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9/11 Fiction and the Construction of Cultural Trauma

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9/11 Fiction and the Construction of Cultural Trauma

by

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Abstract

According to sociologists Jeffrey C. Alexander and Neil J. Smelser, events themselves are not intrinsically traumatic. Rather, it is the meanings applied by discursive carrier groups that shape our perception of which events qualify as cultural trauma. Drawing on this theory, my dissertation examines how fictional responses to the events of September 11, 2001 participate in the ongoing construction of 9/11 as cultural trauma. Some critics question the merits of this theory, arguing that trauma is something that happens to individuals not to groups. They claim that the concept of cultural trauma demotes subjectivity, encourages new master narratives, and produces an aestheticized notion of trauma. Their objections overlook how cultural trauma is dependent on a *process*, an ongoing, prolonged, and often-disputed struggle to locate meaning. Cultural trauma is not simply the *product* of initial claims to injury, but is the *production* of meaning over a period of time.

Beginning with a survey of the many strands of trauma studies and an evaluation of the mainstream media's framing of 9/11 as "national trauma," I examine how fiction interrogates this initial response. Selecting works that contest key aspects of the initial coding of 9/11 as culturally traumatic, I focus on Ulrich Baer's edited collection, *110 Stories: New York Writes After 9/11*, Amy Waldman's *The Submission*, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and Siri Hustvedt's *The Sorrows of an American*. Even though these short stories and novels challenge and redefine earlier perceptions, they do not negate 9/11's status as cultural trauma. On the contrary, characteristic of the "continuing counterpoint of interested and opposing voices" (Smelser, "Psychological" 50), they grapple with and contest the various implications of 9/11, and thereby paradoxically maintain the event's status as cultural trauma. I read these texts as sites of contestation, as

evidence of communal grappling, and as vehicles of debate that challenge earlier perceptions of 9/11. As such, they confirm the indelibility of September 11 as cultural trauma and the utility of cultural trauma theory in literary studies.

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To Ray

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Dedication.....	vi
Table of Contents.....	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Theories of Trauma.....	15
2.1 Psychological Trauma.....	18
2.2 Cultural Trauma.....	32
Chapter 3: 9/11 and the Whitewash Effect of the Media.....	52
3.1 9/11 News Coverage, NBC and CNN.....	55
3.2 Context Matters.....	63
3.3 Comics and 9/11.....	73
3.4 Complexities of Subjectivity.....	79
Chapter 4: First Impressions: <i>110 Stories: New York Writes After September 11</i>.....	87
4.1 Cultural Trauma Identity Displacement.....	91
4.2 Alternate Angles.....	103
4.3 Taboo Subjects.....	109
4.4 (Re)examining Cultural Trauma Theory.....	112
Chapter 5: “All of These Protagonists”: Ambivalence and Ambiguity in Amy Waldman’s <i>The Submission</i> and Mohsin Hamid’s <i>The Reluctant Fundamentalist</i>.....	117
5.1 <i>The Submission</i>	122
5.2 <i>The Reluctant Fundamentalist</i>	140

Chapter 6: <i>Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close</i> and <i>The Sorrows of an American</i>:	
Contesting 9/11 as Cultural Trauma.....	152
6.1 <i>Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close</i>	157
6.2 <i>The Sorrows of an American</i>	173
Chapter 7: Conclusion.....	188
Bibliography.....	197

Chapter 1: Introduction

In their 2004 collection of essays, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka argue for a model of collective trauma that emphasizes the meaning making process of cultural trauma formation. That is to say, while it may seem “natural” to regard large scale catastrophic events as traumatic, events themselves are not inherently traumatic: “It is the meanings that provide the sense of shock and fear, not the events themselves” (Alexander, “Toward” 10); or, as Smelser puts it, “cultural traumas are for the most part historically made, not born” (“Psychological” 37). My dissertation examines the events of September 11, 2001 according to this theoretical paradigm. In it, I argue that it is the meanings and perspectives applied to the events of 9/11¹ by particular discursive carrier groups within the community that maintain their status as cultural trauma.

While one of my goals is to explore the meanings of cultural trauma, this dissertation is above all a literary project. The objective here is to explore how fiction questions the initial

¹ In accordance to what has become standard practice, I have chosen to refer to the terrorist acts in the United States on September 11, 2001 as “9/11” or “September 11.” While I adopt these terms for reasons of ease and continuity, I appreciate the debates over the acceptance of these terms. Five weeks after the events, Jacques Derrida, for example, questioned the “minimalist aim of this date” (Borradori 86): “The telegram of this metonymy—a name, a number—points out the unqualifiable by recognizing that we do not recognize or even cognize, that we do not yet know how to qualify, that we do not know what we are talking about” (qtd. in Borradori 86).

approach to September 11 that framed the events of that day as immediately “traumatic.” Even though the fiction discussed here disputes the more popular framing of 9/11, that is how it was hastily propagated as a “national trauma” by mainstream media sources and the nation’s leaders, this does not negate the event’s status as cultural trauma. As Smelser explains, “the establishment of a collectivity’s responses to a trauma is a matter of bitter contestation among groups, sometimes over long periods of time and often without definitive settlement” (“Psychological” 49). Therefore, relying on Smelser’s claims, which consider trauma creation as a process involving a “continuing counterpoint of interested and opposing voices” (“Psychological” 50), this dissertation argues that despite the media’s rushed and unsubstantiated claims that defined the attacks as cultural trauma, 9/11 fiction, in terms of its adversarial role, confirms even as it redefines its status as cultural trauma. Distinguishing my work from studies that simply object or bemoan the rapidity with which the attacks were coded as cultural trauma (the dangers of which I discuss in more detail in chapter three), I use Smelser and Alexander to argue that the ongoing debates about what 9/11 signifies can be read as evidence for the event’s ongoing status as cultural trauma. While my argument might question a simplistic understanding of these events as cultural trauma, it also challenges, drawing attention to Alexander and Smelser’s emphasis on the on-going accumulation of engaged and conflicting voices, a simplistic understanding of cultural trauma theory.

Alexander et al. explore the notion of cultural trauma extensively and across multiple contexts specifically drawing attention to the meaning-making process that follows catastrophic events, not the intrinsic traumatic quality of the events themselves.² As a whole, their approach

² Eyerman, for example, focuses on the cultural trauma of slavery, how it has and continues to affect African American identity (“Cultural”); both Giesen and Alexander focus on the

understands cultural trauma as a constructed process, as an interpretive and progressive effort to assign meaning to an event. This “process of trauma creation,” as Alexander calls it, “occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (“Toward” 1). Or as Sztompka puts it, “truly *collective* traumas, as distinct from massive traumas, appear only when people start to be aware of the common plight, perceive the similarity of their situation with that of others, define it as shared” (160). That is to say, a catastrophic event, mass atrocity, or large-scale event that yields a substantial number of individuals suffering from post-traumatic stress is not *culturally* traumatic per se; rather, it is the perspective of the injured collective, the allocation of meanings surrounding the events, and the public expression and distribution of these meanings that make an event culturally traumatic. Furthermore, these meanings must continue to be understood as damaging to the collective *by* the injured collective and must have enduring, indelible effects on the group’s identity as a whole.

Alexander contends that the formation of cultural trauma is dependent upon the claim-making process, that is to say, mediator groups within the collective play an enormous role in the Holocaust — Giesen examining it as “the traumatic reference for German national identity after 1945” (115) and Alexander demonstrating how it has transformed from a war crime into a “generalized” and “universalized” symbol for human suffering and moral evil (“On the Social” 197); Sztompka explores the cultural construction of trauma, the “traumatic sequence,” he calls it, after the collapse of the communist system in East-Central Europe (171); and finally, Smelser examines the “traumatic ingredients” of September 11, how compared to other cultural traumas, it is a “trauma with a rare historical twist” (“Epilogue” 269).

process of trauma creation: “Collectivities do not make decisions as such; rather, it is agents who do. . . . Carrier groups are the collective agents of the trauma process. . . . they are situated in particular places in the social structure, and they have particular discursive talents for articulating their claims” (“Toward” 11). These collective agents can include mainstream media, political authorities, celebrities, artists, authors, poets, talk-show hosts, intellectuals, and most recently, members of the general public through the sharing of perspectives on social networking sites such as Reddit and Twitter.

As it follows, it is often the work of the more powerful carrier groups that dominate other perspectives, and in the case of 9/11, the dominant agency was the media, which by extension also broadcast claims made by the nation’s leaders. As Alexander explains, “When the trauma process enters the mass media, it gains opportunities. . . . Mediated mass communication allows traumas to be expressively dramatized” (“Toward” 18). This tendency towards dramatization, as I explore in depth in chapter three, is evident in the way the media and members of the U.S. government constructed a framework around the attacks; they began immediately to shape the events of September 11 according to a paradigm of trauma.³ As sociologist, Brian A. Monahan

³ Critical studies that examine the journalistic narrative framing of 9/11 and the media’s rhetorical influence over the creation of a dominant national “9/11 narrative” include Matthew J. Morgan’s edited collection of essays, *The Impact of 9/11 on the Media, Arts, and Entertainment: The Day That Changed Everything?*, Brian A. Monahan’s *The Shock of the News: Media Coverage and the Making of 9/11*, Steven Chermak, Frankie Y. Bailey, and Michelle Brown’s edited collection of essays, *Media Representations of September 11*, Bradley S. Greenberg’s edited collection of essays, *Communication and Terrorism: Public and Media Responses to 9/11*,

explains, “dominant media narratives had an unusual influence on shaping the meanings attached to these events and the cultural and political responses to them” (xii). Monahan characterizes the 9/11 media coverage as “public drama” in which

news workers necessarily must omit the more complex aspects of an issue or event in favor of a less complicated narrative. As a result, members of the media audience are told a dramatic tale with a fairly simple story line. . . . This, however, requires an unfortunate trade-off: instead of a nuanced assessment of the causes or consequences of an event or the policy implications of an issue, the audience is presented with a story that has a rather narrow narrative crafted around a familiar structure, archetypal characters, and a melodramatic plot filled with notions of good versus evil. (8-9)

As many scholars have already argued, this perspective and narrative structuring, that framed the entire nation as innocent victims, was subsequently adopted and manipulated by the Bush Administration to further their political and military initiatives.⁴ When the trauma trope is co-opted in such a way it becomes a potentially dangerous tool through which to bolster support for what might otherwise be controversial and debatable initiatives. As Diana Taylor asks, “what, I

and Elisabeth Anker’s essay, “Villains, Victims and Heroes: Melodrama, Media, and September 11.”

⁴ Many studies make this claim (see for example Alan Gibbs, Greenberg, Monahan, Marc Redfield, Reynolds and Barnett, and Taylor). Gibbs, for example in *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*, argues that, “the Bush administration employed a paradigm of collective trauma precisely to decontextualise and therefore simplify and depoliticise alleged reasons for the attack” (22).

wonder, are the political ramifications of such a public discourse of victimhood in the face of the United States' expanding, and undefined, war against terrorism?" (260).

According to anthropologists Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, trauma "has become a major signifier of our age. . . . Today we talk of rape and genocide, of torture and slavery, of terrorist attacks and natural disasters in the same language, both clinical and metaphorical, of trauma: one signifier for a plurality of ills signified" (xi). Indeed, much is taken for granted regarding the notion of trauma; the word has become a conventional way to signify any painful experience that remains elusive or beyond the grasp of understanding (Fassin and Rechtman xi; Leys 1-2; Alexander, "Toward" 2-3). In this context, it is not surprising that the events of September 11 were immediately and heavily coded in the language of trauma. And I want to be careful in this dissertation not to engage in a kind of ethical or moral blaming of the media. There are reasons for these adopted narrative strategies, not least of which is a public appetite for the dramatization and cinematic rendering of events (through the influence of Hollywood movies, for example). American newspaper headlines on the morning of September 12, 2001 describe the events the day before as "Unthinkable" (*The Salt Lake Tribune*), as "America's Darkest Day" or "Darkest Hour" (*The Detroit Free Press*; *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, *The Denver Post*). When the "Attacks Shatter [the] Nation" (*The Post and Courier*, Charleston, S.C.), the United States is conceived immediately as a "Nation in Anguish" (*San Diego Union-Tribune*). Further to this, newspaper headlines the day after characterized the events as immediately indelible: "A New Day of Infamy" (*The Boston Globe*, *Albuquerque Journal*, *Tulsa*

World, and *The Charleston Gazette*); “America Savaged, Forever Changed” (*The Detroit News*); “None of Us Will Ever Forget” (*The Seattle Post Intelligencer*).⁵

In contrast to the narrative established in the days, weeks, and months after the events of September 11, the fiction explored here offers a more nuanced approach. These authors reconsider the events of 9/11 from more subtle and subjective perspectives, within less restrictive narrative parameters than those initially constructed. Thus, they pose more questions than answers and aim to keep the event open to multiple perspectives and approaches. My objective therefore is to draw attention to the meaning(s)-making influence of this fiction since it foregrounds significant controversies and dilemmas that have intensified in the aftermath. If, as Monahan claims, American mainstream media “tilted the balance in favor of certain interpretations and, by extension, determined the social and political response to the attacks” (10), we might ask how the fiction examined here points us in different directions.

But as stated above, my approach, that views 9/11 fiction as the product of carrier groups that seek to question the dominant perspective, does not negate the classification of 9/11 as cultural trauma. On the contrary, relying on the theories of Alexander and Smelser, I argue that the texts examined here in fact reaffirm its codification as cultural trauma. According to Alexander, the process of meaning making, or “story-telling” as he calls it, which effectively transforms catastrophic events into cultural traumas, is not always agreed-upon and can become a “complex and multivalent symbolic process that is contingent, highly contested, and sometimes highly polarizing” (“Toward” 12). Smelser further emphasizes this point, suggesting that this

⁵ These and other notable headlines can be viewed online at “Today’s Front Pages: Wednesday, September 12, 2001, 145 Front Pages From 19 Countries” at the Newseum website or in person in the “9/11 Gallery Sponsored by Comcast” at the Newseum in Washington D.C.

often results in a “fascinating type of cultural accumulation — a nonending, always-expanding repository . . . a continuous and pulsating process of remembering, coping, negotiating, and engaging in conflict” (“Psychological” 50, 54). The process of trauma creation therefore must be understood first and foremost as a *process*, as an ongoing struggle to find meaning, as a way to assess and reassess the enduring effects of events, and as a way to consider “cultural” wounds within the injured collective (how they might differ and for whom). Within the context of September 11, I explore what Alexander means by and how we begin to measure a collective “fundamental injury,” when “the patterned meanings of the collectivity are abruptly dislodged,” and when cultural traumas leave “indelible marks upon group consciousness” (“Toward” 11, 10, 1). In this theoretical context, debates and contestations surrounding the events of 9/11 point directly to the event’s indelibility, and in this way, function as significant components in the trauma creation process. While it might be the case that a dominant and more “official” interpretation of the events achieves authority over others, “counterinterpretations or stories may continue to exist alongside, as several variations may become rooted in the collective memory” (Eyerman, *Assassination* 17). Thus, the texts under discussion here can be read as examples of counter perspectives and as such deserve considerable attention. While they might differ from the initial perspective, they in effect sustain the event’s status as culturally traumatic.

There are several book-length studies of the literary representations of 9/11 including Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn’s collection of essays *Literature After 9/11* (2008), Kristiaan Versluys’s *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (2009), Birgit Däwes’s *Ground Zero Fiction: History, Memory, and Representation in the American 9/11 Novel* (2011), Richard Gray’s *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (2011), Martin Randall’s *9/11 and the Literature of Terror* (2011), and most recently, Arin Keeble’s *The 9/11 Novel: Trauma,*

Politics, and Identity (2014). Similar to my perspective, many (if not most) of these studies view (some) 9/11 fiction as contestations that challenge the status quo. Versluys, for example, argues that the terrorist attacks were in effect a “semiotic event, involving the total breakdown of all meaning-making systems” (2), and that “a narrative is needed to restore the broken link” (4). He argues that while some 9/11 fiction engages in a kind of formulaic narrative fetishization, in which “Tragedy is turned into triumphalism without proper mourning or working through,” other novels “succeed in engaging a full range of the imagination, beyond patriotic clichés and beyond the pabulum of the talking heads” (13).

Likewise, Keniston and Quinn explore the ways “that literature contests 9/11’s co-option for narrowly political ends” (3). The essays in their collection explore the ways in which the “highly varied and ever-growing range” of 9/11 fiction rejects the notion of a singular perspective on the events, and thus has “contributed to and complicated on-going conversations among political commentators and cultural critics about the meaning and uses of 9/11” (2). These essays demonstrate how, in contrast to “political discourses that seek to simplify or fix the meaning of 9/11,” literature opts instead to trace “a more complex alternative” (3). Similar to Keniston and Quinn’s approach, Keeble considers 9/11 fiction as an opportunity to “engage with and begin to unpack some of the complexities, conflicts and tensions that mainstream news media and the official government response attempted to unify and simplify” (8). Keeble focuses specifically on the “complex and nuanced *conflictedness* that exists throughout the canon of 9/11 fiction” [emphasis added] (2). He draws attention to the ways in which certain novels expose disagreements, divisions, and tensions that have surfaced in the wake of the events, arguing that it is “the novel form that allows for in-depth textual analysis of this conflictedness” (6).

In many ways, my dissertation complements the studies of Keniston and Quinn and Keeble. Like Keniston and Quinn, I emphasize the complexity, diversity, and probing qualities of 9/11 fiction, drawing attention to the ways in which it privileges questions over answers, ambivalence over certainty, and diversity over singularity. Like Keeble, I explore the ways in which these texts testify to the various debates and contestations that have emerged and intensified since the attacks. My work distinguishes itself from these studies, however, by examining literary responses to 9/11 through the lens of cultural trauma theory as outlined by Alexander and Smelser. In this context, the novels and short stories under discussion here become examples of alternative voices to the initial national narrative, serving as agents who expose the instability of 9/11 as an identifiable or ascribable event and that challenge the media's hasty codification of 9/11 as trauma. But to read these texts as sites of struggle or as evidence of communal grappling is also to draw attention to the indelibility of September 11 as a culturally traumatic event. The fiction discussed here, by reason of its subversive agenda, exemplifies the "disputed" or "prolonged process of collective groping, negotiation, and contestation over the proper historical meaning to be assigned" (Smelser, "Psychological" 49).

In analyzing the fiction within this theoretical context, that is, as examples of how groups articulate claims in the ongoing process of trauma creation, I uncover a recurring thematic trend: the tension or anxiety between the private and the public, between the individual and the collective. The texts under discussion here expose an inherent anxiety that exists at the crossroads of considering 9/11 as a national/global, public event, "experienced" vicariously by most Americans on television, and 9/11 as an individual, private event, the impact of which reverberates in a profound and personal way in people's lives. I should note: the consideration of the terrorist attacks from an individual, private perspective is not reserved for survivors or family

members of the deceased. On the contrary, many of these texts draw attention to the ways in which September 11 transformed the lives of some Americans regardless of their relationship with or proximity to the impact zone.

What each of these texts does well is approach the attacks and their aftermath subjectively and more diversely than the mainstream media. In so doing, the fiction examined here opposes what Michelle Balaev calls a “monocular view of memory” (3), opting instead for a more diverse, nuanced approach that often raises more questions than answers. At the same time, however, these texts frame the individual, and his or her subjective experience, within the larger, cultural context. For as Balaev claims, “If the self is conceived as a product of both culture and individual idiosyncratic tendencies and behaviors, then it follows that the meaning of trauma is found between the poles of the individual and society” (17). In the context of large-scale events such as 9/11, the traumatic impact of the events “necessarily oscillates between private and public meanings, between personal and social paradigms” (Balaev 17). The subject is therefore conceived within the larger context of society just as society is conceived as comprising a diverse range of subjects. The way in which the fiction examined here dramatizes the unease between the private and the public, between the personal and the social is central to my study. At work in much of this literature is a frustration over what I coin *cultural trauma identity displacement*, the notion that an individual’s identity as a direct witness or survivor of a large-scale trauma can be dwarfed, displaced, and homogenized into the larger national or cultural narrative that comes to define the event. Thus, my study brings to the fore certain anxieties inherent within the dichotomy between individual and collective experiences of events.

My dissertation begins by providing a brief yet thorough survey of the complex multi-disciplinary field of trauma studies. This chapter provides a theoretical and foundational

framework for the literary analysis that follows in subsequent chapters. Here I provide an outline of trauma studies, which finds its origins in the work of Sigmund Freud, J.M. Charcot, Josef Breuer, and Pierre Janet, specifically highlighting the differences and similarities between psychological theories of individual trauma and the more recent sociological theories of cultural trauma. In particular, I provide an overview of cultural trauma theory, which begins with the 1970s work of Kai Erikson and continues through to the work of Alexander et al. in 2004.

My next chapter examines and evaluates the media's representation of 9/11. Appreciating the overwhelming influence of the media and their hegemonic effect on perceptions of the attacks allows for a comparative consideration of alternative or subversive voices in proceeding chapters. Therefore, relying on extensive media studies such as one conducted by Monahan, who scrutinizes the storytelling strategies of NBC, as well as one conducted by Amy Reynolds and Brooke Barnett, who examine CNN's news coverage of the events, I trace the evolution of a dominant national narrative. This chapter questions the rush to code 9/11 so quickly as cultural trauma, the rapidity of which is strikingly different from the less certain labelling of other historical events such as the Holocaust or the Vietnam War. I explore how the media fashioned a narrative according to a distinct dramatic style, which was "given shape by several features of American culture and American character" (Smelser, "Epilogue" 280). The media's framing of 9/11 was structured according to highly recognizable thematic tropes such as American unity, revenge and retaliation, good versus evil, heroes and villains, and national patriotism.

In chapters four, five, and six, I turn to the fiction itself. In chapter four, I examine Ulrich Baer's overlooked edited collection, *110 Stories: New York Writes After 9/11*, a text compiled soon after 9/11 and which represents one of the earliest literary responses to the events. Baer insists on approaching the events of September 11 "from angles," arguing against "simple

answers, ready-made and precision-bombed solutions, and the arrogant and foolish certainty of having the correct response to a severe and collective trauma” (“Introduction” 2). A number of the pieces in *110 Stories* expose a frustration with the media’s structuring of the events, and at the same time, demonstrate an inherent anxiety between individual and collective trauma. At work here is a dramatization of what I mean by *cultural trauma identity displacement*. Negotiating, grappling, and trying to come to terms with these feelings of displacement is a focus of many of these stories.

In the fifth chapter, I explore concepts of ambivalence and ambiguity within the context of collective trauma in Amy Waldman’s *The Submission* and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Waldman’s novel, which initially seems to play with certain 9/11 archetypes, refuses to co-opt its characters according to narrow restraints, choosing instead to foreground aspects of ambivalence and indecisiveness. Likewise, Hamid’s novel, through the ambiguous characterization of his protagonist, exposes the tension between appearance and reality, demonstrating the instability and unreliability of popular assumptions surrounding 9/11.

Chapter six examines Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Siri Hustvedt’s *Sorrows of an American*. In this chapter, I explore how these novels resist classifying 9/11 as cultural trauma. Instead, they approach the attacks according to their psychological traumatic impact, thus demoting the event’s collective influence. Ironically, however, if we accept Alexander and Smelser’s understanding of cultural trauma, that defines it as an ongoing process of meaning-making, these novels, even as they seek to redefine 9/11 as an individually traumatizing event, ultimately participate in its classification as cultural trauma.

To accept current theories of cultural trauma, that emphasize both the claim-making power of carrier groups *and* the “non-ending, always-expanding” accumulation of meanings

(Smelser, “Psychological” 54) is to pay attention to alternate agents of memory that aim to challenge the dominant storyline, to the ways 9/11 fiction aims to subvert the status quo, challenge dominant perceptions, and foreground diversity over singularity. Unlike other studies, I foreground how these texts and the way in which they grapple for meaning demonstrate the permeating impact of 9/11, and thus work to reaffirm 9/11’s status as cultural trauma. When applied to Alexander and Smelser’s theories of cultural trauma, 9/11 fiction, even as it seeks to contest the media’s hasty framing of 9/11 as trauma and the co-option of this trope by a political administration to support its military strategies, effectively validates 9/11 as cultural trauma.

In their ability to examine the impact of 9/11 across multiple contexts and through a range of perspectives, these texts counterpoise and help to correct the more simplistic use of the trauma paradigm as first appropriated by the media and the nation’s leaders. They do this in such a way as to foreground both the collective wounds (the cultural traumata) that still resonate from 9/11 *and* the debates and contestations that have surfaced since. As such, these texts guard against the narrow co-opting of the trauma trope, upholding the complexity of the events of 9/11 as a priority. Yet in their effort to “de-trope” trauma, these novels and short stories contribute to the ongoing process of cultural trauma creation. Whether these debates and contestations over how to perceive 9/11 continue and claims to the cultural injuries from 9/11 persist, remains to be seen. As Smelser notes, the coding of an event as cultural trauma requires “social agents and contending groups” (“Psychological” 39). This dissertation demonstrates how contending groups reaffirm 9/11’s status as cultural trauma in a far more complex way than initially proposed, but that is no guarantee as to how the events will be remembered in the future.

Chapter 2: Theories of Trauma

As sociologist Ron Eyerman notes, “There is a difference between trauma as it affects individuals and as a cultural process” (*Cultural* 1). This chapter explores such differences, bringing to the forefront significant and pervading scholarship on the concept of cultural trauma. I trace here theories of cultural trauma and their relationship to the larger, complex, field of psychological trauma. This chapter briefly surveys perspectives on psychological trauma before exploring theories of cultural trauma that have emerged over the past few decades. My objective here is not to provide an exhaustive genealogical survey of psychological trauma, but instead to foreground significant developments in trauma theory in order to underscore key distinctions between between psychological and cultural trauma.

Eyerman offers us a simple yet useful differentiation between psychological and cultural trauma: “As opposed to psychological or physical trauma, which involves a wound and the experience of great emotional anguish by an individual, cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion” (*Cultural* 2). Furthermore, if an event or the memory of an event is to be considered culturally traumatic, it must be continually represented and identified as such by the injured collective. A disturbing, overwhelming, often violent or abusive assault on a distinct group of people (for example, genocide, racism, or terrorism) does not inherently constitute cultural trauma. The event must be identified, understood, and remembered as traumatic by the affected community as a whole. As Eyerman states, “While it may be necessary to establish some event as the significant ‘cause,’ its traumatic meaning must be established and accepted, a process which requires time, as well as mediation and representation. . . . a national trauma must

be understood, explained, and made coherent through public reflection and discourse” (*Cultural* 2). The meaning-making component of cultural trauma raises concerns over how and in what way the events of September 11 were coded as trauma. If it is the construction of meaning and representation of certain events (and not merely the events themselves) that define cultural trauma, we must pay attention to collective agencies that assign these meanings in the first place.

Yet the initial representation of events is not the only consideration in the overall classification of cultural trauma. Current theories in the emerging field of cultural trauma consider the coding process as ongoing, allowing for and appreciating multiple, even contradictory, interpretations of events. In fact, the debate over how to process, understand, or memorialize an event often validates the event’s status as cultural trauma in the first place. As Neil J. Smelser explains, by their very definition, “cultural traumas can never be solved and never go away” (“Psychological” 54). In order to classify as cultural trauma, the event in question must be continually memorialized; those directly and indirectly affected, and even subsequent generations, must engage in “compulsive examining, and reexamining, bringing up new aspects of the trauma, reinterpreting, reevaluating, and battling over symbolic significance” (Smelser, “Psychological” 54). And while this may lead to a certain level of ambivalence over the trauma, yielding over time to “a reservoir of hundreds of different renditions of the memory,” it also speaks to the indelibility of the events and the effect they have on cultural identity and integrity (Smelser, “Psychological” 54). In fact, over time cultural traumas can and often do produce polarizing responses (Smelser, “Psychological” 55), and there can remain little if any agreement over how to interpret or remember these historical events.

In her study of trauma in American novels, Michelle Balaev argues for a model of trauma that supports a “multiplicity of responses to an extreme experience” (xi). Balaev explains that not

every response to trauma is predictable or entirely similar, stressing the importance of “contextual factors” when determining the significance of the event for a particular individual or victim (xi). This perspective opposes more established, foundational theories of trauma, which Balaev describes as “homogenous” and “narrowed” (xi). Balaev disputes the psychological premise that trauma is unrepresentable, that events remain frozen in the victim’s memory, irretrievable and inaccessible except through abreaction through therapeutic narrative recall. According to these more traditional and popular approaches, trauma is imagined as a “dissociated entity that orbits consciousness, or as an inherently wordless event that creates an unknowable memory or mental illness” (Balaev xiv). Pursuant to Balaev’s position, I argue that recent theories in cultural trauma push conventional understandings of trauma beyond singular, homogeneous readings, demoting the idea that there is a distinct, identifiable, and predictable response to trauma. While cultural trauma theories might broaden our perspective and understanding of traumatizing events and while they might borrow from psychological theories, they remains distinct from individual trauma studies.¹

¹ Using the adjective *traumatic* to describe an event is hotly debated. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud mentions “external danger” (9) and “surprise” or “fright” (11) as factors that can lead to traumatic neuroses, independent of physical wounds or injury. Gunnar Karlsson defines “traumatic events” as “events where the sum of excitation surpasses that which the mental apparatus is able to bind” (145). However, Eyerman suggests that because large-scale shocking events involve a process of mediation in the construction and representation of the event as *traumatic*, we should avoid describing the events themselves as *traumatic*: “Allowing for the centrality of mediation and imaginative reconstruction, one should perhaps not speak of traumatic events, but rather of traumatic effects” (*Cultural* 3). In other words, while an event

2.1 Psychological Trauma

Today, much is taken for granted regarding the concept of trauma; the word itself is now loosely employed in the vernacular, often used casually to signify a range of painful experiences (some extreme and others comparatively mild). Ruth Leys, who provides a genealogical survey of trauma studies, calls attention to the recent shift towards the popular usage of the term by juxtaposing two reported incidents of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), both of which occurred in the Spring of 1998: the first involves over three thousand Ugandan girls suffering from symptoms of PTSD following their abduction and brutalization by the militant group, the Lord's Resistance Army (L.R.A.); the second involves Paula Jones, a former U.S. state employee who sued U.S. President Bill Clinton in 1994 for sexual harassment. Jones's lawyers assert that as a result of the "trauma of her alleged sexual harassment by President Clinton, Jones now suffered from post-traumatic stress with long-term symptoms of anxiety, intrusive thoughts and memories, and sexual aversion" (Leys 2). Leys concludes that on the one hand, this example demonstrates the "absolute indispensability" of the concept of trauma, that an identification of trauma, and specifically a diagnosis of PTSD, might lead to a deeper understanding of the painful experiences of victims, such as those of the kidnapped children in Uganda (2). On the other hand, when considered within the context of Jones's legal issues, we see how the concept

may operate as the cause or catalyst for the traumatic effects, this event cannot independently be called *traumatic* since it must be established and accepted as such by carrier groups within the community. Therefore, it might be more appropriate to describe the external event as *traumatizing* rather than *traumatic*, since the event itself only becomes traumatic once meaning has been applied.

of trauma has become “debased currency” (Leys 2). Leys’s example here draws attention to how trauma is now loosely employed for conventional use in intellectual, emotional, legal, social, casual, and political discourse, often for political or legal gains, that despite its serious beginnings in the late 1800s with the work of Freud and others, it has become an unrestricted catch-all for all kinds of anguish and stress.

Yet in spite of its ambiguous use in today’s vernacular, the study of trauma has informed our perspectives of victimhood as well how we diagnose, treat, and compensate post-traumatic suffering. It is difficult, however, to adopt a linear approach to trace the development of trauma studies, and psychologist Richard J. McNally is certainly correct in his claim that the definitional process of trauma “is fraught with complexities” (78). Despite debates within the field, a distinct theoretical model of psychological trauma prevails: trauma is generally understood as an impaired cognitive response to a particularly overwhelming or disturbing event, which often materializes in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, dissociative symptoms, mental breakdowns, hallucinations, and neurosis. This view suggests that the event enters the mind unexpectedly and with great force, and remains lodged in the mind almost like a piece of shrapnel. Because the event is so foreign, unexpected, and shocking, the mind is not able to process it properly and memories of the experience become unrepresentable and unspeakable. Instead of registering the event normally into one’s consciousness, the victim is left with intrusive repetitions of the past often in the form of dreams and flashbacks. According to this perspective, trauma displaces language; thus, the only worthwhile response is to recreate or abreact the event through narrative recall, what Freud would call “the talking cure.” As Balaev explains, “this popular notion . . . that trauma inherently produces a temporal gap and a pathologically fragmented self works from a Freudian perspective of the mind that imagines normal external stimuli enter the brain in one

fashion, but traumatic stimuli enter another region of the brain in a different fashion” (6). A traumatic experience thus impedes normal cognitive processing; the victim is unable to register the experience normally into his or her consciousness, and the event becomes frozen somewhere in the psyche ultimately shattering or destroying the identity of the victim.

Most scholars agree that this prevailing model of trauma finds its origins in the work of Freud, J.M. Charcot, Josef Breuer, and Pierre Janet. While traumatizing events and traumatized victims undoubtedly existed prior to this, serious study of trauma as a psychological concept began with the work of these physicians during the late 1800s and early 1900s. But Freud and his colleagues did not become interested in trauma by chance; the increased frequency of industrial and railway accidents and the impaired cognitive response to these accidents became the catalyst through which Freud and others began their clinical research. As E. Ann Kaplan puts it, “The phenomena of trauma . . . that interested clinicians did not arise in a vacuum. The phenomena were closely linked to modernity, especially to the industrial revolution and its dangerous new machines” (25). The introduction of the railway in particular resulted in many life-threatening, gruesome accidents, often leading to serious physical and mental injury for survivors. Freud paid particular attention to the victims of such accidents, as well as to other psychoanalytical patients displaying comparable symptoms. Through these case studies, Freud and others began speculating on theories of “nervous shock.”

The word “trauma” did not always denote psychological impairment; it originally referred to a physical injury, derived from the Greek word meaning “wound.” Of course, the word has not lost all of its original connotations since it is still used by the medical community to refer to serious bodily injury. But in large part due to the work of Freud and others in the late 1800s, the term *trauma* primarily became a psychological term referring to a victim’s disrupted

mental state in response to an event so intense and incomprehensible that it overwhelms and overpowers normal cognitive functioning. Since trauma, as a serious field of study, finds its theoretical roots in Freud and his colleagues at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is often considered a modern concept connected to various industrial accidents and wartime neuroses that began to occur with increased frequency.

In their initial definition of traumatic neuroses, Freud and Breuer become the first, but certainly not the last, to describe trauma as a “foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work” (6). Later, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud expands this idea more fully, suggesting that the human mind contains a “protective shield against stimuli” (30). Traumatic neurosis is a result of an extensive breach of this protective shield: “. . . a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli. Such an event as an external trauma is bound to provoke a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organism’s energy and to set in motion every possible defensive measure” (*Beyond* 33). A Freudian perspective thus understands traumatizing experiences as invasive and infectious, as contagions of the mind lodged directly into the subconscious.

Through his research on traumatic neurosis, Freud developed the concept of the “talking cure” — that in order to purge the negative pathological affects of a past life-altering event, the event must be “abreacted” or relived through psychotherapy and hypnosis: “The injured persona’s reaction to the trauma only exercises a completely ‘cathartic’ effect if it is an *adequate* reaction. . . . But language serves as a substitution for action; by its help, an affect can be ‘abreacted’” (Freud and Breuer 8). Freud and Breuer conclude: “It may therefore be said that the ideas which have become pathological have persisted with such freshness and affective strength because they have been denied the normal wearing-away processes by means of abreaction and

reproduction in states of uninhibited association” (11). If the memory of an overwhelming and painful experience is suppressed and denied, often subconsciously as a mechanism of defense (rooted in what Freud later calls the pleasure principle – i.e. the avoidance of pain), recollections of the event force themselves to the surface pathologically; these memories manifest as various debilitating symptoms such as nightmares, convulsion, hallucinations etc. A patient can work through these painful memories by re-experiencing and reliving the event through hypnosis and free association, ultimately allowing the patient to gain mastery and perspective over the memory, ideally halting the occurrence of pathological symptoms.

From these observations, Freud developed the concept of “compulsion repetition,” which, Freud emphasizes, occurs during psychotherapy: the idea that since the patient cannot necessarily remember the whole of her experience, she is “obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past” (*Beyond* 18-19). The patient becomes stuck or fixated on repeatedly reliving the frightening event as though it is occurring in the present; thus, it is the role of the physician to help the patient re-experience the event (and bring to the surface the forgotten parts) in such a way as to help the patient recognize that the event in question occurred in the past, and not in the present reality. Here Freud stresses the indelible component of trauma, how it pierces one’s mind with great force, remains lodged as foreign body, infecting one’s cognitive processes.

