumatic memories be converted into narrative memories that promote politically responsible forms of restorative justice over revenge? Detloff points out how a synergistic relationship arises between redemption and revenge when narratives “redescribe physical loss as spiritual gain, terror as cleansing, [or] pain as edification” (90-91). In his novel Darkness at Noon, which examines the contradictory logic of terror instituted by Stalin in the Soviet Union, Arthur Koestler shows how redemptive narratives lead to a form of regenerative violence that ironically forces one “to become a slaughterer, in order to abolish slaughterings, to sacrifice lambs so that no more lambs be slaughtered” (152). Since this idea of suspending ethics precisely in order to save ethics can infect any culture, political creed, or religion, the “single thought” Thomas Sr. keeps telling himself during the Dresden bombing takes on a newfound importance for Foer’s post-9/11 readers: keep thinking (Foer 214). As an ideological engine of plot, the notion that one must “make terror in order to win happiness” reveals a friction within the process of narrative storytelling itself—from narrative fiction to historiography—since narratives can become vehicles not only for self-discovery, but also for ideological self-deception (Detloff 176). The need to “keep thinking” in the wake of traumatic experience is really an ethical imperative to distrust the epistemological groundwork of our own thinking, which typifies the role of critical literary inquiry.

In Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, this kind of epistemological distrust is manifested in the linguistic limitations inherent in representing trauma. Even though direct representation may be impossible for Foer, indirect representation, which is the suggestive language of fiction, plays a crucial role. While the representational component of language may fail, Foer shows how its connotative component can still express complex emotions, especially the abstract intersubjective sentiment of love. The three main characters—Thomas Sr., Oskar and his grandmother—all question the aporetic gap between experiencing love for someone else and expressing their love for that person. Since Thomas Sr. is unable to speak, he attempts to express his love for his wife by taking her hands and slowly moving her index fingers toward one another, and when they are “about to touch, as they [are] only a dictionary page from touching, pressing on opposite sides of the word ‘love,’ [he stops] them” (135). The distance between her index fingers, which are typically used to physically point to objects in the world, symbolizes the distance between their inner subjectivities; and the word love serves as the imaginary bridge between each self-confined consciousness. At the end of her last letter to Oskar, his grandmother
also invokes the suggestive power of language. Admitting to Oskar that she did not tell Anna that she loved her before the Dresden firebombing, she explains that it felt “unnecessary” and she wonders: “… how can you say I love you to someone you love?” (314). Although she acknowledges the constitutive distance between herself and her grandson, she tells Oskar: “Here is the point of everything I have been trying to tell you, Oskar. It is always necessary. I love you” (314). To paraphrase Tennyson, the grandmother’s words half conceal and half reveal the essence of her feelings for Oskar (Tennyson 9). In this context, language succeeds as a medium of communication precisely because it fails in a unique way; despite its denotative limits, connotative language in Foer’s novel attempts to leap across the gap of inter-subjectivity. Foer fleshes out this idea in a scene between Oskar and his father. When Oskar questions the veracity of his father’s story about the fictional “Sixth Borough” of New York City, his father says that “there’s no irrefutable evidence. There’s nothing that could convince someone who doesn’t want to be convinced. But there is an abundance of clues that would give the wanting believer something to hold on to” (221). The bridge of language connects people not with the certainty of deduction, but with the unreliable belief of induction. While complex internal experiences like pain and love may be inaccessible for direct referential language, they can be imagined through a kind of irreligious leap of faith. Toward the end of the novel, Oskar embodies this leap when he thinks to himself: “I don’t believe in God, but I believe that things are extremely complicated, and [my mom] looking over me was as complicated as anything ever could be. But it was also incredibly simple. In my only life, she was my mom, and I was her son” (324). Paradoxically, authentic interpersonal communication here almost demands the construction of a lie that is meta-aware of its own deception. Because Foer is keenly aware of the representational weaknesses and mystification of language, his novel continually draws attention to its own artifice. Depending on how one counts, the novel’s first Hamish Hamilton edition includes at least 63 pictures, while the second Mariner books edition contains around 60 (Codde 250). As alternatives to written language, these pictures construct a vocabulary of suggestive images. None of the pictures, though, have elicited the ire of critics like the novel’s (in)famous flipbook. In the novel’s last pages, Oskar collects pictures of a man falling from the World Trade Center and reverses the order so that when he flips through them, it looks like the man is “floating” back up into the tower (325). Oskar thinks, “If I’d had more pictures, he would’ve flown through a window, back into the building…” (325). He continues to think about reversing time until it brings his father back to him, which leads Oskar to assert in the novel’s closing line: “We would have been safe” (326). In his caustic review “Extremely Cloying and Incredibly False,” Harry Siegal calls Foer a “fraud and a hack” and claims that the novel ends “with the hope of redeeming ourselves from history, of returning to the wonderful mysteries of youth, where things are ‘extremely complicated’ yet ‘incredibly simple’” (“Extremely Cloying”). But if the main thematic thrust of the novel up to this point has been to disrupt and dislocate redemptive narratives, it seems odd that Foer would end his work with simplistic, cartoon-like closure. Instead, as Philip Codde explains, “the entire closing section of the novel is written in the past conditional mood, which clearly indicates the illusory nature of the entire endeavor” (251). Foer’s repeated use of the conditional “would” emphasizes this closing section’s awareness of itself as artifice. In fact, Oskar’s reversed flipbook, in its very irrationality, represents the false comfort of the redemptive 9/11 narrative. As an example of Detloff’s notion of resilient writing, Foer successfully navigates between the potentially dangerous mode of redemption and the apocalyptic unspeakability of resignation. Similarly, Oskar manages to solve the riddle of “stepping back” from Žižek’s meaningless stain. He gains critical distance from his traumatic
experience without converting loss into a fetishized absence that generates endless grieving. In the last line of the novel, when Oskar thinks “We would have been safe,” he recognizes that he can regain neither his father nor the symbolic paternal safety of his naïve youth (326). Therefore, Oskar’s ability to begin working through his trauma coincides with a renewed investment in his relationship with his mother and a maturing sense of ethical responsibility.
Chapter 3: Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*

*The event itself has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile.*

Don DeLillo, “In the Ruins of the Future”

While Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* both explore the traumatic aftermath of 9/11 through the vehicle of the nuclear family, which metaphorically extends to a critical exploration of the public sphere, the political thrust of DeLillo’s 2007 novel is, in one sense, more ambiguous than Foer’s 2005 novel, but less ambiguous in another. For example, in *Falling Man*, DeLillo’s characters are consciously engaged in the post-9/11 political environment in a way that Foer’s characters are not, as DeLillo’s characters debate theoretical reasons for the attack several times throughout the novel—from capitalist exploitation in the era of globalization to the religious “panic” of developing Middle Eastern countries and the subsequent desperation at the root of terrorism’s entropic agency (*Falling Man* 46-47). DeLillo engages even more directly in the political and ethical implications of 9/11 by writing three chapters from the point of view of the terrorists, one of which serves as the novel’s final chapter “In the Hudson Corridor.”

The political and ethical critiques imbedded in *Falling Man* are more ambiguous and nuanced than *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. As historical events threaded together by the deliberate targeting of civilians, Foer suggests a tripartite connection between 9/11, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the firebombing of Dresden. Instead of employing Foer’s grand historical comparisons and broad thematic leaps, DeLillo treats 9/11 as a historical singularity and questions his own ability as fiction writer to respond to large-scale violence. DeLillo seems to recognize the potential paradox of writing about violence outlined by Slavoj Žižek, who explains how a direct analytical engagement with violence may prevent critical thinking in two key ways: an analysis that is too passionate leads to an intense empathic identification with victims and closes off impartial understanding, while an analysis that is too dispassionate ignores the traumatic power of the violent event and the suffering of victims (*Violence* 4). Žižek’s dual-pronged warning against too much empathy and not enough empathy depends upon the premise that “making sense” of violence is an inexorably moral endeavor.

Since meaning and morality are integrally entwined, DeLillo struggles to represent violence without credulously misinterpreting reality and falling into various traps of uncritical thought, which could serve as a rudimentary definition of ideology. In *Falling Man*—and his 2001 Harper’s essay “In the Ruins of the Future”—DeLillo dispenses with the didactic cultural impulse to declare the “meaning” of 9/11 by illustrating how “response is always a question of response-ability, or the ethical how” (Abel 1236). DeLillo does not merely inquire into what 9/11 means, which requires a basic judgment of mass mediated content, but into how 9/11 generates meaning within particular ideological frames, an approach that brackets the mediated content of 9/11 and suspends hasty moral judgment. In his famous claim about the moral implications of poetry after the Holocaust, Theodor Adorno criticizes the demand to declare the “meaning” of Auschwitz:

*Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to*
absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation. ("Cultural Criticism and Society" 34)

Adorno does not criticize poetry itself, but rather the contemplative search for what violence means; he advocates inquiry into how that specific mode of searching engenders meaning. When appalling violence is sublimated into an unsophisticated dialectical synthesis that "makes sense" of suffering by employing metaphors—e.g., "putting the past behind you"—Adorno suggests that abstract ideas of redemptive progress reify the traumatic impact of violence. This attenuation of horrific suffering thrusts the Holocaust into a pseudo-edifying framework that claims to clarify self-referential ideological positions. In his conditional revision of his famous statement, Adorno draws attention to the structural framework that brings meaning into being: "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems" (Negative Dialectics 362). At first glance, it may seem ironic that Adorno uses a simile to make his point when poetic metaphors and representations are precisely what he criticizes in his assertion concerning the barbarity of poetry after Auschwitz. But Adorno’s “screaming tortured man” simile is a self-erasing comparison that explodes the framework needed to conceptualize the notion of “likeness” itself. In his essay “In the Ruins of the Future,” DeLillo uses a comparable self-erasing simile when he describes the surreal implosion of the World Trade Center: “The [implosion] was real, punishingly so…and there was the huge antenna falling out of the sky, straight down, blunt end first, like an arrow moving backward in time” (“In the Ruins” 39). DeLillo puts the notion of metaphorical “likeness” at stake, which cognitive linguist George Lakoff claims governs conceptual human thought, in order to interrogate linguistic and narrative representations as modes of objective understanding (Lakoff and Johnson 3; Abel 1244). DeLillo questions the representational objectivity of language and stories since they tend to establish Archimedean points of view that mistakenly imply that the writer is outside two seemingly comparable traumatic events (Abel 1245). For DeLillo, this post-Enlightenment fantasy of an objective outside is the structuring field of ideology. In Falling Man, I argue that DeLillo explores how this representational field generates meaning in the face of disquieting images of people falling or jumping from the World Trade Center. Taking Richard Drew’s famous Falling Man photograph as a nodal point in the affective framework of that day’s trauma, DeLillo’s novel illustrates how a melancholic attachment to the narrative of U.S. dominance leads to violent acting-out, whereas the ability to respond with ethical consistency is predicated on a critical distance from an ideological field of vision, from which DeLillo does not exempt himself as a writer. Careful not to diminish the traumatic impact of 9/11 within a redemptive mode, DeLillo also foregrounds the body as a site of vulnerability, metaphoric complexity, and resilience.