Many theoretical perspectives on trauma consider traumatic memories as infectious, invasive, chronic, and indelible. Trauma is described as the “traces left on the psyche” (Fassin and Rechtman 2); as an “alien . . . smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defense” (Erikson, “Notes” 183); as a “piercing or breach of a border. . . seared directly

into the psyche, almost like a piece of shrapnel” (Luckhurst 3-4); as “a response to events so overwhelmingly intense that they impair normal emotional or cognitive response bringing lasting psychological disruption” (Vickroy ix); “as a memory that one cannot integrate into one’s own experience, and as a catastrophic knowledge that one cannot communicate to others” (Caruth and Keenan 256); and as intrusive memories that “are fixed in the mind and not altered by the passage of time, or the intervention of subsequent experience” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 172).

Psychiatrist Judith Herman’s extensive and influential work on trauma titled *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992) outlines a spectrum of traumatic disorders (ranging from those of a single devastating event to the effects of extensive and repeated abuse), and identifies common patterns in both the symptoms and the recoveries of traumatic disorders. In her book, Herman describes trauma in rather simple terms as “an affliction of the powerless,” thus evoking a sense of both injury and victimhood (33). Herman identifies the principal crisis of trauma: while the “ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from our consciousness,” (this for Herman is the true meaning of the oft-repeated word: *unspeakable*), atrocities “refuse to be buried” (1). Symptoms of trauma in an individual survivor, such as flashbacks, nightmares, dissociative personality disorders, and intrusive memories involving the event, are evidence of the overwhelming power of the effects of the event(s) upon the human psyche. According to Herman, an individual experiencing trauma becomes powerless to its control.

As Herman claims, there exists a central dialectic within a victim of psychological trauma: “the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud” (1). It is this dialectic, the “unspeakable” manifestation of trauma coupled with the often-

overpowering need to relive the event, that ultimately gives rise to a kind of psychological paralysis in victims; individuals who experience such events, either directly as a victim or indirectly as a witness, often exhibit “complicated, sometimes uncanny alterations of consciousness” (Herman 1). Victims find it difficult to “remain clearheaded and calm, to see more than a few fragments of the picture at one time, to retain all the pieces, and to fit them together” (Herman 2), yet they cannot forget or banish the experience entirely. While they might possess the will to speak about their experience, they often suffer from deep psychological impairment impeding them from finding the right language or even the ability to communicate cohesively. Central to Herman’s work is her claim on the fundamental stages of recovery for the trauma victim, that “remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims” (1). Thus, the individual healing process of a trauma victim, which for Herman involves “reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community. . . . challenges us to reconnect the fragments [and] to reconstruct history. . . .” (3).

The American Psychological Association (APA), the largest scientific and professional psychological organization in North America, defines trauma in 2013 as

any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative impact on a person’s attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning. Traumatic events include those caused by human behavior (e.g. rape, toxic accidents) as well as by nature (e.g., earthquakes) and often challenge an individual’s view of the world as a just, safe, and predictable place. (VandenBos 597)

Likewise, in the *DSM-IV-TR* published in 2000, trauma is defined as a

direct personal experience that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate (Criterion A1). The person's response to the event must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror. (463)

Victims of trauma are destined to re-experience the threatening event repeatedly, not in actuality, but through various intrusive thoughts, images, dreams, and memories. The *DSM-IV-TR* claims that victims of trauma continuously reexperience the event(s) through recurrent and intrusive recollections, distressing dreams, dissociative states, hallucinations, and flashbacks (464-65).²

² Psychiatrist Robert Spitzer directed the revision of the *DSM* which resulted in the publication of the *DSM-III* in 1980. Spitzer and members of the *DSM-III* taskforce considered psychoanalysis too abstract and theoretical and the *DSM-II* as lacking scientific validity (Spiegel). They were "deeply skeptical of psychiatry's unquestioning embrace of Freud" (Spiegel). The goal of the *DSM-III*, therefore, became diagnostic reliability, "to reduce interpretive variance by standardizing definitions" (Spiegel). Rather than align with a singular theory of psychoanalysis, the *DSM-III* taskforce "decided to restrict themselves to describing behaviors that were visible to the human eye" (Spiegel). While a Freudian psychoanalytical approach is concerned with internal conflicts, the *DSM-III* is concerned with providing a checklist of descriptive symptoms. Classifying clusters of symptoms for mental illnesses became, and still remains, a chief concern of the *DSM*.

I include here the definition of trauma in the *DSM-IV-TR*, published one year prior to 9/11, to contrast it with changes found in the *DSM-5*, published in 2013. First, the stressor criterion for what qualifies as “traumatic” has been expanded to include “repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s)” (271). In order to be diagnosed as a victim of PTSD under the qualifications of the *DSM-5*, an individual no longer needs to have direct exposure to a violent or threatening event, nor does she need to have a close relationship with someone who was directly exposed the event(s), as was the case with the *DSM-IV-TR*. The new criterion in the *DSM-5* suggests that victims of PTSD might include individuals exposed to the details of an event, although they are not necessarily connected to the event in a personal, familial, or relational way. This includes for example psychologists, police officers, coroners, and even perhaps clean-up crews, who are often exposed repeatedly to the aversive details of a traumatizing event, yet their lives or the lives of their loved ones are not threatened. This new criterion is interesting since it draws attention to what the psychiatric community considers the range of victims of traumatizing events, which according to the *DSM-5* includes primary victims, witnesses, bystanders, relatives or close friends, and now those repeatedly exposed to the details of an event. The *DSM-5* is quick to note, however, that this new criterion “does not apply to exposure through electronic media, television, movies, or pictures” (271).³ Furthermore, the inclusion of the addendum, which excludes those exposed to an event through electronic means such as the television or Internet, implies that the media’s increasingly pervasive role in the dissemination of traumatizing images and information can no longer be ignored and must be singled out as a disqualification for PTSD. This is a topic to which I will return in later chapters.

³ With the *DSM-5*, the APA abandons its prior use of Roman Numerals as a way of indicating subsequent editions.

Despite their move away from Freudian theory, the model of trauma affirmed by influential diagnostic organizations such as the APA and the *DSM-5* has much in common with what Balaev refers to as the “traditional” or “popular” model. To summarize, trauma is generally understood as an impaired emotional response to a shocking event or series of events; this response is so overwhelming that it paralyzes normal cognitive functioning. Memories of the event are indelible, and the mind becomes fixated on memories of the event, essentially reliving the experience over and over again through flashbacks, nightmares, hallucinations etc.

This brings us to the work of Cathy Caruth. Caruth’s scholarship in the 1990s is significant for literary criticism, although she has had little impact on psychologists. In fact, Caruth is often celebrated as the most influential scholar working on trauma outside of the field of psychology. Key to her perspective is the unrepresentable quality of trauma, that “it resists simple comprehension” (*Unclaimed* 6). Caruth says trauma contains a paradox or “aporia”: “that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness” (*Unclaimed* 91-92). Caruth goes on to explain that

The repetitions of the traumatic event — which remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight — thus suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known, and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing. (*Unclaimed* 92)

In other words, while an individual might be present at the time of the violent occurrence, the individual is unable to confront or process what he or she sees; the mind therefore is unable to represent the event since the mind does not properly encode the event in the first place. It is only

afterwards, as a belated experience, that fragments of the event become available to the victim in the form of flashbacks and nightmares. For Caruth, then, there is a “peculiar, temporal structure” or “belatedness” to trauma, “since the event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time” (*Trauma* 7). Trauma is thus never experienced directly but only after a period of latency, analogous to Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, the German word for deferred action or afterwardsness. In response to her question—“Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?” (7) — Caruth responds by suggesting that trauma is both, “the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (*Unclaimed* 7). Trauma therefore is the experience of an overwhelming event only after the event has occurred as flashbacks, nightmares, and other episodes of cognitive impairment and repetition.

Caruth’s theories are influenced by the earlier work of Janet in the early 1900s. Janet suggested that there are two kinds of memory: *narrative* memory, in which a patient is able to properly convert anticipated (i.e. “normal”) experiences into healthy, narrative recollections; and *traumatic* memory, in which a patient is unable to properly integrate the event into narrative memory, due to the event’s shocking, often violent, characteristics. As Leys puts it, traumatic memory “unconsciously *repeats* the past,” whereas narrative memory “*narrates the past as the past*” (105). Janet concluded that familiar and expected life events are easily assimilated into the mind through narrative memory; unexpected and often tragic experiences, on the other hand, “may not easily fit into existing cognitive schemes and either may be remembered with particular vividness or may totally resist integration” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 160). Traumatic memories are stored differently in the mind, are void of the necessary narrative framework, and

appear as fragments or distortions on the surface: “in contrast to narrative memory, which is a social act, traumatic memory is inflexible and invariable. Traumatic memory has no social component . . . it is a solitary activity” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 163). Yet, according to Janet, traumatic memories do nonetheless exist in their precise form underneath the surface of the patient’s consciousness despite their resistance to recall and narration. The goal of the psychotherapist, therefore, is to bring back these traumatic memories and to exhume and expose the veridical truth that remains hidden under the surface. Incidentally, as Leys explains, Janet also articulates the value of “forgetting” or changing one’s memories: “The physician must help [the patient] stop carrying out these absurd actions, teach her to make others, give her another attitude. *To forget the past is in reality to change behavior in the present*” (Janet qtd. in Leys 115).

Balaev challenges traditional understandings of trauma by suggesting that they erroneously consider the self as universal, that all responses to trauma are similar, and that “universal neural-hormonal changes occur in response to a traumatic experience” (9). Traditional models of trauma such as those outlined above assume a singular, generic, and ultimately universal response to an event: namely, that the event pierces the protective shield of the mind; the victim is unable to properly encode the event in his or her memory; the experience is made known to the individual only pathologically through flashbacks, nightmares, and hallucinations; and the victim is unable to find the language to represent the event, rendering him or her speechless. Balaev argues that these models tend to “universalize the diverse responses to and consequences of traumatic experience, suggesting that terrifying events affect all people in the same fashion due to its neurobiological basis” (9). She argues instead for a model of trauma that accounts for the variance in traumatic responses, and recognizes that people can and do react

differently to traumatizing events depending on their age, circumstance, personality, culture, society, etc. She contends that there remains too much reliance on a model of trauma, especially in the field of literary studies, that “claims trauma is a speechless void, unrepresentable, inherently pathologic, timeless, and repetitious” (3). For Balaev, this model is too restrictive in that it erroneously supports a “monocular view of memory” (3). The result is “a limited method of interpretation that fails to adequately address the complex phenomena of trauma in literature” (Balaev 3).

Similar to Balaev, Freud and Breuer acknowledged the role played by context and the profound influence of certain mitigating contextual factors on one’s trauma. They suggest that “Any experience which calls up distressing affects – such as those of fright, anxiety, shame or physical pain – may operate as a trauma of this kind; whether it in fact does so depends naturally enough on the susceptibility of the person affected” (6). An event can and does affect people differently, depending on the vulnerability or predisposition of the victims in question. Further to this, Freud emphasizes the way in which the effects of trauma are dependent upon certain mitigating factors in each individual. He argues that the age of the victim at the time of the event is relative to the event’s damaging effects: traumatic experiences “are all the more momentous because they occur in times of incomplete development and are for that very reason liable to have traumatic effects” (“Introductory” 361).

Finally, Freud paid particular attention in his work to the role of fantasy, sexuality, and/or assault, rejecting the notion that there was a cause and effect relationship between an event and the symptoms that later occurred. Instead, Freud emphasized how the external symptoms, or *trauma* of an individual, “derived its force and efficacy entirely from internal psychological processes of elaboration, processes that were understood to be fundamentally shaped by earlier

psychosexual desires, fantasies, and conflicts” (Leys 21). Or as Susannah Radstone puts it, “In alternative re-interpretations of Freud, it is the unconscious production of associations to a memory, rather than qualities intrinsic to certain events, that is understood to render a memory traumatic” (“Trauma” 17). The effects of an overwhelming event are not solely determined by exposure to the event itself, that is, to what happens on the “outside”; they are also determined by memories, fantasies, and other aspects of one’s internal processes, i.e. what happens on the “inside.”

Balaev argues for a more pluralistic approach to trauma, focusing on the importance of social and cultural contexts in our understanding of trauma and its victims. She connects the individual victim with society, and in so doing, calls attention to how the individual experience of trauma “necessarily oscillates between private and public meanings, between personal and social paradigms” (17). In particular, she raises the issue of how individual trauma is “often connected to larger social factors and ideologies” (17). In literature, this context is often represented by the protagonists who “are shown to experience trauma within the context of a culture that ascribes different layers of meaning to the event” (18). Balaev concludes, “Therefore, the traumatized protagonist carries out a significant component of trauma in fiction by demonstrating the ways that the experience and remembrance of trauma are situated in relation to a specific culture and place” (18). Balaev’s perspective is useful for my project since it speaks to the central role played by context in the representation of trauma, namely that the “speakability” of trauma is dependent upon the cultural context within which the event occurs. Furthermore, when cultural values and assumptions are contested or debated following an event, a multiplicity of responses ensues, and thus the notion of a universal approach to trauma or predictable response to the event is challenged.

2.2 Cultural Trauma

Context plays a critical role in how trauma affects entire communities. While in their deliberations of how cultural trauma works, sociologists Alexander, Eyerman, and Smelser clearly borrow from theories of psychological, individual trauma, they deviate from models that consider the response to traumatic events as unrepresentable and/or universal. Instead, contemporary theories of cultural trauma, such as those put forth by Alexander et al., ally with Balaev, and are comparatively broad in scope, emphasizing the decisive role played by meaning-making carrier groups within the community, and the diversity of responses generated.

Central to recent theories of cultural trauma is the work of sociologist Kai Erikson, one of the first scholars to pay serious attention to the relationship between trauma and community, and one of the first to offer a workable definition of cultural trauma. In his 1976 book, *Everything in Its Path*, Erikson provides a preliminary theory of what he calls collective trauma, what Alexander later describes as a “path-breaking sociological model” (“Toward” 4). In his book, Erikson traces the devastating effects of a flood in a small Appalachian community known as Buffalo Creek in the winter of 1972. During his time spent with the victims of the flood, Erikson discovered that not only did individuals exhibit symptoms and signs of trauma — “It was as if every man, woman, and child in the place – everyone – was suffering from some combination of anxiety, depression, insomnia, apathy, or simple ‘bad nerves’” (Erikson, *Everything* 136) — but it also appeared the community itself, as a “social organism,” was traumatized:

when the community is profoundly affected, one can speak of a damaged social organism in almost the same way that one would speak of a damaged body. . . . The people of the hollow still had memory, kinship, contiguity in common, so there were materials to build with. But for the moment, at least, they were torn loose

from their cultural moorings – alone, adrift, floating like particles in a dead electromagnetic field. (Erikson, “Notes” 188)

Erikson noticed that a number of the residents of Buffalo Creek who were “clearly traumatized” after the flood were not even present when the disaster struck; they were in fact far from home, and did not immediately witness any of the death and destruction from the flood itself (“Notes” 188). Thus, for Erikson, the Buffalo Creek incident became a “telling test case” for the idea of collective trauma, the idea that members of a community who did not experience the event directly were nonetheless injured (i.e. traumatized) “by the loss of a sustaining community” (Erikson, “Notes” 188).

Based on his experience with the victims of the flood at Buffalo Creek, Erikson expanded the concept of trauma, which up to this time focused primarily on individuals, to include “traumatized communities as something distinct from assemblies of traumatized persons” (Erikson, “Notes” 185). Thus, Erikson became one of the first sociologists to extend the notion of trauma to include not just individuals but groups connected by a distinct commonality, collectively affected by a traumatizing event. For Erikson, *individual* trauma is “generally taken to mean a blow to the tissues of the body – or more frequently now, to the tissues of the mind – that results in injury or some other disturbance” (“Notes” 183). By *collective* trauma, however, Erikson means

a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with “trauma.” But it is a form of shell shock all the same, a gradual realization that the

community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared. (*Everything* 154)

In both definitions, Erikson uses similar language; individual trauma is described as a “blow to the psyche,” while collective trauma is described as a “blow to the basic tissues of social life” (*Everything* 153-54). Here there is a definitive shift away from the field of psychology, which focuses on the individual towards the field of sociology, with a focus on communities and community identity. But the two understandings of trauma remain connected in their foundational implications; just as individual trauma threatens one’s identity and sense of self, collective trauma threatens the shared identity of a particular group of people who have been bonded together through one or more commonalities or connections.

Of course, embedded within cultural trauma can be individuals suffering from psychological trauma. But, as Erikson explains, “traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals can combine to create a mood, an ethos – a group culture, almost – that is different from (and more than) the sum of the private wounds that make it up” (“Notes” 185). While large-scale traumatizing events, characterized as events that inflict suffering or terror on individuals within a particular community, can produce both traumatized individuals and traumatized communities, a traumatized community is more than the sum total of traumatized individuals within that community. This is worth emphasizing since it is important to an understanding of cultural trauma and its ongoing, long-lasting effects on a community. Of course, individuals who experience trauma on a personal, psychological (and arguably more direct) level might also experience trauma on a cultural level as part of a collective, as members of a community whose identity has been irrevocably and irretrievably altered due to the event. But individuals suffering from PTSD are not a prerequisite or component requirement for cultural trauma.

A constructionist understanding of cultural trauma, that views it as an ongoing process of mediation and meaning-making, implies that successive generations will continue to acknowledge injuries of the past as significant. Subsequent generations, even though they were not present (nor even alive) during the events in question, continue to identify, articulate, and acknowledge the wounds of the past as something that informs their identity as a group in the present. While this might seem obvious, it is worth highlighting as we begin to consider the similarities and differences between individual and collective trauma. That is to say, “cultural wounds” from past events do not manifest as PTSD but are still identified as injurious to the collective identity by successive generations. We might consider the recent civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri as a good example. The protests in Ferguson, which were triggered by the death of African-American teenager Michael Brown who was fatally shot under questionable circumstances by a white police officer, Darren Wilson, drew national attention to the racial tensions that exist between the city’s black and white communities. This, of course, points back to the treatment of African Americans during slavery and how the cultural wounds from those events still reverberate within the present-day community. While none of the protesters in Ferguson would necessarily identify as individuals *traumatized* by slavery, they do nonetheless still bear wounds from this historical past and continue to construct and classify these wounds as a “loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric” (Eyerman, “Cultural” 61).⁴

⁴ For more on slavery as cultural trauma, see Eyerman’s essay “Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity” or his book by the same name. Eyerman claims that the “trauma of forced servitude and of nearly complete subordination to the will and whims of another was thus not necessarily something directly experienced by many of the subjects of this

Erikson suggests that when experienced as a group, trauma not only shatters community but can also create community, a paradoxical assertion strikingly different from the often isolating and debilitating effects of individual trauma: “trauma shared can serve as a source of communality in the same way that common languages and common backgrounds can” (“Notes” 185). In this way, cultural trauma sharply contrasts with individual trauma, especially considering van der Kolk and van der Hart’s claims to the solitariness of psychological trauma, that it has no social component. Erikson explains that when individuals are traumatized, they often feel set apart, alone, made special by the suffering they endure and the experiences they have faced. In the context of a community, however, this feeling of isolation can also become, for some survivors at least, “a kind of calling, a status, where people are drawn to others similarly marked” (Erikson, “Notes” 186). Trauma can produce a kind of paradox: that out of one’s deepest sense of isolation and separateness a sense of kinship and camaraderie may be born: “there is a spiritual kinship there, a sense of identity, even when feelings of affection are deadened and the ability to care numbed” (Erikson, “Notes” 186).

For Erikson then, trauma has “both centripetal and centrifugal tendencies,” effectively pushing one away from the centre while often simultaneously drawing one back (“Notes” 186). Erikson goes on to explain that this sense of kinship, or social connectedness, often takes on a driving, controlling force in the community: “traumatic experiences work their way so thoroughly into the grain of the affected community that they come to supply its prevailing mood and temper, dominate its imagery and its sense of self, govern the way its members relate to one another” (“Notes” 190). Erikson is careful to note, however, that it is not the atrocity that binds

study, but came to be central to their attempts to forge a collective identity out of its remembrance” (“Cultural” 60).

people together, but rather it is the shared experience of the event, and the suffering that follows that serves as a link connecting one individual to another.

Erikson stresses that in contrast to individual trauma, which “breaks through one’s defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively,” collective trauma has a more gradual effect, “working its way insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it” (*Everything* 153-54). Here Erikson makes distinct the temporal component of psychological and cultural trauma, suggesting that psychological trauma occurs suddenly while cultural trauma takes time. However, Erikson’s conclusions regarding the temporal difference between psychological and individual trauma do not concur with Caruth and Freud, who emphasize the role of latency in psychological trauma, that it is only after an incubation period following an event that symptoms of trauma begin to appear. Freud describes latency within pathological terms in his later work, *Moses and Monotheism*: “The time elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms is called the ‘incubation period,’ a transparent allusion to the pathology of infectious disease” (84). Similarly, Caruth argues that is impossible to directly access an event; a distressing event is not known, understood, or even experienced immediately, but rather assumes its force “precisely in [its] temporal delay” (*Trauma* 9). Therefore, for Caruth, the “experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself” (*Unclaimed* 17).

The initial and immediate codification of 9/11 as cultural trauma, the focus of my next chapter, might at first seem to complicate Erikson’s theory of the gradual and insidious construction process of collective trauma. As I outline in more detail in chapter 3, the media and the nation’s leaders immediately and decisively identified the attacks on September 11 as

culturally traumatic; there was in effect no latency period. In fact, these events were narrated and framed as trauma within hours, in some cases minutes, of the World Trade Centers being hit and the towers coming down. There was little, if any, delay or “gradual effect” to borrow Erikson’s words, in the classification of 9/11 as cultural trauma. Immediate claims were made about the scale of the trauma, the indelibility of the trauma, and the victims of the trauma (i.e. the entire nation) (Smelser, “Epilogue” 280). As Smelser puts it, unlike other cultural traumas in the past, the traumatic process of September 11 was effectively “truncated” (“Epilogue” 280).

But if we accept theories of cultural trauma that emphasize the temporal component of trauma construction, we should not rely solely on the reaction of the media or on any other abridged or hasty public claims to injury. That is to say, to truly assess whether the effects of events lay claim to collective injury, we must pay attention to carrier groups that make injurious claims *beyond* the more abrupt, knee-jerk assessments often propagated by the media. While initial claims made by the media and the nation’s leaders may indeed turn out to be correct, they cannot be relied on exclusively. Understanding events as culturally traumatic “must be established and accepted, and this takes time to occur, as well as mediation and representation” (Eyerman, “Cultural” 61). While the media might play a “decisive role” (Eyerman, “Cultural” 61) in the construction of cultural trauma, alternate voices and prolonged mediations must also be considered.

In his essay, “Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma,” Smelser underscores certain aspects of psychological trauma relevant to current insights about cultural trauma, emphasizing both the “promise and limitations” of these connections (“Psychological” 34). But before he lists the ways in which the prevailing theories of psychological trauma inform the notion of cultural trauma, Smelser reiterates Freud’s thoughts on the importance of context in his understanding of

psychological trauma, since key propositions of cultural trauma rely heavily on these concepts. Interestingly, scholars such as Caruth often ignore Freud's thoughts on how context plays a critical role in the manifestation of traumatic symptoms, perhaps since it challenges the notion of a universal response to trauma. But as Freud suggests, context in terms of one's age, background, susceptibility, or mental stability can affect one's response to a threatening event. In addition, Freud "evoked the logic of context . . . when he took note of concurrent (or auxiliary) causes. . . . 'emotional disturbance, physical exhaustion, acute illness, intoxications, traumatic accidents, intellectual overwork, etc.'" (Smelser, "Psychological" 34). Smelser concludes, "in Freud's preliminary formulations, the idea of trauma is not to be conceived so much as a discrete casual event as a part of a process-in-system" ("Psychological" 35). By this, Smelser stresses the notion of context, that the impact of an event is entirely dependent upon a system of qualifications, and not every event no matter how disturbing will yield the same results in every person.

While this idea of context is not the only similarity between psychological and cultural trauma, it is one worth emphasizing since Smelser's theory of cultural trauma depends upon it.

As Smelser proposes:

No discrete historical event or situation automatically or necessarily qualifies in itself as cultural trauma. . . . The radical aspect of this proposition rests on the fact that we are normally accustomed to think of some events — catastrophic natural disasters, massive population depletion, and genocide, for example — as in, by, and of themselves traumatic. They are nearly certain candidates for trauma, to be sure, but even they do not qualify automatically. ("Psychological" 35-6)

Put simply, cultural traumas are "made, not born" (Smelser, "Psychological" 37). In order to qualify as cultural trauma, the event requires an intentional and articulate meaning making

system-in-process, that is, a system produced and maintained by those within the affected community (either directly or indirectly). The event in question “must be remembered, or made to be remembered” in order to qualify as culturally traumatic (Smelser, “Psychological” 36).

Beyond this issue of context, Smelser outlines two key similarities between psychological and cultural trauma: the *negative effect* of the event on community identity (similar to how psychological trauma alters an individual’s personality); and the *indelibility* or *permanence* of the event on the community’s sense of identity (similar to how traumatic memories remain lodged in an individual’s memory). In regards to the former, Smelser explains that a “cultural trauma is, above all, a threat to a culture with which individuals in that society presumably have an identification. . . . this threat, if experienced, arouses negative affects” (“Psychological” 40). In order to emphasize the importance of the event’s negative effect, Smelser concludes in reverse that, “if a potentially traumatizing event cannot be endowed with negative affect (e.g., a national tragedy, a national shame, a national catastrophe), then it cannot qualify as being traumatic” (“Psychological” 40). Put another way, if a terrible event occurs but does not cause lasting *negative* damage to a community’s identity, and is quickly and quietly forgotten despite its shocking, overwhelming, or even violent characteristics, this event does not qualify as cultural trauma. This event may be traumatizing to some on an individual level, and may remain so, but it does not in spite of its violent or alarming qualities automatically qualify as cultural trauma.

But despite being similar in this regard, psychological and cultural traumas also differ here, and the concept of negativity versus positivity becomes more complex when considered in the context of cultural trauma. True, the immediate effects of a cultural trauma are usually devastating and destructive, and it is certainly not my intent to suggest otherwise. However, sometimes there is a surge of positive support shortly after a community crisis (although again

this depends on context, both in terms of the kind of event and of the susceptibility of the affected community). As Smelser says, “A welling-up of community solidarity has been recorded in the wake of many community disasters, as people pull together collectively to rescue victims, to comfort the survivors of victims, and to rebuild what has been lost” (“Epilogue” 268). In an individual, on the other hand, the negative effects of trauma usually supersede any positive feelings, or at least it takes a lot longer for the individual to be able to look back on the experience with any positive feelings. Victims of psychological trauma sometimes do express gratitude for their negative experience, since it often plays a large role in shaping them into the people they become. However, this perspective usually takes time, care, and treatment, and is not immediately apparent, if at all. A cultural trauma, however, often immediately incites an ambivalent mix of good and bad feelings; the event becomes “simultaneously shocking and fascinating, depressing and exhilarating, grotesque and beautiful, sullyng and cleansing,” (Smelser, “Epilogue” 269). While community members might continue to articulate the negative impact of the event, they often behave in ways that suggest a more positive response: communities may become overtly patriotic or loyal to their city or nation; there may be a burst of camaraderie or solidarity between community members; individuals and corporations often become more philanthropic and sympathetic; and a general positive spirit towards the community may dominate. While we cannot say this is the case everywhere or with every event, this was certainly evident in the United States following the events of September 11.

The second similarity between psychological and cultural trauma, the indelibility of trauma, is another example of how these two theoretical streams are at first similar yet in effect quite different. First, for trauma to be trauma both on the psychological and the cultural level it must be indelible, that is, it must be invasive and pervasive. As sociologist Arthur G. Neal states

in his early work on cultural trauma in the late 1990s, “The enduring effects of trauma in the memories of an individual resemble the enduring effects of a national trauma in a collective consciousness. Dismissing or ignoring the traumatic experience is not a reasonable option” (31). To reiterate, if an event is eventually dismissed or ignored, it does not meet the criteria as cultural trauma; it might be a terrible event that causes damage to certain individuals, but it does not qualify as an event that is socially or collectively damaging. Instead, in order to qualify as a cultural trauma, an event must be intentionally remembered, continually endowed with meaning, and coded (and continually recoded) as unforgettable. As Smelser explains, “once a historical memory is established as a national trauma . . . its status as trauma has to be continuously and actively sustained and reproduced in order to continue in that status” (“Psychological” 38). Active carrier groups, as Alexander calls them, become collective agents in the remembering process (“Toward” 11). They must make and continue to make meaningful, intentional, and articulate claims about the impact of the event in order to establish and sustain the indelibility of the event.

These claims are controlled and manipulated by those with particular influence within the community, including but not limited to the media, political authorities, cultural leaders, artists, authors, curators, celebrities, and intellectuals. By contrast, the indelible affects of trauma on an individual level are not intentional at all, nor are they controlled, manipulated, or properly articulated, at least not according to traditional understandings of trauma. In fact, they manifest themselves in quite the opposite manner: the symptoms of trauma often control and manipulate victims, leaving them paralyzed by the experience. As Smelser says,

cultural trauma differs greatly from a psychological trauma in terms of the mechanisms that establish and sustain it. The mechanisms associated with

psychological trauma are the intrapsychic dynamics of defense, adaptation, coping, and working through; the mechanisms at the cultural level are mainly those of social agents and contending groups. (“Psychological” 39)

Unlike psychological trauma in which the injured party has little or no control over whether the experience of the event becomes indelible, cultural trauma requires agency, groups who assign meaning to the event. This raises the question as to how free groups are in the assignment of meanings. For example, groups previously affected by cultural traumas might be more prone to view current events through a traumatic lens. Nonetheless, cultural trauma requires a keen and invested interest by collective agents who code the event as trauma, that is, as a communal tragedy, an unforgettable experience, or identity-shifting or shattering event.

Mirroring Smelser’s understanding of cultural trauma, Alexander provides a succinct definition: “Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (“Toward” 1). Like Smelser, Alexander agrees that the “horrendous event” itself is not inherently traumatic; it is the interpretation and understanding of the event by the community as a whole that establishes the event as cultural trauma. In this way, cultural trauma is similar to psychological trauma, in that it is generally understood not as the event itself, but as the symptoms or responses that follow. The event operates as a catalyst, to be sure, but it is ultimately the meaning-making efforts following the event that designate the experience as cultural trauma. As Alexander explains, “Only if the patterned meanings of collectivity are abruptly dislodged is traumatic status attributed to an event. It is the meanings that provide the sense of shock and fear, not the events themselves” (“Toward” 10).

The “horrendous event” inflicted upon a community takes many forms and crosses many ranges of experiences: a sudden, violent event that inflicts terror although not necessarily mass casualties, such as the attacks on September 11 (which compared to other cultural traumas resulted in a relatively small number of deaths); prolonged, continual, and intense abuse of a group bonded by one or more relational commonalities, such as the Indian Residential School System abuse in Canada, or slavery in the United States; or widespread genocide, which might occur over a short period of time, such as the mass slaughter of over 500,000 Rwandans in 1994 in approximately 100 days, or over a longer period of time, such as the killing of almost 6 million Jews during the Holocaust. The effects of these events are prolonged and widespread, and include intense cultural upheaval, a collective loss of security, damaged and altered identities, a communal sense of fear and terror, not to mention death or physical injury. Alexander explains that the destabilization that occurs within the community is “not the result of an event but the effect of a sociocultural process. It is the result of an exercise of human agency, of the successful imposition of a new system of cultural classification. . . . Events are one things, representations of these events quite another” (“Toward” 10).

Alexander’s perspective is particularly valid in terms of 9/11, which in many ways was represented (and continues to be represented) as culturally traumatic. The casualties on September 11, which totalled 2,996, were comparatively low in terms of other global tragedies, and yet the event’s potential impact on American identity, the sense of shock and fear that ensued, and the overriding sentiment that things will never be the same, was repeated over and over again in popular culture, through the media, and by various politicians, celebrities, intellectuals etc. in the days, weeks, months, and years since the attack. Alexander is not so much concerned here with whether the events themselves, at the time of their occurrence, are shocking

to those immediately involved, or for those in the surrounding area, which they undoubtedly were. Instead, Alexander is more interested in the role played by certain carrier groups in the sustainability of certain events as trauma, long after the events have occurred.

As Alexander explains, whether or not an event is remembered as traumatic is not solely dependent on the scale or magnitude of the event in question. Rather, whether an event is coded as traumatic is a “matter of intense cultural and political work,” which “narrative wins out is a matter of performative power” (Alexander, *Trauma 2*). Alexander cites an interesting, and somewhat disturbing example, often referred to now as the “forgotten Holocaust,” in which over 250,000 Chinese were massacred by Japanese military over a period of seven weeks in the coastal city of Nanjing in 1937. As Alexander explains, despite the major loss of life in Nanjing and the subsequent devastation of the immediate community, the massacre was not constructed as cultural trauma. Alexander asks, “Why did it not become a major point of reference for China as a nation, searing itself into the collective memory, defining institutions and demanding reform” (*Trauma 119*). Indeed, the media seemed to go completely silent about the event, and the event became noticeably absent from children’s history textbooks in China; it was “not until 1992 that the massacre entered into required reading for elementary schools in post-Maoist China. . . . This absence of representation in the identity-forming texts of young Chinese was matched by silence about the massacre in the public rhetoric broadcast to their parents” (*Trauma 123*). Alexander suggests that the answer to why this tragedy was not seared into national memory is twofold, both of which point to the performative power of dominant carrier groups: first, “When Nanjing was controlled by the Japanese occupier, the trauma creation process was subject to control by the very groups who had perpetrated the crime. Evidence of the massacre was destroyed, observers silenced, and counternarratives disseminated throughout the occupied

territories” (*Trauma* 124). Second, the event was also not constructed as cultural trauma by the Chinese even after their liberation in 1945, because, quite simply, “the Chinese had other fish to fry. The potential carrier groups did not carry” (Alexander, *Trauma* 124). Counter-intuitive as it might seem, unless dominant carrier groups identify the Nanjing massacre as culturally traumatic, it does not inherently, at least according to Alexander’s definition, qualify as such.

Some events might initially seem traumatizing to a nation or community but often do not sustain their distinction as cultural trauma. We might consider the bombings at the Boston Marathon in May 2013, which resulted in three deaths and over 100 injuries, as an example of a tragedy that could quite easily fail to retain its initial designation as a culturally traumatizing event. At the time, headlines abounded with phrases such as: “Terror Returns: Boston Blasts Rattle Americans as Nation Goes on Alert” (*USA Today* 4/16/2013), “That Post-9/11 Quiet? It’s Over” (*USA Today* 4/16/2013), “Nation’s Fears Reawakened” (*Des Moines Register* 4/16/2013) and “Terror Attack Rattles a Nation” (*The Atlanta Journal Constitution* 4/16/2013).⁵ Indeed, in the days and weeks following, and as those responsible were hunted down by police (with one suspect eventually killed and the other apprehended on television in dramatic style), the nation as a whole appeared fixated on the events as they unfolded; comparisons with feelings of terror during September 11, 2001 were casually and frequently declared. But while Bostonians at least may continue to remember, commemorate, and interpret the events of that day as trauma, will the event remain seared in the national memory? Or, on a national level, will it eventually be forgotten and ignored? Will it remain nationally or culturally indelible to Americans at large?

⁵ For more on the Boston headlines and for facsimiles of various newspaper covers on April 16, 2013 including those mentioned above, see Eric Randall’s article, “How the Nation’s Front Pages Showed the Boston Marathon News.”

According to Alexander's perspective, if the answer turns out to be no, which I suspect it might, the bombings which occurred in Boston, while certainly terrible, horrific, and life-changing for some, will not ultimately retain their initial and rapid classification as cultural trauma.

Since cultural trauma is not born by the event itself, but is instead structured or identified over time by certain carrier groups, what we might also call agents of memory, these groups carry a great deal of power and influence. As such, the more effective the carrier, the more lasting the effects of the trauma; the classification of cultural trauma, is "deeply affected by power structures and by the contingent skills of reflexive social agents" (Alexander, "Toward" 10). The creation or structuring of cultural trauma is dependent upon the effectiveness of memory-making agencies; the more effective the voice, the more likely the event will affect the community at large, and for a longer period of time. From this perspective, the construction of trauma might be considered precarious business, depending on who in the community has the most power, the loudest voice, the most effective platform, or the most compelling message. In terms of the events on September 11, this notion is particularly significant. The cultural construction of trauma surrounding the events of September 11 began with fundamental claims made by the media who, without hesitation, began the process of coding 9/11 as cultural trauma. However, the value and implications of these initial claims have since been questioned.

Not all agree that cultural trauma is a useful concept. Holocaust scholar, Wulf Kansteiner, in particular, questions whether the term is even legitimate, arguing that the growing body of work on trauma "has created an aestheticized, morally and politically imprecise concept of cultural trauma . . . which elide[s] the moral differences between victims, perpetrators and bystanders of acts of violence" (194). Kansteiner challenges the meaning of mass traumatization and whether it can be adequately assessed; he questions whether these new theories of cultural

trauma effectively and inevitably universalize trauma and collapse all levels of experience under one catchall, the “collective.”

Specifically, Kansteiner asks, if the media play an important if not central role in the trauma-making process (something I will demonstrate in the next chapter), as the means through which collective injury is mediated, disseminated, and represented, should we trust its claims? What Kansteiner seems to overlook, however, is that the media represent only one carrier agent in the constructive process of cultural trauma, albeit a powerful one. He neglects definitional properties of cultural trauma that understand it as a system-in-process, as the enduring efforts to claim, contemplate, and question the injurious aspects of the events. Smelser, in particular, emphasizes the notion that cultural traumas should, and often do, yield a diversity of responses, some of which may be oppositional to others. Claims over collective injury, explains Smelser, often become a “disputed process” sometimes involving “finger-pointing, mutual blame, and demonization” (“Psychological” 52). In his critique of cultural trauma theory, Kansteiner pays little attention to the temporal quality necessary to cultural trauma, that claims to collective trauma take time, and are progressive and prolonged: “Symbolic struggles over the proper remembering of trauma often have a generational dimension” (Smelser, “Psychological” 50).

Kansteiner also questions how we go about measuring collective injury: “how many members of a given group have to be suffering from post-traumatic stress before the group as a whole might be appropriately characterized as a traumatic community. Alternatively, if collective trauma should not be construed as an aggregate of individual traumata, the problem remains of how this collective phenomenon is defined” (208-09). Unlike psychological trauma which can be empirically measured through a diagnostic process to identify PTSD, how do we measure the more abstract injuries of collective trauma? While there is no way to circumvent the

abstract and metaphorical qualities of cultural trauma, especially when compared to the more empirical, diagnostic-based approach of psychological trauma, Smelser provides one answer to Kansteiner's question: the traumatic event must evoke an "initial sense of shock, disbelief, and emotional numbing"; it must incite "fear, anxiety, terror, and some evidence of mental disturbances in a small number of affected people"; it must induce widespread collective mourning; it must have an "immediate sense of [] indelibility"; it must be "Closely related to unforgettability" coupled with a sense of "national brooding over the events"; it must advance a "collective endowment of the events with a sacred character"; it must stimulate the "emergence of deliberate efforts to remember the events collectively"; there must be "Sustained public interest in the remembering process"; and there must be a culminating sense that the collective identity has been altered ("Epilogue" 266-67).

Smelser's exhaustive list makes tangible what Alexander means when he says that collective actors must "decide" to represent their communal pain as a "fundamental threat to who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go" ("Toward" 10). Piotr Sztompka restates these "ingredients" more succinctly:

Truly *collective* traumas . . . appear only when people start to be aware of the common plight, perceive the similarity of their situation with that of others, define it as shared. They start to talk about it, exchange observations and experiences, gossip and rumors, formulate diagnoses and myths, identify causes or villains, look for conspiracies, decide to do something about it, envisage coping methods.

(160)

To summarize, it is not events that control the outcome, but claims made by the community itself, led and dictated by key players who choose to code the event with traumatic significance.

Smelser's list, in contrast to Kansteiner's reductive approach to cultural trauma, suggests that claims to cultural injury are not arbitrary but are based on collective reactions and responses to the events in question.

The fiction I have chosen reveals a more nuanced, thoughtful response to 9/11 that seeks to question or redefine the initial approach by the national news media. If, as Smelser suggests, the construction of cultural trauma can be a "disputed process," then this study represents an exploration into the details and implications of these disputes. On the one hand, the immediate codification of 9/11 by major U.S. news networks challenges claims that cultural trauma takes time, that it has a more gradual effect on a community. On the other hand, the responses represented in the fiction support the notion that time is perhaps needed in order to yield more thoughtful, sobering responses to events such as September 11. These responses, which often ask more questions than they answer, resist gross over-simplifications of September 11, and step back as it were to properly consider levels of victimization, aspects of complicity, and the media and nation's swift and perhaps even dangerous interpretation of the events. Instead of adhering to a singular understanding or response to trauma, the fiction here demonstrates a matrix of responses, what Smelser describes as a "fascinating type of cultural accumulation — a nonending, always-expanding repository consisting of multiple precipitates (both negative and positive) of a continuous and pulsating process of remembering, coping, negotiating, and engaging in conflict" ("Psychological" 54).

Debates and disputes over how to interpret the meanings of events enforce the indelibility of the events in question; as Sztompka claims, a "truly collective trauma" involves intense discourse among community members. Those affected by the event, either directly or indirectly, talk about the event and debate the issues to great lengths: "Those debates reach the public arena,

are taken by the media, expressed in literature, art, movies. The whole ‘meaning industry’ full of rich narratives focuses on giving sense to the common and shared occurrences” (Sztompka 160). We might ask whether the narratives examined in this dissertation are able to alter the dominant narrative of 9/11 or perhaps whether they are part of a larger shift in perspective that is already taking place. The fiction studied here suggests that the initial reading of 9/11 is being challenged and that new injuries that connect to the events of 9/11 are being claimed. However, even as they redefine or complicate claims over collective injury, they do nonetheless affirm the events as cultural trauma; in their effort to ask questions, dispute meanings, and question earlier perceptions, these texts continue to mark the event as indelible.

Chapter 3: 9/11 and the Whitewash Effect of the Media

We had a trauma to be sure, but it's not really a national trauma. If you were not in New York on September 11, what you saw was an event on CNN.

Morgan Freeman in 2002 (qtd. in Hays and Martinez)

While there were undoubtedly other carrier groups exerting influence over the way in which the events of 9/11 were translated and interpreted, television news played a large role in the initial codification of 9/11 as “traumatic.” This chapter examines how mainstream television media networks assumed that role so quickly, and questions how this interpretation has come to shape our current perceptions of the attacks. Indeed, on some news stations the projection of meaning regarding the events as “traumatic” began within minutes and hours of the planes hitting the buildings, even before the two World Trade Center towers collapsed. While it is not my intent to deny the events of 9/11 as psychologically traumatic for specific individuals who experienced the events directly, or even to discount the events as *culturally* traumatic for affected communities, it is my goal to draw attention to the exceptional rapidity with which these events were labelled culturally traumatic by the mass media. Therefore, before I examine the ways in which fiction represents a supplementary and at times alternative approach to the events, I examine here the “post-traumatic” context in which this fiction was written. In order to demonstrate how some authors challenge earlier claims about 9/11, I must first chart this perspective itself, questioning both the storytelling approach of the news media and the socio-cultural contextual milieu of American audiences at the time.

This chapter proceeds in four parts. First, in order to show how the events of September 11 were coded immediately as trauma, I draw attention to the data provided by 9/11 media studies. I do want to note, however, that the term “media” is an amalgamating concept, encompassing a wide range of communication agencies: television media, advertising media, print media, social media, etc. In this chapter, I am primarily focussed on television media, that is, how the events of 9/11 were reported on American mainstream television news networks like NBC, CNN, CBS, FOX News etc. While there is a wide range of research on the topic of 9/11 and the media, I choose to highlight two studies in particular: Brian A. Monahan’s book-length study, *The Shock of the News: Media Coverage and the Making of 9/11* and Amy Reynolds and Brooke Barnett’s report, “‘America Under Attack’: CNN’s Verbal and Visual Framing of September 11.” Monahan’s research offers an in-depth look at NBC’s coverage of 9/11, including the language, rhetoric, and imagery employed by news directors, anchors, and reporters. He highlights a “disturbing trend” in U.S. journalistic practices in which the news is “fashioned into long-running ‘serialized dramas’ that bear greater resemblance to popular fiction than to journalism” (xii). Likewise, Reynolds and Barnett, in their examination of the verbal and visual frames on CNN, categorize the 9/11 coverage according to certain dominant thematic clusters, which reveal “less objectivity and more interpretation and commentary” (101). Taken together as a case in point, these two studies demonstrate how the media adopted a simplified approach to the events, framing them according to recognizable American tropes and values. While there were other collective agencies in the claim-making process, television news media quickly became the most persuasive of the bunch, first responders, as it were, in the construction of meaning-making.

Second, I examine the way in which context and expectation, that is the social, political, and cultural environment in which an event occurs, plays a significant part in determining the effectiveness of the claims made by dominant agencies. The persuasive power of the leading carrier group cannot be understood as arbitrary; the dominant carrier group is dependent upon its audience and whether or not that audience is predisposed to receive and accept certain meanings and interpretations. In this case, the storytellers (i.e. the media) relied on certain normalized clichés that were immediately recognizable to audiences. Rather than assume an approach that censures the media for what might be described as a narrow or singular representation of the events, I consider how the media utilized strategies shaped on the one hand by “American values” and on the other by a cultural fascination with cinematic, apocalyptic spectacle. Furthermore, the response by the news media is not without historical basis, the foundations of which can be traced back to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Third, and in order to draw attention to the stringency of what became the master narrative around 9/11, I examine two comics produced ten years apart, *The Amazing Spider-Man* #36 and *Cartoonists Remember: September 11, 2001-2011*. Television news networks’ framing of 9/11 affirmed many American platitudes and clichés: the notion of American exceptionalism, innocence, patriotism, the sanctity of the American flag, adulation of the American hero, and an oversimplification of good versus evil. In contrast to the fiction examined in chapters four, five, and six which offers alternate approaches to 9/11, these comics endorse most, if not all, of these clichéd responses. This suggests that despite new perspectives put forth in the decade since, the rigidity of the dominant framing of 9/11 to some extent remains.

In the fourth section of this chapter, I explore the complexities of subjectivity in the context of cultural trauma. While I accept the notion of a “collectivity,” defined as a group of

people who share identifiable, agreed-upon commonalities (e.g. religion, nationality, gender, age, race, etc.) *and* the notion of collective injury, as a fundamental (albeit sometimes abstract) wound to the values or identity of that group, I draw attention here to the stress on individuals as they try to reconcile their private experience of events against a mass mediated perspective of these events as collective trauma.

3.1 9/11 News Coverage, NBC and CNN

To briefly recap, cultural trauma theory asserts that in order for an event to be classified as cultural trauma, it must first be identified and recognized as collectively injurious. These injuries, that is, the collective wounds of cultural trauma, while they may indeed (and often do) involve individual pain and suffering, are characterized as damaging to collective identity and/or collective values: “Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity. Collective actors ‘decide’ to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go” (Alexander, “Toward” 10). Thus, cultural trauma is defined not by the events themselves but by the constructive, claim-making process that identifies these events as injurious to a collective identity.

Collective agents, or carrier groups, as Jeffrey C. Alexander calls them, a term he borrows from sociologist Max Weber, make claims to collective injury in four different dimensions: the nature of the pain, the nature of the victim, the relationship of the trauma victim to the wider audience/community, and the attribution of responsibility, that is, the identity of the perpetrator (“Toward” 13-15). When the representation of events is approached from these angles, it develops into a story, “a compelling framework of cultural classification,” what can

also be called “a master narrative” (Alexander, “Toward” 12). It is the public sharing and dissemination of these claims that is of interest here. Public agencies, which can include fiction writers, broadcast such claims to a wider audience, coding and thus rendering the event as culturally traumatic, that is, as fundamentally damaging to the group’s identity or values.

If a cultural trauma demands that “members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness” (Alexander, “Toward” 1), the events of September 11 certainly qualify; they evoked an overwhelming sense of shock and disbelief among American citizens and induced a widespread communal outpouring of grief. In New York, immediately after the events, people spontaneously gathered in parks and city squares to commemorate or memorialize the victims with makeshift memorials, even before the threat of subsequent attacks had subsided. Any discussion of the memorializing efforts of New Yorkers would be remiss not to mention the posters, pictures, and keepsakes of “the missing” taped to fences and walls throughout the city.¹ Furthermore, the numerical index, “9/11,” which quickly developed as kind of poetic shorthand for the events, was instantly coded as indelible. In fact, the oft-repeated characterization of 9/11 as “the day that

¹ For the most part, this dissertation focuses on the events and the impacts of September 11, 2001 as they occurred in New York City. This is not to diminish the experience of witnesses to the destruction of the Pentagon or to the victims onboard the airplane that crashed in Pennsylvania. However, the majority of the scholarship on 9/11 maintains a similar focus, as does a large cross section of 9/11 fiction.

changed everything” became one of the most common responses to the day’s events, so much so, that the phrase is now considered a “9/11 cliché.”²

Even before potential *psychological* traumatic effects were properly or clinically realized, it became commonplace to hear leaders, such as President George W. Bush, identify the day’s events as collectively and irrevocably traumatic. In front of the UN General Assembly on November 10, 2001, for example, Bush said: “Time is passing. Yet for the United States, there will be no forgetting” (Bush 163); and former secretary-general of the United Nations, General Kofi Annan, raised the notion of universal grief when he claimed, “We are all traumatized by this terrible tragedy” (“Reaction”). Taken together all of these “qualifications” render 9/11 a “recitation of the textbook features of cultural trauma as we have come to understand them” (Smelser, “Epilogue” 267).

A number of media scholars have produced in-depth studies that meticulously explore mainstream media coverage of September 11. Many of these studies contend that rather than observe and report the events as “objectively” as possible,³ the media placed a dramatic and

² In the introduction to their anthology, *Beyond 9/11: Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Twenty-First Century U.S. American Culture*, Christian Kloeckner, Simone Knewitz, and Sabine Sielke claim that this phrase has in fact become a “misleading assumption”: “commentators and scholars have critically interrogated this view for a long time and shown that the world post-9/11 is characterized as much by cohesion as by transformation. Thus even if the aftermath of September 11, 2001, initially fostered our sense of having witnessed a radical break with the past, this binary perspective has been proved deceptive” (13).

³ Of course, the question of “objectivity” in news reporting has been widely studied by media scholars for decades.

arguably narrow rhetorical framework around 9/11, which left viewers with a particularly emotional and *traumatic* reading of the events and gave leaders a framework through which to justify a revenge/retaliation military response. If we consider the events of September 11 as a catalyst that sent Americans into a “war on terror,” we notice temporal dissimilarities between it and past war-triggering events. As Melvin J. Dubnick, Dorothy F. Olshfski, and Kathe Callahan explain, after 9/11, “The idea of ‘going to war’ seemed obvious enough at first blush. We had been attacked, and we planned to respond in kind. It was that simple. Or was it?” (9). As these scholars point out, “Although other American wars are associated with ‘triggering’ events (e.g., the bombardment of Fort Sumter, the sinking of the Battleship Maine, Pearl Harbor, the invasion of Kuwait), none of those past instances occurred in a ‘narrative vacuum.’ In each previous case, the road to war had been well paved materially, politically, and psychologically over an extended period of time” (9). By contrast, the events of 9/11 “had no such gestation period” (Dubnick, Olshfski, and Callahan 10).

As Richard Jackson explains in his examination of how 9/11 was socially constructed, even if this hasty response to the events “was always highly likely given the existing structures and character of American political culture,” this approach “was not necessarily inevitable or natural” (28). As Jackson puts it, events do not “speak for themselves”; analysis and interpretations are needed to initialize certain responses (25). Indeed, other approaches and interpretations of 9/11 were possible and available for appropriation by the Bush administration (Jackson 28-29). But instead of considering alternative approaches or taking the time, as it were, to properly sanction a retaliatory approach, the U.S. administration capitalized on an opportune narrative endorsed by the media.

Monahan, a media scholar interested in the coverage of 9/11, was neither personally nor psychologically impacted by the attacks on September 11, nor did he live in New York at the time. Yet Monahan's observations about New York made two days after the attacks reveal an incongruity between the mood on the streets and the narrative building on television:

The manner in which the anchors and reporters on these networks, many of whom were delivering their reports from lower Manhattan, were depicting what was happening in New York City did not seem to mesh with what I had observed. . . . I had walked down a great many of Manhattan's streets during those two days. . . .

I had watched as people walked their dogs, strolled around Times Square, stopped for coffee, dined in restaurants, and did other "normal," everyday things.

Certainly, this was a more subdued and solemn atmosphere than usual, but it did not seem to me to be the "city in shock" that the national headlines were suggesting. (xiv)

Monahan became concerned by the "skewed media coverage" (xv). He noticed that the way in which "the media present issues and events does not tend to match the reality of those issues and events; instead, the media translate and transform their subject matter in accordance with their needs to mold news items into reportable form, to attract an audience, to entertain that audience, and so on" (xiv), a fact that puzzles him in this case due to the inherent drama of 9/11 itself — "After all, this spectacle did not need to be made even more dramatic. It already was a Hollywood movie come to life" (xiv). Why apply additional dramatic framing to an event that already seemed to exceed the desired dramatic quota?

Monahan explains that in creating public drama, the media seek to tell a single story, often a "melodramatic morality tale built on the struggle between good and evil and populated

with villains, heroes, and victims” (31).⁴ Drama of this kind assigns distinct archetypal roles to various players: the *villains* here might include those who flew the planes, Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, and the Taliban; the *heroes* might include the New York Fire Department, the Police Department, President Bush, Mayor Rudy Giuliani, and eventually Americans as a whole, characterized as “stronger-than-ever” following the attacks; and the *victims* might include those who died, families and friends of the deceased, and citizens of the United States.

On NBC, the first indication of melodramatic rhetoric came from news anchor Tom Brokaw, who at 10 a.m. on September 11 one minute after the first tower collapsed stated:

It is hard to overstate the consequences of all this, and this is just the beginning. We’ll be living with this story and dealing with the consequences of it for some time. The United States will change as a result of all of this. . . . this is going to change this country profoundly in not just the coming days but the coming months. . . . America has changed today. This is a dark day in this country. It will be in bold print in future history books about how America was attacked within its continental borders with devastating effect by terrorists. (Brokaw qtd. in Monahan 80)

Here an unscripted Brokaw makes a number of significant claims regarding 9/11, many of which mark the beginning of a kind of theatrical approach to 9/11. First, in characterizing 9/11 as a “story,” Brokaw begins the plot-making process; second, he makes a claim (twice) for the

⁴ For a more thorough detailed analysis of NBC news coverage of 9/11, including the amount and duration of the coverage, the patterns and journalistic strategies employed by news anchors and executives, the deliberate positioning of Ground Zero as the central setting, and the characterization of New York firefighters as the heroic iconic protagonists, see Monahan 70-170.

indelibility of 9/11 (even before the second tower has collapsed), that these events will undoubtedly change the United States forever, and that this day will be distinguished as a rupture in American history, with a distinct before and after; and third, he frames the events within a historical context, implying that these events will remain seared into the history books. While all of what Brokaw states here might prove true, it is the rapidity with which these claims are made as well as the clichéd framing of the events that is of interest here. In similar fashion, NBC news anchor Stone Phillips describes the planes crashing into the buildings as an “indelible image to be replayed again and again, seared into the American memory” (qtd. in Monahan 91). This statement frames 9/11 as traumatizing, forever scarring the memory of the victim. It is described as something constantly “replayed” in the minds of survivors, as something that remains “seared” into one’s memory. Here, in this simple scripted statement, the entire nation is conceptualized as trauma victim.

In their study of CNN, Reynolds and Barnett conclude that the news network “notably contributed to the confinement of the parameters of a meaningful citizen debate,” and that the 9/11 coverage on CNN demonstrates “how the media is complicit in narrowing, rather than broadening, meaningful discourse about America’s response to the events of September 11” (101). They categorize CNN coverage according to recurring narrative patterns citing the “war theme” as the most frequent (Reynolds and Barnett 93). Monahan identifies a similar trend in NBC’s coverage citing the “responsibility and retaliation frame,” as one of the most frequent. Within the “war theme” or “responsibility and retaliation frame,” the media consistently and repeatedly vilify the villains, praise the heroes, and support vengeful, retaliatory action, thus advancing “the twin notions of American victimization and the need for a militaristic hunt for justice” (Monahan 64). Put another way, the media framed the events of 9/11 as “an act of war so

horrific that immediate military retaliation was not only justified but necessary” (Reynolds and Barnett 86).

NBC and CNN also framed 9/11 according to themes of national pride and unwavering unity. Within hours of the events, the American flag became a ubiquitous symbol for national pride and strength. The media adopted this symbol of patriotism to use as a backdrop to the oft-repeated images of the destruction, and as such to promote notions of commonality, unification, and universalism. Senators were reportedly standing “shoulder to shoulder,” behind the president, “flanked with bipartisan support,” even breaking out in the spontaneous singing of “God Bless America” at the end of a Congress press conference (Reynolds and Barnett 95).

By deliberately staging 9/11 as public drama and carefully framing the events of that day in accordance with dominant themes such as innocence, exceptionalism, war, unity, and heroism (all of which can be characterized as “American” tropes or clichés), the media helped shape how we remember and interpret 9/11, which then informed military actions in the future. What Monahan, Reynolds and Barnett, and other media scholars suggest here is that in coding and framing 9/11 in the language of trauma, in constructing a trope of “responsibility and retaliation,” which clearly draws a line between *us* and *them*, and by leaning on certain established American clichés such as American heroism, exceptionalism, and military prowess, the media set the stage for the victimization of America as a whole and for retaliation as the only viable and appropriate response.⁵

⁵ Monahan lists several other studies that examine how the media immediately began to frame its coverage around themes of the innocence of America, and the need for retaliation and appropriate military action: see Anker 2005; Breithaupt 2003; Debatin 2002; and Reynolds and Barnett 2003.

Media scholars have long acknowledged the agenda-setting role of the news, that is, the media's ability to attract attention to events that might not otherwise attract much attention (Monahan 19). Depending on how much attention the media pay to a particular event, or to particular aspects of the event, the public's attention and interest will follow; the media direct attention towards certain compelling aspects of the events and thus, the experience of the event and subsequent responsive efforts become informed by these frameworks: "This agenda-setting capacity enables the news media to direct public discourse and concern which, in turn, can affect how resources are allocated and policies are developed around those issues featured in the mainstream news media" (Monahan 19). In assigning attention to a particular event, the media dictate the focus, and this in turn, affects public, social, and political policy. The media do more than report the "facts"; they shape, manipulate, and direct attention to distinguishable frameworks they find most compelling for audiences. This in turn arranges the events according to a dominant narrative, and any reproach of this narrative is deemed taboo.

3.2 Context Matters

In my consideration of the dominant narrative impressed upon American audiences after 9/11, I want to emphasize the relationship between context and trauma, that is, the predisposition and expectations of audiences and their history with mainstream television news reporting. Indeed, the television news media's approach to 9/11, even the rapidity to which this approach was adopted, might seem natural and appropriate to American audiences because they align with certain expectations on how to respond to such events. These expectations are rooted in past reactions to historical events like Pearl Harbor and the Kennedy assassination. The latter, in particular, created precedence for a "where-were-you-when-the-world-changed" approach, and is

often understood as a critical turning point for television news media and their influence over the construction of national narratives. As Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright explain,

it was Kennedy's tragic death that demonstrated the power of television and the photographic image both nationally and globally in the mid-twentieth century, with the impact of the film image of his death and the television coverage of his funeral. . . . The networks covered the events surrounding Kennedy's death and his funeral over many days with uninterrupted television coverage, making of the events a public spectacle and creating an opportunity for mass-mediated participation in the ritual of mourning. (180-81)

As biographer Barbara Leaming tells us, despite Jackie Kennedy's private, post-traumatic response to her husband's death, which left her repeatedly (perhaps pathologically) questioning what she could have done different that day, Jackie Kennedy became a national symbol of comfort and resilience. In a recent adaptation of her forthcoming book on the subject in *Vanity Fair*, Leaming explains, "At a moment of national catastrophe, people had anointed Jackie a heroine. In a time of mass confusion and anxiety, they had invested her with almost magical powers to hold the nation together" (278). I highlight this notion of audience expectation, that is how audiences have grown used to the media's role in framing large-scale national events, to sidestep what can quickly become a value-based dichotomy between the media and dissident voices. That is to say, censuring the media for their role in creating master narratives and concurrently celebrating fiction as a way to alter these perspectives is to generalize. Indeed, not all 9/11 fiction challenges status quo approaches nor do all media sources endorse dominant narratives.

Furthermore, as James Trimarco and Molly Hurley Depret suggest, there are good reasons for the media's approach to 9/11 as trauma: "we do not view trauma simply as a tool unilaterally imposed by an elite-controlled mass media. This explanation misses the emotional draw that these events held for viewers. . . . Even if the sense of national trauma was constructed through media accounts and shaped by political agendas, this does not mean that people did not experience it" (36). Though the media may have compounded and exaggerated patriotic sentiments, it does not follow that people were not feeling increasingly patriotic after 9/11. However, as I demonstrate in later chapters, post-9/11 flag-waving did in fact mean more for some Americans than the unflinching allegiance to the United States that the media claimed it to be; it was also a way for certain individuals and businesses to disassociate themselves from the actions of Islamic extremists. This example demonstrates that while the media's framing of 9/11 might have a foundational basis in the mood and actions of Americans, the complexities and minutiae of these behaviours are often narrowed and/or excluded.

Dominant carrier groups, such as television news media, are not the only agents in the cultivation and promotion of a master narrative. As Michelle Balaev suggests, and as outlined in chapter two, "the experience and remembrance of trauma are situated in relation to a specific culture and place" (18). Or as Sztompka puts it,

The defining, framing, interpretative efforts do not occur in a vacuum. There is always a preexisting pool of available meanings encoded in the shared culture of a given community or society. Individual people do not invent meanings, but rather draw selectively from their surrounding culture and apply existing meanings to the potentially traumatizing events. (165)

While cultural trauma is dependent upon the effectiveness of the claim-making efforts by dominant carrier groups, it might be equally dependent upon the context within which these claims are made; audiences must be accustomed and receptive to the presiding narrative, that is, it must coincide with the way the community already thinks and operates.

But who shapes these fantasies or encoded ways of looking at the world? What determines the socio-cultural context of a particular community? Certainly dominant carrier groups such as the media play a large role in not only assigning meaning to events but also in shaping the context in which these meanings are applied. Regardless, it seems fair to conclude that many factors contribute to the shaping of a particular socio-cultural context; these factors might include gender, nationality, ethnicity, age, proliferation of the media (or lack thereof), celebrity culture, political and foreign policies, technology, wealth, and popular culture. As Alexander and Elizabeth Butler Breese claim, “Which narrative wins out is not only a matter of performative power. It is also a matter of power and resources and the demographics of the audiences who are listening” (xii). Or as Eyerman puts it, carrier agents such as the mass media “are protagonists in a social drama in that they represent occurrences as dramatic stories, creating a spectacle for audiences already predisposed to receive them” (*Assassination* 21). The media present the “news” in a recognizable, archetypal public drama format with maximum entertainment value. Crucial to the success of the public drama is an audience predisposed to such a form; without audience receptiveness to this kind of “reporting,” the media could not continue to employ such strategies.

Susannah Radstone emphasizes the importance of context when she suggests that 9/11 occurred within a fantasy culture: the notion that the idea of September 11 had been previously imagined and anticipated in Hollywood movies. Radstone contends that an event “may prove

traumatic, indeed, not because of its inherently shocking nature but due to the unbearable or forbidden fantasies that it prompts” (“The War” 120). The event is, in effect, the fictional nightmare come true, although this time without a redemptive resolution. The 9/11 attacks may not have been traumatic due to their *unimaginable* quality, but rather “What rendered these attacks unimaginable was precisely what *had been previously been* imagined. The dominant cultural imaginary of the United States has been shaped, in part, by *fantasies* of impregnability and invincibility, and dreadful as the events themselves were, it was also the puncturing of these fantasies that contributed to the shock” (Radstone, “The War” 121). The fantasy-based culture within which the attacks occurred must be acknowledged when considering the construction of 9/11 as cultural trauma; indeed, “fantasy scenarios underpin the formation of those dominant cultural memories” (Radstone, “The War” 120).

Similar in ways to Radstone’s concept of “fantasy culture,” Frank Furedi’s concept of “therapy culture” can be understood as another socio-cultural context through which 9/11 was “received.” As Furedi explains, the United States (and arguably other Western nations) operate within a culture of emotionalism in which the “vocabulary of therapeutics no longer refers to unusual problems or exotic states of mind” (1). Furedi claims that, “Terms like stress, anxiety, addiction, compulsion, trauma, negative emotions, healing, syndrome, mid-life crisis or counselling refer to the normal episodes of daily life” (1). These concepts are no longer reserved for exceptional or unique moments but are instead frequently applied to everyday life. In perceiving the world through the lens of emotionality, in which therapy is no longer exceptional but normal, a world in which “trauma dramas” (as Eyerman calls them) are not unique but common, American audiences become predisposed to accept the media’s framing of 9/11 as trauma, despite the majority of citizens not being present nor directly witness to the events as

they occurred. For Furedi, “The response to the destruction of the World Trade Center in September 2001 illustrates how the therapeutic imagination informed the subsequent interpretation of this tragedy. . . . Within hours of this terrible event, the potential for great psychological damage to a population represented as traumatized was circulated as a matter of incontrovertible fact” (12). The media framed the events as unmistakably traumatic for all Americans, despite one’s geographical proximity to the events, one’s relationship to the victims, or the way in which one received information as the events occurred.

Ten months after September 11, experts purported that tens of thousands of school children in New York City were experiencing chronic nightmares, severe anxiety, and fear of public spaces; a staff writer for *The Washington Post* predicted that during the year after 9/11 hundreds of thousands of Americans would continue to suffer psychological wounds (Furedi 13). Another study, Furedi tells us, published in September 2002, “estimated that more than 500,000 people in the New York metropolitan area would have developed PTSD as a direct result of the attacks” (13). The fact remains, however, that the “expectation of a massive jump in the number of psychologically damaged people demanding mental health services did not materialize” (Furedi 13), and that while the “popular media representation of trauma contained the implication of a life sentence,” this was in fact not the case (Furedi 14). However, the notion that thousands of Americans would bear deep psychological wounds from 9/11 was seemingly incontestable at the time. In a community immersed in a kind of “therapy culture,” in which an attack seemed impossible and unconscionable, the media’s codification of 9/11 as “trauma” made sense, and would be received as sensible by American audiences. Furedi’s approach thus demonstrates how the effectiveness of dominant carrier groups depends upon the socio-cultural context in which this message is received.

Psychiatrist Sally Satel and philosopher Christina Hoff Sommers published a telling article in *The Wall Street Journal* only one month after September 11 entitled, “Good Grief: Don’t Get Taken by the Trauma Industry.” Here they suggest,

The sensationalizing mental health professionals and journalists have mistaken the mood of the country. Americans do, indeed, feel a new and dismaying vulnerability, but that feeling should not be confused with helplessness, panic or the need for therapy on a grand scale. What we need — and thankfully seem to have — is a morally galvanized and focused citizenry, not a population turned inward on its alleged psychological fragility.

Almost a year later on July 26, 2002 in an article titled, “New Yorkers Don’t Need Therapy,” Satel writes, “Right after Sept. 11, hospital and clinic directors in New York City braced themselves for epic caseloads of depressed and traumatized residents. In the shock of the moment, these frantic preparations made sense. Yet the flood of ‘psychically damaged’ patients never arrived.” Satel concludes, in much the same way as the recent edition of the *DSM*, that to experience a catastrophic event directly is not the same as watching that event unfold live on television, nor does it yield the same number of PTSD patients: “Viewing the fiery towers on television or from a safe distance was surely horrendous, but the psychological impact cannot compare to actually surviving a harrowing conflagration.” Satel and Sommers’s conclusions here were certainly not the norm at the time, nor were they accepted openly. There were far more reports echoing the media’s claims that Americans were clinically traumatized, that the entire country had been victimized, that recovery would be long and difficult, and that therapeutic counselling would reach unprecedented proportions.

Fritz Breithaupt raises similar concerns as Furedi, characterizing the media's role as twofold, as both the educator and the cure. He suggests that in covering 9/11, the media first diagnosed the nation as "traumatized" in order to then function as therapist, the "agent of healing" (67). Breithaupt contends that the concept of "trauma," fabricated and shaped by the media, became the "central axis" (67) or "organizing device" (69) around which all understandings or interpretations of September 11 were situated. For Breithaupt, the "most prominent and [] appealing aspect of the ideology of 'trauma' is, of course, the innocence of the victim" (69). Breithaupt pays attention to what he calls totems, reassuring static images used repeatedly by the media to comfort or ease the nation's "stress": the face of the president, images of the firefighters, American flags, images of sunlight, etc. The media repeatedly showed images of terror (not least of which were the planes in an endless loop crashing over and over again into the towers), and then proceeded to follow these images with "totems" of comfort and assurance. As Breithaupt puts it, the media behaved like an "agent of national healing," first diagnosing the nation as traumatized, and then offering an antidote for healing, specifically in the form of retaliatory rhetoric. As it follows, "Once one manages to position oneself as a 'trauma' victim, one seems absolved from possible involvement" (Breithaupt 70).⁶ While those who were killed or injured on September 11 are certainly not responsible on an individual level for the attacks, the same cannot be said on the political level, as past U.S. actions and policies have taken many lives in the Middle East. . . . A discussion of the U.S. military activities and strike would not have conformed to the ideology of "trauma" and

⁶ Herman's study of rape victims helped propel the idea that a victim should not be blamed for her traumatic experience, nor should her credibility be challenged. For Herman, it is crucial to "give voice to the disempowered" (9).

thus had to be ignored. . . . choosing a concept of “trauma” is a good choice to whitewash this involvement. (70)

Thus, a designation of “trauma” produced certain taboos, topics that were simply off-limits; endorsing the notion that all Americans were victims, the media foreclosed upon any mainstream discussion of complicity.

In the days and weeks after September 11, 2001, certain things could not be said. Country music band, The Dixie Chicks, learned this the hard way when they were shunned for months by radio stations and fans over a comment made by lead singer, Natalie Maines, ten days before the invasion of Iraq in 2003. At a concert in the U.K., she said: “We don’t want this war, this violence, and we’re ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas.” The backlash over this comment was extreme: fans held public demonstrations to destroy Dixie Chicks CDs and one fan even issued a death threat to band members. The controversy was so extreme that it inspired a documentary, *Shut Up and Sing*, chronicling the public scrutiny and the band’s reaction. An argument could be made that the band never fully recovered their reputation on the country music scene despite their success at the Grammy Awards in subsequent years. Even in 2006, country music stations all but ignored their two hit singles, “Not Ready to Make Nice” and “Everybody Knows,” both of which deal explicitly with the backlash of Maines’s 2003 comment.

Other notable breaches of established 9/11 taboos include Susan Sontag’s “Talk of the Town” in *The New Yorker* on September 24, 2001 in which she writes:

The disconnect between last Tuesday’s monstrous dose of reality and the self-righteous drivel and outright deceptions being peddled by public figures and TV commentators is startling, depressing. The voices licensed to follow the event

seem to have joined together in a campaign to infantilize the public. Where is the acknowledgment that this was not a “cowardly” attack on “civilization” or “liberty” or “humanity” or “the free world” but an attack on the world’s self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions? (32)

Similarly in 2002, comedian and talk show host Bill Maher was fired as host of ABC’s *Politically Incorrect* over his reaction to Bush’s characterization of the terrorists as “cowards”: Maher said at the time, “We have been the cowards. Lobbing cruise missiles from two thousand miles away. That’s cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building. Say what you want about it. Not cowardly.” Even actor Morgan Freeman breached accepted 9/11 rhetoric when he said, “We had a trauma, but it’s really not a national trauma. If you were not in New York on Sept. 11, what you saw was an event on CNN.”⁷

Some intellectuals braved even deeper waters shortly after 9/11 publishing lengthy debates that unapologetically oppose accepted 9/11 tropes. Noam Chomsky published *9/11: Was there an Alternative?* one month after the attacks in November 2001. Here he questions the complicit relationship between decades of U.S. foreign policy and the attacks on September 11. Similarly, Jean Baudrillard, in his November 2001 essay, “The Spirit of Terrorism,” subsequently published in book form in 2002, questions (among other things) the United States’s relationship with global terrorism: “All that has been said and written is evidence of a gigantic abreaction to the event itself, and the fascination it exerts. . . . For it is that superpower which, by its unbearable power, has fomented all this violence which is endemic throughout the world” (5).

⁷ For more on the backlash of Freeman’s comments, see Elizabeth Hays and Jose Martinez.

There is of course a temporal component to consider here since all of these commentaries published soon after 9/11 would draw little if any negative attention today.

As Allen Meek argues, “Because images of the 9/11 attacks were viewed ‘live’ by American and international audiences there was an immediacy to the events which was replicated in public discourse about them. The events were *immediately* ‘traumatic’” (172). The “national” reading of 9/11 as broadcast and promoted by the media repudiated and foreclosed upon any discussions that might question the status quo. Simply put, the media rigidly framed 9/11 as “trauma”; all future commentary was considered, assessed, approved (or disapproved) within that diagnostic paradigm.

3.3 Comics and 9/11

Two graphic representations of 9/11 and its aftermath, produced ten years apart, illustrate the strength of the media’s agenda-setting efforts, and speak to the pervasive and indelible aspects of the media’s early framing of September 11. First, issue 36 of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, published in October 2001, illustrates many (if not most) of the representational strategies and established clichés adopted by the media as outlined above. Second, 100 syndicated cartoons published in Sunday papers across the United States on September 11, 2011, produced in commemoration of the tenth anniversary of 9/11, demonstrate the indelibility of this early reading, since they too (for the most part) recap many of the by now recognizable 9/11 storylines. Major syndicates across the country encouraged their principal cartoonists to produce an image or series of panels that reflect the events of September 11; these comic strips have since been compiled and grouped together online as *Cartoonists Remember: September 11, 2001 - 2011*.