Some of the most disturbing images to emerge from 9/11 were the World Trade Center “jumpers.” A USA Today study estimated that at least two hundred people fell to their deaths—mostly from the north tower’s 101st, 105th, 106th, and 107th floors (Friend 133). The circulation of these images, though, became almost immediately controversial in the United States. In Watching the World Change: The Stories behind the Images of 9/11, David Friend claims that images and video clips of planes exploding into the World Trade Center were not censored because the horror was "beyond the range of the eye and the camera;” representations of “jumpers,” however, “isolated the instant just before certain death. And it brought the viewer…to the very ledge of terror itself” (134). Associated Press photographer Richard Drew’s Falling Man photograph became a lightning rod for popular outrage and the ethical debate surrounding media self-censorship. For instance, on September 12th, The Morning Call in Allentown, Pennsylvania
ran a full-length shot of Drew’s photograph. The photo features an ostensibly dark-skinned man wearing a white jacket and black pants plunging headfirst in a frozen bicycle-kick. According to Naomi Halperin, the photo editor at *The Morning Call*, “I got in [that Wednesday] at 9 a.m. and had five [voicemail] message[s]. Four didn’t leave numbers or names. They just screamed. For a while” (as quoted in Friend 137). A number of scholars, cultural critics and journalists—from Susan Sontag and David Simpson to *Esquire*’s Tom Junod—have theorized why these images in general, and Drew’s photo in particular, have provoked such visceral public anger. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag claims that “[p]hotographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness…that terrible things happen” (13). Junod notes how public anger played a role in regulating the photos and videos of “jumpers” to the “internet underbelly,” which made it seem “as though the jumpers’ experience, instead of being central to the horror, was tangential to it, a sideshow best forgotten” (quoted in Friend 139). Interpreting his own photograph, Richard Drew believes that “it’s hard to look at [the Falling Man] because [viewers are] thinking about what comes at the end of that, when he hits the ground, and that could be them” (quoted in Friend 141). But despite the fact that public anger pressured traditional mass media into suppressing images of “jumpers,” David Simpson identifies an interesting paradox regarding the media’s coverage and the American culture’s reaction to the disturbing photographs of people falling through the air. While very little media coverage showed people jumping or falling, many politicians and cultural pundits painted these same people as heroes who had sacrificed themselves for the nebulous notion of freedom in the United States (Simpson 48). Simpson focuses on then-New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s December 2001 farewell address, when Giuliani claimed that “[l]ong after we are all gone, it’s the sacrifice of our patriots and their heroism that is going to be what this place [Ground Zero] is remembered for” (quoted in Simpson 47). Simpson maintains that Giuliani’s invocation of heroism and sacrifice betrays the “desperate urge to assure us all that these deaths were not in vain, that they were exalted and dignified sacrifices in a great cause…” (49). This yoking together of victim and hero harkens back to the early American captivity narratives exemplified by Mary Rowlandson and their central motif of extracting meaning from seemingly absurd suffering. Just as sacrificial victimhood within the early captivity narrative embodies heroic agency before God and his greater divine plan, the anxious alchemization of dead American civilians into martyrs for the American “homeland” introduces a mode of discourse that knots together God and the nation-state. Hence, the redemptive narrative works as a hollowed out theodicy, as an attempt to justify suffering in the name of a greater, transcendent plan. Like Simpson, Jürgen Habermas also criticizes the post-9/11 misuse of the concept of heroism and quotes Bertolt Brecht’s famous warning: “Pity the land that needs heroes” (quoted in Borradori 43). Habermas implies that heroism is symptomatic of a need to retroactively impose meaning onto unbearable anguish like a Freudian “screen memory.” According to Freud, screen memories “screen out” or conceal memories that may be too painful for the subject’s ego (Sturken 22). Freud wondered if any truly accurate memories exist from the structurally traumatic time of childhood: “Our childhood memories show us our earliest years not as they were but as they appeared at the later periods when memories were aroused” (quoted in Sturken 22). Like the adult subject’s unconscious desire to mask the psychical pain of childhood, redemptive 9/11 narratives not only screen out the most disturbing images of meaningless suffering, but also commemorate the people in these images by substituting the traumatic impression of helplessness with the more meaningful concept of stoic heroism. In *Falling Man*, DeLillo illustrates this ideological manifestation of redemption through the continual
performance of Richard Drew’s iconic image of “jumpers” in order to short-circuit that ideological frame with what he calls a “counter narrative.”

Several months after 9/11, DeLillo published the essay “In the Ruins of the Future” in Harper’s Magazine, where he claims that, even though the “massive spectacle” of the attacks seem “too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practiced response,” the narrative of that day “ends in the rubble and it is left to us to create the counter narrative” (35; 34). Since notions of representational accuracy and good judgment are already bound up with underlying moral demands, DeLillo emphasizes the form of the counter narrative when he writes that “plots reduce the world” (“In the Ruins” 34). DeLillo’s counter narrative aims to reconfigure the usual framework that makes a violent event coherent enough to understand, to question “with greater seriousness and rigor, how imaging processes can render visible—seeable—an event such as 9/11…” (Abel 1247). DeLillo writes that images of people “falling from the towers hand in hand” are “part of the counter narrative, hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel. In its desertion of every basis of comparison, the event asserts its singularity” (“In the Ruins” 39).

But with the publication of Falling Man in 2007, DeLillo raises fundamental questions about his own claims through three key scenes featuring David Janiak, the Falling Man performance artist who dresses in a suit and suddenly plunges headfirst off buildings only to have his fall broken by a harness. In Janiak’s first scene, DeLillo says that the performance artist “brought it back…those stark moments in the burning towers when people fell or were forced to jump” (33). Here, DeLillo comments not only on his own novel, but on the ethical and political implications of the “post-9/11 novel” as a nascent genre. Like the Falling Man performance artist, DeLillo brings back “the single falling figure that trails a collective dread” (Falling Man 33). Janiak’s performance art via DeLillo’s novel raises a much larger question anticipated by Sontag: “Are viewers inured—or incited—to violence by the depiction of cruelty”? (Sontag, back cover). If “more aggressivity toward the threatening Outside” by the United States amounts to “a paranoiac acting out,” then could representations of 9/11 become ideological fuel for the “War on Terror” and, in some sense, choreographed acting-out? (Žižek Welcome 49). DeLillo’s description of the angry crowd around Janiak questions the goal of Janiak’s art: “The people were shouting up at him, outraged at the spectacle, the puppetry of human desperation” (33). Janiak’s enigmatic presence in the novel does not confirm the sweeping theoretical generalization that 9/11 exploded all cultural structures of meaning-making, which is an absurd attempt to put 9/11 categorically on par with the Holocaust. Instead, Janiak represents a kind of traumatic belatedness that continually disrupts, and thus haunts, how a particular ideology actualizes meaning. The inscrutability of Janiak’s artistic motives enrages the people because he brings back an event they have not fully understood. DeLillo underscores the inability to understand Janiak when Lianne realizes that he is on “another plane of being, beyond reach” (Falling Man 168). Pushed to its limit, this epistemological disruption bleeds into an ontological uncertainty anticipated by Derrida, who outlined terrorism’s “hauntology” in the early 1990s: “The subject that haunts is not identifiable…one cannot decide between hallucination and perception, there are only displacements” (136). During Janiak’s second scene, DeLillo zeros in on the discomfort of a single character, Lianne, to emphasize the anxiety that generates these displacements:

She wished she could believe this was some kind of antic theater, an absurdist drama that provokes onlookers to share a comic understanding of what is irrational in the great schemes of being or in the next small footprint…This was too near and deep, too personal.
All she wanted was to share a look, catch someone’s eye, see what she herself was feeling. (*Falling Man* 163)

Lianne wants to put Janiak’s performance into a familiar category, but the scene wounds her too deeply and blurs the boundaries between artistic expression and mimetic representation of a past reality. In Lianne’s moment of disorientation, DeLillo fleshes out his cryptic dictum from his earlier novel *Mao II*: “the future belongs to crowds” (*Mao II* 16). Puzzled by the Falling Man performance artist, an obvious symbol for the Falling Man photograph, Lianne feels the need to connect with people around her, a crowd whose fear seems eerily proportional to its targeted anger at Janiak. In Janiak’s final scene, Lianne watches another man watch Janiak’s performance: “[The man] was seeing something elaborately different from what he encountered step by step in the ordinary run of hours. He had to learn how to see it correctly, find a crack in the world where it might fit” (168). Drawing an explicit metaphorical connection between Janiak’s continual re-presentation of the Falling Man photograph and the mediated representations of disturbing 9/11 images, DeLillo shows how this man—like a television viewer—unknowingly seems “to be in a pose of his own, attached to this spot for half a lifetime” (168). DeLillo reverses the usual logic of observation; instead of metaphorically consuming the representation by looking at it, the man is metaphorically consumed by the image as if the representation is somehow looking at him. This ostensibly eccentric inversion bears out Derrida’s claim that, within a hauntology, “one feels oneself looked at by what one cannot see” (*Specters of Marx* 136). DeLillo underscores the illusion of agency within a Western political paradigm that stresses negative freedom. While viewers are “free” to look at Drew’s Falling Man photograph and interpret its meaning, DeLillo suggests that the motivations behind the recirculation of Drew’s photograph are as opaque as Janiak’s motivations for reenacting that photograph. In other words, DeLillo suggests that for many Americans the freedom to view the Falling Man photograph is really just the abstract husk of freedom since it tacitly approves of the existing ideological framework, which is ill-equipped to comprehend all of the photograph’s political implications. Conversely, DeLillo hopes to illuminate how positive freedom draws attention to the ideological framework itself as the *a priori* structure governing interpretation. Ultimately, DeLillo’s description of crowds yelling before an upside-down Janiak illustrates how images like Richard Drew’s Falling Man are one of the indirect means by which the myopic concept of post-9/11 “patriotism” is reified in order to legitimate the melancholic violence at the core of the “War on Terror.”

Toward the end of the novel, Lianne discovers in the newspaper that David Janiak has died of seemingly natural causes at age 39 (219). Considering Janiak’s fate, DeLillo seems to imply that the glut of media representations of 9/11 could prove destructive, especially if these representations are filtered through narrative structures of redemption and regeneration through violence. According to the performance artist’s brother Roman, David Janiak had “plans for a final fall…[that] did not include a safety harness” (221). In a novel replete with motifs of suicide—i.e., the final scene is from the perspective of the terrorists inside the first plane to hit

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16 I’m using the term “negative freedom” within the context of Isaiah Berlin’s seminal essay “Two Concepts of Liberty,” where he distinguishes between negative and positive liberty. Characterized by the absence of limits, Berlin maintains that negative liberty aims to find a solution to the problem: “What is the area within which the subject—a person or group of persons—is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?”; on the other hand, positive liberty is characterized by the presence of autonomy and self-awareness and tries to determine: “What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?” (121-22).
the World Trade Center, and Lianne is still haunted by her father’s suicide—Janiak’s planned suicide proposes a metaphorical connection between the incessant need to repeat 9/11 through various media and the post-traumatic symptom of self-destructive acting-out. For Derrida, a curious contradiction emerges in this constant recirculation of 9/11 representations: the desire “to conjure up, as if by magic, the ‘thing’ itself, the fear or terror it inspires (for repetition always protects by neutralizing, deadening, distancing a traumatism…) and, on the other hand, to deny… our powerlessness to name in an appropriate fashion, to characterize, to think the thing in question…” (Borradori 87). Derrida identifies a significant paradox: this apotropaic impulse—i.e., the desire to conjure up and banish away a thought at the same time—morphs into a neurotic attempt to simultaneously reveal and conceal the trauma. This contradictory impulse corresponds to what trauma theorist Judith Herman calls “the central dialectic of psychological trauma”: “the conflict between the will to deny the horrible events [to leave them un-named] and the will to proclaim them aloud” (1). Toward the end of the novel, DeLillo addresses this problem of naming the un-namable when his protagonist Keith Neudecker walks out of World Trade Center: “That’s where everything was, all around him, falling away, street signs, people, things he could not name. Then he saw a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fell, arms waving like nothing in this life” (246). DeLillo challenges the very claim he made in his Harper’s 2001 essay that we must create the counter narrative; he demonstrates how simplistic acts of memory and “truth-telling” may mask the a-logically codified “doublethink” of post-traumatic narratives. DeLillo even raises questions about his own capacity as a fiction writer to create the counter narrative when a New School panel wonders: “Falling Man as Heartless Exhibitionist or Brave New Chronicler of the Age of Terror?” (Falling Man 220). The New School panel challenges DeLillo with the same kind of question: does his novel typify a callous appropriation of suffering or is it a bold attempt to understand the United States after 9/11? DeLillo asks readers to examine whether Falling Man in particular, and the post-9/11 novel in general, is simply a cog in the larger machinery of media recirculation that prevents the counter narrative from developing. Essentially, DeLillo seems conflicted as to whether he is part of the solution or complicit in the problem.

For DeLillo, a hidden aspect of that problem may include the much-lauded notion of “contemplation,” or the deep vertical thinking typically extolled by novelists, literary scholars and critics. In his famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin disputes the ethical beneficence of contemplating the static image of a painting. Benjamin notes how the “painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations” (Illuminations 238). In his interpretation of Benjamin, David Simpson notes that “the space opened to depth and seriousness by concentration must…also be the space of ideology at its most potent” (69). In lieu of contemplative raptness, Benjamin emphasizes the positive distractive potential of film in the tradition of Dadaist art.² Bennington’s film for the Dadaists “became an instrument of ballistics” that produced a “moral shock effect” in an outraged public (“The Work of Art” 239).
pictures and video clips of people plummeting through the air beside the World Trade Center towers. Though not many “jumper” photographs were disseminated by major American media outlets, David Friend notes that virtually no full video clips were shown of people falling all the way to the ground (134). In Friend’s estimation, photographs of people falling were disseminated—and still are through commemorative 9/11 photography books—because they “can be consumed at one’s own pace, then accepted or rejected or rationalized on one’s own terms, largely because the experience has been decontextualized: terror, compartmentalized into pixels” (134). The speed of real-time video, however, causes the thoughts and questions of viewers to “hurtle by at an unprocessable pace [since]…[the] videos allow the [viewers] to witness the horror whole” (Friend 134-35). The moment frozen in the picture frame allows viewers to concentrate and process the image through their own ideological lenses.

While DeLillo does not privilege distraction in the same way as Benjamin, DeLillo suggests that similar problems exist when we focus too intensely on cathected photographs like the Falling Man. When Lianne stares for the last time into a photograph of Janiak, the “picture [burns] a hole in her mind and heart, dear God, he was a falling angel and his beauty was horrific” (Falling Man 222). DeLillo introduces a dual-pronged analytical problem: the civic sacredness of the Falling Man photograph not only tends to occlude critical understanding, but it also bestows a mysterious notion of meaning onto that photograph. This hazy notion of meaning can be clarified when applied to other sacred American still-shots, like those captured from Abraham Zapruder’s film of President Kennedy’s assassination. In the twelve years following the assassination, the Zapruder film was available to the public only in stills (Sturken 26). Marita Sturken claims that these stills were “imbued with a kind of sacred status, as if they [held] within [them] an essential clue to the meaning of [President Kennedy’s assassination]” (26). When sacred political images are woven into the fabric of cultural understanding, Sturken asserts that people tend to believe that such images contain hidden pieces of “truth” which can be extracted and used to understand the event in toto (26). A number of journalists and pundits employed this ill-considered style of “synecdoche analysis” vis-à-vis the Falling Man photograph, noting how the man’s dignified stoicism in the face of certain death metaphorically extended to some kind of stoically resilient American character (Friend 136). Leon Wieseltier, literary editor of The New Republic, exemplifies the danger of such an analytical approach when he implies that redemptive meaning can be extracted from the Falling Man photograph. Wieseltier states that the rigidly posed man in the photograph looks like an upside-down soldier against the background of the equally rigid vertical towers, a pose which momentarily suspends the laws of gravity and points toward heaven (Friend 136). DeLillo implicitly criticizes this kind of deep, Benjaminian contemplation since it is already colored by an ideology that invokes the sublime beauty of “falling angels” and bends toward redemption. Tendentiously decontextualized, the Falling Man photograph distorts reality in a compelling manner and promotes chimeras of redemption. DeLillo captures the effects of such compelling distortion when Keith and Lianne’s son refuses to acknowledge the collapse of the towers, thereby constructing a soothing Freudian “screen memory.” Listening to her son, Lianne realizes that his desire to rewrite his own personal memory—and, by metonymic extension, the official history of 9/11—includes details that are

18 The much-repeated notion that the Falling Man is inflexibly posed, dignified and pointing downward like an arrow throws into even sharper relief the rhetorical difference between photographs and video. Richard Drew actually took several pictures of the Falling Man, most of which capture the man hideously out of control (Friend 136).
“elements of a failed fairy tale, eerie enough but without coherence” (Falling Man 102). DeLillo suggests that the incoherent eeriness of decontextualized representations of 9/11 have the potential to engender redemptive narratives resembling failed fairy tales.

DeLillo uses an embodied metaphor to illustrate the latent danger of deodorized narratives of redemption that refuse to recognize the complexity of trauma’s aftermath. After Keith escapes from the World Trade Center relatively unharmed, he goes to a hospital where a doctor explains the concept of “organic shrapnel:”

In those places where [the attack] 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 of the suicide bomber’s body. The bomber is blown to bits, literally bits and pieces, and fragments of flesh and bone come flying outward with such force and velocity that they get wedged, they get trapped in the body of anyone who’s in striking distance. (16)

While this passage uses an embodied metaphor to literalize the effects of psychological trauma, it also contains a trenchant insight into the inherently destructive logic of terrorism. In his 1991 novel Mao II, DeLillo writes that terrorists “make raids on human consciousness” (41). In his 2001 Harper’s essay, DeLillo makes a similar claim about terrorism: “It was the power of American culture to penetrate every wall, home, life and mind. Terror’s response is a narrative that has been developing over years, only now becoming inescapable. It is our lives and minds that are occupied now” (33). Aside from the public spectacle of killing civilians, the 9/11 attackers sought to alter the American consciousness, to destabilize it through an invisible, virus-like infection of fear. As one character in the novel put is, “There are no goals [the terrorists] can hope to achieve. They’re not liberating a people or casting out a dictator…They strike a blow to this country’s dominance…[they] show how a great power can be vulnerable. A power that interferes, that occupies” (46). This analysis of the teleological endpoint of terrorism corresponds to what Jean Baudrillard calls the “terrorist hypothesis:” “that the system will commit suicide in response to the multiple challenges posed by deaths and suicides” (17). Since 9/11 style terrorism achieves its political goals through suicidal and destructive means, violent overreaction by the United States blindly mimics the self-destructive instrumentality of the terrorists.

According to Giovanna Borradori, Jürgen Habermas stresses this exact point: “the risk of overreaction on the part of the United States after 9/11…has for [Habermas] a paradoxical and tragic implication: in spite of not expressing realistic political objectives, global terrorism succeeds in the supremely political goal of delegitimizing the authority of the state” (56). From this perspective, DeLillo’s “organic shrapnel” metaphor literalizes traumatic introjections into the psyche and portrays the U.S.-led “War on Terror” as an uncritical adoption of inherently suicidal means which lead to destabilizing ends. For Alain Badiou, the United States’ embrace of such means in the “War on Terror” represents the “disjunctive synthesis of two nihilisms” (quoted in Simpson 5). In the last chapter of Falling Man, which begins from the perspective of the terrorists who are piloting a plane into one of the towers, DeLillo shows the organic shrapnel of the nameless terrorist’s consciousness embedding itself into Keith: the terrorist watches a bottle roll 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 Nuedecker out of his chair and into a wall” (Falling Man 239). Not only can the body of the victim become strangely interfused with the terrorist’s body, but so too can the victim’s perception of reality, which parallels how the logic of the American redemptive narrative becomes eerily interfused with the terrorist’s narrative; hence, one kind of suicidal framework is pitted against another. DeLillo’s description
of one terrorist’s internal narrative framework before 9/11 could just as easily be applied to the United States after 9/11: “Plot drew them together more tightly than ever. Plot closed the world to the slenderest line of sight, where everything converges to a point” (174). This description echoes the deathward spiral of plot in DeLillo’s 1988 novel Libra: “Plots carry their own logic. There is a tendency of plots to move toward death” (221). By carrying their own logic, plots “shape every breath” since they are necessary templates for understanding and responding to events (Falling Man 176). The potential for violence escalates when these narrative templates conceptualize dead bodies not as the flesh of fully human individuals, but as plot points. In a 1993 interview with the Paris Review, DeLillo claims that highly plotted mystery novels move either “inexorably toward a dead body or [flow] directly from it” and thereby localize “the awesome force of the real death outside the book…” (“The Art of Fiction” 330). In Falling Man, one of the 9/11 hijackers objectifies the innocent people he will kill, thinking of them as points in a highly plotted religious narrative: “The others exist only to the degree that they fill the role we have designed for them. This is their function as others. Those who will die have no claim to their lives outside the useful fact of their dying” (176). This notion of objectification within the narrative of the “War on Terror” forms the moral core of Judith Butler’s question after 9/11: “What makes for a grievable life?” (20). The nihilistic plots of both Al-Qaeda terrorists and the post-9/11 “War on Terror” resemble the cyclical violence of the Furies in the Oresteia. When the Furies are the victims of deadly force, their pain is more ontologically valid than the exact kind of pain the Furies cause with their own use of deadly force against others. Symbolizing the justice of tribalism, they justify retributive violence because it accords with a narrative template that tends to subjectify the traumatic impact of death on their side while simultaneously objectifying the deaths of their enemy. Each side’s melancholic focus on its own dead perpetuates a cycle of violence where both understand themselves as victims fighting in self-defense. For Derrida, this cycle of violence continues because almost every “terrorist in the world claims to be responding in self-defense to a prior terrorism…one that simply went by other names and covered itself with all sorts of more or less credible justifications” (quoted in Borradori 103). Therefore, DeLillo writes three chapters from the terrorists’ points of view not because he aims to “speak for them”—a hubristic impulse that usually codifies our own anxieties and misunderstandings and projects them onto an orientalized Other—but in order to show how dogmatic fidelity to ideological plots reifies the bodies of others and fuels cyclical violence. But DeLillo does not slip into total despondency, for he also outlines how the United States can stop this myopic plot of cyclical violence and self-destructive acting-out by engaging with the “humaness” of the human body qua body.

DeLillo uses embodied metaphors of trauma in order to demonstrate how the body operates not only as a site of vulnerability, but of resilience. He suggests that once United States’ citizens recognize that “there is no logic in apocalypse,” that the desire for revenge merely perpetuates the very cycle one has been wronged by, they can begin to responsibly “work through” the trauma of 9/11 (“In the Ruins” 34). Since “the core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others,” as Judith Herman claims, “recovery [must] [be] based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation” (133). For DeLillo, if the body is both the literal and metaphorical site for uncontrolled acting-out, the body is also the site of complex forms of recovery and empowerment. As trauma survivors, Keith and Lianne represent two different patterns for response, the healthier of the two epitomized by Lianne. After he escapes from the World Trade Center, Keith engages in two
rituals that represent melancholic acting-out: performing wrist exercises and playing poker. In order to repair a minor cartilage tear suffered on 9/11, Keith obsessively performs the exercises four times a day, which he knows is unnecessary, because they are “the true countermeasures to the damage he’d suffered in the tower, in the descending chaos…His injury was slight but it wasn’t the torn cartilage that was the subject of this effort. It was the chaos…” (*Falling Man* 40). As a physical neurosis that simultaneously reveals and conceals his trauma, Keith begins to compulsively repeat the exercises toward the end of the novel: “There was no problem with his wrist. The wrist was fine. But he sat in his hotel room, facing the window, hand curled into a gentle fist…He counted the seconds, he counted the repetitions” (235-36). Instead of remembering the injury and its associated trauma in a self-integrated narrative, Keith repeats the memory as an action, like a dejected parody of true self-empowerment. Aside from his wrist exercises, Keith also obsessively plays poker after 9/11, eventually traveling to Las Vegas for weeks at a time. At first glance, Keith’s poker playing seems like the early stages of working through. Not only does Keith play at a table with other people, but he also begins to find meaning within the rules of game:

…the game had structure, guiding principles, sweet and easy interludes of dream logic when the player knows that the card he needs is the card that’s sure to fall…Call or raise, call or fold, the little binary pulse located behind the eyes, the choice that reminds you who you are. It belonged to him, this yes or no… (212).

Within the game of poker, Keith conceives of binary choice as pseudo-proof of his own Cartesian, “I-choose—therefore-I-am” subjectivity. However, Keith fails to realize how the belatedness of trauma—what Freud called *Nachträglichkeit*—disrupts the binary opposition of inside and outside (Leys 21). In other words, Keith can never be sure whether the “choice” supposedly constitutive of his subjectivity is self-generated from within or generated from the continual return of the “organic shrapnel” of the traumatic experience which has penetrated his psyche. Once Keith travels to Las Vegas, he grows increasingly more isolated, as he runs into his friend Terry Chang and decides to keep playing alone. When Keith travels back home, which happens less often as the novel progresses, he feels like there is “no language…to tell [Lianne and his son] how he spent his days and nights” (197). For Keith, the structure of poker facilitates not an opening up to others and a conversion to narrative memory, but a narcissistic focus on the self and a repetition of statistical analysis, causing DeLillo to describe Keith as “a self-operating mechanism, like a humanoid robot that understands two hundred voice commands, far-seeing, touch-sensitive but totally, rigidly controllable” (*Falling Man* 226). The limited choice Keith experiences while playing poker is actually governed by a broader, uncontrollable compulsion to continue making those limited choices. Hence, Keith can make choices within the game, but he cannot choose *not* to play the game. The framework of poker resembles the framework of ideology, as the illusion of choice typifies the demand to declare the “meaning” of 9/11. DeLillo emphasizes how American fictions writers can choose what 9/11 means within post-9/11 ideology, but not how that ideology engenders meaning. To underscore the mystifying, self-referential nature of Keith’s psycho-ideological response to trauma, DeLillo aligns poker with religious discourse. While watching a poker tournament with Keith before he leaves for Las Vegas, Lianne realizes that the “game itself faded into anesthesia” and she makes “a leap to Kierkegaard, somehow” (117). When Keith runs into Terry Chang in Las Vegas, he tells Keith about secret high-stakes games that are springing up like an “underground religion…Like early Christians in hiding” (202-03). Similar to the totalizing metaphysical systems of Islam and Christianity, for Keith there is “nothing outside the game [of poker] but faded space” (*Falling
From a political perspective, DeLillo suggests that the quasi-religious framework of poker keeps Keith disconnected from reality after 9/11 and functions like an opiate in Marx’s famous critique of religion. For Marx, religion functions like an opiate because “it covers over the suffering without actually removing it” (Raines 72). Keith attempts to cover over or repress his traumatic experience within the framework of poker where he encounters “the kind of mellow tradition exemplified by the needless utterance of a few archaic words” (Falling Man 99). Unable to work through his traumatic experience, Keith can neither remove himself from the doctrinal ideology of the game nor stop the useless exercising of his already-healed wrist, since his wound is not physical but mental. In Keith’s last present-time scene, DeLillo shows him sitting alone on a hotel bed, a dejected figure “reciting fragments from the [wrist exercise] instruction sheet…[counting] the repetitions” (235-36).