Written by J. Michael Straczynski and illustrated by John Romita Jr., *The Amazing Spider-Man* 36, published in print on October 31, 2001, characterizes Spider-Man as a passive witness, emotionally distressed by the destruction yet powerless to intervene. The issue, which introduces itself as an interruption to the “regularly scheduled program” (2), stands outside the serialized script of the Spider-Man comic books. While the text represents Spider-Man’s thoughts and emotions as he bears witness to the destruction of the World Trade Centers and the subsequent rescue and clean-up efforts, the words are strategically positioned in the corners of the pages away from Spider-Man himself. Spider-Man’s thoughts are both connected to yet at a distance from the images on the page, thus presenting Spider-Man as less a hero and more an “Everyman,” a bystander as it were paralyzed by the images he sees. One might argue that Spider-Man is typecast here as “America”; likewise his response, which is very much in line with the media’s principal narrative as outlined above, becomes “America’s response.” Thus, in sidelining Spider-Man to the role of passive witness, and in positioning the text away from Spider-Man, Straczynski and Romita Jr. emphasize the “universality” of Spider-Man’s response, and in so doing, they position the firefighters and police officers centre stage, as the “real heroes” of 9/11.

Page after page of the comic book features men in uniform (FEMA, NYPD, FDNY, and EMS) lifting beams, rushing towards the destruction, climbing staircases to save those in the WTC buildings, or exhausted leaning against brick walls (5-9). Many are depicted with American flags wrapped like sweatbands around their foreheads. When the issue was printed, these images would already be iconic. In keeping with his passive and observant role in the tragedy, Spider-Man describes himself and other superheroes as insignificant in comparison with the event’s real heroes, the firefighters, police officers, and rescue workers: “But with our

costumes and our powers we are writ small by the true heroes” (7). Spider-Man describes the real heroes of 9/11 as “Those who face fire without fear or armor / Those who step into the darkness without assurances of ever walking out again, because they know there are others waiting in the dark / Awaiting salvation / Awaiting word / Awaiting justice” (7). This last thought, “Awaiting justice,” is positioned alongside a coffin, draped by an American flag, with the words FDNY Ladder 21 hanging over. As Simon Cooper and Paul Atkinson suggest,

To see superheroes standing solemn before a disaster is in marked contrast to the usual representations of superheroes intervening in moments of crisis. . . .

Mourning and witnessing become heroic acts where the anguished expressions and muscular stances of these exceptional figures serve as indexical signs marking out the event in history, making it truly singular. (69)

In positioning Spider-Man as a passive witness rather than in his usual role as hero and saviour, Straczynski and Romita Jr. emphasize the exceptionality of 9/11. The events on September 11 are endowed here with the kind of significance that can alter the course of Marvel Comics’s superhero agenda.

In addition to the idolization of the NYPD and FDNY, the comic book repeatedly conceptualizes 9/11 as traumatic. On the first two-page spread, as smoke billows from the World Trade Center site, Spider-Man stands at the top of an adjacent building and thinks, “Some things are beyond words . . . Beyond comprehension . . . Beyond forgiveness,” suggesting that the event is outside interpretation and representation, a way of describing 9/11 according to traditional understandings of psychological trauma as outlined in the previous chapter. Later Spider-Man seems speechless, repeating, “There are no words / There are no words” (13), a frequent recitation in the context of psychological trauma.

The comic book also affirms the perspective of an uncompromising (and arguably oversimplified) division between good and evil, supporting the clichéd notion of “us” versus “them.” As Spider-Man gazes at the destruction at Ground Zero, and while passers-by ask him, “Where were you? / How could you let this happen?” (4), he thinks: “Only madmen could contain the thought, execute the act, fly the planes / The sane world will always be vulnerable to madmen, because we cannot go where they go to conceive such things” (4). The trope of innocence and exceptionality and the binary between “us” and “them” are hard at work here. Later, after pondering why such things happen, and how to explain the event to children and to future generations, Spider-Man thinks: “Whatever our history, whatever the root of our surnames, we remain a good and decent people, and we do not bow down and we do not give up” (18). Aligned with the principal narrative unfolding in the mainstream media, the text here definitively separates the sane from the insane, the good from the bad, us from them, fuelling the notion that justice and revenge are the only suitable responses.

It is worth noting here that Straczynski has in the past been the frequent target of conservative attacks over his liberal characterization of DC Comics superhero, Superman. Accordingly, the text is also cautious in tone, suggesting that revenge and retaliation must be handled delicately, with what Spider-man calls “wisdom.” In three particularly telling panels, this cautionary tone becomes apparent: the first panel depicts American military leaders at a podium in front of a target screen, the second panel illustrates the shadowed silhouettes of veiled women, and the third shows the silhouette of an aircraft carrier illuminated by the sun. The text reads:

Panel 1: We live in each blow you strike for infinite justice, but always in the hope of infinite wisdom

Panel 2: Because we live as well in the quiet turning of your considered conscience. The voice that says All wars have innocents. The voice that says You are a kind a merciful people

Panel 3: The voice that says Do not do as they do, or the war is lost before it is even begun. Do not let that knowledge be washed away in blood. (17)

Embedded within the message that retaliation is justified, Spider-Man urges good judgment in future military strategies, perhaps suggesting that this kind of endeavor is bound to be complex, messy, and fraught with political complexities.

The Sunday comic strips published in U.S. newspapers on the tenth anniversary of 9/11, compiled together online as *Cartoonists Remember: September 11, 2001 -2011*, illustrate that most of the framing strategies employed by the media in 2001 still dominate rhetoric a decade later. Almost all of these comics demonstrate the ineffaceability of by now familiar 9/11 tropes, with the valorization of firefighters and police officers being the most prominent. In *Dustin*, by Steve Kelley and Jeff Parker, for example, young Hayden is pictured in a superhero mask and cape asking a grown-up Dustin which superhero he would like to be. Dustin answers, “It’s a toss-up, really . . . either a firefighter or a cop,” his newspaper open to reveal the headline, “9/11 Remembered.” Likewise, in *Daddy’s Home* by Anthony Rubino and Gary Markstein, a firefighter, construction worker, police officer, and soldier are pictured hoisting the new World Trade Center building into place, referencing both the famous photograph, “Raising the Flag” taken at Iwo Jima at the end of World War II, and the similar and by-now iconic image of firefighters hoisting the flag at Ground Zero. In *Agnes* by Tony Cochran, two dominant frameworks are addressed: the historicizing of 9/11 according to other cultural traumas and the deification of firefighters. Here Agnes gazes in a pile of rubble at a faceless FDNY worker

holding a hose; the caption reads, “In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart, *Anne Frank*.” Another comic, *Freshly Squeezed* by Ed Stein, participates in similar historicizing. Here characters one after the other draw attention to the trauma that marks their time: “Nate was just an infant on 9/11 / Hitler came to power the year I was born / I was two when Pearl Harbor was bombed / Kennedy was shot the year before I was born,” and the comic concludes with, “We all grew up in the same kind of world. Dangerous.”

Doonesbury by Gary Trudeau attempts to capture the unknowability of 9/11, while also honouring the psychological trauma that likely still exists for those who “worked the pile.” Here B.D. tells Zonker to turn off the television coverage of the tenth anniversary of 9/11; when asked why, he says, “If you were there, you don’t need to be reminded of what happened, we get to relive it every night []. . . . Go see ‘Cowboys & Aliens’ instead. Something that makes sense.” Finally, one comic strip, *Speed Bump* by Dave Coverly, draws attention to the indelibility of 9/11: Uncle Sam is pictured here at the doctor’s office, with his shirt open and a tattoo or scar of sorts that reads 9-11; he tells his doctor, “I’ve had this scar for 10 years, and it still hurts.” While this is just a sampling of the 100 comics that were published nationally on the tenth anniversary, many, if not most, reflect similar themes.

Only one comic in fact speaks with some sense of dissidence and frustration over the last ten years: *Candorville* by Darrin Bell. Here the strip’s two main characters, Lemont Brown and Susan Garcia discuss how they felt on September 11, 2001:

Lemont: What were you thinking about when you went to bed on 9/11?

Susan: I was praying I’d wake up the next day and it’d all be just a dream.

What were you thinking about when you went to bed on 9/11?

Lemont: I was hoping we’d rise to the occasion and honor the dead, the survivors,

and the heroes . . . by failing to rebuild the twin towers, by curtailing our own civil liberties, by calling each other ‘un-American,’ by torturing prisoners, mocking the French, invading the wrong country, and having our airports inspect kids’ and old people’s underpants.

Susan: I don’t think sarcasm’s allowed on 9/11 day.

In summing up ten years of frustrating post-9/11 fallout, Lemont subverts the accepted conventional behaviour for September 11 memorials. In acknowledging Lemont’s approach as sarcastic through Susan’s response, however, the comic strip becomes palatable on the tenth anniversary, as more humour, less political rant. What this strip does do is emphasize how rare these kinds of responses are, especially within mainstream media. The other 99 comic strips on the tenth anniversary can be categorized as being framed by one of the dominant 9/11 paradigms: grief and loss, heroism, revenge and retaliation, or historical contextualization. With the exception of *Candorville*, they all align with established and expected clichés surrounding 9/11.

3.4 Complexities of Subjectivity

Before I turn to a literary analysis of 9/11 fiction, I want to draw attention to an inherent anxiety in cultural trauma that is connected to the media’s central role in the construction of events, that is, the tension between individual and collective trauma. E. Ann Kaplan testifies to this tension when describing her experience in New York on September 11. Kaplan juxtaposes her *private* experience of 9/11, as she walks through her neighbourhood after September 11, snapping photographs, trying to make “real” what she “could barely comprehend,” with the *public* phenomenon of 9/11, that, is as a global catastrophe “experienced” vicariously for the vast majority through television and the Internet (2). Kaplan draws attention here to the complex

relationship between direct trauma and virtual trauma, and likewise between individual trauma and cultural trauma, and suggests, “it is necessary to distinguish the different positions and contexts of encounters with trauma” (2). Gradually, Kaplan begins to identify a schism between two distinct perspectives of 9/11: the perspective on the street, what she dubs “local collective trauma,” and the perspective of the media, that is how the events of 9/11 were “managed” by institutional forces into what she calls “mediatized trauma” (7, 2). When comparing her personal response to the events with the response by the media, Kaplan concludes, “it is hard to separate individual and collective trauma” (1).

In contrast to what she witnessed on the “street” level, Kaplan began to question the “official” or “national” interpretation of 9/11:

It was through wandering around the streets with my camera that I began to understand the differences between the media, reporting more or less national (or at least “official” positions), and what I was witnessing myself. It gradually became clear that national ideology was hard at work shaping how the traumatic event was to be perceived. . . . The media aided the attempt to present a united American front. But this proved to be a fiction — a construction of a consensus in a Eurocentric and largely masculine form. (13)

As days went by, Kaplan became increasingly concerned that a kind of cultural trauma takeover was taking place, as though the media and the classification of the events as collective tragedy began to displace her private, individual experience of the attacks. While the media participated in what Kaplan describes as “a ‘disciplining’ and homogenizing of the United States,” the mood on the streets revealed “multiple, spontaneous activities from multiple perspectives, genders, races, and religions or nonreligions. . . . something fluid, personal, and varied” (13-15). Kaplan

asks, “Was [9/11] being fixed within certain tropes of patriotism and male heroism that began to pall with distance? Was the ‘realness’ of 9/11 being gelled into stock images, stock forms that would forever limit its meanings?” (17). Kaplan’s concerns here, read against a backdrop of how the media framed 9/11 as trauma, alert us to the tension between collective and individual trauma. As outlined in chapter two, Wulf Kansteiner debates the usefulness of the cultural trauma paradigm for precisely this reason. For Kansteiner, cultural trauma, in its efforts to claim injury on behalf of an entire community, can potentially (and haphazardly) displace the experience of individual victims. A wounded individual and a wounded culture are not the same thing, argues Kansteiner, and should not be conflated as such.

Similarly, Sabine Sielke warns of the tendency amongst cultural trauma theorists to “override . . . the unmistakable distinction between collective experience and personal trauma” (265). She questions whether “concepts of cultural trauma politicize and recontextualize, yet in turn also simplify the complexities of subjectivity” (266). As I will demonstrate in upcoming chapters, some 9/11 fiction writers grapple with these complexities as they pertain to collective events. These writers aim to reinstate and re-imagine subjective perspectives of 9/11, paying particular attention to the ways in which individuals negotiate the various impacts of the events. In my next chapter, we see that many of the authors in *110 Stories* struggle with a crisis of subjectivity in the context of the media’s claim-making efforts; they feel their personal experience as witnesses to 9/11 begin to collapse or dissolve under the weight of the collective narrative forming on television.

Kaplan asks: “How could we keep the event open, fluid, specific?” (17). Her desire to do so suggests two things: first, that to close, fix, or generalize the event might be damaging and alienating to the community or to individual victims since it limits the acceptable range of

responses to a select few; and second, that singular, narrow, incontestable narratives carry risks. The dominant reading of 9/11 produced a distinct “us” versus “them” polarity, and contributed to the “othering” of individuals who (for a multitude of reasons) present or behave outside the “official” response. Furthermore, labelling alternate or subversive voices as anti-American, and promoting instead a storyline of victimization and innocence as the “official” or “national” response becomes advantageous for military agendas.

In the decade or more since 9/11, social media have played an increasingly powerful role in the dissemination of information. Even though television news still operates as a central carrier group in the meaning-making process of events, its influence is diminishing and other carrier groups, propelled by social media, are gaining in popularity. Arguably, these alternative carrier groups are more democratic, representing multiple voices. Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans is a case in point. Similar in many ways to 9/11, Hurricane Katrina was framed by the media according to a distinct and dominant narrative. Indeed, many New Orleanians were dismayed by the dominant “official” perception of their city as framed by the television media. As Stephen F. Ostertag and David G. Ortiz explain, “the national news consistently embarrassed and angered some residents with their reporting of wide-scale racial strife, unverified violence, arson, looting and other moral problematics that stigmatized the city and its residents” (191). Disturbed by the dominant “national” narrative unfolding on television, many New Orleanians created blogs to document their experience during and after the storm: New Orleanians “used their blogs to engage and contest the national media narratives and construct more affirmative meanings of New Orleans and its residents” (Ostertag and Ortiz 188). Here, privately-written yet publically-viewed blogs become an example of how “lengthy battles over meaning making are waged” (Ostertag and Ortiz 188). This is precisely what Smelser means when he claims that

cultural trauma produces “a reservoir of hundreds of different renditions of the memory” (“Psychological” 54). And considering the easily-accessible, user-friendly, mass-appropriated format of social media sites, we might have to revise Smelser’s “hundreds” to millions.

What the example of Hurricane Katrina points to is a shift in how we record events, how we transmit information, and how we receive information. If we mark Kennedy’s assassination as the beginning of television’s influence over how events are reported and received in the United States, we might consider the events of 9/11 as the beginning of the end of this kind of influence. Perhaps, the power of the television media reached its peak during September 11 and has been declining ever since with the introduction of new digital media gaining influence every day. Indeed, the medium through which we transmit and receive information regarding large-scale events today, which shifted from September 11 to Hurricane Katrina, has shifted once again with the use of digital media during the days following the Boston Marathon bombings on April 15, 2013. Blogs are now used less frequently, and sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit (which calls itself “The Front Page of the Internet”) have taken centre stage.

Information, whether speculative or empirical, is immediately shared and received on social media, especially during a newsworthy event. The bombings that occurred in Boston, for example, speak to a cultural trend towards immediacy, with Twitter and Reddit playing a central if not lead role in the dissemination of information regarding the event, information as it turns out which was often incorrect, inaccurate, and inflammatory, yet viral in its influence nonetheless. Reddit’s general manager, Eric Martin issued an apology following the Marathon bombings for Reddit wrongfully identifying missing Brown University student, Sunil Tripathi, as a key suspect. Tripathi was later found dead on April 23, 2013 and was believed to have died

before the Marathon bombings.⁸ As reporter Matt Buchanan explains, after the Marathon bombings in Boston, “Every new bit of information was instantly, indiscriminately sucked into the media vacuum. If there is a medium of this moment, it is Twitter.”

I raise these issues because they speak to a particular technological shift in how paradigmatic narratives might now become fixed within the cultural imagination. What we remember (or what we forget) and the interpretative frames placed around those memories may be unmistakably tied to the medium through which we share and receive information. For Harvard students, Seth Mnookin and Hong Qu, the Twitter coverage in Watertown, which arguably aided police in the capture and arrest of the Marathon bombing suspect suggest “a remarkable milestone for journalism”: “Even more remarkable are the implications for ordinary citizens who, without a press pass, can report news and influence coverage.” All of this forces the question, will the “nowness” of digital media, and the seemingly unending and at times overwhelming display of opinions and perspective regarding events, begin to move us away from hegemonic, universal narratives? Will these social media sites promote more democratic, less autocratic, interpretations of events? Or will we (en masse) merely seize the story most suited to the context within which we find ourselves (that is, the story most aligned with the identity of the imagined community) and fervently “retweet”?

On September 11, 2001, people relied almost exclusively on television news media as a source of information. Had the events of 9/11 happened today, other digital media such as Twitter or Reddit that favour unofficial, uncensored (and sometimes incorrect) interpretations of an event may have dominated the story-telling process, instead of the more traditional mass-

⁸ For more on this, see David Lee’s BBC article, “Boston Bombing: How Internet Detectives Got It Very Wrong.”

produced narratives of large television networks. In effect, our interpretation of 9/11 may have been entirely different. Of course, there is no way of predicting how 9/11 would have been “narrated” had people been able to rely on Twitter or Reddit, nor is it constructive to speculate. It might be wise to remember, however, that 9/11 occurred during a particular technological moment in history in which television news media played the lead role in how information regarding large scale events was packaged, framed, presented, interpreted, and disseminated. As Alexander and Smelser contend, cultural expressions that expose another angle of an event and which question dominant paradigms are central components to collective trauma. Television news media, although not surprisingly nor without basis, displaced and disclosed upon alternative views of 9/11 that did not conform to the constructed and accepted consensus. This has not, however, remained the case.

Time is needed for communities to “calm down,” as it were; there is a temporal component fundamental to cultural trauma when a period of “routinization” occurs and when the “lessons” of the events begin to be examined (Alexander, “Toward” 22). While the fiction examined in proceeding chapters might once have seemed overtly subversive, they read less so now. However, despite their less-than dissident qualities today, these texts still represent another way of looking at events. Novelists who engage with historical events as their subject matter have the advantage of time. Time allows novelists to consider the implications of things, to construct the sentence and the storyline more carefully, with a more nuanced tone. Art, in this case fiction, thus becomes one way of “translating” large-scale events (Kaplan 19) – a way of making meaning that embraces and promotes multiple viewpoints. Thus, cultural expressions that aim to push back against the momentum of dominant carrier groups can be read as acts of resistance. While perhaps still marginal to the dominant 9/11 narrative, the literature to which I

turn functions as an alternative carrier of collective memory. This literature foregrounds new complexities regarding the events of September 11 and its impact, and (re)introduces subject matter that may have been eradicated by the “official” discourse. These texts defend against singular, over-simplified, closed acts of remembering and provide a different optic through which to examine the events of 9/11. The fiction here has the potential to shift our focus away from dominant paradigms, even for a moment, back to what Kaplan identifies as the private, street level experience of 9/11.

Chapter 4: First Impressions:

110 Stories: New York Writes After September 11

I find myself walking around making up arguments in my head, but when I try to write them down they dissolve in a flood of questions and misgivings. I value these questions, these misgivings, more than my analysis of the situation.

Charles Bernstein, "Report from Liberty Street"

I was very happy for him to be a New Yorker but I wasn't sure I wished him to be American.

Peter Carey, "Union Square"

As I suggest in chapter three, to accept cultural trauma as a theoretical model by which we might examine mass-scale events is to pay attention to the claim-making efforts of dominant carrier groups *and* to pay attention to the products of not-so-dominant carrier groups that often tell a different story. To reiterate Neil J. Smelser's position, theories of cultural trauma not only call attention to the dominant players in the claim-making processes, they also consider the importance of the ongoing accumulation of meanings ("Psychological" 54), some of which might be positioned as marginal to others. Nonetheless, Smelser reminds us to pay attention to the "matrix of responses" which might challenge the status quo reading of things.

Edited by Ulrich Baer and first published in September 2002, *110 Stories: New York Writes After September 11* is an example of the product of one such marginal carrier group. The text, described by Baer as representative of the "diverse and multi-hued texture of New York City" (1), is a collection of 110 short literary responses (meant to mirror the 110 storeys of the

World Trade Center buildings) written by resident New York authors in response to the events of September 11, specifically those that took place in New York. Some of these responses deal with the event or the day itself while others seem only tangentially connected. This text is particularly important to my project for two reasons. First, New York writers penned all the submissions, providing the reader with a kind of local and thus more intimate framework for what occurred in New York on September 11 and in the days that followed; this more local and intimate framing of 9/11, at least in some cases, complicates the early visual and narrative engineering of 9/11 by the mainstream media. Second, it was published within a year of the attacks giving it unique temporal significance. While online poetry became the earliest artistic genre through which writers chose to represent 9/11, short stories, essays, and personal musings soon followed. Baer's text is unique since it represents one of the earliest *prosaic* literary representations of 9/11. Full-length novels did not appear until years later.

Rather than write testimonial pieces, predictable "where-were-you" stories, or emotional consolatory tracts, these authors ask difficult questions, express shared frustrations, and expose fears and deep-rooted anxieties surrounding the events of 9/11. Thus, in its diverse approach, one that allows for multiple understandings, considerations, and questions even despite potential contradictions, *110 Stories* can be read as a counter reading to the more dominant framing of 9/11 by television news media. As Baer puts it, the miscellany of responses in *110 Stories* affirm the "necessity of approaching an event from angles," of offering an alternative consideration of the event for "everyone who distrusts simple answers, ready-made and precision-bombed solutions, and the arrogant and foolish certainty of having the correct response to a severe and collective trauma" (2). As he suggests, "Instead of providing solace, the work of fiction cauterizes the wound with uncomfortable questions and unflinching reflection" (2). As we will

see in this chapter, the responses in *110 Stories* remain “skeptical of preconceived ideas” and “locate unwelcome truths,” (Baer 3). Therefore, they represent another mode in which to keep the events of 9/11 open to multiple interpretations. In proposing more questions than answers, in keeping the event open to multiple, sometimes-contradictory responses, and in avoiding simple, consolatory solutions, *110 Stories* works here (whether intentionally or not) to reconstitute and re-contextualize 9/11.

While vastly different in a variety of ways, many of these stories contain recurring themes in their response to 9/11. While I hesitate to categorize these stories according to distinct parameters, since it is the text’s diversity that I intend to foreground, it is interesting to consider these stories under the umbrella of shared anxieties. My consideration of *110 Stories* proceeds in three parts. First, many of these writers express frustration, confusion, or disappointment with the mass media’s role in the shaping of the events of 9/11. These authors struggle with the notion of individual versus collective trauma, questioning where their private experience ends and the collective experience begins. While some do seem to write their experience (including their proximity to the events) as a kind of badge of honour, they also testify to the anxiety between the individual experience of events (as bystanders) and the mass mediated interpretations of those events on television.

Second, a number of these stories present a different point of view on some of the more widely held perspectives surrounding 9/11 in the early weeks following the attacks, such as the overt patriotism and unity felt by Americans across the United States. Rather than offering simple, comforting stories that reflect national solidarity and pride (although I should mention that some do indeed adopt this approach), these stories force difficult questions to the forefront, and thus represent some of the first published commentary on many of the now-topical “9/11

concerns,” such as race, racial profiling, bigotry, and religious freedom. These stories alert readers, even subtly, to the risks inherent to the construction of master narratives, suggesting that they can lead to inclusive/exclusive ways of thinking not based on justified or thoughtful processes.

Third, some of these stories call attention to the issue of complicity, that is how American military and political agendas in the Middle East and other parts of the world played a role in what led up to the events of 9/11. In comparison to the way in which this topic is openly discussed by academics, talk-show hosts, and politicians today, this text approaches this subject cautiously. Considering the backlash received by other public figures and scholars, who soon after 9/11 tried to suggest a connection between U.S. foreign policy and the events of September 11, this more subdued response in *110 Stories* is perhaps understandable. Despite their moderate approach, however, these stories demonstrate an early challenge to what was fast-developing as a master narrative that affirmed ideals of American innocence and global victimization.

Ann Cvetkovich claims that after an event such as 9/11, it is particularly important to create and promote “forums for public feelings, to make room for the emotional complexity of people’s responses, which included fear, grief, anger, numbness, helplessness, ambivalence, and more, often in contradictory and confusing combinations” (60). I contend that *110 Stories* represents one such forum, and thus deserves more critical attention than it has received so far. With the exception of a few reviews, one of which describes the book as “the most interesting and affecting way to represent the atrocity at this point in time” (“Rev. of *110 Stories*”), and one academic essay (Niday), little scholarly attention has been paid to *110 Stories* thus far. Alex Houen touches on the anthology as a whole but pays little attention to the individual stories themselves in his essay, “Novel Spaces and Taking Place(s) in the Wake of September 11,” as

does E. Ann Kaplan in her book, *Trauma Culture* (137-39). Jackson A. Niday provides the only in depth analysis of the stories in his essay, “A Rhetoric of Trauma in 9-11 Stories: A Critical Reading of Ulrich Baer’s *110 Stories*.” However, Niday examines only seven of the 110 entries, and with the exception of two stories, “Union Square” and “Senseless,” he does not examine any of the stories I discuss in this chapter.

110 Stories underscores the idea that there is no correct response to 9/11; there is only the attempt to put into words that which has been witnessed or experienced, felt or seen, remembered or awakened. These attempts take many forms, both in terms of genre (the collection is made up of poetry, dramatic prose, testimony, diary-like entries, allegories, parables, excerpts from larger works etc.) and in terms of content since each entry seems strikingly different from the other. Because it has received little attention so far (and is thus at risk of being “forgotten” if additional attention is not paid) and because of its potential as an important and necessary forum for cultural expression through the diversity of responses it provides, *110 Stories* is significant to my project as a whole.

4.1 Cultural Trauma Identity Displacement

My analysis of *110 Stories* begins with stories that deal most directly with the day itself and with the tension that exists at the intersection between considering 9/11 as a personal event or as a collective event. Given the circumstances of September 11, as an event that unfolded in an unprecedented way on live television, it is not surprising that one of the key concerns in this collection is the tension that exists between the public and the private. Many of these pieces wrestle with what I call *cultural trauma identity displacement*, the idea that an individual’s experience as a direct witness, bystander, or survivor of a large-scale trauma can be dwarfed,

displaced, and homogenized into the larger national (master) narrative that comes to frame the event. This can be frustrating for witnesses and survivors since the (sometimes deafening) broadcast of “national” discourse surrounding the event can drown them out. If their experience as witnesses or survivors of a particular event threatens the status quo, and is inconsistent with the nationally “accepted” narrative, their anxiety over the need to retain and express these memories becomes that much more intense.

Many of the stories in *110 Stories* protest the news media’s hasty codification of 9/11 as cultural trauma since it felt almost immediately like their personal experience, the events in “their” city, were being displaced and defined as a “collective” experience. This sense of identity displacement motivates these writers to articulate their frustration and anxiety over how 9/11 was managed by the national media. *110 Stories* demonstrates the way cultural events that produce abstract wounds for the larger community can be difficult to process for those closer to the events. These authors grapple with the ownership of grief and develop feelings of resentment towards those not as directly affected. Some take a more direct approach to separate their own response from the “nation’s response,” while others adopt a more metaphorical or symbolic approach and aim to expose or draw attention to what they came to view as a skewed perspective on television. *110 Stories* thus exposes the anxiety over 9/11 as a real, visceral, and ultimately confounding event for those living nearby and 9/11 as a mass-consumed, seemingly surreal event, taking place on television. As Baer suggests in his introduction to the anthology, *110 Stories* “serves to determine where an individual’s story and voice links up with, and where it contradicts, collective concerns” (4).

Michael Rothberg, in his most recent work on Holocaust memory, argues for the concept of multidirectional memory; rather than perceive memory as a battle between competitive

perspectives, with clear winners and losers, Rothberg seeks to view memory as multidirectional. All too often a dominant narrative surrounding a historical event takes hold, essentially erasing other competing narratives or perspectives from view. But, Rothberg says, “those who understand memory as a form of competition see only winners and losers in the struggle for collective articulation and recognition. But attention to memory’s multidirectionality suggests a more supple social logic” (*Multidirectional* 5), in which perspectives that do not support the status quo should not be considered losers in the battle, but rather alternate directions. These alternate perspectives, which often reflect more private, individual experiences of an event, may not be as powerful or persuasive as the dominant point of view, but they should nonetheless be kept in the mix. For as Rothberg points out, “today’s ‘losers’ may turn out to be tomorrow ‘winners’” (*Multidirectional* 6). Who knows how perspectives will shift, how minds will change, or what new information will be made available? *110 Stories* might best be viewed as an alternate direction in memory-making, as not so much a loser in the battle over meaning-making (despite its lack of attention), but rather a valuable resource for the earliest alternate responses to September 11. The further we move away from September 11, 2001, the more important it is to draw attention to these alternate directions to alert us to the potential risks in an unflinching acceptance of a master narrative.

I begin my discussion of *110 Stories* with three stories that best exemplify the anxiety over the public and the private experience of 9/11: A.M. Homes’s “We All Saw It, or the View from Home,” Philip Lopate’s “Altering the World We Thought Would Outlast Us,” and Alice Elliot Dark’s “Senseless.” While these three stories deal most overtly with the issue at hand, there are many others in the volume that express a similar anxiety. For example, after watching the second plane hit the north tower on television, Roberta Allen’s narrator in “The Sky Was So

Blue,” runs down her stairs and out onto the street to watch the event live: “I don’t want this to be a TV event, I told myself” (26). Similarly, after watching the event the day before on television, the protagonist Anne, in James Gibbons’s “The Death of a Painter,” ventures outside to witness for herself the now-changed skyline of New York City: “For Anne it would be a first glimpse, displacing, she hoped, the images she’d seen on television” (106). The narrator in Robert Polito’s “Last Seen,” runs up and down the street, “to stare again at the flames, twenty blocks away, as if to prove this wasn’t a TV spectacle” (239). In varying ways, these stories illustrate a shared anxiety over what those nearby witnessed on September 11 and what seemed to only be “occurring” on television. For many of these writers, this dichotomy is difficult to reconcile.

In “We All Saw It, or the View from Home,” Homes’s narrator begins by describing his experience of witnessing the second plane hit Tower Two from the window of his apartment. Homes begins methodically, reciting what he sees with little descriptive context: “The plane is moving towards the second tower counter-intuitively, rather than avoiding the tower, it is determinedly bearing down, picking up speed. I see the plane and I see the plane crash into the building. I see the buildings burn and I see the buildings fall down” (151). This description, for the most part, tells it like it is, with little analysis, interpretation, or emotionality: the planes approached the building, the planes hit the buildings, fires burned, and the buildings fell. Homes follows this approach, however, with a personal, intimate description of how he feels watching the events unfold out his window, which contrasts the screened “reality” of 9/11 on television: “Seeing it with your own eye, in real time, not on a screen, not protected by the frame of the television set, not set up and narrated by an anchor man, not in the communal darkness of a movie theater, seeing it like this is irreconcilable, like a hallucination, a psychotic break” (151).

Homes uses the language of individual trauma here: “irreconcilable,” “hallucinatory,” “psychotic.” Later Homes describes his experience as “not something you want to remember, not something you want to forget,” (152) invoking and modifying Dori Laub’s concept of the victim’s (or in this case the witness’s) ceaseless struggle, the constant and incessant battle between the will to remember and the desire to forget (Laub 63).¹ Homes’s story demonstrates it is not so easy to find the words to express traumatic experience, nor is it easy or even possible at this stage to apply meaning or understanding to one’s experience.

What makes Homes’s piece particularly interesting is that even though he appears individually affected by what he has seen, he worries that his feelings are at risk of being displaced by the narrative unfolding on TV. He senses a kind of collective trauma “takeover” occurring, to borrow Kaplan’s words (13). Like Kaplan, he experiences similar anxiety over his desire to keep the experience private, personal, and individual. He writes:

I spend the afternoon moving back and forth from the window to the television. . . . I have the sense that my own imagery, my memory, is all too quickly being replaced by the fresh footage, the other angle, the unrelenting loop. I become fearful of my mind’s liquidity, my ability to retain my own images and feelings rather than surrendering to what is almost instantly becoming the collective narrative. (152)

¹ Similarly, Alex Molot, in his piece “Earlier Winter,” calls attention to Laub’s notion of the “ceaseless struggle.” He writes, “What strikes me hard, though, is how simple the telling is and that I cannot. It forces on me all that has since happened. Loss and disillusion. Sadness and regret. The gap between what I feel and what I know” (213-14).

When Homes fears the “liquidity” of his mind, he fears the overpowering influence of the rapidly forming collective narrative, a force so intense it has the power to liquidate his own memories: for to liquidate is to cash in, to replace one’s assets for an alternative currency, and to ultimately surrender the object one held in the first place. Due to the overwhelming force of the television coverage, Homes must fight hard to retain and even remember his own experience of 9/11; remembering his experience of 9/11 as it occurred outside his window becomes an intentional exercise. Rather than allow the “national narrative” to take over his memory as default, Homes writes to resist dominant meaning-making forces: “I write staring out the window, depending on the fixedness of the landscape to give me the security to allow my thoughts to wander, my imagination to unfold” (153). The “security” Homes seeks is not found in simplistic, singular answers but in thoughts, questions, and contemplations that keep his consideration and memory of the event fluid and open-ended.

Lopate in “Altering the World We Thought Would Outlast Us” expresses similar anxiety over how to keep the events of September 11 personal and private within the overwhelming context of the event’s publicity. In contrast to his wife, who in conversation with other New Yorkers engages in what Lopate describes as “that compulsively repetitious dialogue by which an enormity is made real,” Lopate prefers to grieve silently and individually: “I was indulging the fantasy that I was invisible, not a team player. . . . My wife and I both felt anguished all week, but it was an anguish we could not share. The fault was mine: Selfishly, I wanted to nurse my grief at what had been done to my city. I mistrusted any attempt to co-opt me into group-think, even conjugal-think” (190). Although they are both upset over what has happened in their city, Lopate and his wife access and assess the tragedy from different vantage points, one preferring to “selfishly” withdraw while the other seeks community and conversation. This

draws attention back to Michelle Balaev's understanding of how traumatic responses often vary, and in some cases, even contradict each other, an approach that contests more popular understandings of trauma (i.e. trauma as unrepresentable, irretrievable, and inaccessible) that privilege universality and homogeneity in response to traumatic events. Whether one experiences trauma as a direct threat to one's physical existence or psychological well-being or whether one witnesses this threat as happening to someone else, a number of diverse responses to the event may occur. A book such as *110 Stories* as a whole and a specific story such as "Altering the World We Thought Would Outlast Us" demonstrates that there is no universal reaction to troublesome events.

As the piece continues, Lopate's reaction to 9/11 centres on the civic as opposed to the national. He becomes resolute in his desire to protect his own local position in the context of the attacks, as he, like Homes, senses a kind of nationalistic takeover of 9/11 taking place on television. He becomes frustrated by the media's repetitive broadcasting of images, "the same information, the same pictures, over and over" (191), and concludes that this media strategy has become "our modern therapy in catastrophes, the hope that by immersing ourselves in the media, by the numbing effect of repetition we will work through our grief" (191). For Lopate, it does not work and instead of feeling comforted or connected to others through the publicity of the event, he gets a "kind of sugar buzz and feel[s] nauseous afterward" (191), analogous to a child who has been given too much candy. Lopate struggles here with what we might call the ownership of grief, that due to one's proximity to the event in question, an individual or group of people are either more or less part of the conversation. Ultimately, he finds it difficult to consider 9/11 a "national event" as opposed to a civic one:

I feel so identified with my native city that it took a mental wrenching to

understand that all of America considered itself a target. . . . if [the American flags] were a nationalistic statement about America as the greatest nation, then I could not join that sentiment. The only banner I wanted to fly was the orange, green and white flag of New York City, with its clumsy Dutchman and beaver” (191).

Lopate is frustrated and confused here over the classification of 9/11 as a culturally traumatic event and resents the media’s framing of the event as such. Like Homes, he is caught at the intersection between his own individual response (or at least the grief and shock felt from being a direct witness to the events) and the national discourse. He struggles with feelings of anxiety and resentment over the media’s displacement of his personal identity as a New York citizen, and it takes a special kind of mental strength to understand the event as one that has national traumatic significance.