Still suffering primarily from her father’s suicide, but also from the breakdown of her marriage to Keith and his near death at ground zero, Lianne attains the critical awareness necessary for working through her trauma via a renewed focus on her body, which allows her to recognize the inherent humanity embedded in other bodies outside her ideological framework. After Keith returns to Lianne after 9/11, her sexual desire for him changes: “It was a need that had the body in it, hands, feet, genitals, scrummy odors, clotted dirt…She wanted to absorb everything, childlike, the dust of stray sensation, whatever she could breathe in from other people’s pores” (Falling Man 105). By detailing the absorptive component of Lianne’s sexual desire, DeLillo draws an inverted parallel between sexual intercourse and the organic shrapnel of terrorism. Whereas organic shrapnel represents a destructive inter-bodily experience, DeLillo represents sex in this scene as a constructive experience. To convert this analogy into Elaine Scarry’s terms, sex is an example of making the world while organic shrapnel is an instance of unmaking the world. DeLillo even goes so far as to depict sex between Lianne and Keith as a kind of gentle violence: “They’d made love in the night, earlier, she wasn’t sure when, two or three years ago. It was back there somewhere, a laying open of bodies but also time…It was the tenderest sex she’d known with him” (69). DeLillo inverts the novel’s previous image of the body opened by organic shrapnel, suggesting a connection not only between the violent libidinal cores of both sex and terrorism, but also between sex and traumatic dissociative amnesia.

DeLillo highlights how the binary opposition between making and unmaking—eros and thanatos, respectively—is not nearly as rigidly defined as some may think. In his short story “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” Ernest Hemingway deconstructs this binary in way that sheds light on DeLillo’s deconstruction, as Hemingway’s protagonist claims that sex is “the good destruction. That’s the way we’re made to be destroyed” (47). Just as acting-out is intimately bound up with working through, DeLillo uses metaphors of the body to show the complex interlacement of vulnerability and resilience. Translating the resilience of her body into a resilience of mind, Lianne utilizes religious spirituality in the form of running to work through her trauma in way that Keith does not. Throughout the novel, Keith teases Lianne about her rigid running schedule, calling her “one of those madwomen running in the streets” (Falling Man 70). But Keith fails to see that for Lianne “long-distance running [is] [a] spiritual effort” (233). In Lianne’s last scene, she returns from jogging and smells “the sour reek of the morning run” and realizes that “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. It wasn’t even something she smelled so much as knew” (236). Lianne’s self-knowledge and renewed understanding of individual selfhood allows her to begin working through her father’s suicide. Since his suicide, Lianne thinks of herself as “only a girl, always a daughter, and her father was [always] drinking
a Tanqueray martini” (231). For most of her life, Lianne has defined herself in relation to her father as the lost love object, making her a melancholic in the Freudian sense. However, the self-imposed “pain and rigor” of running helps her develop an autonomous self that is no longer defined by that lost object (Falling Man 233). For Keith, poker is a spiritual framework that produces an ideological mystification that mimics the myopia of religious fundamentalism. But for Lianne, running is a spiritual framework that produces empirical questions—instead of groundless assertions—about not only her own body and identity, but about the bodies and identities of others.

After Lianne gains this spiritually intuitive knowledge of her body, she engages in a phenomenological investigation of her mind in relation to the minds of others: “This mind and soul, hers and everyone’s, keep dreaming toward something unreachable. Does this mean there’s something there…a force responsible in some way for the very nature, the vibrancy of our lives from the mind out…” (Falling Man 232). A tension emerges in Lianne’s distinction between self and other: the notion of an autonomous self that helped her work through her father’s suicide does not exist in a vacuum. If taken to its extreme philosophical conclusion, the standard Western conception of a “whole” self, and the subsequent focus on self-empowerment, slips into solipsism. Therefore, aside from self-empowerment after trauma, DeLillo illustrates how the most important aspect of working-through is the connection with others through community. His conception of community, though, is twofold: he stresses empathic awareness not only within the national community of the domestic United States, but within the international community as a whole. After her mother’s funeral, Lianne discovers the true identity of her mother’s lover “Martin,” whose actual name is Ernst Hechinger. When she realizes that Hechinger was a member of the communist terrorist group the Rote Armee Fraktion in West Germany during the Cold War, Lianne excuses his actions but then is immediately terrified at her own ability to justify instrumental violence: “Whatever it was he’d done, it was outside the lines of response. She could imagine his life, then and now…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” (195). Lianne overhears how her deeply structured ideological assumptions actualize information. Her sudden critical insight is that her ideology acts as a filter disturbingly similar to the very terrorist ideology she condemns: both ideologies produce narrow, tribalistic plots that close “the world to the slenderest line of sight” (DeLillo Falling Man 174). In this important scene, Lianne undergoes anagnorisis (“recognition”), which Aristotle defines as “a change from ignorance to knowledge” (Kennedy and Lawrence 1). For a brief moment, her perspective is disturbingly similar to Aeschylus’ Furies, who stress the traumatic impact of violence perpetrated against them but minimize their own violent actions. In this moment of recognition, Lianne takes the first step in gaining the critical distance necessary for halting the mimetic repetition of violence. For DeLillo, this moment of recognition also encompasses a critique of the unilateralism of the United States, which is at the heart of the “War on Terror.” According to Judith Butler, such unilateralism fails “to consider the ways in which our lives are profoundly implicated in the lives of others” (7). Continuing his relentless artistic self-examination, DeLillo raises questions about the violent implications concerning the claim in his 2001 Harper’s essay that 9/11 avoids “every basis for comparison…[and] asserts its singularity” (“In the Ruins” 39). Through Lianne’s characterological evolution, DeLillo shows how the notion of historical 19 For a concise overview of the Bush Administration’s push toward military unilateralism after 9/11, see the seventh edition (2007) of American Foreign Policy: Pattern and Process.
exceptionalism—e.g., “a violent tragedy like 9/11 has never happened before”—revives a kind of American exceptionalism that legitimates extraordinary violence, like preemptive war and interrogation techniques previously categorized as torture. DeLillo draws a complex connection here between the self/other binary distinction between bodies and the ethical distinction between violent historical events. In one sense, each self and each violent event can be conceptualized as divisible units different from any other self or event. But in another sense, DeLillo deconstructs this us/them binary opposition and shows how no self is a totally autonomous island, just like no violent event occurs against a historically blank background. Ultimately, the site of ethical responsibility is in the imaginative movements between bodies and events.

These empathic leaps do not necessarily stress a collective human condition; rather, they attempt to conceptualize all violently wounded bodies as representations of full human beings, not ideological plot points, with analogous inner worlds for registering pain. Hence, each wounded body is at once “like” and “not like” other wounded bodies. Žižek describes the ethical conclusion of this bivalent logic when he claims that “the terrifying death of each individual is absolute and incomparable…[thus] the only appropriate stance is unconditional solidarity with all victims” (Welcome 51). Of course, DeLillo wonders if we can even identify victims and perpetrators within our ideological frameworks. Such ideological misrecognition occurs when Keith and Lianne’s son mistakes Osama Bin Laden’s name for “Bill Lawton,” phonetically Westernizing the name of the founder of Al-Qaeda so as to make it understandable to his young mind (Falling Man 74). Although we may not be able to fully escape ideology and thus recognize our own misinterpretations of “Bill Lawton,” the ethical thrust of Falling Man is illuminated by Italo Calvino’s assertion that “politics, like literature, must above all know itself and distrust itself” (100). By short-circuiting our ideological assumptions, DeLillo reminds us that the essence of understanding is the unseen frame, and he advocates for a post-9/11 American literature of trenchant self-suspicion.
Chapter 4: Jess Walter’s The Zero

Our enemy are haters who hate our way of life and our abilities of organization! We will confound them!

Jess Walter, The Zero

In Brave New World Revisited, Aldous Huxley draws a contrast between philosophy and propaganda: while philosophy generates uncertainty about “the things that seem to us self-evident,” propaganda “teaches us to accept as self-evident matters about which it would seem reasonable to...feel doubt” (“Propaganda” 274). Huxley claims that the essence of propaganda is the repetition of stereotypical Manichean phrases (274-75). Attempting to answer the question “Why do they hate us?” after 9/11, national politicians and media pundits repeated several hackneyed buzzwords which usually emphasized the terrorists’ “hatred” of Western political conceptions of liberty. In his 2001 speech before a joint session of congress, President George W. Bush claimed that the terrorists “hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with one another” (“Address to a Joint Session”). Outraged at the Bush administration’s misuse of grief, Lynne Sharon Schwartz writes in her novel The Writing on the Wall that such nationalistic fervor represents “an assault on the common language (78-79).

In his 2006 novel The Zero, Jess Walter also critiques the aggressive propagandistic attempts by politicians to manufacture political consensus after 9/11. Walter parodies the habitual repetition of key words like “freedom” and “hero” in order to reveal not only their rhetorical circularity—e.g., the tautological premise that terrorists are “haters who hate our way of life”—but also the dangers of such self-insulated blindness (The Zero 101). Walter’s novel implies that the American response to 9/11 adhered, unfortunately, to LaCapra’s notion of a “founding trauma,” which is a traumatic event that should engender a fundamental reevaluation of national identity, but simply becomes the groundwork for the reinforcement of an already existing ideological conception of nationhood (LaCapra Writing History 162). For Walter, in the best of all possible worlds, 9/11 would have stimulated a philosophical inquiry into supposedly self-evident conceptions of who we are as Americans and what we stand for. Instead, Walter suggests that 9/11 has been hijacked by propaganda that attempts to establish as self-evident reactionary political positions that should be doubted—like preemptive war, indefinite detention, and state-sponsored torture.

In The Zero, Walter literalizes the blinding effects of the United States’ cultural and political response to 9/11 through his protagonist Brian Remy. In the opening scene, Remy wakes up in his New York apartment days after an unnamed, 9/11-style terrorist attack to find that he has shot himself in the head. Not only is Remy’s vision distorted by mysterious spots, but he suffers from random, dissociative “gaps” in consciousness that leave him unable to remember what happened in between his blackouts, which renders the novel’s narrative structure equally discontinuous and disorienting. As he retires from the New York police department, Remy is assigned to work for the fictional Documentation Department, a covert governmental agency that hopes to thwart the terrorist’s goals by identifying, filing and organizing every piece of paper at Ground Zero. Above the office door where Remy works, a large sign quotes “The Boss,” the city’s ruthless mayor: “Imagine the look on our enemies’ faces when they realize that we have gathered up every piece of paper and put it back!” (100). Eventually, the agency believes it discovers evidence of a latent terrorist cell in New York, and Remy is assigned to an even more
covert investigative team that employs violent Machiavellian means during his blackouts in order to help the agency search for the mysterious March Selios.

In this chapter, I argue that Jess Walter’s *The Zero* criticizes not only the United States’ surreally de-historicized political and cultural response to 9/11, but also how this response produces dangerously blind redemptive narratives that promote secret, state-sponsored violence. By remaining ignorant of such violence, the United States resembles a trauma victim who acts-out rather than works through psychic pain, an analogy which raises complex questions about collective moral agency. Ultimately, Walter deconstructs the us/them binary opposition that underpins the violence generated by redemption narratives, which is best illuminated by Derrida’s notion of “autoimmunitary aggression.”