It is interesting to note that as Lopate stands in a crowd on the waterfront watching as smoke billows from the buildings, he senses “a sort of holiday mood, in patches, of unexpected free time. Some younger people were even laughing” (190). Lopate observes how on-lookers experience an ambivalent mix of good and bad feelings, something that often occurs during or shortly after a catastrophic event after immediate fears of personal danger have diminished. Jenefer Shute writes about similar feelings in “Instructions for Surviving the Unprecedented (Break Glass in Case of Emergency, If Glass Is Not Already Broken),” which reads like a kind of instruction manual, a what-happens-during-an-emergency list of protocols. She writes: “You will feel the first inklings of the unprecedented, a vertigo of the whole body, a speedy, queasy weightlessness. . . . You will feel a slight, illicit thrill” (270). Similarly, in “Death of a Painter,” Gibbons describes the mood in the city as “festive unease,” as though the air contained a kind of

“shared electricity” (106). As Smelser tells us, catastrophic events such as the events on September 11 can become “simultaneously shocking and fascinating, depressing and exhilarating, grotesque and beautiful, sullyng and cleansing” (“Epilogue” 269). While some on-lookers might be speechless, shocked to the point of silence by what they are witnessing, others might behave strangely euphoric, and the unexpected break in the monotony of daily experience often leads to animated conversation and camaraderie between strangers. Again, this speaks to the matrix of emotional responses to large-scale events and to the dangers of superimposing universal characteristics on all affected individuals.

Unlike Lopate’s narrator, who seeks a quiet escape from the overbearing response of the media, Dark’s protagonist Clara, in her short story “Senseless,” becomes completely obsessed by the television coverage and cannot bring herself to turn off the news. In fact, she believes “irrationally, stubbornly, grandiosely, and holding herself in contempt for so doing — that if she watched enough television and learned enough facts, if she controlled the information, there wouldn’t be another attack. It was all up to her” (65). This kind of “electronic vigil,” as Lopate calls it (191), consumes Clara’s entire day: “she’d become obsessed with it; she’d turn the TV on the moment she got home and kept it on until she left again; kept it on during meals, baths, sleep (what little there was of that), and phone calls. . . . watching the buildings explode into fire and collapse over and over again” (65). As it turns out, Clara’s reaction was not exceptional; many people in fact found themselves glued to the television in the days and weeks following 9/11 with little ability or desire to turn it off. As Clara watches the news coverage, she begins to measure herself and her own private thoughts against the larger, collective “response” as managed by the media. She even considers herself a traitor if she considers anything that might

not adhere to the status quo: “it seemed disloyal to even remember her own private opinion of it now. . . . She was part of a group now, the large United States” (65).

Clara panics when, in a line at Starbucks, she overhears details about a “development” she had not yet heard about, on a station she had not even considered listening to (65-66). Rushing back to her car, she is relieved when the radio is turned back on. But when Clara turns off the ignition, she is overcome and terrified by the silent void: “there was a sudden silence . . . and she felt utterly alone, with nothing reaching her ears except the sound of her own breath” (67). Panicking, she rushes to turn the radio back on: “There it was, the calm burring voice, the one that knew everything. She tried to listen, to catch up, but her heart had begun to pound uncontrollably so she couldn’t pay attention” (67). Her desperate attempt to “catch up” is futile, and the story ends: “She snapped the radio off, and began to weep” (67). Once Clara detaches from what she considers her only totem of comfort, she is overcome with personal emotion. For the first time since the event occurred, she attends to her own private experience and response, free from the “protective” drone of the television news. Literally and metaphorically, she hears her own heartbeat for the first time, independent from the beating of the collective heartbeat (as framed by the news media). This surrendering and perhaps ultimately liberating experience is also frightening for Clara, as any attention to one’s traumatic experience might be, if we can call it that. Clara’s attention to the mediation of 9/11 on television rather than to her own private feelings is framed here as a defense mechanism. In this short and simple story, Dark draws attention to the numbing effects of the media after the events of 9/11, and the way in which they can displace one’s own private emotional response.

Considered together, Homes’s, Lopate’s, and Dark’s stories call attention to Wulf Kansteiner’s concerns over cultural trauma theory. As noted earlier, Kansteiner objects to the

way current theories of cultural trauma tend to collapse all levels of victimization into a singular notion of “culture” or “community.” Kansteiner argues that theories of cultural trauma, that aim to broadly account for the social repercussions of historical events equate “two disparate problems of representation—the inexpungeable relativism in all matters of representation, on the one hand, and the vexing problems of memory and identity encountered by survivors of trauma, on the other” (194), and fail to adequately distinguish between the lived experience of survivors (and direct witnesses) and the collective representation of the event by dominant cultural and political structures. In fact, the lived experience of survivors is often at odds, even incongruous, with mass representations of the event. Failing to retain the various distinctions between levels of traumatic experience is a mistake, says Kansteiner.

The stories by Homes, Lopate, and Dark might be read as an endorsement of Kansteiner’s theories. In fact, Kansteiner’s concerns over the generalizing tendencies of cultural trauma theory are particularly interesting in the context of 9/11, since September 11 so quickly became an event coded by the media as “cultural trauma” *and* since it was viewed live on television by millions of viewers hundreds even thousands of miles away. How can we say that an individual living in and around the World Trade Center buildings experienced the same thing as someone watching on television miles away? Even the most recent edition of the *DSM* states that one cannot be traumatized from “exposure through electronic media, television, movies, or pictures” (271). It is in these kinds of contexts that we might ask whether theories of cultural trauma, which claim that entire societies can be damaged and indelibly marked by certain events, suppress all levels of victimization into a kind of dangerous singularism. According to Kansteiner, cultural trauma theory, in trying to generalize about abstract injuries on a society, runs the risk of eliding or collapsing the “moral differences between victims, perpetrators and bystanders of acts of

violence” (Kansteiner 194). And while Kansteiner does not list “television audiences” as potential “witnesses” to the violence, we might be wise to extend his argument (at least in the context of 9/11) to include this group as well, in the sense that it becomes erroneous to equate the experience of one watching the towers collapse on television with the experience of one watching from the street, for example. Theories of cultural trauma which attempt to account for a singular “traumatized society” risk the conflation of all levels of experience of a particular event — an entire community is thus represented as equally traumatized, despite the more immediate or direct experience of the event by some individuals within that community.

But is this really what cultural trauma theory says? As previously noted, when we attend to Alexander and Smelser’s definition of cultural trauma, we begin to understand it less as something that endorses dominant (media-motivated) narratives and more as something that acknowledges the ongoing accumulation of meanings, meanings that often contest, complicate, and pay attention to various levels of victimization. Homes, Lopate, and Dark, in varying ways, encourage us to assess these various levels of victimization, and thus push back against a monocular reading of 9/11 as collectively traumatic. Yet these stories, even in their attempts to distance themselves from the collective narrative, still represent carrier groups in the ongoing claim-making process. Together these stories ask: How do we keep separate the experience and feelings of those escaping the towers, those witnessing the destruction from the windows of their homes and offices, and those watching the events unfold on television hundreds of miles away? In so doing, they draw attention to the multiple ways the events of 9/11 impacted the nation.

Although these stories aim to keep distinct the various levels of victimization, and in so doing begin to challenge the role played by the news media, it does not follow that a collective injury did not occur. While these stories question the rush to label the entire country as

“victims,” they do not necessarily work to deny that an abstract injury was in fact felt. As Alexander reminds us, collective injuries are not measured by the sum total of individuals suffering from post-traumatic stress symptoms. Rather, collective injuries, usually triggered by a “horrendous” event of “actual harmfulness” or “objective abruptness,” occur when the “patterned meanings of the collectivity are abruptly dislodged” (Alexander, “Toward” 1, 10). Thus, while these stories might complicate the notion of what we mean by a “traumatized society,” they nonetheless are representative of a *claim* to some “fundamental injury, an exclamation of the terrifying profanation of some sacred value, a narrative about a horribly destructive social process, and a demand for emotional, institutional, and symbolic reparation and reconstitution” (Alexander, “Toward” 11).

4.2 Alternate Angles

In addition to exposing the tension that exists at the intersection between one’s private response and the public media-managed response of 9/11, *110 Stories* also exposes alternative perspectives to some of the more widely accepted views about 9/11 and its aftermath. Specifically, some of these stories complicate commonly accepted perceptions regarding the copious amount of flag flying that occurred in New York in the hours, days, and weeks following September 11. For many, at least on the surface, the American flags that sprung up in the city (and in other parts of the country) represented a surge in patriotism, a kind of pro-American posturing, a way to demonstrate national solidarity in crisis. Kaplan writes,

Certainly, on one level the flags represented a newly engaged patriotism (a patriotism increasingly problematic for me), echoing sentiments written on memorials in the park and on the walls and around fire stations and police

precincts, such as "United We Stand: God Bless America," "We Love America," and so on. But (at least in New York around where the catastrophe had happened) the flags were also a way to indicate empathy for those who had lost relatives and friends, and a shared trauma about the shock to the United States. (9)

Many Americans shared this perspective of the flag-waving. Peter Carey in his decidedly sentimental and consolatory contribution to *110 Stories*, "Union Square," purchases a T-shirt with an American flag on it for his son, Sam. He writes, "this shirt he put on immediately, and then we went out together again . . . out amongst the people, giving ourselves some strange and rather beautiful comfort in the middle of all the horror that had fallen on our lives. 'I love this city, dad. I love it more than ever'" (56). Similarly, as Lopate writes, "The American flags that started appearing everywhere seemed fitting, especially if taken to honor firemen and police who died trying to rescue victims" (191). This sense of civic and national pride represented by the visual presence of the flags is a valid and perhaps predictable response. Certainly, it became the foremost perspective adopted and sustained by the media.

But some stories in *110 Stories* expose another side to the overt flag-waving, a perspective that becomes increasingly relevant as the country moves further and further away from the day upon which the attacks occurred. Rather than simply representing a "newly engaged patriotism," the flag-waving that occurred shortly after the attacks became a way for Arab and Muslim Americans to distance themselves, their homes, and their businesses from both the terrorists themselves and from radical Islam altogether. Hanging a flag from their doorstep or in the windows of their businesses became a public act of disassociation, a way to declare allegiance to the United States (and alternatively condemn radical Islamic terrorism). Charles Bernstein's "Report from Liberty Street," for example, speaks of a "new sport" around town,

“checking not what stores have put up flags but which ones don’t” (45). It is the shops and restaurants that do not fly a flag that become of interest to the narrator, that come to represent something more credible and authentic: “Still, there is one Afghani joint in midtown that has no flag in sight. Stu and I head over to try out the lamb kebab” (45). In her story, Shute expresses mixed feelings over the presence of a flag at her apartment, but comes to understand its greater purpose: “You will come home to find an enormous flag on the front door of your building. You will feel violated, misrepresented; you will think, no, this isn’t what I want to say. But you will understand why it’s there. The super has put it there. He’s an immigrant. He’s afraid” (274).

Of all the stories in the collection that seek to complicate the “unity trope,” “Man on the PATH,” by Masood Farivar does it best. Initially, Farivar’s protagonist, an Afghan, a “Non-Resident Alien,” as he describes himself, is moved by the abundant display of flags: “They were everywhere. Giant flags on storefront windows, bandana flags on sidewalk vendors’ foreheads, little flags sticking out of backpacks, and piles and piles of stars and stripes on the vendors’ tables” (89). The protagonist observes that while he never before even carried a flag from his home country, he felt a sudden urge “to feel what it was like to proudly hold a flag. . . . It was my way of saying, we’re in this together. I’m with you. I share your pain” (89). But after purchasing his two dollar flag, he is suddenly overcome with self-consciousness; he becomes aware of “the incongruous spectacle of a Non-Resident Alien carrying an American flag” (89). His friend shares a different perspective assuring him that as an Afghan Muslim, openly carrying the American flag at this time is “good protection” (90). The protagonist soon realizes that his flag-wearing, whether he likes it or not, represents more than a simple desire to express unity and empathy, and essentially serves a “larger purpose than an awkward show of patriotism” (90). In fact, as he begins to look around, he notices that this “protective” kind of flag-flying is adopted

by many Muslim New Yorkers, as even the Arab shoe repairmen near his office “had plastered an enormous American flag on his window” (91).

Farivar is not content to leave the issue here, however, and in the second half of his short piece aims to complicate matters further. The story takes a noticeable turn when the wearing of the American flag begins to feel like an unintended surrender or submission for the protagonist, an involuntary denial of his identity as a Muslim. This apprehension, over what feels like involuntary submission, also occurs in the novels *The Submission* (aptly named) and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* which I discuss more fully in chapter five. Protagonists in both of these novels become anxious over these feelings of submission and engage in similar behaviours to protest these emotions. The protagonist in Farivar’s story notices that in addition to flag-waving, Muslims around the country in the days following the attacks were keeping a “low profile” (91); “It would be rude,” thinks the protagonist, “even reckless, for a Muslim to flaunt his faith” (91). Yet, as he journeys home on the PATH, he spots a man reading the Koran on the train (90). He is “stunned,” and thinks, “What did he think he was doing? Wasn’t he afraid? What he was doing was suicidal” (91). He even imagines the passenger’s answer if he were brave enough to ask why he was being so bold as to read the Koran on the train — something, he notes, which up to this point was not uncommon on the PATH on late-night rides: “I knew what his answer would be. Why should I be afraid? I’m not a terrorist. Why should I hide my religion? I’m a Muslim and I’m not afraid of practicing my religion” (91).

Suddenly, the wearing of an American flag feels akin to a kind of false posturing, more like an act of submission than an act of support. The protagonist resolves at the end of the story never to carry the flag again (92). As a whole, this story complicates the singular, narrow perspective that reads flag-waving after 9/11 as an outward gesture of goodwill, unity, and

patriotism. While this was certainly the case for many who hung a flag in their window, it was not the case for everyone. For many, the wearing or hanging of the American flag represented a protective strategy, a way to disassociate themselves from the terrorists and their affiliates. For the protagonist in “Man on the PATH,” this kind of flag-wearing also comes to represent a kind of submissive acceptance of what constitutes the “new normal” for Muslim-Americans, one with potentially racist or prejudiced implications. The story’s success lies in its ability to call attention to alternative perspectives regarding the issue, which then raises questions and concerns over such things as racial-profiling, religious freedom, and what a post-9/11 America now looks like.

Imraan Coovadia’s autobiographical piece, “The Same Tune,” also addresses issues of race and religion as the author considers what kind of country his infant son will grow up in. Coovadia begins by explaining that “finding the right tone for a piece . . . belongs to the core of discovery which interesting writing requires” (62). Tone, he continues, is “another name for irony as well as for confidence” (62). Beginning in such a way, Coovadia frames his approach paradoxically: the idea that one might be ironic (satirical, doubtful, and critical) and at the same time confident (convinced, hopeful, and optimistic) about the future. Within this context, we must read Coovadia’s story as a cynical yet somewhat hopeful piece about post-9/11 America.

His son, as he describes him, is “all or half Jewish, half Russian, and half a New Yorker (on his mother’s side) and all or half Muslim, half Indian, and half South African (on his father’s side)” (62). Coovadia is aware that the “fractions add up to more than one hundred percent” (62-63), but this is entirely his point. One’s identity, argues Coovadia, cannot nor should not be evenly divided according to one’s lineage. In spite of his son’s “six-sidedness,” Coovadia hopes that he will “grow up in a world where religious war, jingoism, cultural conflict have gone extinct” (63), a world in which his son’s “six-sided” identity “makes sense to everyone, and not

only his parents” (63). This reads of course overtly optimistic. However, Coovadia began his story by drawing attention to the paradoxical affiliation between confidence and irony, the idea that while one might wish to remain optimistic after crisis, cynicism and doubt become nevertheless ubiquitous. He writes,

there should be time to arrange this, after the present emergency, when the damage these acts have done to trust and religious harmony begin to be mended. . . . I cannot doubt that amazing promise made about the United States —the promise found not in the Constitution but in the words of the American poet . . . Walt Whitman, who dedicated this country to be, now and forever, the ‘teeming nation of nations.’ (63)

Eager perhaps for all this to be true, Coovadia cannot nonetheless hide his ironic tone.

His piece thus becomes oxymoronic: simultaneously hopeful, dreaming of a “tacit faith in the infinite future” (62), and painfully ironic, fearing an uncertain, intolerant America in which his son will grow up. Just as Farivar complicates the deeply engrained unity trope of flag-waving, Coovadia complicates the unity trope by questioning whether the United States will remain, as Whitman hoped, the “teeming nation of nations.” Neither story, however, provides easy answers and simplistic conclusions. Rather, each story affirms the notion that moving forward from 9/11 will not be easy, and that there remain multi-layered complexities that cannot simply be framed and assessed according to comforting tropes and consolatory symbols. While it might be desirable, in the short term, to reach for easy, comforting solutions, such as the flag-wearing of Farivar’s protagonist or the sentimental Whitmanesque “optimism” of Coovadia, these ultimately become empty, fleeting totems of comfort.

4.3 Taboo Subjects

Another aspect of *110 Stories* that works to complicate the dominant narrative surrounding 9/11 is the suggestion that the United States and its past foreign policies are somehow connected to the attacks. Unlike some of the more direct claims published early on after September 11 that reject the notion of American innocence, these stories approach the issue allegorically, almost like parables. Some stories in the anthology do address the issue directly, but are framed as questions rather than answers, with a prevailing tone of concern and confusion rather than anger or condemnation. Bernstein's "Report from Liberty Street" is perhaps the best example of this direct approach. Here he considers the taboo yet vexing thought: "'We got what we deserved' a shrill small voice inside some seems to be saying. But surely not *this* person, nor *this* one, not *this* one, nor *this* one. . . . Even if 'we' and 'they' have felled many, too many (any is too many) in this way" (45). Bernstein's piece is intentionally open-ended: "overwhelmed by explanations of things," Bernstein prefers to keep his questions unanswered: "I value these questions, these misgivings, more than my analysis of the situation" (45).

Two stories that deal with the issue of American responsibility more metaphorically are worth highlighting in detail: Laird Hunt's "Still Life with Snow and Hammer," and Tova Mirvis's "Potato Stories." Neither story deals directly with the events of September 11 nor are they set in New York City. Instead, both stories access the issue allegorically. Hunt's piece tells the story of a young boy who takes to playing on the street with a large green-handled hammer, throwing it up in the air "to let it fall with a pleasantly muffled thunk onto the ground" (156). The game quickly evolves to include another boy and considerable increased risk: "we took to standing directly under the point of the hammer's projected descent and to leaping out of its way at the last second, with the idea that points were to be awarded for the nearest misses and that the

game would be over when one or the other of us would be hit” (157). Allegorically, this childish game of one-for-one represents the concept of cultural and national exceptionalism, the idea that regardless of a nation’s own risk-taking behaviour and aggressive policies, no harm can nor should occur to the people of the risk-taking nation. Regardless of how high or fast the hammer is thrown, the boy in the story has too much pride to quit the game, as boys often do, and is confident that he will be able to get out of the way quick enough to avoid being hurt.

Of course, this is not how the story ends; the boy does not escape injury, nor do we expect as much. As the story approaches its conclusion, the narrator states, “So it was that at the end of the longest and final round, I stood under the looping falling hammer, looking up into the dark, snowy air with a mixture of terror and exaltation, as well as a sense of irreality, as if it wasn’t me about to be hit on the head by a carpenter’s hammer, as if there were no snow, as if it wasn’t night” (157). We cannot help but connect this “looking up,” this “mixture of terror and exaltation,” this “sense of irreality” with the events in New York on September 11. Placing the story in an anthology of 9/11 responses renders it significant in this regard. Independent of the contextual framing of Baer’s anthology, Laird’s story (as well as Mirvis’s story for that matter as we see below) would probably not be understood as a political comment on the events of 9/11. But framed by the overarching theme of Baer’s anthology, the story takes on specific significance. Thus, the story raises the question, if the conclusion of the hammer game is not shocking (and is in fact entirely foreseeable), which ends with the boy being hit on the head by the hammer — “Stupid boy, poor child, my mother said” (157) — how can we be so surprised by the events of September 11? U.S. foreign policy here is symbolically aligned with a game of chicken, and inevitably does not end well.

While not directly concerned with issues of complicity and responsibility, Mirvis's "Potato Stories," also takes an allegorical approach, only this time to draw attention to the importance of perspective and point of view when attempting to understand traumatizing events. Mirvis's story dramatizes the notion that an event can take on different levels of significance and seriousness depending on one's focal point. This story demonstrates how even the slightest shift in point-of-view can yield vastly different conclusions, suggesting that 9/11 and all its various implications deserve a widened perspective. The story is divided into four parts, and begins, innocently and simply enough with a description of a young Polish girl named Gertrude who together with her brother dig for potatoes for their grandmother. When they finish digging, they notice that two Polish boys have stolen Gertrude's shoes.

From here, the same story is told three more times, each with added detail and an increasingly ominous tone. In the second story, Gertrude dreams of getting married while she is taunted by Polish thieves; in the third, the thieves are replaced by trolls, with "gray fur . . . half human, half animal" chasing the children as they run towards home, her "black shoes sprung to life, flying behind them, escorting them home" (209); and finally, in the fourth version, Gertrude in her attempt to outrun the boys, is seized and raped while her brother, Shale, watches, cowering in his hiding spot under the stairs:

She felt their arms on her shoulders, their breath on her neck, and as they pushed her down, she thought if she closed her eyes, they would go away. But soon she saw Shale catching up and running past, hiding under the steps that led to her family's door. And not thinking of him before, now all she thought of was Shale under the steps, his mouth a frozen circle. Watching. Holding his breath. Waiting for it to end. (210)

The first version is deceptively simple, the third version is infused with elements of fantasy and fairy-tales, and the final version reads shockingly raw and disturbing. With each retelling, Mirvis applies a wider-angled lens, offering more and more of the story until the reality of Gertrude's experience is exposed.

While this story might be about a good number of things, not least of which is a commentary on the complexity of survivor testimony, it is its concern with the issue of perspective and point of view that is of interest to me here. This story underscores the notion that perspective matters, that a widening of the lens is an important, necessary, and crucial element to any consideration of important events, perhaps especially traumatizing ones. Mirvis's story addresses the limitations of representation, and how the omission or denial of certain aspects can render one version or interpretation of an event entirely different from another, even incongruously so. While not addressing the issue of complicity directly, it draws attention to various levels of representation that might exist surrounding a particular event. The story cautions against applying too narrow a lens to an event, perhaps suggesting that if we focus too closely on the falling buildings in New York City, we might miss a much larger, more complex, and potentially darker story that deserves considerable attention.

4.4 (Re)examining Cultural Trauma Theory

110 Stories raises some of the same questions as Kansteiner regarding the usefulness of cultural trauma theory. Many of the anthology's contributors fight to retain their subjectivity in the context of 9/11 and feel their identity as local witnesses to the event collapse under the weight of the larger narrative unfolding on television. These authors testify to the way the mainstream news media rushed to democratize the events of September 11, coding them

traumatic for *all* Americans. This is one of Kansteiner's chief objections to cultural trauma theory. He cautions against the ready acceptance of a theory that aims to co-opt all levels of experience under the singular notion of a "collective injury." Specifically, he claims that this model is overly reliant on the influence of dominant claim makers like the media: "We should probably avoid reducing complex media effects to the trope of trauma" (208). He explains that the "experiences of actual trauma victims seem to have little in common with the collective or individual psychological effects of media representations" (208). As we have seen, *110 Stories* makes similar claims.

On the other hand, *110 Stories* as a whole engages in exactly what Smelser means by cultural trauma as a "process of collective groping, negotiation, and contestation over the proper historical meaning to be assigned, the proper affective stance to be adopted, the proper focus of responsibility" ("Psychological" 49). *110 Stories* becomes one of the earliest examples of the "compulsive examining, and re-examining" that can occur in the construction of cultural trauma (Smelser, "Psychological" 54); it represents one of the first platforms for the "bitter contestation among groups" (Smelser, "Psychological" 49). For Smelser, this prolonged process of compulsive reexamination is precisely what qualifies events as cultural trauma, for, it is not only the meaning-making efforts of the more dominant cultural institutions like the news media that claim cultural trauma, but also ongoing debates that question the validity of these dominant meanings. Kansteiner's reading of cultural trauma therefore is too narrow. Although he rightfully distrusts agents such as the mass media who claim to "speak for the collective," he also overlooks Alexander and Smelser's focus on the ongoing-ness of cultural trauma, that it involves the accumulation of meanings from a variety of collective agencies and sources.

According to Alexander and Smelser's approach, we might value *110 Stories* as the product of another carrier group in the process of understanding and/or remembering September 11. Considered this way, *110 Stories*, even as it contests early meanings around 9/11, paradoxically affirms its status as cultural trauma. Indeed, cultural trauma is perhaps paradoxical by nature: that while its meanings depends upon a "collective," — that it is classified as cultural trauma when "members of a *collectivity* feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their *group* consciousness" [emphasis added] (Alexander, "Toward" 10), it also involves "counterinterpretations," "variations," (Eyerman, *Assassination* 17) and an "always-expanding" accumulation of meanings (Smelser, "Psychological" 54), that can foreground subjective identities and perspectives.

My approach values *110 Stories* as a form of resistance to the more mainstream, mass mediated perspectives of 9/11. In varying ways, these stories avoid consolatory tendencies and challenge the status quo. To this end, *110 Stories* resolutely asks more questions than it answers and leaves the door open to multiple perspectives and considerations. The questions listed in "Near November" by Lynne Sharon Schwartz capture the overall message of the collection:

What is the just path? . . . Can we love our country if we loathe the voices that claim to be our country? Could this have happened? . . . Why not to us? But why should such things happen to anyone? Who did it? Who are "they"? Who is innocent? Who is guilty? How can we tell? . . . Will some voice, please, speak an intelligent word in public? (261)

Thus, the collection's central value lies not in its ability to offer new or unique insight regarding our understanding of how or why the events of September 11 occurred, but rather in the way it complicates many of the conclusions hastily made early on.

In her 1996 seminal work, *Worlds of Hurt*, Kali Tal suggests that literatures of trauma operate as acts of resistance that aggressively battle against the appropriation of trauma by dominant cultural forces for specific political purposes:

Bearing witness is an aggressive act. It is born out of a refusal to bow to outside pressure or revise or to repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity, to endure a lifetime of anger and pain rather than to submit to the seductive pull of revision and repression. Its goal is change. The battle over the meaning of traumatic experience is fought in the arena of political discourse, popular culture, and scholarly debate. (7)

One might object to my use of Tal in this discussion; Tal concentrates her study on personal narratives written by survivors of traumatic experiences such as the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, rape and incest. The contributors of *110 Stories*, by contrast, are not even survivors of 9/11 per se (no one, for example, was in the towers at the time). Yet many of them did witness the destruction of the World Trade Center buildings from the windows of their offices or homes. Thus, their commentary might be called witness testimony rather than survivor narrative.

Despite this important difference, I contend that Tal's theories on the revisionary and reconstitutive potential of literature still apply here. In fact, as an event watched by millions on television, it is perhaps especially important to read these stories as acts of resistance and revision since they aim to complicate master narratives surrounding 9/11. These stories point us in another direction and highlight new points of view and perspectives. Baer's anthology aims to participate in memory-making that "captures simultaneously the individual, embodied, and lived side *and* the collective, social, and constructed side of our relations to the past" (Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 4). Rather than accept the mainstream framing of 9/11, these stories function as

supplementary voices, directing readers to new topics, alternate angles, and diverse perspectives. Since 9/11 was “received” by most Americans through television news media, and quickly collapsed into familiar, dramatic, and arguably overly-simplistic frameworks, it is perhaps particularly important to pay attention to these more subjective, and at times revisionary, stories.

Chapter 5: “All of These Protagonists”:

Ambivalence and Ambiguity in Amy Waldman’s *The Submission* and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

...all these different Claires, who just happened to look alike, seemed to rest inside her, so that every argument, no matter how contradictory, found sympathy.

Amy Waldman, *The Submission*

Amy Waldman’s *The Submission* (2011) and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) focus on the lingering impact of the attacks on September 11, 2001 particularly as it affects the Muslim-American community. In so doing, both novels draw attention to the complexities of 9/11 and to their enduring effects. In contrast to the more confident tone of mainstream television news networks in the days and weeks after the events, which were anchored in clichés of national unity, strength, and heroism, these two novels refuse to provide easy answers or present simple solutions to the many reverberations of 9/11, opting instead for a prevailing tone of ambivalence and ambiguity.

Focusing on the debate around the design of the memorial at Ground Zero, Waldman’s novel becomes increasingly complex and ambivalent as the story proceeds. On the surface, Waldman’s characters seem to fit into what the media scripted as “9/11 archetypes” (the widow/the firefighter/the mayor/the Muslim etc.); however many of them deviate from their “assigned” roles in terms of how they question the status quo and in how they vacillate between altering viewpoints and perspectives. Waldman’s novel thus presents as a kind of puzzle with no easy or obvious solution. The novel suggests that while the attacks may indeed have produced an

injured collective, the injuries within that collective do not look the same. Although the novel might accept the concept of a “wounded culture” after 9/11, it pays particular attention to the complexity of these wounds; these wounds are felt differently by different characters, and in some cases constitute different wounds altogether. From one point of view, the novel recognizes the nation-wide impact of 9/11 and supports Neil J. Smelser’s formal definition of cultural trauma: “that it is a memory accepted and publicly given credence . . . evoking an event of situation which is a) laden with negative affect, b) represented as indelible, and c) regarded as threatening a society’s existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions” (“Psychological” 44). But the novel’s primary aim, which I foreground here, is to underscore the dynamics of individual reactions within this collective. There is a subjective purpose here, an effort to examine the impact of 9/11 from an individual perspective while at the same time acknowledging that person’s role in the collective.

Rather than endorse one platform or perspective over another, Waldman examines multiple perspectives, creating an escalating tone of ambivalence throughout the novel; readers are pulled back and forth across debates as characters become more and more unsure of their own position in those debates. *The Submission* suggests therefore that not only did the impact of 9/11 generate public battles regarding race, religion, multiculturalism, politics, and civil rights, it also produced ambivalence, uncertainty, and private conflicts within individuals themselves. Thus, in contrast to the earlier framing of the attacks, that endorsed nationally recognized tropes and clichés, *The Submission* rejects the idea that there is one way to approach or interpret 9/11. Despite the collective impact of 9/11, suggests Waldman’s novel, the subjective effects of 9/11 ought to be emphasized.

Likewise, Hamid's novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, suggests a narrative tone of ambiguity and uncertainty. Just as Waldman does with *The Submission*, Hamid explores the experience of post-9/11 America subjectively, examining the private concerns and conflicts of one man while also appreciating his larger, more symbolic role in the collective. Rather than present multiple perspectives like Waldman, however, Hamid focuses on one protagonist in particular, Changez, a young Pakistani man who, after completing a degree at Princeton University, lands an elite position at a top American consulting firm. However, Changez, who aspires to live out his own version of the "American dream," becomes increasingly disillusioned with his adopted country, particularly after the events of 9/11. Changez's position on the advantages of living and working in the U.S. wavers throughout the novel; trips overseas to the Philippines and Chile and the experience of living as a Pakistani man in post-9/11 New York begin to challenge his initial, more romantic perspective on the American dream.

Thus, Changez, as the narrator of the novel, becomes increasingly unreliable as the story proceeds; readers are left unsure of the final outcome of the story and of the protagonist's ultimate allegiance. Hamid deliberately avoids placing a definitive stake on where Changez's eventual loyalties lie, thus maintaining the novel's (and Changez's) ambiguity. Hamid uses ambiguity and ambivalence here to emphasize the discrepancy that can occur between appearance and reality — that jumping to conclusions based on appearances is a dangerous game. Just as Waldman's novel emphasizes the spectrum of post-9/11 perspectives through a myriad of ambivalent characters, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* underscores post-9/11 complexities through its use of an ambiguous, unreliable narrator. Rather than view the events of 9/11 through a distinct and clear perspective, Hamid views 9/11 through a more obscure filter suggesting a need to look beneath the surface and beyond initial appearances.

As outlined earlier, current theories in the field of cultural trauma, particularly those argued by Jeffrey C. Alexander et al., suggest that in order to qualify as cultural trauma, an event must be continually, publicly remembered. Yet these theories emphasize that while public memory-making might constitute an act of collective coping, it is not always cohesive or uncontested. As Smelser explains, “Most often the establishment of a collectivity’s responses to trauma is a matter of bitter contestation among groups, sometimes over long periods of time and often without definitive settlement (“Psychological” 49). Indeed, the debates over how to interpret, understand, or commemorate a particularly troubling event often render that event indelible, and thus culturally traumatic. According to Smelser then, it is not the existence of an “official” version or master narrative that qualifies an event as collectively traumatic but rather, the “continuing counterpoint of interested and opposing voices” (“Psychological” 50). These opposing voices often become “chronic,” and interested parties may never reach a point of consensus (Smelser, “Psychological” 50). These kinds of debates can lead to the splintering of national identities, the ostracization of certain groups within the collective, and widespread unresolved collective dissension — a dramatic and ironic counter-story to the unity trope adopted earlier. As Arthur G. Neal explains, “While in some cases national trauma results in enhancing a sense of unity within a society, there are other cases in which collective traumas have fragmenting effects” (31). Initially, at least according to a hastily-formed dominant narrative, the attacks on September 11 coincided with the former. It might be more likely, however, that due to the debates since and to the controversial U.S. military response that followed, the attacks might be remembered as the latter. Or perhaps, a remembrance of 9/11 will encompass both, unifying in terms of communal grief and national pride and at the same time fragmenting in terms of new-found prejudices and disputes.

Rather than endorse one “official,” homogenous version of 9/11 (that is, how it should be remembered, viewed, or memorialized), both these novels examine the events and their impact through a variety of different contexts, viewpoints, and contestations. In privileging heterogeneity over homogeneity, both novels adopt tones of ambiguity and ambivalence, choosing to foreground the *process* of debate (both private and public) and the ambivalence within these debates over any singular endorsement of popular assumptions. It is interesting to note that in cultural trauma theory ambivalence plays a big role. Once groups reach the stage of memorialisation, there is often less monopoly of one perspective over another, and ambivalence becomes one of cultural trauma’s most identifiable and remarkable characteristics (Smelser, “Psychological” 54). The manifestation of ambivalence in cultural traumas can lead to what Smelser calls “cultural play, cultural fussing, even culture wars. Ambivalence lends strength to the assertion of indelibility: cultural traumas can never be solved and never go away” (“Psychological” 54).

Not only do Waldman and Hamid draw attention to the conflicts and debates over how to approach or memorialize the attacks between sub-groups in the collective, they also foreground the conflicts and debates that occur within individuals themselves. Ambivalence surfaces here not only between groups but also within individuals; no one it seems is sure of how they feel, how they should respond, or whether they do or do not support certain attitudes going forward. Similar in this regard to *110 Stories*, a tone of ambivalence draws attention to *cultural trauma identity displacement*, the anxiety between the individual and the collective and the pressure to conform to the mainstream framing of large-scale events. Both novels highlight the complexity of individual reactions to events, while at the same time understanding and acknowledging how these individuals belong to a larger, collective identity. Thus, both novels demonstrate how

ambivalence towards events such as 9/11 can occur both at the macro, community level (manifesting as debates and contestations between relevant, interested parties) *and* at the micro level, as interior conflicts and identity crises within individuals themselves.

5.1 *The Submission*

While there is little scholarship on Waldman’s debut novel thus far, early reviews of the novel are for the most part favourable. Writing for *The New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani, describes Waldman’s debut novel as having “verisimilitude,” “political resonance,” and “heart” (“The Right”). Kakutani suggests that the novel skilfully “reminds us how inextricably linked the personal and the political, the private and the public have become in our post 9/11 world,” and how the impact of decisions surrounding 9/11 can be “magnified and distorted by the echo chamber of 24/7 news coverage.” Likewise, Kamila Shamsie, in her review of the novel for *The Guardian*, describes the novel as having “texture” and “complexity”:

the grief surrounding 9/11 – the form it takes, the claims it makes, the claims made in its name by third parties, the hierarchy which surrounds it (not all griefs are equal), the guilt and anger which are born from it, the gulf between the silence of private grief and the clamour of public grief — is central to this exceptional debut about a changing America.

This chapter builds on these early reviews by providing detailed literary analysis on how exactly Waldman achieves this.

Arin Keeble provides the only academic scholarship so far on Waldman’s novel in his book *The 9/11 Novel: Trauma, Politics and Identity* (2014). Here Keeble examines both *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Submission*, calling them (and Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland*)

“the most directly political 9/11 novels” so far (15). Keeble claims the novel “works against the unilateralism of the Bush Doctrine, and attempts to reanimate some of the nuance, complexity and conflictedness that was overshadowed by Manichaeism and clash-of-civilizations discourse” (16). I would agree, and my perspective in this chapter in many ways complements Keeble’s thesis. Keeble reads Waldman’s novel correctly as a “portrayal of post-9/11 disorientation” (166), that is, as a novel that considers “the emotional and socio-political complexities that were buried beneath [the Bush administration’s] rhetoric” (167). In contrast to Waldman’s approach, which foregrounds post-9/11 conflictedness, the Bush administration “went to great lengths to respond to the complex array of national and international issues that 9/11 brought to the surface or created by generating clear objectives and targets, creating heroes and protagonists, and identifying enemies to defeat” (Keeble 167). However, while I appreciate and endorse Keeble’s central reading of Waldman’s text, I extend it by arguing that not only does Waldman foreground a tone of ambivalence between characters, she creates ambivalent identities within these characters themselves. Waldman frames 9/11, not as an event that created simplistic (Manichaeistic) binaries, but one that cultivated ambivalent and confusing feelings within individuals themselves.