When Brian Remy regains consciousness after his self-inflicted gunshot wound, he experiences amnesia and quickly realizes that clear and consistent analytical thought is predicated on memory: “These gaps in his memory, or perhaps his life, a series of skips—long shredded tears, empty spaces where the explanations for the most basic things used to be” (5). Remy cannot locate “the loose string between cause and effect,” rendering him unable to understand the larger channels of power surrounding him, since, as Michel Foucault claims in “The Subject and Power,” power can be broadly defined as “a set of actions upon other actions” (Walter 4; Foucault 220). In the first several pages of his novel, Walter identifies the same historiographical danger as Hannah Arendt in her essay “Truth and Politics”: “Facts and [historical] events are infinitely more fragile things than axioms, discoveries, [or] theories…[because] once they are lost, no rational effort will ever bring them back” (231). Although “historical fact” and “historical truth” are distinct philosophical concepts, Walter suggests that agreed upon historical facts constitute the necessary groundwork for interpreting the dynamic nature of historical truth. In this sense, historical facts are primarily ontological statements, whereas the historical truth interpreted from those facts is primarily epistemological. Therefore, Walter’s depiction of Remy demonstrates how the loss of historical facts loosens one’s bearing on reality. For Remy, the problem is not simply an inability to make sense of a self-evident reality, but whether a commonly shared reality even exists. When Remy sees Dr. Rieux—who shares the same name as Albert Camus’ protagonist in *The Plague*—about his “hallucinatory images,” Dr. Rieux doubts Remy’s version of reality: “I’m prettying sure you’re not working for some top-secret department, investigating whether or not your girlfriend’s sister faked her death” (Walter 195). Ontological confusion also occurs when Remy’s son Edger refuses to acknowledge that his father did not die in the terrorist attacks. After Edger demands to know what separates him “from some kid whose father actually died that day,” Remy responds perplexedly, “The fact that I’m alive?” (Walter 35). Edgar privileges the simulacra of televisual news stories and misinterprets the immediate reality of his living father. Assuming that the prima facie reality of television is true, Edgar engages in comically pseudo-syllogistic deduction: fathers died in the terrorist attack; those fathers left children behind; I have a father; therefore my father died in the attack and left me behind. As Edgar puts it, “why is it so hard to believe that I could be grieving the same thing as those other children?” (Walter 33-34). Adhering to Brian McHale’s concept of postmodernist fiction, Walter’s novel foregrounds “ontological indeterminacy” in relation to its own intertextual world(s) (27). Late in the novel, Remy watches a primetime television drama that uncannily mirrors Remy’s own life and features his avatar, the police officer Bruce Denny (Walter 284). When the television suddenly cuts to a commercial, Remy sees “how seamlessly this happened, one world to another and the detectives were gone and two kids were standing in a clean suburban living room” (284). Walter illustrates a
metaphorical connection between the gaps in Remy’s conscious memory and surreal gaps in television’s representation of reality: “Remy watched the TV go from one reality to another…and he thought about how familiar this was…the way these imperceptible gaps led from sorrow to humor and pathos” (240). These two kinds of gaps—in Remy’s memory and on television—preclude a linear narrative, the typical technique for making meaning from experience. Extending the metaphor of nonlinear gaps to post-9/11 politics, Judith Butler claims that the absence of a fully contextualized linear narrative of history allows the United States to position itself as a sudden victim with “no relevant prehistory to the events of September 11, since to begin to tell the story a different way…leads to the fear of moral equivocation” (Butler 6). Walter’s foregrounding of ontological uncertainty in The Zero is not simply a theoretical postmodern critique of master narratives that impose an artificial linearity onto history. McHale notes how American postmodernist fiction in 1960s and 1970s embraced Foucault’s notion of a heterotopia in order to critique this kind of hegemonic political authority. For Foucault, heterotopias are politically subversive “because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they destroy ‘syntax’ in advance…” (quoted in McHale 44). But Walter implies that conservative politicians, led by the Bush Administration, utilized postmodernist techniques after 9/11 to authorize a war against the abstract noun of terror. Walter makes this connection for readers rather explicit: “Who really knows more than the moment he’s in? What do you trust? Memory? History? No, these are just stories, and whichever ones we choose to tell ourselves…there are always gaps. There must be countless men all over the country crouched in front of barbecues…wondering how their lives got to that point…[and] if they [find] themselves at war, they [assume] the reality of irreconcilable differences, malignant tumors, premonitions of evil” (160; 163). Americans in Walter’s novel fail to comprehend the attacks of 9/11 because they are unable to understand the full historical context of American empire, choosing instead to engage in the ersatz realities of mass mediated television and Hollywood movies. Addressing Remy as a synecdoche for the entire United States, the sagacious Middle Eastern professor, code named Jaguar, ventriloquizes Walter’s harshest criticism against America’s cultural and political response to 9/11: “Entertainment is the singular thing you produce now…You demand the propaganda of distraction and triviality, and it has become your religion, your national faith…You switch sides […] arm your enemies and wonder why get shot with your own guns. I’m sorry, but history doesn’t break into you little four-year election cycles” (Walter 222-23; 291).

Walter stresses this critique even further when Remy’s partner from the police department Paul Guterak acquires an entertainment agent so he can appear on television and, Guterak hopes, big budget thriller movies. The agent tells Guterak that he will “do [TV] gigs until the movie market matures for [his] kind of story…and then the big money—thrillers…history has become a thriller plot” (Walter 150). Walter satirizes American culture’s attempt to convert the seemingly nonsensical “evil” of 9/11 into a thriller movie where the hero violently defeats his symbolic antagonist and redeems the country’s suffering. Walter illuminates the symbiotic relationship of self-deception between American cultural entertainment and institutional politics. While testifying before congress on the importance of the Documentation Department, The Boss declares:

There is nothing so important as recovering the record of our commerce, the proof of our place in the world, of the resilience of our economy, of our jobs, of our lives. If we do not make a fundamental accounting of what was lost, if we do not gather up the paper and put it back, then the forces aligned against us have already won. (Walter 19)
Although it may feel eerily Orwellian, Walter’s Documentation Department performs the exact opposite function of the “memory hole” in 1984. In Orwell’s novel, Big Brother installs memory holes in every room and corridor of its government buildings so that people can drop any documents which present a counter-history into the holes for immediate destruction (Orwell 38). While the principle means of control employed by Big Brother is the destruction of historical information, the Documentation Department hopes to control the post-9/11 narrative by recovering specific historical information that reconstructs the myth of American exceptionalism. Since post-9/11 politics seem to mirror the redemptive heroism of thriller movies, Walter identifies an American paradox: the description of the United States as a suddenly dehistoricized victim can only be sustained by nonlinear amnesic gaps, but redemptive narratives require linear storytelling where traumatic experiences are easily transcended and Pollyannaishly worked through. An ostensible antinomy emerges here between an emphasis on victimhood and heroism, between an infinitely traumatic wound of terror and an infinite war on terror. The Zero raises the fundamental question: what happens when these two narratives collide, when continual psychological suffering collides with the American motif of rags-to-riches, sin-to-salvation redemption?

According to Dan P. McAdams, a clinical psychologist who studies themes of redemption in personal American narratives, redemptive narratives “often portray deeply committed protagonists who move relentlessly forward, upward, and onward. Redemptive narratives tend to be linear and progressive. Over time, bad gives way to good, sin to salvation, slavery to freedom, sickness to recovery, rags to riches” (George W. Bush 215). Conversely, stories of trauma victims do not feature unidirectional movement from physical pain to healing but dizzying cycles of painful repetition. Walter’s posttraumatic narrative—and other posttraumatic narratives such as Toni Morrison’s Beloved, Tim O’Brien’s In the Lake of the Woods, and Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony—represents the antithesis of the standard redemptive narrative. In The Zero, Remy continually re-experiences traumatic memories, recovers, and then re-experiences them again; bad gives way to good and then to bad again. The belatedness of trauma haunts its victims in a way that confirms Faulkner’s famous assertion that “the past isn’t dead, it isn’t even past” (quoted in Werner 37). Whereas redemptive narratives tend to literalize the cliché “putting the past behind you,” posttraumatic narratives exhibit a precise reversal of this cliché: they “put the past in front of you.” Jacques Derrida makes the same claim in relation to the temporality of traumatic repetition: “We are talking about a trauma, and thus an event, whose temporality proceeds neither from the now that is present nor from the present that is past but from an im-presentable to come (à venir)” (quoted in Borraadori 97). Remy comes to understand this traumatic temporality while listening to April Selios explain the essence of her grief after losing her sister and husband in the terrorist attacks: “You think that after you’ve suffered long enough, that the people you’ve lost can just […] come back…But they don’t. They never come back. That’s the trick. They die all over again for you, every few months” (217). After suffering from posttraumatic dissociation, Remy begins to think that “maybe the gaps [are] going away, [that] the crack in his mind…[is] [sealing] itself,” only to suffer through much more debilitating episodes of amnesia as the novel continues (Walter 20). In Trauma and the Memory of Politics, Jenny Edkins claims that this confusion of temporality is the result of a collision between “the time of the state” and “trauma time” (233). The subsequent confusion of this collision is what Edkins refers to as “a curious unknown time, a time with no end in sight,” which bears a striking resemblance to the notion of time for the melancholic (Edkins 233). Walter criticizes the United States government’s callous conversion of trauma time into redemptive vengeance, into a need to
act-out violently against a scapegoat before working through the trauma and attaining critically contextualized historical distance. This extremely aggressive retaliatory logic is summarized in *The Zero* by Steve, the new husband of Remy’s ex-wife: “Don’t waste time separating guilty from innocent…Go to the [United Nations] and say, ‘Let’s make a deal. If your country shows up on the front page of the *Times* for anything other than a travel feature, you’re toast’” (Walter 28). An ostensible contradiction between victim and hero emerges at the core of Steve’s ignorance, which is manifested in a delicate balancing act between remembering the violence done to the United States while simultaneously forgetting how the United States helped create the conditions to bring that violence into being. Remy’s gaps in memory exemplify how this contradiction is resolved, as they are “holes not so much in his memory but in the string of events, the causes of certain effects. He found himself wet but didn’t remember rain” (Walter 43). Remy’s story starts *in medias res* with his own self-inflicted gunshot wound just as the “War on Terror” and its pursuit of mythic redemption begins with post-9/11 American suffering. Judith Butler cogently elaborates on this idea in *Precarious Live: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*: “In order to condemn these [terrorist] attacks as inexcusable, absolutely wrong, in order to sustain the affective structure in which we are, on the one hand, victimized and, on the other, engaged in a righteous cause of rooting out terror, we have to begin the story with the experience of violence we suffered” (6). To arbitrarily choose when and where the narrative of 9/11 begins, to engineer an affective framework of suffering through the circulation of videos clips and images, is to believe one knows exactly whom one must attack in order to redeem that suffering.

It is important to note, however, that supplying the missing historical context would *not* lend support to the absurd argument that the United States *got what it deserved* on 9/11. Perhaps the most infamous defender of this argument is Ward Churchill, who argues that the United States somehow got what it deserved because the World Trade Center was full of “little Eichmanns” who had “willingly (and profitably) harnessed themselves to the task [of] making America’s genocidal order hum with maximal efficiency…” (Churchill 19). On the contrary, if Americans had possessed a fuller historical understanding of the United States’ significant role, and often controversial reputation, in international affairs, Americans would have better understood why certain terrorist malcontents wished to attack them. For instance, many Americans before 9/11 were not aware of how deeply intertwined Osama bin Laden’s wealth was with America’s capitalist economy. The Mohammed bin Laden Company, founded by Osama’s father, was started by an Aramco sponsorship—i.e., the Arabian American Oil Company (Wright 64). Several American companies built virtually the entire economic infrastructure of Saudi Arabia (the country which produced 15 of the 19 hijackers on 9/11): its petroleum industry, highway system, passenger airline service, government buildings, televisual broadcasting facilities, and defense industry (Wright 152). Furthermore, Osama bin Laden was an ally of the United States during Afghanistan’s war against the Soviet Union, just as Saddam Hussein was a US ally during Iraq’s war against Iran (Simpson 135).

While bin Laden’s interpretations of history are filtered through an exceptionally narrow religious ideology, he claims that his anger was first generated from an event which many Americans have forgotten. In bin Laden’s own words, his hatred for the United States was sparked in 1982 “when America permitted the Israelis to invade Lebanon and the American

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20 An even more macabre irony is that Saddam gassed his own Kurdish population in 1988 with US-financed weapons, an act of brutality that he would be charged with in his 2003 trial (Simpson 135-36).
Sixth Fleet helped them” (quoted in Wright 150). In 1996, bin Laden declared a fatwa on the United States entitled “A Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places,” which garnered very little American media attention (Wright 234). While this partial historical contextualization does not cast blame on the United States for 9/11, it allows Walter to raise questions about the lethal frameworks of forgetting in American culture and the political implications of the “War on Terror” as a dangerously ignorant redemptive quest. While Remy and his girlfriend April sit in a restaurant, an Italian waiter comments on this theme of redemption: “In America, everyone thinks every story have a happy ending…It’s so stupid. How can every story be a happy ending? Someone got to be sad” (242). Walter does not just criticize redemptive 9/11 narratives because they are false, but because they are also dangerous. As the Middle Eastern professor in the novel says: “That’s what happens when a nation forgets the truth. Everything is the Alamo…The rest of the world wails and vows revenge and buries its dead and you turn on the television” (Walter 222). The danger of redemptive 9/11 narratives lies in their instrumental use of violence within simplistic frameworks of collective amnesia.

As a synecdoche for collective forgetting in the United States, Walter’s multifaceted portrait of Remy represents a nuanced figurative connection between ethical responsibility and political awareness. Walter foregrounds the ethical and political stakes of Remy’s behavior when readers discover that, in between his dissociative gaps, he carries out the ethical “dirty work” of a shadowy governmental organization. Like the ardently committed protagonist of the redemptive narrative, Remy feels like he only needs to act with more determination and willpower: “A life is made up of actions, and if he wanted the world to be different, then he only needed to act differently. Every minute of every day was an opportunity to do the right things, to make something of this mess” (Walter 212). But Walter parodies this type of ardent protagonist, since the more determined Remy is to control his choices and not hurt suspected terrorists, the more uncontrollable his actions become and the more he hurts innocent people. Before experiencing one of these gaps, Remy writes himself a note, “Don’t Hurt Anyone,” only to find a responding note, presumably written by a dissociated version of himself, that reads: “Grow Up” (190). Eventually, Remy realizes: “You can’t beat this thing…You want to do the right thing; you can vow to pay attention, to focus, to connect the dots. But once you start down this path, it really doesn’t matter” (293).

Walter highlights an important political point that mimics the Player-King’s famous line in Hamlet: “our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own” (Shakespeare 3.2.219). Just as Remy’s dissociated self performs violent acts in the name of Brian Remy’s conscious—though largely unaware—self, so too do the novel’s shadowy governmental agencies perform violent acts in the name of a largely unaware populace. In one sense, Remy is clearly responsible for his violent acts; one can trace a direct causal relationship between Remy as an agent and his own actions. But in another larger sense, Remy represents a collective body that is only partially responsible for violence. The American public may think it knows its government has engaged, and still engages, in unethical and illegal violent behavior, but that fact does not necessarily make it wholly responsible for violence committed in its name, especially for acts of which it remains ignorant. In a similar vein, Walter’s careful construction of his protagonist allows the figurative connection to extend even further. While the 19 hijackers are the direct casual agents of 9/11, the United States helped create—both knowingly and unknowingly—the necessary conditions for terrorism.

Here, the distinction must be made between necessary and sufficient conditions. As Judith Butler claims, a necessary condition is a “state of affairs without which terrorism cannot
take hold, one that terrorism absolutely requires” whereas a sufficient condition is one in which “its presence is enough for terrorism to take place” (11). An example from Catch-22 illumines this distinction. In Heller’s World War II novel, Milo Minderbinder controls an international black-market syndicate that has contracts with both the American and German militaries. The syndicate pays American fighter planes to bomb Germans while it simultaneously pays Germans to shoot down American fighter planes. After Milo warns the Germans of an oncoming American bombing raid, the Germans shoot down and kill Mudd, whom the main character Yossarian refers to as “the dead man in my tent” (265). When Yossarian accuses Milo of killing Mudd, Milo responds: “I didn’t kill him…I wasn’t even there that day, I tell you. Do you think I was down there on the ground firing an antiaircraft gun when the planes came over?” (265). Like the United States on 9/11, Milo was not the direct causal agent; the United States did not fly planes into the World Trade Center and Milo did not shoot down Mudd’s plane. However, Milo’s syndicate created the necessary conditions for Mudd to be killed. Essentially, Catch-22’s Yossarian and The Zero’s Brian Remy face the same complex ethical dilemma: what is the role of “individual responsibility in lights of its collective conditions”? (Butler 15). If Butler correctly asserts that “conditions do not ‘act’ in the way that individual agents do, but no agent acts without [those conditions],” then how is Remy supposed to act within the necessary conditions he finds himself (11)? This question takes on even more complexity when readers attempt to understand the ethical implications of Remy’s dissociated consciousness.

While it becomes increasingly clear in the novel that Remy is responsible for various acts of torture and several murders, he is utterly unable to remember these actions. Walter stresses this point by omitting any present-time scenes depicting Remy’s most violent behavior. Remy eventually concludes that he cannot trust himself “in the moments between bouts of consciousness. What am I doing in those moments I don’t remember?” (Walter 181). In terms of trauma theory, Remy exhibits signs of “splitting” or dissociation that accords with Ruth Leys’ mimetic theory of trauma. For Leys, trauma has historically been conceptualized within a paradigm of two oscillating theories: mimesis and antimimesis. In the mimetic theory, the distinction between self and other is obliterated as the victim unconsciously imitates the traumatic experience, which is “constitutively unavailable for subsequent representation and recall” (Leys 9). By contrast, the antimimetic theory views trauma as “a purely external event that befalls a fully constituted subject,” a stance which allows the autonomously coherent victim to recall and represent the traumatic experience, even though such recollection may be difficult (Leys 299). The official political response to 9/11 resembles a nationalistic antimimeticism. The strict binary opposition between us and them is epitomized in The Boss’s nearly nonsensical assertion: “Every question we ask is a love letter to our enemies” (Walter 54). Walter’s eviscerating satire reveals several intersecting binary oppositions here: question/answer, love/hate, friend/enemy and self/other. These binary oppositions are indicative of the larger antimimetic understanding of 9/11: the notion that the United States was a secure sovereign state—a coherent self—that was attacked by an external Other but was still able to bear witness to its traumatic experience through various media and remember that experience, as evidenced by the post-9/11 clarion call “Never forget.” The resulting US-led “War on Terror” also adheres to the theoretical effects of antimimeticism. Since this theory establishes a rigid dichotomy between inside and outside—between us and them—violence always comes from the outside; coincidently, the demarcation of internal and external usually leads to “passionate identifications” that are “transformed into claims of identity,” a phenomenon which parallels LaCapra’s notion of a founding trauma (Leys 37). Yet Walter’s portrait of Remy’s amnesia
suggests that the United States’ memory of 9/11 is closer to the mimetic theory. While seemingly myriad 9/11 video clips and photographs exist, Walter’s novel exposes an acute anxiety concerning the (im)possibility of truly representing and bearing witness to the most traumatic moments of that day. When people ask Paul Guterak, Remy’s friend and police partner, “what the bodies sounded like when they hit the sidewalk,” he tells them to clap their hands harder and harder until they are red and sore only to say: “No. It didn’t sound like that at all” (85). In The Zero’s opening lines, Walter’s symbolic use of birds and paper illustrates the neurotic impulse to hide and expose images of people falling from the towers: “They burst into the sky, every bird in creation, angry and agitated, awakened by the same primary thought, erupting in a white feathered cloudburst, anxious and graceful…[but] it wasn’t a flock of birds at all—it was paper” (3). In trying to distance the traumatic impact of the falling bodies, Walter’s emblematic collage reveals an anxious disruption of self and other, of viewer and falling body. Richard Drew, the man who took the Falling Man photograph, thinks that these images of falling bodies establishes an unconscious identification with the victim that is simply too strong (Friend 140). Walter’s double symbolic concealment of falling bodies with birds and paper sheds a different light on the unconscious motivations of the Documentation Department. The real goal of its obsessive need to recover and organize all of the paper at Ground Zero is to find the disintegrated bodies and, in near literal sense, to re-member the iconic falling body, which itself is a metaphorical substitute for the American body politic. Walter’s description implies that it is impossible to remember 9/11 because it is impossible to re-member the victims of 9/11. Dismembered and disseminated in the dust and ashes, Walter writes that both people and paper at Ground Zero “scattered like dandelions in a windstorm” (19). Remy and the rescue workers wear facemasks and oxygen tanks because everything, including people, “liquidized into dust and endless tons of bits, indistinguishable pieces of rubble…” (44). Not only are they taking precautions against inhaling chemical debris, but also organic human debris, which Walter employs as a radical metaphor freighted with the potential to deconstruct the binary opposition between living and dead. When applied to Remy as a symbol of the United States, the mimetic theory also has the potential to deconstruct the binary opposition of us/them—i.e., victim/terrorist. In this theory, “the victim can come to psychically collude in the scene of violence through fantasmatic identifications with the scene of aggression” (Leys 38). The mimetic theory underpins Žižek’s claim that numerous pre-9/11 Hollywood movies like Independence Day attest to the idea that 9/11 “was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise” (Welcome 16). Baudrillard makes a similar point but takes it a step further, asserting that “the countless disaster movies bear witness to this fantasy” and prove that the West has “become suicidal, and declared war on itself” (The Spirit of Terrorism 7). According to Leys, the mimetic theory also accounts for this kind of self-destructive impulse. The victim remains unable to recall the traumatic experience because the mimetic theory posits a “hypnotic imitation or identification,” which has led to treatment attempts that incorporate actual hypnosis (Leys 298). During hypnotic treatments or mimetic-hypnotic imitation, the dichotomy between self and other tends to dissolve “to such a degree that the hypnotized subject [comes] to occupy the place of the ‘other’ in an unconscious identification so profound that the other [is] not apprehended as other” (Leys 46). Essentially, mimesis produces a disassociated self that feels compelled to destroy the “other” who is actually the self (Leys 46). 21 When the Middle Eastern professor asks Remy a

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21 The best example of this self-destructive impulse occurring in a psychotherapeutic setting is the classic traumatic dissociation of “Sally Beauchamp,” who said of her alter ego “I hate her, I just hate her…I wish she were dead” (quoted in Leys 46).
pointed question, he calls attention to this idea within the mimetic theory that Remy is both a victim and a terrorist, a multivalent symbol of both us and them: “Does a man ever realize that he has been the villain of his own story” (Walter 321). Ironically, Remy is recruited as an agent in a war on terror, but his participation in a shadowy network of secret governmental organizations transforms him into an agent of terror. Remy becomes part of a secret, CIA-like investigative team that infiltrates a terrorist cell (CELL 93) of Islamic extremists in America that supposedly has connections to the furtive March Selios. However, it quickly becomes evident that the terrorist cell is just a group of innocent Muslims whom Remy’s team has yoked together and mistakenly identified as terrorists. Furthermore, March Selios’ connection to the group is nothing more than a former boyfriend named Bishir, who is forced to provide “intelligence” for Remy’s team; and March’s oddly surreptitious behavior before 9/11 is due to an affair with her brother-in-law rather than international terrorism. But Remy and his partner Shawn Markham, a lawlessly belligerent agent who may exist only in Remy’s imagination, use increasingly violent and illegal means to interrogate anyone affiliated with Bishir. Remy and Markham torture and most likely kill Assan, the brother of a friend of Bishir, who provides them with obviously specious information (Walter 135). Eventually, Remy and his shadowy double Markham begin to not only extract false information, but actively produce false evidence. Remy’s team has Bishir and several other men—who all work for the covert agency—make a false videotape where they pretend to be “commanded by Allah” to ignite a bomb on a New York train platform (Walter 312). But Remy’s incompetent team accidentally gives the fake terrorists both a real bomb and detonator, and an explosion occurs on the train platform, severely injuring Remy and killing his girlfriend April.

Like the dehistoricized political response to 9/11, this scene also exhibits a common postmodern motif, as the simulacrum of the terrorist videotape leads to a real explosion. Furthermore, when the fake terrorists are all killed in a gunfight, Markham explains to Remy why the terrorist targets had to be “neutralized:” “They were making suicide videos. They were holding a machine gun, Brian” (Walter 319). Remy’s team retroactively constructs the very justification needed to implement violence, meaning they produced the fake evidence they claimed they would find before they even found it. Although Remy is supposed to be an agent of immunity for the United States, ensuring the country’s national security, he ends up becoming an agent of autoimmunity, destroying the very body politic he is tasked with protecting. Remy’s posttraumatic acting-out unwittingly perpetuates the very terror he seeks to stop, thereby exploding both the reductive political dichotomy between us and them and the more dangerous totalizing metaphysical dichotomy between good and evil.