The Submission is a fictional story about a juried architectural competition to select a winning design for the 9/11 memorial in New York City. The central problem in the novel, around which the entire plot pivots, is that the winner, whose design was submitted anonymously (as the process demands), turns out to be an American architect named Mohammed Khan (hereafter and throughout the novel referred to as Mo). This news, which suggests to the jury that the winner is most likely Muslim, provokes a wide range of responses from various jury members: “Jesus fucking Christ! It’s a goddamn Muslim!” (16); “Let’s stay calm here” (16);

“‘Is he even American?’” (16); “‘I think we need to assume the worst—I mean, that he’s a Muslim,’ the mayor’s aide said. ‘Not that that’s the worst’” (17); “‘It could be a healing gesture’” (17); “‘This is no time for multicultural pandering’” (17); “‘What if he is one of the problematic ones?’” (18); “‘There’s nothing to talk about. . . . The vote’s been taken. It’s over’” (18); “‘This —this Mohammed hasn’t technically won the competition yet. I mean, there are safeguards built in, right, against criminals. Or terrorists’” (19). The story proceeds from here, deepening the debate around the decision over whether or not to award Mo the winning bid. In so doing, the novel expands the identities of key characters, which include Claire, a 9/11 widow; Paul, a political idealist and jury chair; Mo, the architect; Sean, a hot-headed and somewhat displaced brother of a New York firefighter who died in 9/11; Alyssa, a journalist who first uncovers the story with the headline “MYSTERY MUSLIM MEMORIAL MESS” (52); and Asma, an illegal alien living in New York who, like Claire, lost her husband in the World Trade Center buildings on September 11.

At first glance, Waldman’s novel seems to be teeming with characters emblematic of by-now familiar 9/11 stereotypes: Claire, the widow; Ariana, the liberal elite; Sean, the knee-jerk reactionist; Alyssa, the unscrupulous journalist; Paul, the political “neutral” stoic; and Mo, the Muslim. Waldman creates characters here who are entirely recognizable within the 9/11 narrative, at least certainly as it developed and evolved during the decade following the attacks. On a superficial level, Waldman’s text can be read as the personification or rather personalization of many of these 9/11 archetypes, that is, as a way for readers to approach the complexity of traumatic events with more specificity, empathy, and understanding. This is perhaps what Laurie Vickroy means when she asks whether the fiction of trauma can “make overwhelming psychosocial dilemmas available to individual readers by personalizing them”

(xvi). *The Submission* certainly aims to highlight particular dilemmas that have escalated since 9/11, not least of which is the xenophobia and bigotry directed at the Muslim community. But as we will see in more depth below, Waldman's novel does more than make certain psychosocial dilemmas available to readers by personalizing them; she convolutes (presumed) perspectives of certain dilemmas *and* she complicates the individual identities of those who work to personalize them, suggesting that a singular, oversimplified approach to these problems should be avoided.

In choosing as her subject the 9/11 memorial design competition, Waldman dramatizes and personifies what E. Ann Kaplan means by the "complex interconnections of individual and cultural trauma" (2). For example, initially at least, jury members Claire and Ariana can be read as representative of two opposing ends of the spectrum, the former symbolic of the individual, personal victim of 9/11 (as a family member of the deceased) and the latter representing someone at an arm's length, who "witnessed" the attacks vicariously and from a distance. In comparison to other jury members, Claire considers herself distinct: "They'd all lost, of course — lost the sense that their nation was vulnerable; lost their city's most recognizable icons; maybe lost friends or acquaintances. But only she had lost her husband. She wasn't above reminding them of that tonight, when they would at last settle on the memorial" (3). Ariana, by contrast, represents the collective "victim," as it extends beyond the immediate victims to come to include the entire nation. While not having any immediate ties to those who lost their lives in the attacks, people like Ariana demand an appropriate vigil nonetheless. Claire describes Ariana as having "disproportionate impact" (7); Ariana criticizes Claire for having too "little clinical distance" (8), for whom "Sorrow can be a bully" (7). For Paul, the chairman of the jury, "Claire Burwell and Ariana Montagu together strained him, their opposing sureties clashing like electric fields, the room crackling with their animus" (6). Right from the beginning, Waldman positions

these two women as representative of the two conflicting ways in which events like 9/11 are framed and perceived, that is, according to an individual victim approach as represented in Claire and/or according to a cultural, mass public approach as represented in Ariana. This dichotomy essentially frames the entire novel. Characters are constantly placed in situations in which their individual identities clash with what has come to be identified as “collective” interests, attitudes, and behaviours (and whether these really are the interests and attitudes of the “collective” becomes another aspect Waldman explores).

Waldman chooses an apt platform, the 9/11 memorial, from which to question the tension between individual and cultural trauma. As David Simpson explains in his work on theories of commemoration and culture,

Rituals of memorialization exist to assimilate these intense and particular griefs into received vocabularies and higher, broader realms than the merely personal. The routines of commemorative culture, whether private or public, exist to mediate and accommodate the unbearably dissonant agonies of the survivors into a larger picture that can be metaphysical or national-political and is often both at once. (2)

Public memorials of mass catastrophes often try to balance the private grief of individuals with the public need for commemoration and remembrance; memorials such as these become, by the very nature of what they are, representative of the sometimes-fraught, always-complicated relationship between survivors, victims’ families, and the public at large.

Yet public memorials of mass-mediated events (and deaths) also call into question the tension between what Christine Bold, Ric Knowles, and Belinda Leach call “hegemonic cultural memory” and “cultural countermemory,” that is, between master narratives and their various

contestations (18). In their study on Canadian memorials of murdered women, they question whether memorials should “resist the traditional tendency for monuments to fold an event into history, celebrate the dominant culture, and forget what does not affirm the status quo” (17). Bold, Knowles, and Leach characterize memorials that promote or sustain the status quo as more indicative of “‘active forgetting’ than remembering” (18). Instead, they believe “that contestations and negotiations around the control of representation are key to understanding and promoting the link between activist memorializing and resistant cultural memory” (17). Such debates and contestations around the memorialization of events are vital to the remembering process because they challenge routine assumptions that may not be valid and that may have been appropriated by positions of power to endorse particular agendas. In this context, Waldman’s novel becomes a valuable contribution to the remembering process since it dramatizes and as such vocalizes the various “contestations and negotiations around the control of representation.”

Waldman’s subject matter of course resonates with reality — the actual 9/11 memorial in New York City, entitled “Reflecting Absence” designed by architect Michael Arad, was selected in 2003 after a rigorous juried competition, similar to the one in Waldman’s novel. Like Claire in the novel, Paula Grant Berry, who lost her husband during 9/11, sat on the jury, along with other prominent figures from the political and cultural scene. Furthermore, the novel’s subject calls attention to the 2010 controversy over the construction of what is now known as Park51, an Islamic community center located in lower Manhattan two blocks from the World Trade Center site. There was a great deal of media attention around Park51, controversy that was originally sparked by a group called “Stop Islamization of America” who misleadingly and incorrectly began referring to the center as the “Ground Zero mosque,” even though the project was neither

a mosque nor was it located on Ground Zero. After years of controversy and media attention, in which family members of 9/11 victims both supported and opposed the project, Park51 opened on September 21, 2011.

Public memorials aim to fuse the representation of individual sorrows with the act of collective remembering. This is not an easy task, and speaks to the inherent anxiety that may exist for the individual in the context of cultural trauma. This relates back to what I call *cultural trauma identity displacement*, the feeling of displacement or devaluation of one's individual experience in the context of large-scale mass-mediated events. The memorialization of a mass catastrophe, and the debates which surround the various possibilities, can be a moment in which this anxiety becomes particularly apparent, certainly past memorial decision processes attest to this.¹ In grappling with the tension between the individual and the collective, *The Submission* asks two questions: first, how do the needs of individual victims become entangled with the collective expectations of the public? Secondly, when it comes to memorializing such events, how do we negotiate the tension that exists between collective theories of identity and individual experiences? While Waldman accepts the notion of a national collective identity that was damaged in some way from the attacks, she is more concerned with emphasizing the diversity of individual responses within that collective itself.

As James Edward Young explains, "Memory at Ground Zero is not zero-sum: it is an accumulation of all these disparate experiences and needs. Just as we accommodate ourselves to the competing needs of others every day of our lives in this city . . . we should build into both the process and this site the capacity to remember together but separately" ("The Stages" 217). What

¹ See for example, James Edward Young's work on Holocaust memorials, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*.

we “should” build, however, does not always come to fruition. This speaks to one of the central dilemmas of cultural trauma: how do we appreciate and distinguish separateness when speaking and acting on behalf of togetherness? There remains an inherent anxiety between individual wounds and collective wounds and the difficult process of accounting for both. When the event in question has damaged not only individual lives but also threatened the collective spirit or cultural identity of a particular group, how do we consecrate the memory of that event in such a way that recognizes both without quashing either?

The 9/11 memorial thus provides Waldman with a unique yet fitting stage from which to explore these issues and tensions. Waldman attempts to explore the topic from as many different vantage points and perspectives as possible. Unlike the article for *The New Yorker* that Waldman creates in the novel, that reads: “In venturing into public space, the private imagination contracts to serve the nation and should necessarily abandon its own ideologies and beliefs” (125), Waldman it seems advocates for a more nuanced approach, one that explores more private responses to 9/11 within the unavoidable context of a public event.

Ideally, as Young suggests, the act of memory-making and memorializing should be “an ongoing negotiation among all the groups of people whose lives were affected by this event and those whose lives will be shaped by what is built here” (“The Stages” 216). Waldman’s novel demonstrates that the balancing of individual and collective concerns is a precarious and difficult endeavour, a process that precludes easy outcomes or solutions. Young it would seem agrees, suggesting that the memorialization process, and the selection of a design, should be an evolving process. Writing before the real 9/11 memorial was designed, he says:

I would have us build into this site a worldview that allows for competing, even conflicting, agendas — and make this, too, part of the process. Rather than

fretting about the appearance of disunity (all memorial processes are exercised in disunity, even as they strive to unify memory), we should make our questions and the public debate itself part of our memory-work. Memory is, after-all, a process and is everlasting only when it remains a process and not a finished result. (“The Stages” 216)

Young’s challenge might be asked of the newly-built 9/11 memorial. We might ask whether “questions and public debate” have been incorporated into the 9/11 memorial in New York City.

In the novel, Paul as jury chair appreciates the amalgamating potential of the memorial as something particularly important since the events of 9/11 were “experienced” vicariously by the majority of Americans: “You couldn’t call yourself an American if you hadn’t, in solidarity, watched your fellow Americans being pulverized, yet what kind of American did watching create? A traumatized victim? A charged-up avenger? A queasy voyeur? Paul, and he suspected many Americans, harbored all of these protagonists. The memorial was meant to tame them” (13). Paul’s thoughts here, which mock the notion of “solidarity” and allude to the multiplicity of “protagonists” both within the nation as a whole and within individuals themselves, embody many of the novel’s principal themes. As Paul points out, a large portion of the country did participate in the same activity at the same time, that is, most individuals “witnessed” the destruction of the Pentagon and World Trade Center live on television on the morning of September 11, 2001. Further to this, most Americans received information about the events in much the same way, through the media — filtered, shaped, and manipulated according to popular ideologies and tropes. Americans did this “together,” so to speak, in the same way and at the same time.

On the one hand, Paul's thoughts draw attention to how easily group identity can form within the context of mass-mediated events. On the other hand, he foregrounds diversity, that despite being framed as a "solidarity," the "nation" actually contains different autonomies, including but not limited to "the traumatized victim," "the charged-up avenger," and the "queasy voyeur" (13). Furthermore, Paul's thoughts suggest that this kind of multiplicity also exists within individuals; people may contain within themselves contradictory viewpoints, multiple attitudes, and varying perspectives to events. While Waldman's characters, on the surface, might appear emblematic of post-9/11 stereotypes, they are in fact complex, ambiguous, and arguably ambivalent. Even Paul, who throughout the novel represents a kind of desired neutrality, struggles with his own ambiguous feelings after 9/11 regarding his driver, whom he had "known was Muslim but never dwelt on it" (13): "three months later, when a sorrowful Sami—was he ever any other way? — begged to leave to return to Pakistan because his father was dying, Paul was relieved, although he hated to admit it. He promised Sami an excellent recommendation if he returned, politely declined to take on his cousin, and hired a Russian" (13). The novel situates characters within identifiable archetypal categories only to dismantle these categories through the use of ambiguity, uncertainty, and conflict. Set up as it is, with a contest at its core and archetypal characters as its cast, Waldman's novel could easily become a straightforward, somewhat linear, debate novel; each character would be assigned a position in the debate and readers would be encouraged to do likewise. The novel could have contained obvious winners and losers (heroes and villains) with a clear validation of certain moral and ethical values. But Waldman avoids this kind of oversimplified approach and instead complicates the debate through the development of characters that fluctuate between approaches and perspectives.

The development of three characters in particular, Mo, Sean, and Claire is decidedly non-linear; each character vacillates between various perspectives, often without the desired epiphanic moment of clarity. In the novel, Mo is introduced to readers in LAX one week after September 11, 2001. Waldman toys here with what has now become a post-9/11 scenario, in this case, a Muslim-American in a security line at an airport after 9/11 (although despite the clichéd characteristics of this scene, it was and arguably still is a reality for many Muslim-American travelers). Earlier that week, Mo observed how his behaviour since 9/11 had begun to change, as though he was guilty by association:

he realized that the difference wasn't in how he was being treated but in how he was behaving. . . . he had become gingerly, polite, careful to give no cause for alarm or criticism. He didn't like this new, more cautious avatar, whose efforts at accommodation hinted at some feeling of guilt, yet he couldn't quite shake him. Cloistered at the airport, he struggled to maintain his self-respect even as the avatar encouraged obsequiousness. (25)

Immediately, the novel stresses Mo's ambivalence and multiplicity. The use of the word "avatar" is an interesting choice since it refers to one's alternate persona, a substitute identity meant to represent the individual in a different way. Mo wants to behave justifiably, to stand up for his own civil rights and oppose discrimination, but is continually cautioned by his inner voice and becomes self-conscious. Mo's concern for the collective good is superseded by his private interest to maintain a low profile.

Throughout the novel, there are many examples of Mo's outrage towards obvious 9/11-generated racial-profiling. When passed over for an expected promotion, for example, he is shocked, angry, and humiliated: "Outside his body shivered out of proportion to the temperature,

and there was no plane above to account for the roar in his ears” (40). Recalling his recent airport “interview,” Mo’s anger increases: “The memory of the airport interrogation was unpacked, shaken out, stuffed full of straw to make it lifelike once again. There was no evidence Roi hadn’t elevated Mo because he was a Muslim but none against it, either. If he had been singled out once, why not again?” (40). Mo feels the sting of discrimination, the anger of prejudice, and the frustration of being profiled according to ethnic and religious standards. These are all appropriate and predictable responses.

However, rather than characterize Mo as one-dimensional, as a frustrated and angry victim of racial profiling, Waldman complicates him. When asked by his girlfriend how he would respond to the question on FOX news, “Should Muslims be singled out for searches at airports?” (40), Mo answers affirmatively: “So be it—I have nothing to hide. I’m not going to pretend that all Muslims can be trusted. If Muslims are the reason they’re doing the searches in the first place, why shouldn’t Muslims be searched? . . . you’re presuming that because I’m Muslim I’ll feel a certain way about how Muslims should be treated. . . . It’s patronizing that attitude” (41-42). Even though Mo resents being treated as part of a collective and tries to retain a sense of individuality, he seems to understand the desire to search all members of a particular group if some members of that group are indeed responsible. Rather than profile Mo according to dominant expectations, Waldman casts him as ambivalent, suggesting that these debates are never simple, not even for those most affected.

After Mo’s design wins the memorial competition, his ambivalence magnifies. At times, he resolutely defends his rights: “I want the same credit for my design as any other winner” (63); “I don’t traffic in labels” (64); “I will not withdraw, and I will not make any of these accommodations” (92). Other times, he seems moderately antagonistic, staging quiet protests

such as withholding information or growing a beard: “he would not . . . reassure anyone that he was ‘moderate’ or ‘safe’ or Sufi, whatever adjective would allow Americans to sleep without worrying that he had placed a bomb under their pillow. It was exactly because they had nothing to worry about from him that he wanted to let them worry” (78); “He had grown a beard on his return from Kabul merely to assert his right to wear a beard, to play with the assumptions about his religiosity it might create” (114). But he also doubts his approach: “Mo began to put psychological distance between himself and the Mohammed Khan who was written and talked about, as if that were another man altogether. It often was” (126); “Every day I’m different If this keeps up, in two weeks I won’t be the person you know now” (155). Eventually, his “mind operates like a kaleidoscope: just shift the view and suddenly everything looks completely different” (175).

Like Mo, Sean and Claire become increasingly difficult to label. At first, they seem easy to tag: they adopt strong (albeit oppositional) positions in the debate — Sean is opposed to Mo’s design and Claire is in favour of it. Granted, Claire’s initial response to a Muslim winning the design competition is atypical for a victim’s family member. She is nonetheless (at least initially) resolute in her opinion: ““So that’s what you propose? That we quash it, when the majority of us believed it to be the best design? That’s a total betrayal of what this country means, what it stands for”” (21). Defying the expected, stereotypical response of a family member, Claire positions herself in favour of Mo’s design, respecting the principles of the process over the anticipated controversy regarding the designer’s “identity” as a Muslim-American. Sean, by contrast, is outraged by the choice of Mo’s design: ““My mind closed toward Muslims the day they killed my brother”” (88).

But despite his initial outspoken protest against the design (and the designer), Sean develops mixed feelings about the role he is expected to play. As part of group with a shared identity, his feelings toward a Muslim-American winning the competition are straightforward — on behalf of all the families, he is disgusted and outraged. For Sean as an individual, however, the controversy comes as a relief, “exactly the rudder Sean, lately lacking one, needed. Catastrophe, he had learned, summoned his best self. In its absence he faltered” (56). Sean’s post-9/11 life, as a kind of celebrity, contrasts the “herky-jerky improvisation” of his pre-9/11 self (56). However, he often feels like an imposter. Introduced at one rally as “showing the same bravery as those who gave their lives that fateful day,” Sean reddens (86). As “he seamlessly interwove ass-kissing and financial-speak, Sean saw himself too clearly: A no-name worthy of addressing but not worthy of knowing” (129).

At times, Sean is portrayed as representative of the stereotypical knee-jerk reactionary, the type of person who might decide to build a “giant helmet in Manhattan” and call it a memorial (104). Other times, he is portrayed ambiguously, as a displaced and reluctant public figure who is never quite sure who he is, what he stands for, or in which direction he is headed. He is characterized concurrently according to “collective” associations, which frame him as hero, and subjective associations, viewing himself as a failure and a fraud. In framing him according to this dichotomy, Waldman is once again able to foreground themes of ambivalence and uncertainty. In this context, it is fitting that Sean’s most celebrated act of protest, the yanking of a Muslim woman’s headscarf, is framed as an ambiguous, uncertain act. In contrast to the media’s characterization of the event — Sean, the aggressive “Headscarf puller” with a “history of violence against women” — the actual event is part accident/part protest: enraged liberals call

the scarf pulling a “stunt” (153), and those in Sean’s camp claim the act as a “stroke of genius” (153). Neither, however, represents an accurate description of the events as they occurred.

Like Sean and Mo, Claire can be categorized as belonging to an archetypal, post-9/11 group, the widows. Unlike Sean, Claire is less volatile and reactionary; she is chosen for the selection jury precisely because she is the safe (elite) choice: “Claire Burwell, the only family member, was picked because her Ivy League credentials and art collection comported with the other jurors’ sensibilities” (104). From a political standpoint, Claire’s presence represents the public’s need for involvement. As it turns out, she does not epitomize a safe or predictable choice for the jury. She in fact complicates the process by denouncing any decisions based merely on appeasing or placating the public, and resolutely encourages everyone to “keep an open mind” (88). Rather than behave as expected, Claire sees herself as an “outlier,” as one who knows “better than to seek group consolation” (144). Like Mo, she does not automatically align her opinions with the role assigned to her within the dominant narrative.

In spite of her stalwart position at the beginning, Claire is portrayed as progressively multidimensional in terms of both her position on the debate and her understanding of her own identity within that debate. At first, her perspective seems to be based on moral, ethical, and procedural principles, that the chosen design should be accepted based on its suitability, not rejected based on the name or supposed affiliations of its designer. However, while she claims that her position on the issue is the obvious ethical approach, she also demands special recognition for having the “courage” to do so: “Until he failed to express gratitude toward her, she hadn’t realized she was expecting it. He must have seen the *Post* column, must have some inkling of the courage it took to stand up for him” (115). This suggests, even subtly, that Claire views her position not just as the obvious ethical choice, but also as the exceptional, praise-

worthy approach. In defying convention, even as she frames it as the only logical and correct approach, she feels deserving of extra recognition, as though she should be rewarded for doing the right thing.

Soon after this disappointing interaction with Mo, Claire becomes increasingly uncertain about her position: “Claire snapped off the television, not wanting to hear more. . . . Bile burned up Claire’s esophagus, rose in the back of her throat, and stayed there, corroding her ability to speak or swallow” (117). But just as quickly as she begins to doubt, she “regained her senses” (117), admitting that the media were probably stirring things up. When the jury meets to make a final decision, she is completely ambivalent: “Claire had scaled to a longed-for view, only to find it vertiginous. Their backing of Khan, which she had sought so vigorously, now dizzied her” (236).

This brings us to the novel’s most poignant metaphor for the ambivalent identities portrayed throughout the text: Claire’s Russian matryoshka dolls. Claire’s husband bought the dolls as a symbol of their family, each member represented in descending order. But when asked by his son why “Daddy” got to be the biggest doll, Cal ordered three more sets so that each of them could take turns at being the “biggest”:

Claire now could create a matryoshka of just herself—Claire within Claire within Claire within Claire. . . . all these different Claires, who just happened to look alike, seemed to rest inside her, so that every argument, no matter how contradictory, found sympathy. Each time she thought she had reached the last Claire, the true and solid one, she was proved wrong. She couldn’t find her core. (235)

The matryoshka dolls draw attention to the diversity not only within the collective but also within individuals themselves. While catastrophic events might produce new categorical

identities (such as victims, victims' families, survivors, public figures etc.), the individuals tethered to these labels are not all the same, nor do they always hold the same perspective or opinion despite their shared identities. Waldman argues here that in the context of 9/11, the meanings of which were shaped according to identifiable patterns, archetypal storylines, and recognized tropes (good and evil, heroes and villains etc.), it is important to maintain a more nuanced, multitudinous approach to the dilemmas created by these events. Smelser would agree: "In a word, we need to adopt a more complicated view of the contrapuntal relations between the positive and negative and between the heroic and the tragic in the theory of collective trauma" ("Epilogue" 281-82).

Waldman's novel also supports Michelle Balaev's theories on trauma that endorse multiplicity over singularity, and emphasize the importance of context when considering the effects of trauma, how one's interiority and contextual background often play a profound role in determining the impact of the event on a particular individual. Balaev contends that an individual's response to a potentially traumatizing event, based largely on one's past experiences and contextual background, "necessarily oscillates between private and public meanings, between personal and social paradigms" (17). *The Submission* suggests that this oscillation often produces more questions rather than answers, more ambivalence than certainty. Posters of Claire at Sean's rally, for example, in which her face is depicted as a question mark, vividly illustrate this ambiguity. Even Claire later admits that this depiction is not entirely inaccurate: "The question mark on her face, his dubious creative stroke for the rally, hadn't been wrong" (234).

The Submission culminates with the death of Asma. As an illegal immigrant whose husband is killed in 9/11, Asma symbolizes those outside the established and accepted injured collective. Indeed, Asma's plight throughout the novel is to find a way to honour her husband's

death within a culture that questions his very existence: “How could you be dead if you did not exist? . . . They were very sorry about Inam, ‘if indeed he had existed’” (70). U.S. government authorities and organizations only discreetly acknowledge Asma as part of the injured collective; she has not been afforded the same attention or notoriety as the other victims’ families. Thus, Asma serves here as an alternate view to the collective identity; she represents yet another perspective of the events of 9/11, one that has been suppressed or ignored within the dominant public narrative.

But while Asma might initially appear to be on the margins of the injured collective, not belonging to the wounded culture in any official capacity at least, she becomes (late in the novel) representative of an alternate and noticeably stable viewpoint on the issues at hand. That is to say, in contrast to Mo, Sean, and Claire, Asma is anything but ambiguous; she is in fact one of the only characters in the novel who takes a firm and unwavering stand: “‘I think a garden is right,’ she says at the much-anticipated public hearing, ‘because that is what America is — all the people Muslim and non-Muslim, who have come and grown together. How can you pretend we and our traditions are not part of this place? Does my husband matter less than all of your relatives?’” (231). Asma supports Mo’s design, suggesting that rather than try to quash or ignore the various conflicts within the wounded culture, Mo’s Garden honours the different agendas and identities and thus becomes an apt choice. Asma’s support for the Garden, as a memorial that allows for competing agendas within the national collective suggests that “all memorial processes are exercised in disunity, even as they strive to unify memory” (Young, “The Stages” 216).

Asma’s speech solicits a range of responses. Sean, for example, is touched and begins to feel empathy towards the “other side.” Asma’s speech also ironically solicits the “Oprah-effect,”

garnering her instant celebrity status, even a phone call from Oprah’s “people” about a spot on the show. Sadly, however, it ends with Asma’s murder: ““The press! The press! They killed her!”” (257). Rather than use the ending of her novel to moralize over the rights and wrongs of what has transpired, and to vilify those responsible for Asma’s death, Waldman concludes without identifying any clear winners or losers. In a final ironic switchback, Mo’s design is not used for the 9/11 memorial, yet it is commissioned and built anyway as a private garden for a wealthy Muslim overseas; in place of the names of the victims is a transcription of sections of the Quran. What was intended as a site of memory becomes a symbol of irony, a mockery of ideals, and a reflection on the complexity of the situation. There is no tidy or satisfying result. Thus, even at the end of the novel, Waldman remains loyal to the themes of multiplicity, ambivalence, and complexity, and resolutely avoids simple solutions, neat explanations, or desired outcomes.

5.2 The Reluctant Fundamentalist

The Reluctant Fundamentalist addresses many of the same themes raised in *The Submission*, most noticeably the impact of 9/11 on the daily lives of Muslim-Americans. The novel does so with an equally intentional ambiguous and ambivalent tone. Published four years prior to *The Submission*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has garnered a fair amount of scholarship so far and early reviews herald the novel as one of the more carefully-orchestrated and effective post-9/11 novels to date.² The novel quickly became an international bestseller, published in over

² See for example, James Lasdun who describes the novel as a “quietly told, cleverly constructed fable of infatuation and disenchantment with America,” or Karen Olsson who writes

30 languages, adapted for the screen by director Mira Nair in 2012, shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, and named Book of the Decade by *The Guardian* and a Notable Book of the Year by *The New York Times*. Notable scholarship on the novel includes Keeble and Peter Morey. Keeble appreciates the “dual perspective” of Hamid’s novel, which situates the protagonist, Changez, as both an “assimilated young emigrant [] pursuing and achieving his American Dream, and the disillusioned mature Changez describing his dream’s post-9/11 disintegration” (118-19). For Keeble, it is the careful orchestration of this “unique narrative duality” (116) or “dialectical tension” (115) that gives the novel a “sharp critical edge and offers one of the first meaningful representations of ‘otherness’ in the canon of 9/11 fiction” (115). Through Changez, the novel combines the immigrant American experience and all the optimism that that suggests with the post-9/11 mysterious Muslim “Other” (Keeble 115).

In his analysis of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Morey suggests that through its use of the allegorical and dramatic monologue form, the novel effectively “parodies cultural certainties” (136), that is, it “forces readers to think about what lies behind the totalizing categories of East and West, ‘Them and Us’ and so on — those categories continuously insisted upon in ‘war and terror’ discourse” (138). Morey suggests that Hamid’s style, which involves unreliable narration and a dominant tone of ambiguity and ambivalence, has a “deterritorialization” or “destabilizing” effect on readers (136). Hamid’s use of “hyperbole, strategic exoticization, allegorical layering and unreliable narration,” force readers to examine the “space *between* . . . conflicting interests and positions” (Morey 138): “The novel, instead of just describing people’s feelings, could

that Hamid’s novel “is distinguished by its portrayal of Changez’s class aspirations and inner struggle.”

usefully explore the contradictions that animate debates in the world today, making the text a site of struggle for these different versions” (138).

I extend Keeble and Morey’s readings by viewing the uncompromising adherence to ambiguity in Hamid’s novel as an example of the “disputed process” of cultural trauma. In keeping his characters and the novel’s conclusion open-ended, Hamid speaks to the prolonged process of playing, fussing, and battling over meanings inherent to the construction of cultural trauma. My reading appreciates *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (and *The Submission* for that matter) as a “site of struggle” that grapples with Alexander’s categories of “the nature of the pain” and “the nature of the victim” (“Toward” 13-14). Echoing Alexander, Hamid’s novel asks, “What actually happened . . . ?”; “What group of persons was affected by this traumatizing pain? . . . Did a singular and delimited group receive the brunt of the pain, or were several groups involved?” (Alexander, “Toward” 13). In its allegiance to ambiguity, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* thus becomes a valuable site of debate and contestation in which we can question the impact of events, account for the range of injury, and perhaps as Alexander puts it, “identify the existence and source of human suffering and ‘take on board’ some significant responsibility for it” (“Toward” 1). That is to say, in resisting the trend of categorizing 9/11 according to familiar, circumscribed binaries, Hamid encourages readers to reflect on those aspects of 9/11 that might fall through the gaps of the nationally-accepted narrative; his novel asks us to take notice of the troubles, the dilemmas, and the complex nuanced effects of 9/11 that might not otherwise be made known by the dominant “official” readings of the events.

Changez, a young Pakistani man who comes to the United States to experience the “American Dream,” tells his story to a mysterious American in a small café in Lahore, Pakistan. The novel is set up like a dramatic monologue. As the principal speaker, Changez controls the

narration throughout and speaks only to the American in the café. Any inferences, reactions, or responses by the American are likewise expressed through Changez's point of view. Because of this, the reader is never sure of Changez's reliability or trustworthiness; in fact, as Changez's disenchantment with America grows, he becomes increasingly suspicious of the American in the café. Readers are uncertain if Changez is an active threat to the American or a passive storyteller disenchanted by his failed American Dream. Is Changez (and Hamid) merely toying with preconceived assumptions? Nor are readers sure of the American's role: is he an official CIA operative there to eradicate Changez as a threat or is he merely an American tourist? This ambiguity, of course, is precisely the point since it draws attention to the tension between appearance and reality, that is, between our presumed assumptions and concrete, verifiable evidence.

Changez's name, as well as the title of the novel, speaks to the ambiguous duality of the novel. Changez, which means "firm" or "solid" in Parsi, has embedded within it the English word "change," which contrasts of course with its Parsi definition. This subtle maneuver by Hamid disrupts and complicates readers' perception of Changez. Readers cannot be sure whether Changez remains loyal to the United States or whether he returns to his home country of Pakistan radicalized due to his growing distaste for post-9/11 America. Likewise, the word "Fundamentalist" in the novel's title, can be read in two ways: on the one hand, from the perspective of Changez's firm, whose guiding principle was *Focus on the Fundamentals*; on the other hand, the word is defined as a strict allegiance to a set of principles or doctrines. Perhaps because of September 11, the word is now viewed mostly negatively, describing an individual willing to take extreme measures for his or her cause.

The subtext of Changez's narration, which suggests a bitterness towards America and Americans, is evident early on. The novel opens with Changez greeting the American in the café: "Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America. I noticed you were looking for something; more than looking, in fact you seemed to be on a *mission*, and since I am both a native of this city and a speaker of your language, I thought I might offer you my services" (1). Changez then proceeds to explain how he came to identify the man as American: "it was your *bearing* that allowed me to identify you, and I do not mean that as an insult, for I see your face has hardened, but merely as an observation" (2). The inherent tension in this opening passage is immediately apparent. Changez introduces himself as both a "lover of America" who speaks the language *and* as "bearded," read by Changez as a presumed threat to the American. Likewise, the American is characterized as deliberately ambiguous; he is characterized as a casual stranger yet he is "more than looking, on a "mission," and perhaps in need of Changez's help. Whether they know of each other, are looking for each other, or are in fact hostile towards each other is uncertain, and their relationship throughout the novel remains precarious.

As Hamid himself explains in an interview about the novel:

The narration . . . is deliberately stylised and that creates a certain tension between the American who you never hear speak and Changez, who describes him. The resulting tension generates many possibilities. Is Changez a terrorist who is about to kill this American? Is the American a CIA operative who has come to take out Changez? Is the American a rather bemused tourist who is wondering why the hell this Pakistani guy is talking for three hours? Is Changez just a loon, a lonely and slightly nutty character who has bumped into somebody and is

monomaniacally telling him his life story? The doubt in this interaction and the tension generated between this American and Pakistani guy begins to suggest some of the frictions of our time. (qtd. in Yaqin 46).

The tension to which Hamid refers is evident throughout; Changez's narration is sometimes delivered as straightforward, honest story-telling and other times fuelled by sardonic commentary. Because of this, Morey calls the novel a "hoax confessional" (136), a narrative style that effectively toys with readers' presumptions, drawing attention to judgment-based reactions towards perceived threats and new found post-9/11 scapegoating. As Hamid himself says, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is "not an exercise in straight-out realism" (qtd. in Singh 155). Instead, it uses a stylised narrative that plays with concepts of appearance versus reality: "You have to enter the process of determining what is real for you, what is not real. . . . What is . . . interesting is to engage the reader in the process of making a decision that carries moral weight for themselves, and coming to realize as the novel progresses that they had made certain moral decisions and thus are being presented with their reading" (Hamid qtd. in Singh 156). Here, Hamid deliberately characterizes Changez as ambivalent to call attention to the way in which many people after the attacks were scapegoated as potential threats. Hamid in a sense corners readers into having to examine their own moral judgments towards Changez that might have formed (without concrete evidence) as the story develops.

Changez's experience in America begins when he is accepted at Princeton. He subsequently completes a degree at the top of his class, falls in love with an American writer named Erica (perhaps a pun on Am-erica), and is hired during an exclusive selection process by an elite New York consulting firm, Underwood Samson. Changez is living out the dream of many American immigrants, and the novel, as it progresses, becomes a fairly simple story about

the disenchantment of this dream, particularly for an American immigrant living in a post-9/11 world. At first, everything seems to go as planned. When Changez arrives at Princeton, he compares his first impressions of the place to a Hollywood film. After landing a job in New York, the city feels immediately welcoming: “I was, in four and a half years, never an American; I was *immediately* a New Yorker” (33). Later, riding the subway dressed in “a starched white kurta of delicately worked cotton over a pair of jeans,” Changez feels completely at ease:

It was a testament to the open-mindedness and — that overused word — *cosmopolitan* nature of New York in those days that I felt completely comfortable on the subway in this attire. . . . The area — with its charming bistros, exclusive shops, and attractive women in short skirts walking tiny dogs — felt surprisingly familiar, although I had never been there before; I realized later that I owed my sense of familiarity to the many films that had used it as a setting. (48-49)

It is worth noting that Changez’s positive feelings towards America, and to New York in particular, are largely based on the romanticized perspective of New York in film. The familiarity he feels with the city is based on a highly-stylized, explicitly-managed rendering of the city and its people. Riding the success of his own American Dream-come-true, Changez, for the moment, is happy.

As the novel continues, Changez experiences minor episodes of what he calls a “typically *American* undercurrent of condescension” (55). He begins to feel the seeds of a growing disenchantment with his adopted country and with his new identification. This becomes particularly palpable on a business trip to Manila; here he becomes increasingly “disoriented” (66), frustrated by the “undisguised hostility” (66) directed at him and his colleagues by one of the locals. Suddenly, in this context, outside of the United States, his American colleague

appears completely different: “I looked at him — at his fair hair and light eyes and, most of all, his oblivious immersion in the minutiae of our work — and thought, you are so *foreign*. I felt in that moment much closer to the Filipino driver than to him; I felt I was play-acting when in reality I ought to be making my way home, like the people on the street outside” (67). These mounting feelings of disillusionment towards the United States swell leading to the climax of the novel: his response to watching the events of September 11, 2001 on television.

In Manila at the time, Changez begins to watch what he first assumes to be a movie: “as I continued to watch, I realized it was not fiction but news. I stared as one — and then the other — of the twin towers of New York’s World Trade Center collapsed. And then I *smiled*. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased” (72). Occurring at just about the half way point in the novel, Changez discloses his response to the American in the café, who by now shows evidence of “disgust” (72). Changez explains that his pleasure was not directed at the victims of the attack, but rather, he was “caught up in the *symbolism* of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees” (73). But, in keeping with his ambivalent attitude towards the United States, which cannot be defined as either fully negative or fully positive, he is also the first to acknowledge the incredulity of his reaction: “So when I tell you I was pleased at the slaughter of thousands of innocents, I do so with a profound sense of perplexity” (73). His choice of the phrase, “slaughter of thousands of innocents,” is interesting however since it denotes a biblical reference to Herod’s infanticide. There is a deliberate duality going on here, intended to complicate Changez’s response.

After September 11, Changez’s world begins to shift. He is strip-searched at the airport, glared at on the airplane, and separated from his colleagues at immigration. Feeling guilty by association, both Mo and Changez overcompensate in their reactions, becoming overly self-

conscious of their otherwise normal behaviour. Like Mo, Changez becomes increasingly annoyed by the way the aftermath of the events are handled: “Your country’s flag invaded New York. . . . stickers of flags adorned windshields and windows; large flags fluttered from buildings. They all seemed to proclaim: *We are America* — not New York, which, in my opinion, means something quite different — *the mightiest civilization the world has ever known; you have slighted us; beware our wrath*” (79). This antipathy towards the United States after the attacks coupled with the way in which he is treated, result in what Changez characterizes as the “impending destruction of my personal American Dream” (93). He reflects back to the life he was trying to create in the United States with disbelief and once his “blindness” (93) are removed, he is “dazzled and rendered immobile by the sudden broadening of [his] arc of vision” (145): “I had changed; I was looking about me with the eyes of a foreigner, and not just any foreigner, but that particular type of entitled and unsympathetic American who so annoyed me” (124). Frustrated, Changez, like Mo, grows a beard. His growing anger coupled with his ambiguous relationship to the American in the café increases Changez’s status as an unreliable narrator.

As the novel comes to a close, Changez’s animosity towards post-9/11 America, no longer couched in pleasantries, is tangible:

I would like to claim that my final days in New York passed in a state of enlightened calm; nothing could be further from the truth. I was an incoherent and emotional madman, flying off into rages and sinking into depressions. . . .

Affronts were everywhere; the rhetoric emerging from your country at that moment in history — not just from the government, but from the media and supposedly critical journalists as well — provided a ready and constant fuel for my anger. (167)

Yet even though readers might arguably have a fair amount of circumstantial evidence with which to judge Changez, Hamid maintains his commitment to ambiguity and uncertainty. In the final scene at the gates of a hotel, Changez calmly bids farewell to the American: “I know you have found some of my views offensive; I hope you will not resist my attempt to shake you by the hand. But why are you reaching into your jacket, sir? I detect a glint of metal. Given that you and I are now bound by a certain shared intimacy, I trust it is from the holder of your business cards” (184). Whether Changez faces a possible attack or more parting pleasantries remains unclear. Hamid leaves the ending of his novel open; readers are left unsure of Changez’s loyalties and perhaps better able to assess their own circumstantial judgments and discriminations. As Hamid himself explains, “there is a degree of individuality to the reading that gives meaning to the reader. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is read differently by different readers, and so that’s why I think it’s a rich space” (qtd. in Singh 156). As such, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, in foregrounding ambiguity and rejecting certainty, foregrounds post-9/11 prejudices and assumptions and questions the tension between appearances and realities.

According to Smelser, “the very effort to establish a cultural trauma is a disputed process, as are debates and conflicts over ‘preferred defenses’” (“Psychological” 52). These “preferred defenses,” argues Smelser, can be complex and divisive and often involve “finger-pointing, mutual blame, and demonization” (“Psychological” 52). The disputed process in the formation of cultural trauma often involves scapegoating, a feature of what Kenneth Thompson calls moral panic. As Smelser explains, “when these conflictual consequences appear on the scene, they themselves become potential sources of trauma” (“Psychological” 52). This projection of responsibility onto members of a group broadly linked but not in any way responsible for the events represents a significant part of the cultural trauma formation process. In his 1998 book,

Moral Panics, in which he examines, among other issues, the social anxiety in the UK surrounding muggings, Thompson contends that when experiencing social anxiety, many people direct “their hostility against ‘outsiders,’ immigrants and ‘alien’ influences. . . . The alien forces became the ‘folk devil’ or scapegoat, the bearer of all social anxieties” (68). Muslim Americans became representative en masse of alien influences, potential threats, and thus, the bearers of all social anxiety. Within this context, new injuries arising from past events might form. Thus, in this case, the Muslim-American community after 9/11 may have begun their own process of articulating, examining, and reexamining the significance of the attacks, which might then give rise to certain contestations and disputes within that community as well.

Novels such as *The Submission* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* that draw attention to the complex and wide-reaching impact of 9/11 provide credence to Smelser’s claim that “Ambivalence lends strength to the assertion of indelibility” (“Psychological” 54). These novels foreground ambivalence and ambiguity in terms of both their subject matter and their character development in order to emphasize the nuanced complexity of September 11 and its reverberations in the community. In so doing, they can be read as products of carrier groups that not only articulate relevant conflicts and disputes regarding the meaning and impact of events, but which also examine this impact as a potential secondary source of trauma for sub-communities within the collective. These novels can be read two ways: as part of the disputed process in the effort to establish 9/11 as cultural trauma for Americans as a whole *and* as part of the process to claim a secondary (related yet independent) cultural trauma for Muslim-Americans. Interestingly, Hamid did not expect his novel to do well in the United States, certainly not compared to the U.K. He says, “Funnily enough, in the UK people were more critical of the book’s politics and said that they were one-sided, whereas in America people

seemed much more willing on the one hand to say the book is very biased, this character is partial and so on, but still accept that this is perhaps what we want from a novel. We want to hear different points of views” (Hamid qtd. in Yaqin 47). This is drastically different from the earlier reception of alternate points of view which were ignored, quashed, or vilified. However, as it follows, such multiple, and sometimes conflicted, approaches to 9/11 reaffirm its status as cultural trauma.

**Chapter 6: *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and
The Sorrows of an American: Contesting 9/11 as Cultural Trauma**

Telling always binds one thing to another. We want a coherent world, not one in bits and pieces.

Siri Hustvedt, *The Sorrows of an American*

Not all novelists agree that the attacks on September 11 should be approached as cultural trauma. The objective of this chapter is to explore the ways in which Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Siri Hustvedt's *The Sorrows of an American* resist classifying the events of 9/11 as cultural trauma. While both novels do indeed appreciate the attacks as traumatizing, they do so from a theoretical position of psychological trauma. These novels do not deny the traumatic impact of the attacks, but they reframe it as individual and psychological as opposed to cultural and sociological. By structuring their novels in such a way, Foer and Hustvedt circumvent an approach that conceptualizes September 11 as a collective tragedy. While Foer and Hustvedt do recognize the collective impact of events such as 9/11, one of their principal aims is to question the initial *dominant* framing of the events as cultural trauma.

As Neil J. Smelser explains, carrier groups who contemplate the impact of historical events often disagree over claims to cultural trauma, and this can include contestation over whether events should be defined as cultural trauma. According to Smelser, three types of contestation can occur: 1) contestation over interpretation, "how its meaning should be regarded"; 2) affective contestation, "what kinds of feelings — pride, neutrality, rage, guilt — it should arouse"; and 3) historical contestation — "whether a [cultural] trauma occurred" ("Psychological" 38). As I demonstrate in chapters 4 and 5, *The Submission*, *The Reluctant*

Fundamentalist, as well as some of the excerpts in *110 Stories: New York Writes After 9/11* represent “contestations over interpretation” and “affective contestations.” They challenge a fixed interpretation of 9/11 and highlight instead the wide-reaching, diverse, and sometimes ambiguous impact of the events. They resist the notion of a singular response to the events, opting instead for a multitudinous approach that questions mainstream interpretations and challenges the supposed unity of emotional reactions. In this chapter, I examine *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The Sorrows of an American* according to Smelser’s third type of contestation, as examples of historical contestation, that is, as disputes over whether the attacks should be described and framed in terms of their cultural, as opposed to individual, injuries. Yet ironically, if we accept Jeffrey C. Alexander and Smelser’s definition of cultural trauma that understands it as an ongoing process that involves disputes and contestations over meaning, a paradox emerges: even as these novels seek to reframe 9/11 as an individually traumatic event, they participate in its classification as cultural trauma.

In this chapter, I explore both the value and risk in Foer and Hustvedt’s approach. While the attacks on 9/11 were certainly traumatic for some survivors, eye-witnesses, and family members, what purpose does it serve to focus primarily on their psychological impact? Are there inherent risks in such an approach? In order to tackle these questions, this chapter examines the pros and cons of approaching historical events in terms of their psychologically traumatic impact. On the one hand, fiction like this plays a vital role in alerting others to the plight of survivors or victims. As Michael Rothberg puts it, “[psychological] trauma theory can provide necessary attention both to how the experience of trauma isolates the victim and to how it can create the grounds for new forms of community” (“There” 148). Such an approach defends against the potential desensitizing effects of strategies that seek to frame the events as

collectively injurious. On the other hand, in foregrounding the psychological impact of historical events and at the same time ignoring the cultural implications, Foer and Hustvedt risk overemphasizing the notion of victimization, thus contributing to a depoliticization of 9/11. This approach has the potential of endorsing the trope of innocence and victimization, which then might limit and impede discussions about U.S. foreign policy and other socio-political controversies and dilemmas. As Rothberg says, “[Psychological] [t]rauma theory helps make us attentive to suffering and thus, in principle, to justice and responsibility, but it needs to be supplemented by a positive vision of social and political transformation” (“There” 156). Ironically, while a narrow focus on events as psychological trauma might have a depoliticizing effect, the same could be said about cultural trauma. As outlined in chapter three, accusations of this kind have since been directed at the Bush administration and the American mainstream news media for their hasty classification of 9/11 as cultural trauma.¹ This perspective, however, is reliant upon a narrow definition of cultural trauma, and it does not take into account Alexander and Smelser’s understanding of it as an ongoing process of contestation and dispute.

Despite their obvious differences, Foer and Hustvedt’s novels share much in common: both focus on the impact of psychological trauma (addressing clinical issues such as dissociation, muteness, and other symptoms of PTSD); both value verbal and narrative reconstruction as a tool through which to work through one’s trauma; both contain a quest or a mystery as a driving plot device; and both novels conclude without sought-after answers, settling instead for unexpected outcomes. In addition, these novels rely on, and appear to endorse, what Michelle Balaev describes as “popular” or “traditional” approaches to psychological trauma (6), as established by

¹ See for example Melvin J. Dubnick, Dorothy F. Olshfski, and Kathe Callahan (10) and Richard Jackson (28).

Sigmund Freud, Josef Breuer, Pierre Janet, Judith Herman, and Cathy Caruth. They align for the most part with theories that understand traumatic experiences as elusive and beyond the grasp of normal cognitive processing, as a “dissociated entity that orbits consciousness, or as an inherently wordless event that creates an unknowable memory or mental illness” (Balaev xiv). Yet both novels, as this chapter demonstrates, also foreground a diversity of responses to traumatic experiences, which supports Balaev’s position regarding the important relationship between trauma and context, how “the difficulty of speaking about a traumatic experience is not necessarily due to the intrinsic quality of trauma to defy all representation, but due to variable factors, including individual, social, and cultural factors that influence the remembrance and narration of experience” (Balaev 10).

Concurrent to dominant models of psychological trauma, characters in these novels become fixated on their past experiences, unable to work through their challenges without some kind of narrative reconstructive therapy (clinical or otherwise). The notion of becoming “stuck,” as it were, locked in a liminal state by past events, is thematically present in both novels. Pursuant to this approach, both novels affirm the idea that effective mourning or working through one’s trauma requires narrative reconstruction, transformative movement, and progressive action. While both novels emphasize that healing is never complete nor perfect, these stories value language, narration, and verbal reconstruction as effective catalysts to begin the process. They support Herman’s concept of the “restorative power of truth-telling,” yet understand that the “goal of recounting the trauma story is integration, not exorcism” (Herman 181).

In many ways, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The Sorrows of an American* represent what Laurie Vickroy defines as trauma narratives: “personalized responses to this

century's emerging awareness of the catastrophic effects of wars, poverty, colonization, and domestic abuse on the individual psyche" (x). These novels are not only concerned with the painful aspects of 9/11; they allude to a number of historical events such as the bombing at Dresden and Hiroshima (Foer) and World War II and the Depression (Hustvedt), taking as their focus the psychological impact of these events on individual survivors. As Vickroy explains, by "not losing connection with the fearful and painful aspects" of historical events, trauma narratives attempt to translate the experience of individuals for a wider readership (xi). Trauma narratives therefore pose a "number of thought-provoking questions and dilemmas for writers and readers, ranging from the potentially ethical function of literature, to reconsidering our cultural assumptions about identity, relationality, and intentionality, to what contingencies determine how or if individuals survive the devastations causing trauma" (Vickroy ix).

Dominick LaCapra calls the effects of writing that allows readers to become "responsive to the traumatic experience of others" empathic unsettlement (41). These stories are unsettling enough to invoke ethical responsibility but not enough to cause the "appropriation of [the victim's] experience" (LaCapra 41). That is, they do not become a catalyst for secondary trauma, but rather pose "a barrier to closure in discourse and place . . . in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance" (LaCapra 41-42). In this way, trauma narratives, as the discourse of empathic unsettlement, encourage a cathartic working through of traumatic events that counters the immobilizing symptoms of acting out, aspects analogous to Sigmund Freud's concepts of "mourning" and "melancholia."² As LaCapra puts it, "Working through trauma involves the effort to articulate or

² For more on Freud's concepts of mourning and melancholia, see Freud's seminal essay on the subject, "Mourning and Melancholia."

rearticulate affect and representation in a manner than may never transcend, but may to some viable extent counteract, a reenactment, or acting out, of that disabling dissociation” (42). As we will see in this chapter, both novels recognize the value of LaCapra’s (and Freud’s) notion of working through (mourning) as opposed to acting out (melancholia), and encourage narration and verbal abreaction as a meaningful way to begin the healing process.

6.1 *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

As stated, Foer’s novel frames the attacks on September 11 as well as other disturbing historical events as catalytic episodes for psychological trauma. Rather than foreground the cultural impact of historical events, Foer highlights the psychological pain and suffering these events cause individual victims. As Arin Keeble notes, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is “deeply preoccupied with [its] protagonist’s experiences with trauma” (40). This is most evident in Foer’s choice of characters: Oskar, the child-protagonist who lost his father in World Trade Center attacks, and his two grandparents, both of whom struggle in different ways as they try to come to terms with traumatic experiences during World War II. All of these characters struggle to cope with their individual traumas and aim to work through their pain and fear in various ways, some more successfully than others. While all three respond to their trauma in different ways, they are all characterized as being in transitional states, disrupted by their experiences and caught in an in-between realm of before and after.

This tone of transition, or in-between-ness, pervades the entire novel. It is apparent in the novel’s characterization of trauma victims, as well as in the choice of photographs Foer incorporates throughout the text. For most of the novel, Oskar and his grandparents are “stuck” in a liminal state of grief. Similarly, many of the photographs reproduced in the novel depict

moments of transition and suspension, the most poignant being a photograph from September 11, in which a man is pictured falling to his death from one of the World Trade Center buildings. Foer deliberately uses this photograph, which incidentally was one of the only images censored by the media, to restore focus on the individual in a tragedy defined by its collective impact. As Foer himself states, “September 11 was the most visually documented event in human history. When we think of those events, we remember certain images, planes going into the buildings, people falling, the towers collapsing. That's how we experience it; that's how we remember it” (Foer qtd. in Mudge). Yet with the exception of the photograph of the falling man, none of the images in the novel has anything directly to do with 9/11. In choosing to publish the image of the falling man, and by excluding all other images that by now have become iconic (cultural) representations of September 11, Foer reframes the events as individually injurious — the attacks killed *that* man and left *this* boy without a father. The photographs in the novel, as well as the characterization of Oskar and his grandparents, speak to the liminality of psychological trauma, to the in-between-ness felt by victims as they try to manage their futures while burdened by the weights of the past. How individuals negotiate this transition becomes a chief concern in Foer’s novel.

Both critically and popularly, Foer’s novel represents one of the more successful, even canonical post-9/11 novels to date. In 2011, the novel was adapted into a feature film starring Tom Hanks and Sandra Bullock and went on to receive two Academy Award nominations, including one for Best Picture. Arguably, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* fulfills what one might expect to find in a “9/11 novel”: it focuses chiefly on the events and their impact, explores issues of grief and trauma from the perspective of a victim’s family member, appreciates the therapeutic value of narrative reconstruction of traumatizing events (and alternatively, draws

attention to the paralyzing effects when this does not occur), understands healing as an ongoing process not a product, and addresses some of the more troubling aspects of that day, drawing attention to the people who jumped to their deaths to escape the burning towers.

Many critics consider Foer's novel a significant contribution to the post-9/11 fiction genre. Kristiaan Versluys claims that, "In no other novel on 9/11 is the relation between trauma and language as explicitly articulated" (79). Roger Luckhurst suggests that *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* "show[s] every sign of becoming canonical" (87). Notable academic scholarship on the novel include an essay by Mitchum Huehls, who, in comparing it to Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*, argues that both texts explore how victims renegotiate their experience of events to "prevent the skewed time of trauma from dominating their interactions with the world" (42). Keeble argues that Foer's novel illustrates "an uncertainty and tentativeness" to understanding history (41). He reads Foer's novel as an "explicit struggle to find appropriate tools or forms to represent 9/11," evident in the novel's use of a range of aesthetic elements (photographs, diagrams, and other visual/narrative strategies) (41). Similarly, Versluys argues that these "disruptions in the texture of the text," as he calls them, "serve to underscore the incommunicability of experiences of extremity" (81). He reads Foer's text as a "narrative of grief" (80) that explores the anxiety between trauma and language (79). The novel thus depicts the enduring struggle for victims of psychological trauma, that is, the tension between the will to deny or banish the experience from memory and the need to proclaim the experience aloud (Versluys 79-80).³ By tracing the ways in which Foer frames 9/11 as

³ Versluys relies here on the work of Judith Herman who says, "The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma" (Herman 1). Related to this is Dori Laub's notion of a survivor's

psychologically (as opposed to culturally) traumatic, my analysis of the novel aligns with and extends Versluys's thesis regarding the relationship between trauma and language. While Versluys considers the way in which the novel "relates pain to the impossibility of utterance," that is how traumatizing events become "resistant to articulation" (80), I read this strategy (that foregrounds symptoms of psychological trauma) as an effort to reconceptualize 9/11 as individually injurious.

Indeed, the novel demonstrates a keen interest in individualizing and personalizing historical events. This is particularly evident when Oskar plays for his class at school a tape-recorded testimony from a survivor at Hiroshima. In it, the interviewer presses the witness for testimony that corresponds to the dominant narrative around the Hiroshima bombing:

INTERVIEWER. Did you see the mushroom cloud?

TOMOYASU. No, I didn't see the cloud.

INTERVIEWER. You didn't see the mushroom cloud?

TOMOYASU. I didn't see the mushroom cloud. I was trying to find Masako.

INTERVIEWER. But the cloud spread over the city?

TOMOYASU. I was trying to find her. (188)

"ceaseless struggle": "There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life. . . . Yet no amount of telling seems to do justice to his inner compulsion. . . . The pressure thus continues unremittingly, and if words are not trustworthy or adequate, the life that is chosen can become the vehicle by which the struggle to tell continues" (Laub 63).

Then, when asked by the interviewer if she can describe the black rain, Tomoyasu ignores the question and continues detailing her frantic search for her daughter (188). As this example suggests, trauma-inducing historical events do not necessarily read the same for both the individual and the culture at large. The bombing of Hiroshima, memorialized in historical accounts with words like “mushroom cloud” or “black rain,” is characterized here as a subjective rather than collective event. In this context, the bombing of Hiroshima is not an event for history books, but is the story about a mother searching for her dying daughter. Through Tomoyasu’s testimony, Foer articulates the value of taking a more subjective approach to historical events. When told that it must be hard for her speak about her experience, Tomoyasu responds: “When I heard that your organization was recording testimonies, I knew I had to come. She died in my arms, saying ‘I don’t want to die.’ That is what death is like. 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” (189). Tomoyasu’s testimony alludes to the universality of grief, that regardless of the political circumstances surrounding death, grief is a shared experience. Ideally, for Tomoyasu, the individualization of suffering encourages empathy and peace.

The choice of a child protagonist represents another way the novel aims to redefine 9/11 as an individual rather than collective trauma. As a young boy who wears the “heavy boots” of grief (2), who “wants to know everything” (2), and who constantly and tirelessly invents new ideas and products, Oskar is a precocious and audacious protagonist. Just as a 9-year old might not respond to the attacks through their historical or political context, Foer is able to use Oskar to some extent to explore the impact of the events free from social, cultural, historical, and political implications. In this way, the attacks on September 11 are characterized more by their emotional,

affective impact than anything else. They are understood through feelings of loss, grief, pain, fear, and regret, that is, through psychological as opposed to sociological terms. This perspective, however, does depend upon a common (perhaps sometimes erroneous) perception that children operate outside of culture. In his choice of a child protagonist, Foer relies upon these assumptions. When considered from the point of view of a child, September 11 resonates solely as an impetus of suffering, independent from cultural assumptions, historical complexities, and political controversies.

On the one hand, considered within the context of 9/11, which was heavily mediated by mainstream news sources and repeatedly characterized as a cultural tragedy, this strategy has some value. Ideally, re-conceptualizing historical events according to their emotional, psychological impact encourages readers (or viewers) to remain cognizant and sensitive to the suffering of individual victims. As Rothberg explains, “contemporary trauma studies appears to be well equipped to provide understanding of the volatile dynamics of intersecting experiences of suffering” (“There” 148). This is, of course, Tomoyasu’s motivating wish and the reason behind the sharing of her testimony. On the other hand, however, in choosing a child-protagonist, Foer risks depoliticizing 9/11, detaching it from larger debates over complicity and responsibility, which might then cause a narrowing rather than a broadening of understanding. For as Rothberg goes on to explain, there are risks in approaching historical events through psychological trauma theory: “Most disturbing would be the possibility that a focus on [psychological] trauma solely as a structure of reception might . . . actually end up unwittingly reinforcing the repressive liberal-conservative consensus in the United States that attempting to explain the events amounts to explaining them away or excusing them” (“There” 151).

Rothberg quotes Judith Butler, who warns, “The cry that ‘there is no excuse for September 11’ has become a means by which to stifle any serious public discussion of how U.S. foreign policy has helped to create a world in which such acts of terror are possible” (Butler 178). From Oskar’s perspective as a child, there is of course “no excuse for September 11”; when considered through the eyes of a child who lost his father in the attacks, the events become inexcusable, unexplainable acts of violence. For Butler, a frame of violence that positions the U.S. “exclusively as the sudden and indisputable victim of violence” works to “preclude certain kinds of questions, certain kinds of historical inquiries, and to function as a moral justification for retaliation” (Butler 179). If Foer’s choice of a child protagonist is a way to approach 9/11 from a primarily emotional and more subjective vantage point, does he contribute to this kind of limiting frame of violence? On the one hand, yes. The choice of a child-protagonist to some extent excuses Foer from engaging with political issues.

However, Foer’s characterization of Oskar as a child is also ambiguous. That is to say, Oskar is an atypical 9-year old. In fact, in many ways, he does not think or behave like a stereotypical child at all: he is a keen inventor with an unbounded imagination; he has complex ideas; he roams through New York with little supervision (we think); and is often misunderstood and rejected by peers his own age. Oskar is at times unlikeable and exasperating even for readers. In a telling review of the novel for the *New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani writes, “Oskar Schell . . . should be a highly sympathetic character: a clever, sensitive boy, grief-stricken over his father’s death, neglected by his self-absorbed mother, and beset by insomnia, depression and panic attacks. Unfortunately, he comes across as an entirely synthetic creation. . . . with an exasperating precocity” (“A Boy’s”). My point is, Foer complicates things by characterizing Oskar as somewhat annoying and unworthy of sympathy, thus making him highly ambiguous in

the role. It may well be that in depicting Oskar as a precocious child, Foer is acknowledging the problems with the tired trope of America as an innocent child.

Right from the beginning of the novel, however, it is clear that Oskar is profoundly traumatized by 9/11 and the novel as a whole alludes to symptomatic aspects of psychological trauma, including panic, depression, paranoia, self-harm (bruises), isolation, muteness, survivor's guilt etc. Deeply affected by the events of 9/11 and the death of his father, Oskar spends the first year after the attacks navigating the city in search of answers. He speaks about having an "extremely difficult time doing certain things, like taking showers, for some reason, and getting into elevators, obviously" (36); he becomes easily panicked by "suspension bridges, germs, airplanes, fireworks, Arab people on the subway (even though I'm not racist)" (36). He gives himself bruises and speaks of "zipping [himself] all the way into the sleeping bag of myself" (37). Even his imaginary inventions betray deep wounds: "I invented a special drain that would be underneath every pillow in New York. . . . Whenever people cried themselves to sleep, the tears would all go the same place . . . the Reservoir of Tears" (38).

Yet Oskar's quest throughout the novel, even though it does not end as he hopes, becomes emblematic of a progressive and proactive "working through," rooted in Freudian theories of psychological trauma and the "talking cure." Contemplating his planned journey, Oskar thinks, "Even if it was relatively insignificant, it was something, and I needed to do something, like sharks, who die if they don't swim" (87). Rather than remain in a state of transition, Oskar moves forward. Despite this forward movement failing to yield the answers Oskar is seeking, it is the movement not the conclusion that is significant here. Oskar's journey however is not easy and there is potential throughout the novel for Oskar to remain in a liminal state of grief. The potential for this kind of emotional paralysis is best symbolized in Oskar's

choice not to tell his mother, or anyone else for that matter, about his father's recorded telephone messages on the morning of September 11, which Oskar keeps hidden in his room. Oskar recalls being present for one of his father's frantic phone calls, yet is overcome by fear, frozen as it were, unable to pick up the phone and speak to his father in person. Oskar's guilt over this and his repetitive listening to these recordings is analogous to a kind of looping, an "acting out."

It is not until the end of the novel when he tells Mr. Black and his mother about the tapes that Oskar begins to experience the beginnings of some kind of catharsis. This testimonial process, which marks the end of his journey to find the missing lock, is also deeply mournful and regretful: "I found the lock. . . . I found it and now I can't look for it. . . . Looking for it let me stay close to him for a little while longer" (302-04). While Oskar at the end of the novel begins to work through his grief, he remains aware of the paradox of suffering, that it can seem so simple yet profoundly complex: "I believe that things are extremely complicated, and her looking over me was as complicated as anything could ever be. But it was also incredibly simple. In my only life, she was my mom, and I was her son" (324).

Contrasting Oskar is his grandfather, an individual forever caught in an in-between space, never fully able to move forward beyond his traumatic experience. Unable to effectively mourn the death of his lover and unborn child during the bombing at Dresden, Oskar's grandfather becomes stuck in the past, condemned to relive his traumatic experience in a pathological (melancholic) rather than mournful way. Unlike Oskar, who talks a great deal, Oskar's grandfather becomes mute. He writes,

I haven't always been silent, I used to talk and talk and talk and talk, I couldn't keep my mouth shut, the silence overtook me like a cancer. . . . the distance that

wedged itself between me and my happiness wasn't the world, it wasn't the bombs or the burning buildings, it was me, my thinking, the cancer of never letting go. (16-17)

In an attempt to communicate more effectively with others, Oskar's grandfather tattoos the words YES and NO on the palm of his left and right hand. Reflecting on this, he writes: "what can I say, it hasn't made life wonderful, it's made life possible, when I rub my hands against each other in the middle of winter I am warming myself with the friction of YES and NO, when I clap my hands I am showing my appreciation through the uniting and parting of YES and NO" (17). His actions symbolically cancel each other out; his YES negates his NO and vice versa – a symbolic ambiguous gesture.

This Yes/No dichotomy symbolized by the tattoos is further emphasized by a set of impossible and increasingly ambiguous rules created to organize his suffering: "Only a few months into our marriage, we started marking off areas in the apartment as 'Nothing Places,' in which one could be assured of complete privacy, we agreed that we never would look at the marked-off zones, that they would be nonexistent territories in the apartment in which one could temporarily cease to exist" (109-10). These spaces of Something or Nothing, however, only increase in number, eventually obscuring over time: "I'd often remember having designated a space as Nothing when she was sure we had agreed that it was Something, our unspoken agreements led to disagreements, to suffering" (111). Trapped in a transitional space between the old and the new, the before and the after, the Something and the Nothing, the Yes and the No, Oskar's grandfather tries to cope by organizing his life according to a set of rules only to suffer from these impossible self-imposed delineations.

While Oskar's grandfather remains imprisoned by his grief, even though he does at times attempt "To ~~mourn~~ try to live" (273), Oskar does not. In placing Oskar's active, forward-moving

quest in contrast to his grandfather's melancholic stasis, the novel alerts us to the vulnerability of transitional spaces if not actively negotiated or contemplated. Again, this aligns theoretically with Freud and Breuer's understanding of psychological neurosis: "It may therefore be said that the ideas which have become pathological have persisted with such freshness and affective strength because they have been denied the normal wearing-away processes by means of abreaction and reproduction in states of uninhibited association" (Freud and Breuer 11). Central to Oskar's movement forward, and to his grandfather's failed attempts at "trying to live," is the role of narrative reenactment and verbal discourse.

Even though he himself is unable to find the words, Oskar's grandfather appreciates the significance of testimony, as he encourages Oskar's grandmother to write her life story: "It was my suggestion, and at the time I thought it was a good one, I thought maybe if she could express herself rather than suffer herself, if she had a way to relieve the burden" (119). The elegiac result, however, is a stack of empty white pages; even though she typed for days, there was no ribbon in the typewriter, her eyes too "crummy" to tell the difference: "[He] remembered, just then and far too late, that years before [he] had pulled the ribbon from the machine, it had been an act of revenge against the typewriter and against [himself], [he'd] pulled it into one long thread, unwinding the negative it held" (124). This speaks of course to Herman's notion of the central dialectic of psychological trauma, the "ceaseless struggle," as Laub calls it, between the will to proclaim and the impossibility of finding the words. Incidentally, Oskar's testimony occurs in the presence of others while his Grandmother's attempt to "express herself" is a solitary activity. As Laub suggests, "it is essential for this narrative that *could not be articulated to be told, to be transmitted, to be heard*" (69). Though I dispute Laub's suggestion that the listener "becomes the [] witness *before* the narrator does" (69), I do think Foer's novel affirms

Laub's understanding of effective testimony as "the encounter and the coming together between the survivor and the listener" (69).

The notion of liminality symbolized by Oskar and his grandfather is further emphasized by the inclusion of photographs throughout the text, most of which have nothing directly to do with the events of September 11. A surprisingly large number of these photographs depict people, places, animals, and objects in or as in-between moments: a flock of birds just as they begin to take flight (166-67); fire escapes on the outside of buildings (Preface); door handles (115, 134, 265) and doorways (92, 198); windows and window frames (103); a pre-folded paper airplane (56), Laurence Olivier as Hamlet, an iconic symbol of indecision and existential contemplation (55); a roller coaster just as it begins its descent (148); a cat falling in mid-air (191); and keys and key holes (53, 303). Of course, another space of transition and suspension is captured in the photograph of a man falling to his death from one of the World Trade Center buildings — a man whom Oskar repeatedly imagines to be his father (59, 62, 205, 327). The liminal quality of these photographs are symbolic of the zeitgeist that quickly evolved after 9/11; the United States was now characterized as being in an unprecedented, transitional space. Time and history, it was often surmised, would now be understood as pre- or post-9/11 — "nothing would ever be the same again." In New York, in the days and weeks following September 11, this prevailing mood of transition was palpable. When few bodies or survivors were found in the rubble, victims were not classified as dead but missing. Furthermore, after a day in which a host of unexpected events occurred in seemingly systematic progression, there was a sense of anxiety (at least as publicized by the media) over the idea of subsequent attacks. The perspective of 9/11

as the “day that changed everything” quickly became one of the most oft-heard clichés to emerge after the events; September 11 defined as the quintessential turning point.⁴

Photographs, of course, arrest a particular action or moment (at least figuratively) into an eternal liminal state and can be seen, in a way, as artifacts of transition. In reality, there exists a before and after to every photograph — the roller coaster slowly ascends before it reaches its tipping point; the flock of birds fly away after they take flight; and the falling man does indeed die seconds after the photograph was taken. We might know these things intellectually, but photographs, especially jarring ones, often impact us on an emotional level, sometimes resulting in an ambiguous, surreal effect. As Jean Baudrillard says, “at the same time as [images] exalt the event, they also take it hostage. They serve to multiply it to infinity and, at the same time, they are a diversion and a neutralization” (27-28). Roland Barthes too was cognizant of these dangers: “taming the Photograph is to generalize, to gregarize, banalize it until it is no longer confronted by any image in relation to which it can mark itself, assert its special characters, its scandal, its madness. . . . when generalized, it completely de-realizes the human world” (118). When broadcast in looping form by the media, the photographs and images of 9/11 might be considered

⁴ Christian Kloeckner, Simone Knewitz, and Sabine Sielke question whether it is indeed correct to consider the events of 9/11 as “the day that changed everything”: “commentators and scholars have critically interrogated this view for a long time and shown that the world post-9/11 is characterized as much by cohesion as by transformation. Thus even if the aftermath of September 11, 2001 initially fostered our sense of having witnessed a radical break with the past, this binary perspective has been proved deceptive” (13). Similarly, Matthew J. Morgan and others question, from various diverse viewpoints, whether September 11, 2001 really “was the day that changed everything” (5).

counter-intuitive, as having a de-contextualizing effect, neutralizing the reality of the situation into something “unreal” or “unbelievable.” Oskar’s grandmother senses this generalizing effect at work: “The same pictures over and over. Planes going into buildings. Bodies falling. . . . Planes going into buildings. Planes going into buildings. Planes going into buildings” (230-31). Susan Sontag described it as a “nightly banality” (*Regarding* 108).

However, Foer’s inclusion of the photograph of a man falling to his death from the World Trade Center, in contrast to the looping broadcast of images of the planes crashing or the towers falling, works to counter this banality. Foer’s choice to include this photograph is intended to shock and disturb, meant to render the events painfully individual. The images of the falling people, in fact, are the only images from that day that show the bodies of people about to die. Perhaps because of this, the images of the falling people became almost immediately taboo. As Miles Orvell explains, out of all the photographs from 9/11, the photographs of the falling people, “dramatize the human dilemma most effectively, they personalize the meaning, they put a face or a least a body, to the human loss that is otherwise unrecognizable; and they offer in the image that long moment (it would take about ten seconds to descend to earth from that height) a representation of human vulnerability” (255). Video footage of these victims appeared on CNN, Fox News, and CBS during the first few hours after the planes’ impact, but was censored almost immediately after these initial broadcasts.⁵

⁵ In *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*, Barbie Zelizer chronicles the video coverage of the falling people in more detail. As she explains, “Both ABC and MSNBC decided not to show it all, with executives at both news organizations wondering ‘whether it was necessary to show people plunging to their death.’ NBC aired an image of one person jumping once and then pulled it, because, in one executive’s view, it was ‘disturbing’” (44).

Photographer Richard Drew took a now-iconic photograph of one man falling headfirst to his death. This image is now simply referred to as “The Falling Man.” Drew’s now famous photograph appeared only once in national newspapers across the country (including the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Washington Post*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and the *New York Times*), the day after September 11. Soon after its publication, these newspapers faced a barrage of public complaints and were “forced to defend themselves against charges that they exploited the man’s death, stripped him of his dignity, invaded his privacy, turned tragedy into leering pornography” (Junod 171). Due to the public backlash, the photograph became at once “impermissible,” a rare taboo in an otherwise relentless deluge of images: “In the most photographed and videotaped day in the history of the world, the images of people jumping were the only images that became, by consensus, taboo — the only images from which Americans were proud to avert their eyes” (Junod 171, 172).

In the decade since, there has been much debate surrounding this photograph and others like it. Even the term “jumpers,” as these victims are often called, is laden with controversy since the term suggests agency or suicide, when in actuality death was imminent and inevitable.⁶ Due to the backlash the photographs provoked, these images were swiftly relegated to the “internet underbelly,” as Tom Junod tells us, “where they became the provenance of the shock sites that also traffic in the autopsy photos of Nicole Brown Simpson and the videotape of Daniel Pearl’s execution, and where it is impossible to look at them without the attendant feelings of shame and

⁶ As Junod explains, if one calls the New York Medical Examiner’s Office to ask how many people jumped from the World Trade Center buildings, “one does not get an answer but an admonition: ‘We don’t like to say they jumped. They didn’t jump. Nobody jumped. They were forced out, or blown out’” (173).

guilt” (172). Ironically, as Junod explains, “In a nation of voyeurs, the desire to face the most disturbing aspects of our most disturbing day was somehow ascribed to voyeurism, as though the jumpers’ experience, instead of being central to the horror, was tangential to it, a sideshow best forgotten” (172). But of course it was no sideshow; according to estimates, at least two hundred people died by jumping which accounts for approximately seven or eight percent of those who died in New York on September 11, 2001 (Junod 173).