Jacques Derrida also notes how the United States in particular, and the West in general, tends to react to terrorism in a way that reproduces the very violence it aims to stop. Derrida sees 9/11 as a symptom of “autoimmunitary aggression,” which he defines as a process “where a living being, in quasi-suicidal fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself against its ‘own’ immunity” (quoted in Borradori 94). According to Marita Sturken, the biological immune system has two primary functions: “to destroy the ‘foreign’ element and to create a memory of the body’s encounter with it” (242). Using the immune system as a metaphor, Derrida claims that “political systems…[tend] to create immune and autoimmune

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22 Walter’s fictional narrative bleeds into reality here; in 2004, one Bush Administration official fleshed out this motif vis-à-vis the missing WMDs used to justify the invasion of Iraq, claiming that the United States is an empire “and when we act, we create our own reality” (Suskind).
components at the same time” (Simpson 136). That is, political systems are inclined to create new agents of protection against already existing agents of self-protection (Simpson 136). Regarding the symptomatic event of 9/11, Derrida identifies three phases of the autoimmune crisis: “The Cold War,” “Worse Than Cold War” and “The Vicious Cycle of Repression” (Borradori 150). During the Cold War, Derrida claims that the hegemonic struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union was a psycho-ideological battle more than a conflict between physical combatants (150). For example, late in the Cold War, the United States armed Afghan Mujahideen fighters during their war with the Soviet Union not because of an immediate national security threat but because of that proxy war’s ideological import. In retrospect, during the 1980s, the United States unsuspectingly created autoimmunity agents (a portion of Islamic Afghan fighters) who would either attack the American body politic on 9/11 or provided a national base for that attack—i.e., Al Qaeda and the Taliban, respectively. For Derrida, the end of the Cold War is even worse than the suicidal logic of Mutual Assured Destruction since “it is impossible to build a balance with terrorism because the threat does not come from a state but from incalculable forces and incalculable responsibilities” (Borradori 151). While nuclear weaponry held by the United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War outstripped the theoretical justification for Clausewitzian war, post-Cold War terrorism outstrips the practical justification for large-scale, state-sponsored violence against other states, as the fluid terrorist threat can constantly spread through multiple countries. In this light, Derrida sees George W. Bush’s “axis of evil” and “with us or against us” ultimatums as dangerously reductive since they impose an outmoded Cold War paradigm onto rhizomatic terrorism (Borradori 151). In its final phase, Derrida claims that autoimmunity aggression locks the United States into a cycle of repression and violence: “by declaring war on terrorism, the Western coalition engenders a war against itself” (151). By October 2001, the United States had to mobilize immunity agents (US military) against Osama bin Laden, who was himself once seen as an immunity agent but was re-categorized as an autoimmunity agent, which revived the destructive process of protecting the country against its ostensible self-protection. Derrida asserts that this kind of war on terrorism will “regenerate, in the short or long term, the causes of the evil [it claims] to eradicate” (quoted in Borradori 100). Walter’s description of Remy and his investigative team emphatically underscores Derrida’s warning against autoimmunity aggression. Remy’s team actively perpetuates terrorism and is responsible for killing at least half a dozen people, including the fake terrorists, when the bomb explodes on the train platform. However, the media misunderstands the true nature of this terrorist attack and develops a narrative which promises to sustain the destructive circularity of autoimmunity logic. Lying half-conscious in a hospital bed after the bombing, Remy overhears a voice on television debating “whether the recent bounce in The President’s popularity [is] entirely due to the recent victory over a terrorist cell…” (Walter 325). Since the bombing is viewed as a victory in terms of politics and national security, the nameless American president sees political and perhaps even righteously moral reasons for expanding the number of secret investigative teams. Walter embeds two frightening ironic points into the novel here: not only is Remy’s investigative team the real covert terrorist cell operating within the United States and killing Americans, but more of these covert autoimmunity teams are growing because of the United States government itself. This compulsive replication of violence is critiqued by the Middle Eastern professor during his final conversation with Remy, and it is at the core of Walter’s conception of the novel’s title: “…zero sum. That’s what we’ve got here, if you ask me. Gains and losses coming out equal. No possible outcome except more of the same” (Walter 309). But redemptive narratives like the “War on Terror” attempt to obfuscate this
cyclical understanding of mutually implicated violence. When politicians invoke hyperbolic terms like “war” and “evil,” they tacitly advocate a narrative structure of redemption that localizes violence and constructs a mythic fantasy of righteous heroes wielding overwhelming violent instruments against evildoers. Walter shows how this dichotomous language collapses under the weight of its own autoimmunitary contradictions. While the fake terrorist cell setup by Remy’s team is, strictly speaking, the direct cause of the bomb’s explosion, Remy’s team creates the necessary conditions for the “terrorist” attack. In this novel, the supposed heroes exercise violence recklessly and they are ultimately responsible for an attack against their own people. But Walter includes Remy in this investigative team in order to complicate its ethical implications. Throughout the novel, Remy gradually goes blind and fails to remember his actions, implying that the United States can neither remember the past nor clearly understand the present. Although he undeniably engages in illegally brutal behavior, Remy is not fully aware of, and thus not fully responsible for, his actions. Like the United States after 9/11, one part of Remy does not know what another dissociated part is doing in the name of Brian Remy. Unlike the post-9/11 novels of Foer and DeLillo, Walter’s The Zero does not offer a characterological template for working through the trauma of 9/11. Before the United States can even begin to deal with the trauma in a way that stops cyclical violence, it must collectively answer the subtly radical question posed to a semi-conscious Remy after the train platform bombing: “Do you want to open your eyes now?” (326).
Chapter 5: Conclusion: Against Political Solipsism

When I thought I was dying at the base of the Loschwitz Bridge, there was one single thought in my head: Keep thinking. Thinking would keep me alive.

Jonathan Safran Foer, Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close

In this thesis, I have argued that literary fiction can be an effective mode for interrogating the construction of national identity. I have contrasted popular American narratives of 9/11 with novels by Jonathan Safran Foer (Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close), Don DeLillo (Falling Man) and Jess Walter (The Zero). Popular Narratives, I argued, tend to offer a mythic foundation for redemption, militant belligerency masked as patriotic heroism, and a deeply embedded notion of “regeneration through violence” outlined by Richard Slotkin. Foer, DeLillo and Walter challenge the cynical arrogation of collective trauma and short-circuit American political attempts to impose cogent frameworks of ideological meaning onto disparate signifiers of mass mediated violence. The U.S.-led “War on Terror,” and its accompanying narratives of redemption, represents a form of violently self-destructive acting-out, whereas my primary literary texts represent constructive, non-lethal attempts at working through the trauma of 9/11. The political and ethical value of these literary representations of trauma rests not only in their nuanced characterological templates for acting-out and working through, but also in their self-critical ability to recognize, and then emerge from, political solipsism. In this concluding chapter, I further develop the notion of political solipsism and briefly explain how Cormac McCarthy’s post-9/11 allegory The Road can be read as an argument against political solipsism.

Even after President George W. Bush demanded that countries unambiguously announce whether they were for or against terrorism in late September 2001, Slavoj Žižek notes that almost none openly declared their support for terrorism. Žižek maintains that “precisely in such moments of apparent choice, mystification is total” (Welcome 54). In other words, when “a questioning attitude is denounced as covert support for terrorism,” Žižek claims that such a stance amounts to an ideological injunction against critical thinking and questioning (Welcome 54). In The Zero, Jess Walter satirizes this myopic stance when The Boss lectures Brian Remy about Remy’s patriotic duty not to question the militant political response to 9/11: “That’s exactly what the other side wants, Brian. For us to start doubting our actions before we’ve even had a chance to take them. Every question we ask is a love letter to our enemies.” In this statement, two false dichotomies are at work. The notion of being for or against terrorism is underpinned by a contrived distinction between thinking and acting. The Boss equates critical thinking with a vacillating moral compass, which, in his black-and-white moral universe, signifies de facto support for terrorism. Shortly after 9/11, this taboofed conception of critical

23 The most explicit character templates for acting-out are: Thomas Schell Sr. in Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, Keith Neudecker in Falling Man and Brian Remy in The Zero. Conversely, The most explicit character templates for working through are: Oskar Schell and his Grandmother in Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close and Lianne Neudecker in Falling Man.

24 Of course, it has become a truism in terrorism studies to point out that very few people self-identify as terrorists or terrorist sympathizers. This point usually devolves into the well-worn definitional debate between “terrorists vs. freedom fighters.” For a succinct analytical recap of this debate see The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research (2011).
thinking was borne out by the vitriolic reactions to Susan Sontag’s innocuous claim in the New Yorker that “a few shreds of historical awareness might help us to understand what has just happened, and what may continue to happen” (quoted in Faludi 27). Perhaps the most telling remark came from the neoconservative New York Post columnist John Podhoretz, who accused Sontag of “moral idiocy” (Faludi 27). Conversely, The Boss equates uncritically examined action with a robust stance against terrorism. Instead of understanding the traumatic impact of the violent attacks and the necessary conditions that could bring such violence into being, a stance which would accord with LaCapra’s notion of working through, The Boss quite literally advocates posttraumatic acting-out. Judith Butler claims that President Bush adopted a similar position in his speech to a joint session of congress when he claimed that the time for grieving had ended and should be replaced by firm action (Butler 29). Butler asserts that when “grieving is something to be feared, our fears give rise to the impulse to resolve it quickly, to banish it in the name of an action invested with the power to restore the loss…” (29). Butler implies that the long difficult process of grieving engenders a new perspective of the world, an insight which mirrors the critical distance achieved by working through a trauma.

In Thinking in an Emergency, Elaine Scarry also warns against the ways in which national emergencies present seductive opportunities to stop thinking. As a near synonym for collective trauma, Scarry claims that a national emergency stuns the mind, immobilizes it and brings “about a genuine enslavement of attention” (Thinking 14). In the aftermath of an event like 9/11, Scarry states that an implicit presumption exists for many politicians: “either [they] can think or [they] can act, and given that it is absolutely mandatory that an action be performed, thinking must fall away” (Thinking 7). Scarry’s criticism of this dangerously reductive distinction between thinking and acting sheds light on Bush’s equally reductive “with us or with the terrorists” binary opposition critiqued by Žižek (“Address to Joint Session”). Scarry maintains that “the call to suspend thinking is precisely the call to suspend governance, whether self-governance or the governance of a polis” (Thinking 8). This notion that both individual and collective governance is deeply entwined with thinking, especially in a national emergency, foregrounds the question of autonomy vis-à-vis the traumatized individual and the traumatized nation. Like the traumatized individual, whose compulsion to repeatedly act-out a trauma exemplifies a fundamental inability to govern the self, a traumatized nation that rejects critical thinking for reactionary violence epitomizes the core of melancholic militarism inside hollow claims of self-governance. Furthermore, acting-out is the impulsive rejection not only of self-governance, but of ethical and political consistency.

The United States’ privileging of action over critical thought after 9/11 further cements the false antithesis of being for or against terrorism as it is presented within the “War on Terror.” For Žižek, this for/against binary opposition should not be wholly discarded, but radically redefined and broadened “so that it will also include (some) American and other Western powers’ acts: the choice between Bush and Bin Laden is not our choice; they are both ‘Them’ against Us” (Welcome 51). Žižek suggests that post-9/11 American ideology and acting-out are functionally similar: both compel action while keeping the actors fundamentally ignorant of the impetus for that action and their own subsequent interests in self-preservation. From this

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25 Scarry goes to considerable lengths to prove this notion that critical/philosophical thinking is deeply entwined with governing in the Western political tradition. She notes that many of the same authors who wrote major political treatises also wrote significant treatises on thinking: Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and John Stuart Mill, among others (Thinking 8).
perspective, the ideology of the “War on Terror” resembles the final lines of Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach:” “And we are here as on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight / Where ignorant armies clash by night” (Arnold). The confused alarms of struggle and flight on 9/11 caused the United States to fold back into itself and narcissistically identify with the lost object of both human life and the myth of national impermeability. This post-9/11 constriction of American reality produced auspicious conditions for ideological blindness and compulsive acting-out. The French novelist Frédéric Beigbeder summarizes this constricted frame of reality in his 2003 novel Windows on the World: “September 11 has had two diametrically opposed consequences: kindness at home, cruelty abroad” (190). Ironically, the same figurative notion of collective pain that brought the country together also became the foundation for political solipsism.