On the one hand, images of the falling people, rendered taboo by the media almost immediately, contrasts the media’s representation of 9/11 that broadcast photos and video of the planes hitting the building in a looping, cyclical manner. Ironically, however, even as he seeks to individualize 9/11 by publishing a photograph of this man, Foer risks reducing this image to a similar fate as the looping images of the planes crashing into the buildings. I wonder, considering that the photograph is reprinted in the novel not once but 17 times and considering how many times the novel itself has been reprinted since 2005, does Foer risk neutralizing the impact of this photograph, rendering it banal? I was initially shocked and disturbed by the photograph on my first reading of the novel, but soon grew “used to” the image as I flipped through the novel a second and third time. But perhaps Foer is aware of the dual tendency of these kinds of images of atrocity, that they can be at once a form of memorialisation, an important revisiting of some of the more troublesome aspects of 9/11 *and* an exploitation of traumatizing experiences, the publication of which risks generalizing the severity of the experience? As Laura Frost suggests, “Foer expresses longing for the ‘still time’ of the photograph as a form of memorialisation; however, his novel also radically questions photograph’s efficacy to resolve the trauma of the falling people” (185).

Like Frost, I think Foer is aware of the benefits and risks of photography and its role in representing, documenting, and understanding atrocity. I also think Foer argues for the necessity of “moving on” from these harrowing moments. As Frost explains, “Oskar’s repeated returns to the picture of the falling man do not help him to comprehend what happened to his father. . . . Moreover, the frozen quality of the photographs — the way in which they capture discontinuous time — prevents access to information outside that time frame, beyond ‘still life’” (190). When Oskar’s quest is complete (and despite not finding the answer he is looking for), he realizes the dangers of fixating on a particular moment, recognizing that looking too long or too close at these arresting images blurs one’s perspective: “I started thinking about the pixels in the image of the falling body, and how the closer you looked, the less you could see” (293). Oskar realizes that these photographs paradoxically bring one “incredibly close” to the events yet extremely far from reality. The flip-book at the end of the novel that shows the man ascending in reverse order up the side of the building becomes a mournful farewell to this transitional state, an unfulfilled yet strangely comforting fantasy for Oskar as he imagines his father “floating up through the sky” (325). Thus, considered broadly, the novel affirms an approach to historical events that foregrounds subjective experience and pays attention to the suffering of individuals, yet it also appreciates the notion of moving on, that holding attention too long in the details can impair our ability to cope.

6.2 *The Sorrows of An American*

In contrast to Foer’s novel, *The Sorrows of an American* has received little popular or scholarly attention so far and is only tangentially concerned with 9/11. In the only significant scholarship to date, Corinna Sophie Reipen argues that the novel as a whole is “concerned with

the gaps in stories and in particular with holes in family histories” (198), how the “ghosts of the past continue to occupy the minds of the living” (195). While thematically the novel centres on issues of individual trauma, psychoanalysis, and narrative catharsis, it pays little attention to the events of September 11. Some might even contest my generic classification of the novel as “9/11 fiction.” The events of 9/11 and their impact on the novel’s characters, while important to the overall significance of the text, are not a central component. Sonia, the protagonist’s niece, is the only character who struggles in any tangible and life-altering way with the events of September 11, having watched through the windows of her school as people jumped to their deaths from the World Trade Center buildings. In fact, rather than focus on the struggle of one individual, the novel contains a wide range of characters, many of whom try to come to terms with a traumatic experience in their life, some of which are related to historical events (wars, poverty, terrorist attacks etc.) and others which are not. The novel avoids privileging the significance of one event over another and positions each character, their experience, and the events they connect to equally alongside others.

The demotion of the exceptionality of 9/11 and the equalization of Sonia’s trauma with the trauma of others is part of the novel’s overall purpose. Instead of framing 9/11 as a unique, history-rupturing event, the novel aligns it with other historical events such as the Depression and World War II. This is not to compare the cultural or historical effects of trauma on societies but to emphasize the cross-generational, cross-historical impact of such events on individual lives. Sonia is not characterized as an *exceptional* character, but as *another* character haunted by and trying to work through her traumatic experience. Likewise, September 11 is not characterized as an *exceptional* event, but as part of a larger historical continuum of trauma-inducing events. The novel demonstrates how the aftershock of these historical events, including

but not limited to 9/11, continue to reverberate for individual victims and witnesses. This does not suggest, however, that individual victims react the same way to traumatizing events. On the contrary, the novel stresses the diversity of individual reactions. In contrast to the collective perception of events, which is often constructed by dominant carrier groups according to key phrases, stock images, and familiar tropes, *The Sorrows of an American* emphasizes the traumatic impact of events on individuals and stresses how contextual factors and individual perceptions often produce a spectrum of responses. The novel affirms the notion that individual responses to events, while they might represent a kind of shared suffering, are nonetheless tethered to personal perceptions, expectations, and individual biases.

Despite obvious differences, not least of which is the amount of attention paid to the events of September 11, *The Sorrows of an American* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* share similarities: they focus on the after effects of trauma, depict characters and episodes that might be classified as “acting out” or “working through,” emphasize the effectiveness of testimony, and use the subject of the falling people as an access point for the events of 9/11. Another overlap is their interest in framing historical events as individually, as opposed to the culturally, traumatic. As Luckhurst explains, fictional expressions of trauma are often “defined against banal, exploitive or routinized cultural expression” (89). Hustvedt’s novel, in aiming to redirect attention towards individual experiences of 9/11 (and other historical events/atrocities), participates in defying “the habituation of trauma into numbing and domesticating cultural conventions” (Luckhurst 89). Through its focus on individual injuries, it protests the banal and generalizing effects of mainstream, often media-generated perceptions of these events that aim to frame historical moments such as September 11 as culturally injurious.

The Sorrows of an American includes a range of characters, many of whom are haunted by memories of some type of traumatic experience. Like Oskar and his “heavy boots,” Hustvedt’s characters try to cope with life carrying the “weights . . . that other people never see” (151). The novel characterizes the identities and memories of these individuals as fragmented, and in some cases, dissociative. Working in New York city as a psychotherapist, Erik, the novel’s protagonist says, “Every memoir is full of holes. It’s obvious that there are stories that can’t be told without pain to others or to oneself, that autobiography is fraught with questions of perspective, self-knowledge, repression, and outright delusion” (8). From the very beginning of the novel, trauma is characterized as a problem or crisis of representation, in keeping with more traditional theories of psychological trauma as outlined in my second chapter. Characters are “occupied by . . . jangling voices” (24); “suffering from absence” (25); they try to live with the “pieces that won’t fit” (85); and their “memories of war, rape, near-fatal accidents, and collapsing buildings aren’t like other memories. They are kept separate in the mind. . . . Trauma doesn’t appear in words, but in a roar of terror, sometimes with images” (85). As the novel describes, “Trauma isn’t part of the story; it is outside the story. It is what we refuse to make part of our story” (52).

Pursuant to Vickroy’s definition of trauma narratives, Hustvedt’s novel is full of characters who try to live with ghosts from the past that “pose obstacles to narrating and recovering from trauma,” and the novel becomes chiefly concerned with the “problematic nature of reconstructions” (Vickroy xi). In the novel, language becomes inadequate for trauma victims; it is characterized as “often flimsy . . . a thin drool of received knowledge empty of any real meaning” (196). For victims, whose lives have been disrupted by traumatizing experiences, “it can be excruciating to speak” (196). Sonia, for example, cannot find the words to write a poem

about her experience on September 11: “There’s supposed to be one about September eleventh next, but I haven’t been able to write it. I’ve tried over and over again, but it’s too hard. Maybe I’ll just have a blank there — a nothing, a big empty spot with only the date” (127). Sonia’s trauma over what she witnesses on September 11 is too painful to organize into a narrative, yet the poem that comes next in her collection reveals some of this pain in fragmented and incoherent form: “They say the young don’t know mortality / but that’s all wrong. I feel it in my bones, / my brain, my eyes, my limbs, in all of me, / in dreaded things as well, like telephones / that ring with news of calamity, / . . . the moans / of disembodied voices in my head” (127). Sonia’s poem even gestures towards the haunting recovery efforts after 9/11 and the exuberant amount of flag-waving that ensued: “They climbed the stairs in hope of finding proof / that body parts still lay beneath the flags / we flew before their meaning turned to spoof” (127).

Aligning with a traditional model of psychological trauma, the novel privileges narrative recall and the psychotherapeutic recovery of events as an effective way to work through trauma. As Luckhurst explains, repeatedly within these traditional models, “there is the claim that psychoanalysis and literature are particularly privileged forms of writing that can attend to these perplexing paradoxes of trauma” (5). Hustvedt’s novel, and many of its characters such as Inga and Erik, support this. Inga, for example, emphasizes “how our memory fragments don’t have any coherence until they’re reimagined in words” (47). Or as Erik thinks, “Words create the anatomy of a story, but within that story there are openings that can’t be closed” (85). Sonia, analogous in many ways to Oskar, experiences nightmares over what she has witnessed and tries to come to terms with her memories of 9/11, as well as the recent death of her father from cancer. Her uncle Erik, her mother Inga, her own poetry, and an epiphanic break down at the end of the novel all play a role in helping her “work through” her grief.

While on the one hand, the novel supports a Freudian (even Caruthian) approach to psychological trauma, what Balaev would define as a “solitary paradigm of pathology,” that reads trauma as a “speechless void, unrepresentable, inherently pathologic, timeless, and repetitious” (3), it also emphasizes the significant role context plays in how one responds to traumatizing events. The novel affirms the potentiality of diversity in how one responds or reacts to traumatizing experiences and pays particular attention to possible variations in what one remembers and how one frames experience. The novel demonstrates this implicitly by incorporating characters who respond to crisis in different ways (some more pathological than others) and explicitly through the articulated perceptions (sometimes dogmatic quality) of its characters. For example, Inga explains that individual responses to events are always tethered to the culture in which we find ourselves: “we make our narratives, and those created stories can’t be separated from the culture in which we live” (86). She contemplates the role personal perception plays in narrating events: “I see bits, not wholes. . . . I can tell you a story about it, and I wouldn’t be lying, but would that reconstruction of the events be real or true?” (48).

Likewise, in his diary, Erik’s father addresses the importance of context and history, how it plays a defining role in how one responds to traumatizing events: “I tend not to believe in stories about sudden changes in attitude due to this or that single event. I do, however, believe in preconditioning — explosives that accumulate bit by bit over time, and then along comes the igniting spark that claims all the credit” (59). This quotation can be read two ways. First, it can be read symbolically as a statement on U.S. foreign policy and how past events connect to the attacks of September 11; 9/11 is not a “single event” but became defined as the “igniting spark.” Second, this quotation is indicative of an approach to psychological trauma that emphasizes

context, subjectivity, and diversity. Past experiences, that is, how one is “preconditioned” in life, play a profound role in one’s response to a traumatizing event.

For Inga, individual perceptions of events are always contingent on personal biases and expectation: “we can’t get to the thing itself, ever. . . . The problem is we’re all blind, all dependent on preordained representations, on what we think we’ll see. . . . We don’t experience the world. We experience our expectations of the world” (130-31). While the novel portrays events from the perspective of individual suffering, it remains cognizant to the way in which individual perspectives are tied to the culture at large. Inga’s point, and the point of the novel as a whole, is that while a more individual, private approach to events might render historical events more meaningful, defending against the potentially generalizing tendencies of dominant narratives, even this approach must be understood as flawed, that all approaches involve biases, influenced by gaps in memory, expectations, fantasies, misconceptions, and cultural influences.

In her book called *American Reality: Examining a Cultural Obsession*, Inga underlines the anxiety between individual and collective perspectives of September 11 illustrating the oscillation between personal and social paradigms. She challenges the media’s efforts to locate “objective truths” that attempt to split the world neatly according to dichotomies of good and evil (47). Much as I did in chapter three of this dissertation, Inga devotes an entire chapter in her book to the media’s framing of September 11 “and its almost instantaneous construction of a heroic narrative to gloss the horror” (48). She notices the “use of cinematic devices in television reporting, the footage of firemen set to music with American flags waving split screen, the spectacular images, the pious announcements that irony had come to end as bitter ironies multiplied one on top of another” (49).

Without apology or discretion, Inga admonishes the media and their role in constructing an over-simplified, banal narrative. She states, “‘reality’ in America has become synonymous with the rank and sordid. We’ve fetishized the *true* story, the tell-all confession, reality TV . . . our version of the public hanging. The crowd gathers to gape” (47). For Inga, the events of 9/11, their potential meanings, and their future implications are not easily divisible nor should they be “objectively” approached: “journalists actually believe they can get the *real* story, the objective truth, or tell *both* sides, as if the world is always split in two” (47). Erik later argues that strategies that promote binaries between good and evil or love and hate “become an argument for Otherness” (194): “Enemies are enlivening. Evil-doers, jihadists, barbarians. Hatred is exciting and contagious and conveniently eliminates all ambiguity” (194). To combat this, the novel affirms subjectivity over objectivity, encouraging ambiguity and diversity over certainty and singularity. Even though the novel acknowledges the unreliability of individual responses — “Our memories are forever being altered by the present — memory isn’t stable, but mutable” (144) — this approach is still favoured over an approach that tries to frame events within narrowly-defined claims of objectivity.

In an effort to counter the media’s framing of 9/11, Inga includes her own testimony from that day, which Erik describes as “the best thing in [her] book” (48):

And to counter the hackneyed pictures and dead words, she told her own story of that day as she remembered it, a fractured account. . . . She decided to get Sonia out of school . . . when she saw the second plane ram the other tower. She had started to run then, against the crowd streaming toward her, but she didn’t register what had happened. . . . when she finally saw Sonia’s face, she felt it must match her own, a mask of pallid emptiness, and how when they left the buildings the

towers were gleaming red like burning skeletons, and Inga said to herself, ‘I am seeing this. It is true. I must tell myself this is real. (49)

Interestingly, Spiegelman also illustrates the towers in *In the Shadow of No Towers* as red skeletal “glowing” buildings (Spiegelman 4). In fact, Inga’s description of the events is strikingly similar to Spiegelman’s: both depict mothers (Inga and Spiegelman’s wife, Françoise) running to their daughters’ school near the World Trade Centers; both women are stopped by security guards at the door, their mouths “contorted” with panic (Hustvedt 49); and both flee the area, taking a moment to turn to see the burning buildings: “We turn to see the bones of the tower glow and shimmy in the sky” (Spiegelman 4), or as it is described in Hustvedt’s novel, “And then the strange impulse that came over her. . . . She said to Sonia, ‘Okay, turn around and look” (49). On the one hand, a number of parents on September 11 rushed to collect their children from schools nearby the burning World Trade Centers; this experience is not unique to Spiegelman or his family. On the other hand, we might question whether Hustvedt is deliberately calling attention to Spiegelman’s by-now seminal representation of 9/11. *The Sorrows of an American* was published in 2008. Spiegelman’s graphic representation of 9/11, published in book form in 2004, would already have received considerable popular and critical attention. Is Hustvedt hinting at the notion that even “subjective” perspectives of events can be informed and influenced by cultural products like Spiegelman’s text? That is, the media are not the only carrier group exerting influence over how events will be remembered. Or is she alluding to Spiegelman’s text to highlight a parallel between his and her concerns, namely, to question the relationship and underlying tension between individual and cultural trauma, between “private and public meanings”? Both texts, as well as Inga’s testimony in Hustvedt’s novel, operate as

counternarratives to the mainstream reading of 9/11. As such, they seek to redefine or at least reframe 9/11 as individually traumatic.

Focusing back on Inga's testimony, we find key words and phrases that resonate with traditional theories of psychological trauma such as "fractured," "didn't register," "pallid emptiness," "telling myself this is real." All of these words counter what Erik describes as the "hackneyed pictures and dead words" of the media (49). Inga's perspective here is important to the novel's critique of the media's role in the representation and interpretation of 9/11. In reducing the events within recognizable tropes of comfort, the media participate in a fetishization of the attacks, what Luckhurst calls "banal, exploitive or routinized cultural expression" (89). Inga and Sonia's private experience thus represents a counternarrative to the framing of 9/11 as a collective trauma. In contrast to the extensive analysis of the events on mainstream news networks, Sonia becomes silent over what she witnessed: "the girl just shook her head, her eyes blank and her mouth tight" (50).

This frustration over the exploitation of 9/11 is further emphasized through the character, Jeffrey, a hostile, paparazzi-like character who functions as Erik's chief adversary. Jeffrey, an artist/photographer who cares little (if at all) for the feelings of his subjects, is characterized as a stalker or a "documenting maniac" (78). One aspect of Jeffrey's character is his incessant picture-taking which may symbolize post-9/11 surveillance and paranoia. The characterization of Jeffrey as a "documenting maniac" gestures towards post-9/11 security raids and surveillance strategies that became permissible under the Patriot Act, legislation that was signed by Congress shortly after 9/11 in October, 2001 to bolster national security. The Patriot Act legalized a range of investigative tactics including surveillance of suspected terrorists, wiretapping, and "sneak and peek" search warrants, which authorized covert entries without the occupant's prior

knowledge. As Jeffrey's girlfriend, Miranda, describes, "Even after it started to go wrong between us, he took pictures all the time. . . . We'd be fighting, and he'd grab a camera" (78). Erik states, "As I stood on the stoop and studied the images, I thought I heard the rapid sound of a camera shutter, but when I turned to look behind me, there was nobody in sight" (74). For Erik, Jeffrey's incessant picture-taking is "hostile," while Miranda's mother considers it less contentiously as "inappropriate" (77). This alludes perhaps to the range of opinions towards surveillance-related developments after September 11; some found this strategy a worrisome yet necessary trade-off for homeland security while others challenged it as a dangerous breach of civil rights.

With few redemptive qualities, Jeffrey not only takes pictures of people without permission but also distorts them for his purposes. For example, in the first series of photographs that Erik finds, Miranda's eyes are scratched out. The removal of Miranda's eyes represents the dehumanization or objectification of the subject. If the eyes are the windows to the soul, then the act of scratching them out is a way of symbolically dehumanizing the individual in question. As the novel puts it, "When we catch someone's eye, we look into a mind. A person without eyes is disturbing for the simple reason that eyes are the door to the self" (36). This speaks metaphorically to the novel's concern over retaining subjectivity and individuality in the context of historical events, how the more "objective" meaning-making efforts to define the events of 9/11 as a cultural or historical trauma can result in dehumanizing the horror.

Jeffrey's crowning autobiographical photographic exhibit becomes a telling moment. In explaining his project to Erik, Jeffrey says, "I'm an explorer taking trips into the wilderness, documenting what he finds, and then remaking the trip when it's over" (218). Jeffrey as the curator is always in control, presenting some photographs void of an appropriate context and

others with an added misleading one: “but it’s all staged, if you see what I mean. *I’m* staging it. You’re one of the players” (218). Rather than expose his intimate, private side, Jeffrey’s exhibit comes across noticeably absent of subjectivity. Some of the photos are so oversized they “had lost much of their definition” (260), others were “so blurry that the [] figures looked like mere shadows” (261), some “had been subjected to some kind of digital distortion” (261). The digital distortion caused by the enlargement of the photograph is reminiscent of Oskar’s thoughts of the photograph of the falling body: “I started thinking about the pixels in the image of the falling body, and how the closer you looked, the less you could see” (Foer 293).

In the exhibition, a series of photographs titled “Stalker” includes a photo of Erik, enraged with a hammer in his hand, taken when Erik thought Jeffrey was an intruder. Beside it is a photograph of Jeffrey with a large bruise on his forehead. The photograph is taken so far out of context that it renders Erik and the event it tries to depict almost unidentifiable:

Anger had contorted my face to such a degree that I was almost unrecognizable.

Like a rabid dog, my eyes bulged and my teeth shone. . . . the photograph made it appear as if I had been raving half naked in the street, wielding a hammer. . . .

Near my own image, I saw one of Lane’s father, a photo of George Bush, the Twin Towers, a hospital corridor, and war images from Iraq. (263)

Highly recognizable images relating to the events and aftermath of September 11 (George Bush, the towers, the subsequent Afghan wars) included along side the photo of Erik gesture to the potential exploitation or distortion of events when framed with little contextual support.

Furthermore, the way in which an image is framed, used, and displayed can and often does play a profound role in how that image, and the events it depicts, is received, interpreted, and remembered. The reaction of Ms. W., a long time patient of Erik, speaks to this: “The

photograph lived on . . . in Ms. W.'s head, as well as in mine. She was stuck on it, and its meanings multiplied. . . . the humiliating image of me became an assault on her" (264). Despite Erik's efforts to explain how and in what ways the photograph had been altered, the emotional affect caused by the photograph supersede his explanations. The image, without proper contextual support, became the dominant memory that remained. The staging of Jeffrey's exhibit thus becomes a metaphor for the staging of 9/11, the framing of which leaves witnesses, like Inga, frustrated by the "grotesque spectacle" of it all (51).

Both *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The Sorrows of an American* stress the importance of testimony, communication, and narrative abreaction in the cathartic working through of grief and trauma. Just as Oskar is unable to share his "secret" regarding his father's phone messages throughout most of the novel, Sonia also keeps a "secret" about what she witnessed during the morning of September 11, 2001. Immediately after 9/11, when Inga asks her daughter what she saw from the windows of her high school, Sonia has no words. Like many traumatized individuals, Sonia, at least at this point, remains unable to speak about the things she saw, paralyzed by images of burning towers and falling people. Like Oskar, Sonia begins to "work through" her experience of September 11 by testifying to it with words: "Then the girl began to talk. She talked, broke down, talked more, and broke down again" (230). Just as Oskar, who at the end of Foer's novel, eventually breaks down with his mother — "I cried so much that everything blurred into everything else" (324) — Sonia too sobs uncontrollably: "The second anniversary opened an internal crack in Sonia, a fissure through which she released the explosive feeling that had horrified her for two years" (230). Just as Oskar's mother cradles him, Inga keeps a firm and protective grip on Sonia: "Inga told me that during those hours she never let go of her daughter. Even when she had made them each a sandwich, she took Sonia to the kitchen

with her and fastened her child's arms around her waist" (230). Neither novel claims that one "gets over" pain after this kind of narrative abreaction; the pain of one's trauma does not immediately disappear once it is put into words: "Sonia's memories wouldn't leave her. . . . If anything had changed, it was that Sonia knew she could survive the power of her own emotion" (230). As Erik says at the very beginning of the novel, "we all have ghosts inside us, and it's better when they speak than when they don't" (1).

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close and *The Sorrows of an American*, questioning the mainstream framing of 9/11 as a collective trauma, seek to redefine September 11, and other historical traumatizing events, as individually traumatic. While both seek to foreground the events of September 11 from a more subjective point of view, Foer is more ambiguous in his approach while Hustvedt is more singular. Approaching historical events solely from a subjective point of view can work to depoliticize historical events and might foreclose upon discussions about complicity and appropriate retaliatory responses. Furthermore, even subjective perspectives of events are tethered to cultural contextual influences; a reading of events, especially events that cause psychological trauma, can be full of gaps, influenced by expectations, affected by prior injuries, and interdependent upon cultural influences. Despite these issues, reconceptualising historical events from more subjective points of view has value for the way it opens us up to empathy.

Yet paradoxically, Foer and Hustvedt's novels, in the way they contest the initial framing of 9/11 that hastily conceived the events as collectively injurious, reaffirm the event's status as cultural trauma, at least according the concept's more comprehensive definition. If as Smelser says, cultural trauma is "more often a prolonged process of collective groping, negotiation, and

contestation over the proper historical meaning to be assigned” (“Psychological” 49), certainly Foer and Hustvedt’s novels participate in the classification of 9/11 as cultural trauma.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

My interest in the topic of 9/11 as cultural trauma developed while reading Diana Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Living in New York at the time, only blocks from the World Trade Center, Taylor gathered with a small group of neighbours on the street outside her building and watched as the second plane hit the South tower: "we stared dumbfounded down the street at the flames. . . . We stood transfixed, watching, witnesses without a narrative" (237). The absence of a narrative, however, was short-lived: "On TV, a narrative sequence was beginning to emerge: people spoke of the attack, the response, 'the world reacts,' victimization, evil, revenge. But the linear plotline too had little to do with what we were seeing" (Taylor 239). Watching the events live as they happened, moving back and forth between the TV and her window, Taylor began to feel as though a "historical event" was overtaking her capacity to understand it: "I went back to the TV, my options limited to a back-and-forth. On TV, I heard that the south tower had fallen. I rushed back to the window. I couldn't believe I hadn't seen it live" (241).

I was struck at the time not so much by the emotional details of Taylor's essay, but rather by the innate duality of the piece, that is, by the way Taylor framed the events of 9/11 simultaneously (and perhaps unintentionally) as both personal and public, individual and collective, civic and national. The dichotomous tone raised many questions for me regarding the experience of large-scale events for individual witnesses and the implications of characterizing 9/11 as cultural trauma. I wondered, what do we make of the back-and-forth-ness to which Taylor refers? That is, how do we negotiate the individual experience of a catastrophe when the events in question are so heavily mediated and arbitrated by dominant collective agents? If

individual trauma is commonly understood as an impaired cognitive response to a particularly overwhelming or disturbing event (often manifesting itself in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, dissociative symptoms, mental breakdowns, hallucinations, and neurosis), what is its relationship to cultural trauma? How does cultural trauma differ, what are its symptoms, and how are they measured?

Further to this, the media's hasty and decisive framing of 9/11 as *trauma*, the victims of which were expanded immediately "to include not only 'those who were viciously attacked' but an increasing number of others affected by the attacks" (Taylor 260), challenges our understanding of what trauma means. The media, as we have seen, hastily and decisively branded the attacks as traumatic, shaping them according to widely-accepted notions of victimhood, unity, and innocence. As Taylor asks, what "are the political ramifications of such a public discourse of victimhood in the face of the United States' expanding, and undefined, war against terrorism?" (260). Thus, we might question the value in approaching events as cultural trauma given the risk that this discursive framework presents in the way it was co-opted by various authorities to bolster national support for otherwise controversial military agendas.

Using the work of Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, I have concluded that cultural trauma is a useful concept *only if* we pay attention to its definitional properties as an ongoing meaning-making system-in-process. As I outlined in chapter two, in order to qualify as cultural trauma, events must be intentionally remembered, continually endowed with meaning, and coded (and continually recoded) as indelible, as unforgettable. That is to say, cultural trauma is not permanently defined by the initial work of the most persuasive carrier group. Rather, it is best understood as the intentional and articulate cumulative assemblage of dissenting voices and conflicting opinions. Despite the (arguably)

convincing work of the media that initially labelled 9/11 as a traumatic event, sustaining the event's status as such depends on much more: "once a historical memory is established as a national trauma . . . its status as trauma has to be continuously and actively sustained and reproduced in order to continue in that status" (Smelser, "Psychological" 38). Cultural trauma theory remains valuable for the way it foregrounds a reconsideration and/or renegotiation of historical events and their impact, and for the way it emphasizes the processes of mediation that extend beyond the work of the media and other dominant agencies.

Through a close reading of 9/11 fiction, I have come to appreciate the value of cultural trauma theory for the way it understands the notion of carrier groups. While the media and other power structures (such as government administrations) played a profound role in the initial claim-making of 9/11 as cultural trauma, they are not the only memory-making agents to consider, nor can we solely rely on these claims in our assessment of cultural trauma. As Alexander puts it, "mass media are significant, but not necessary" ("Toward" 16). Therefore, if we accept Alexander's understanding of cultural trauma as ongoing and cumulative, we pay attention to texts that continue to make claims to the injurious aspects of 9/11. What is interesting here are the ways in which these texts make secondary claims, in response to yet different from, the claims made by the media. While still acknowledging injury (both in terms of individual and collective pain), they contest, debate, and challenge preconceived notions about the events. Even as these texts disagree, foregrounding conflicts, debates, and injustices surrounding 9/11, they contribute to the ongoing construction of 9/11 as cultural trauma.

110 Stories, for example, is notable as an early example of counter-interpretations that contest "ready-made and precision-bombed solutions" (Baer, "Introduction" 2). These stories draw attention to the dichotomy between 9/11 as a mass-consumed, surreal event that took place

“on television,” and 9/11 as a visceral, bewildering experience for those living near impact zones. Considered collectively, the stories in Ulrich Baer’s collection make a claim early on that 9/11 is too important an event to be mismanaged, that other perspectives and experiences should not go unsaid, that something ought to replace or at least work alongside the “unrelenting loop” of the collective narrative, and that issues of responsibility are far more complex than the initial 9/11 national narrative suggests.

Through the use of complex characters, whose identities are characterized as ambivalent and/or ambiguous, *The Submission* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* frame the events of 9/11 and the aftermath as a kind of puzzle with no easy solution. They foreground the notion that despite best efforts to locate and fix meaning around 9/11, this remains a difficult (yet worthwhile) endeavour. As such, these novels make a claim towards the indelibility of 9/11. In *The Submission*, Amy Waldman foregrounds the notion of multiplicity not only in terms of the diversity to which people approach or respond to mass events (and how they react to the various repercussions that occur after), but also in terms of the range of opinions, doubts, and conflicts that may be present in one person. These perspectives are shaped and informed as much by one’s background (family, history, gender, class, race, occupation, age, etc.), as they are by the characteristics of the events themselves. In contrast to reductive efforts that organize the events according to pre-existing, fully-recognizable, comforting tropes, *The Submission* privileges diversity, complexity, and ambivalence, effectively reintroducing the complexity of the individual within the context of the collective. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (re)locates subjectivity in the context of 9/11 and at the same time question dominant constructions. Mohsin Hamid’s novel foregrounds ambiguity in an effort to question newly formed cultural assumptions and injustices, and as such individualizes and personalizes these dilemmas. Both of these

authors, in different yet similar ways, complicate the notion of a collectivity by drawing attention to the diversity of individual responses.

In similar yet different ways, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The Sorrows of an American* also focus attention on the individual impact of 9/11. These novels approach September 11 as a catalytic event for psychological trauma. In so doing, they engage in what Neil J. Smelser calls “historical contestation,” disputes over whether events should indeed be classified as a collective trauma (“Psychological” 38). Jonathan Safran Foer and Siri Hustvedt are more interested in approaching 9/11 and other historical events from a subjective perspective, foregrounding the long-lasting psychological impact of such events rather than their sociological or political implications. Like Baer’s anthology and Waldman and Hamid’s novels, Foer and Hustvedt’s novels alert us to the tension between individual and cultural trauma, specifically to what I call *cultural trauma identity displacement*, the notion that an individual’s experience of large-scale events can be minimized, ignored, and even forgotten due to the mainstream framing of events as cultural trauma.

Considered collectively, these novels and short stories highlight the open-ended process of cultural trauma construction. In content and in tone, they are exemplary of the “nonending, always-expanding repository” of meanings, the “continuous and pulsating process of remembering, coping, negotiating, and engaging” (Smelser, “Psychological” 54). For as Smelser claims, “cultural traumas can never be solved and never go away” (“Psychological” 54). As the preceding chapters have demonstrated, these novels offer a sobering, less linear, and more varied approach than the dominant initial responses. Instead of endorsing singular answers or limit explanations to post-9/11 quandaries, the fiction examined here takes a multitudinous approach, privileging ongoing, open-ended aspects of various debates and disputes.

My emphasis here on the active and ongoing “ingredients” of cultural trauma challenges some of the chief critical objections to cultural trauma theory. As outlined in chapter one, Wulf Kansteiner is one of the most candid opponents of the concept. Kansteiner’s objections alert us to the dangers of conflating all levels of victimization under one catch-all, “the collective”: we must keep distinct, argues Kansteiner, “the moral differences between victims, perpetrators and bystanders of acts of violence” (194). Pursuant to this, Kansteiner objects to the way cultural trauma operates “as a process that somehow runs parallel to the actual development of psychological trauma” (207). Finally, he has issues with the speculative, metaphorical quality of cultural trauma, claiming that it is difficult to measure empirically, and that it depends too heavily on the meaning making efforts of persuasive carrier groups like the media.

Alan Gibbs shares similar concerns. In his consideration of 9/11 as collective trauma, Gibbs challenges cultural trauma theory for its (supposed) overreliance on initial claim-makers like the media. Gibbs examines Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers*, suggesting that it challenges an “unthinking acceptance of the notion of collective trauma” (133). I would agree that this is one of the principal aims of *In the Shadow of No Towers*. However, Gibbs uses Spiegelman’s text as a platform from which to denounce the effectiveness of “collective trauma” as a whole: “it tends to be employed unquestioningly, as if this complex and nebulous phenomenon arises quite naturally following large-scale events such as 9/11” (126). For Gibbs, in its reliance on discursive power structures that define an event as collectively injurious (i.e. traumatic), the concept of cultural trauma becomes suspect as an organizational tool, especially when the dominant narrative derived is politically manipulated as justification for military endeavours. That is to say, if we read the dominant discursive power structure as the media, which many critics do, then the notion of cultural trauma becomes defined by and solely

dependent upon the claim-making ability of this particular power structure. This approach, however, does not recognize the value of other agents of memory in the construction process of cultural trauma.

Many of the objections raised by Kansteiner and Gibbs are shared by some of the authors examined here. Kansteiner keeps us cognizant to the difference between how events impact individuals and collectives, cautioning against the conflation of all experiences into one singular perspective. Kansteiner and Gibbs together foreground the agenda-setting influence of the media and the nation's leaders, warning against the open and unquestioning acceptance of claims to cultural trauma. However, their objections overlook critical aspects of cultural trauma theory, namely, that there is a difference between individual and collective trauma (in terms of injury, identification, and symptoms) and that the ongoing, never-ending quality of cultural trauma construction suggests that there is more to cultural trauma formation than initial claim-making efforts.

Kansteiner and Gibbs's objections seem to be based on a narrow and simplistic view of cultural trauma, that events qualify as cultural trauma when dominant carrier groups say so. Kansteiner in particular reads Alexander's emphasis on carrier groups, a vital aspect of cultural trauma theory, as a way of privileging and endorsing the meaning-making efforts of the media. I contend that this is a misreading, and that while the media may play a role in the initial identification and dissemination of events as cultural trauma, other discursive groups in the community are necessary to sustain the event's status as culturally traumatic. Kansteiner and Gibbs seem to ignore the argument that the claim-making efforts of cultural trauma do not hinge on one persuasive agent in particular. According to Alexander et al., cultural trauma claims take time, are not defined exclusively by knee-jerk reactions in the immediate aftermath, and involve

the ongoing accumulation of conflicting voices in the representation and mediation process. Perhaps it is the media's use of the trope of trauma that should be questioned here, not theories of cultural trauma as a whole. In other words, we should not throw the baby out with the bath water.

There is no way of knowing whether the events of 9/11 will continue to be regarded as cultural trauma or if instead, members of the collective will cease to debate, contest, or reexamine the events. There is no way of knowing whether this period of "calming down," which may already have passed, will lead to a period of forgetting, whether, as Sabine Sielke suggests, the events of 9/11 will "in hindsight turn out as one catastrophic event in a series which was (in part because the media had prepared us so well for what we witnessed) much less disruptive than it first felt to be" (271). Indeed, while attention is still being paid to the events of 9/11, scholars are beginning to approach them in new ways. Some studies, for example, are focusing on the events of 9/11 within broader historical, political, and military contexts. The events of 9/11, which for a long time were framed as a rupture in American history with divisions between a pre- and post-9/11 ingrained in popular and academic discourse, are now beginning to be considered as part of a larger continuum within American and world history. In a 2013 collection of essays aptly titled *Beyond 9/11: Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Twenty-First Century U.S. American Culture*, for example, the events of 9/11 are no longer defined by their exceptionality. This anthology raises questions over what "the label '9/11'" actually implies, highlighting the way it operates "as a shortcut which bypasses (or brackets) many of the complex political and transcultural processes we have only begun to understand" (Kloeckner, Knewitz, and Sielke 14-15). The essays in this collection challenge "the dominant view of 9/11 as a turning point in history and propose to understand the attacks and their aftermaths in the

context of long-term trends” (Kloeckner, Knewitz, and Sielke 16). Yet while this shift in focus may move us beyond a period of “calming down” towards what might be described as a period of reallocation and contextualization, it still nonetheless suggests that 9/11 continues to be regarded as an ongoing focus of attention, the meanings and implications of which continue to be examined. Despite current trends to disparage the media’s hasty codification of 9/11 as cultural trauma, the term cultural trauma remains useful so long as we continue to debate the meanings of the events of September 11, 2001. In its exploration of fiction that engages in some way with the events of September 11, 2001, this dissertation participates in the meaning-making process inherent to the construction of 9/11 as cultural trauma.

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