In her 2004 article “Whereof We Can Speak, Thereof We Must Not Be Silent: Trauma, Political Solipsism and War,” international studies professor K.M. Fierke draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language to conceptualize her understanding of political solipsism. Like numerous other scholars, Fierke distinguishes between Wittgenstein’s early and late philosophy. Written during the horrors of World War I, Wittgenstein’s early book Tractatus Logicus-Philosophicus (TLP) advances a “picture theory” of language. In this theory, a “picture is the model of reality” and humans use language to make “pictures of facts” (TLP 39). Therefore, the abstract logic of reality is “pictured in a set of labels [and] linked in propositions” (Fierke 479). Since metaphysical propositions cannot be pictured, they give “no meaning to certain signs in [those] propositions” (Wittgenstein TLP 189). In Wittgenstein’s early philosophy, metaphysical propositions and individual experiences like pain are beyond language, which leads Wittgenstein to declare famously at the end of the Tractatus: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (TLP 189). If one submits to this final proposition, Fierke notes the theoretical impact it has on trauma theory: “Wittgenstein’s picture of solipsism in the [Tractatus] is compatible with a picture of the traumatized individual, detached from a world of non-related objects, and outside time. The experience of trauma is one ‘whereof we cannot speak’” (Fierke 479). According to Fierke, Wittgenstein’s early philosophy categorizes the traumatized individual as a solipsist who thinks that “the world and [her] world are one and the same thing” (478). However, Wittgenstein’s late philosophy, characterized mostly by Philosophical Investigations (PI), critiques his earlier Tractatus and offers a way out of solipsism. In Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein reveals the philosophical hollowness of individual solipsism and attempts to collapse it like “a house of cards” by stressing two key ideas: the impossibility of constructing an entirely “private language” and the meaning of words as inextricably bound up with their practical use (Fierke 479). For late Wittgenstein, even the solipsist is located within a “common world of language, where expressions of pain or joy, or other expressions of our inner life are radically dependent on customs, uses and institutions” (Fierke 480). Wittgenstein famously claims that “an ‘inner process’ stands in need of outward criteria,” meaning that the inward experience of pain depends upon a shared language that already has a word for pain (PI 153). Wittgenstein asserts that “when we speak of someone’s having given a name to pain, what is presupposed is the existence of the grammar of the word ‘pain’ (PI 92). In other words, language is not simply a transparent medium of communication but an interpersonal, rule-based “social property” that precedes the individual and grants the word “pain” personal meaning (Fierke 480). Hence, the private language of solipsism is impossible because “it is not possible to obey a rule ‘privately:’ otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it” (Wittgenstein PI 81). However,
Wittgenstein’s implicit arguments against solipsism only hold true for the individual solipsist. While a single person cannot doubt that she is in pain herself, other people can certainty doubt her pain. Wittgenstein admits this proposition when he states that “it makes sense to say about other people that they doubt whether I am in pain; but not to say it about myself” (PI 89).

Elaine Scarry echoes this idea with aphoristic pithiness: “To have pain is to have certainty; to hear about pain is to have doubt.” Beigbeder’s succinct analytical breakdown of how 9/11 affected the United States—“kindness at home, cruelty abroad”—epitomizes Scarry’s aphorism, since Americans emphasized the traumatic impact of their own pain while simultaneously doubting the pain they were inflicting, or shortly would inflict, elsewhere (Windows on the World 190). For Fierke, this all-too human capacity to stress the exigent reality of your own pain while doubting the ontological legitimacy of others’ pain can give rise to a metaphorically solipsistic nationalism after a violent political trauma—i.e., political solipsism.26 Regarding international relations, Fierke identifies two fundamental attributes of political solipsism within a nation-state: self-isolation within the global community and the nation-state’s “failure to recognize the suffering of others as part of [its] own goals and projects” (Fierke 491). If individual solipsism is the “view that the world and my world are one and the same,” then post-9/11 political solipsism in the United States is the view that the political reality and America’s political reality are one and the same (Fierke 478). This myopic logic is compatible with former President Bush’s Manichean worldview and the underlying premises for the “War on Terror.” The dangers of political solipsism, as outlined by Fierke, are analogous to the violent effects of Derrida’s autoimmune aggression. If a nation-state fails to consider suffering outside its borders, especially suffering it may have directly or indirectly caused, it “increases the probability of future suffering, which may reverberate back on [itself]” (Fierke 491). Similarly, the governing ethical assumption of Derrida’s autoimmune aggression is that we must operate within the same metaphorical organism—or global system—where violence is reflexive, dynamic and un-confineable to a single node in that system (Simpson 138).

In his post-9/11 allegorical novel The Road, Cormac McCarthy dramatizes this failure to recognize the impact of violence on an entire system. McCarthy emphasizes the motif of blinding darkness in the novel’s opening lines: “Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world” (3). In this vision of a post-apocalyptic United States, a nameless father and son walk south for several months in order to avoid winter and certain death. Not only do they have to search for the small amount of edible food left after a mysterious large-scale catastrophe and its ensuing anarchy, but the father and son also have to avoid becoming food themselves for marauding gangs of cannibals. Similar to Brian Remy in The Zero, the father and son represent a two-part synecdoche for the United States after 9/11. At first glance, the father and son are obvious symbols for two different generational worldviews. The father remembers the pre-9/11 world before the unnamed cataclysm, which wrecked the earth with a “long shear light and a series of low concussions” and metaphorically arrested time, as all the clocks stopped at 1:17.

26 Fierke stresses the multi-metaphorical nature of both collective political trauma and political solipsism. She notes that “psychological trauma itself was originally a metaphor for a physical wound to the human body,” which makes collective political trauma “a metaphor for a metaphor” (Fierke 482). Along the same lines, political solipsism should not be seen as exhibiting a precise one-to-one philosophical relation to individual solipsism. On the contrary, political solipsism and individual solipsism can be said to exhibit a Wittgensteinian “family resemblance” of overlapping similarities.
The son, who represents the Millennial generation since he is too young to remember what everyday adult life was like before the disaster, illustrates the overwhelming influence of 9/11 on those who witnessed the terrorist attacks during their formative years. McCarthy shows the political and ethical implications of these different worldviews in a profoundly complex way. Set in a dystopian world of extreme violence and distrust, *The Road* dramatically augments the fear and uncertainty within the United States after the attacks. In many ways, the father is an allegorical figure for the neoconservative response to this kind of post-9/11 world. According to Andrew Bacevich, an internal relations scholar and retired Army officer, post-9/11 neoconservatism is premised on two supposedly fundamental universal “truths:” “The first truth is that evil is real. The second is that for evil to prevail requires only one thing: for those confronted by it to flinch from duty” (73). From a neoconservative viewpoint, not only is the world filled with extremely dangerous and violent people, but the United States must *defeat*—an emotionally charged verb—these evil people with equal or greater violence before they attack. For Bacevich and other critics of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Bush Administration’s justification for what it mistakenly called “preemptive” war arises directly from a neoconservative worldview. In *The Road*, the father remembers the safety of an imagined past and feels like he must be ruthless in this now suddenly ruthless world. Distrustful of everyone he sees, the father generally refuses to meet people or connect with them on their journey south. After the father kills a man who possibly wants to cannibalize his son, he informs his son that it is duty to protect him at any cost: “My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you” (McCarthy 77). After coming upon a man who has been struck by lightning and badly burned, the son wants to help but his father claims that “there’s nothing to be done” (50). The father’s paranoid fear also prevents his son from helping a “little boy,” whom the son is concerned about. The father scolds his son harshly, asking him, “Do you want to die? Is that what you want?” (85). Significantly, McCarthy does not portray the father as excessively arrogant, hubristic or bellicose, which are all negative words commonly attributed to neoconservatism. The father is not a caricature of a neoconservative warmongering maniac, but an understandably terrified father who looks at his son and thinks: “If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (5). For the father, survival is predicated on immediate action instead of critical thought, since time is limited in his world of perpetual emergency. At one point, the father tells his son that “you should always be on the lookout. If trouble comes when you least expect it then maybe the thing to do is to always expect it” (151). From this viewpoint, the father and son represent a miniature nation-state fundamentally cutoff from others while they fight for survival in an anarchic Hobbesian world. What the father sees as necessary actions for survival cause a self-imposed withdrawal from any kind of community of other people. While this novel necessitates a certain degree of Hobbesian selfishness and violence in the interest of self-preservation, too much selfishness works against self-preservation. The father and son are locked in political solipsism because this self-imposed withdrawal fails to take into account how the suffering of other people ultimately hinders their own survival.

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27 The notion of “preemptive” war typically refers to “the use of force in self-defense against an imminent attack”—e.g., Israel’s preemptive attack on neighboring Arab countries in the 1967 “Six Day War” (Davis 110, footnote 3). However, the Bush Administration’s definition of preemptive war in the White House’s 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* characterizes preemption as an “act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed,” which is actually an explicitly aggressive “preventative” war (quoted in Davis 110, footnote 3).
Even though the son loves his father, he resists his father’s cynical worldview and implores his father to help people like the “little boy” throughout the novel. Whereas the father’s primary goal is to destroy any nascent community from forming in the name of security, the son’s primary mission is to build relationships and construct a community of “good guys.” When the father hears people coming down the road, he tells his son to hide because they might be “bad guys,” to which the son replies, “They could be good. Couldn’t they?” (103). While the father focuses on fighting against people who want to eat them, the son tries to look for “good guys” who may to eat with them. After meeting a weak and defenseless old man, the father says that he does not want to give him any food and he wants to keep moving; but the son insists that they stop for the night and “cook something on the stove” so the old man can eat with them (165). Eventually, the son recognizes the self-destructive logic of political solipsism and his father’s refusal to trust, or empathize with, anyone else. The differing worldviews of the father and son collide toward the end of the novel when they are robbed by a man fighting for survival. When they find the man, the father holds him at gunpoint and tells him to strip naked. The man pleads with the father not to “do this,” but the father responds with, “You didn’t mind doing it to us…I’m going to leave you the way you left us” (257). Once the man leaves, the son cries and tells his father they should help the man. But when his father insouciantly says, “You’re not the one who has to worry about everything,” the son challenges him: “Yes I am…I am the one” (259). This exchange reveals two radically different ethical and political imperatives. For the father, “worrying about everything” means eye-for-an-eye morality, political disengagement with others and short-term rational self-interest. However, the son worries about the ethical value of empathy, social avenues out of anarchy and long-term altruistic interest in larger communities. When his father dies at the end of the novel, the son must choose between the individualistic survival of political solipsism and the more risky, socially-based survival of community building. As the son stands totally alone in the road, holding his father’s pistol, he is approached by an older man with a woman and several children and given a choice: “You can stay here with your papa and die or you can go with me” (283). Before making a decision, the son asks how he is supposed to know if these people are the “good guys,” and the older man responds: “You don’t. You’ll have to take a shot” (283). Ultimately, the son emerges from the faux-safety of political solipsism and continues to “carry the fire” with them. Instead of retreating into himself after the traumatic experiences of a worldwide cataclysm and his father’s death, he takes a step toward working through them by building relationships and, in a broader metaphorical sense, political communities.

The father and son in The Road typify two different paradigms for understanding, and responding to, the trauma of 9/11. In the primary texts I have analyzed by Foer, DeLillo and Walter, the most dangerous and destructive response to 9/11 resembles the father’s bellicosity and self-imposed isolation which only strengthens the larger cycle of violence already in place. Conversely, the main characters in my primary texts who begin to work through their trauma resemble the son, who empowers himself through broader synergistic relationships that aim to end cyclical violence. When judging the ethical and political value of literary representations of 9/11, we should not forget Marx’s premise that critical thinking is ultimately a question of practicality. As Marx claims in his second thesis on Feuerbach, “the dispute about the actuality or non-actuality of thinking—thinking isolated from practice—is a purely scholastic one” (99). A decade after 9/11, we have seen protracted wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, enhanced interrogation techniques previously categorized as torture, indefinite detention in Guantanamo Bay, warrantless wiretapping and a perpetual Orwellian “War on Terror” for perpetual peace.
The need to “keep thinking” critically, as Thomas Schell Sr. says in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, is not just a stimulating artistic or scholastic exercise, but an exigent ethical and political necessity in the search for salutary responses to violence in the twenty-first century.
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