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Technical and Structural Experimentation in Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* and

Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

by

Samantha Branin

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

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Thesis Committee:

[Redacted]

Dr. Rita Jacobs
Thesis Sponsor

[Redacted]

Dr. David Galef
Committee Member

[Redacted]

Dr. Naomi Liebler
Committee Member

Technical and Structural Experimentation in Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

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Abstract: This thesis discusses the experimental writing techniques of two contemporary American authors, Dave Eggers and Jonathan Safran Foer, in their works *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, respectively. These authors' narrative experiments are examined and contextualized through the lens of trauma theory, a practice of literary analysis that relies upon studies of the effects of trauma, most specifically the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Branin posits that Eggers' and Foer's experimental narrative choices—e.g. shifts in form and narrator, the use of circuitous and non-chronological narratives, typographical experiments, and the use of images instead of words—are not only shaped by the trauma the characters in each work have experienced, but are also necessary to accurately and fully convey the experience of trauma. Experimental narratives linguistically and aesthetically reflect the cognitive realities of their traumatized subjects.

TECHNICAL AND STRUCTURAL EXPERIMENTATION
IN DAVE EGGERS' *A HEARTBREAKING WORK OF STAGGERING GENIUS*
AND JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER'S *EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE*

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in English

by

SAMANTHA BRANIN

Montclair State University

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2014

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Introduction

Beginning in the twentieth century, and especially since the Vietnam War, much research has been conducted to identify and explain the nature, causes, and effects of trauma. After professionals in the psychiatric community—namely, Chaim Shatan, Robert Lifton, and members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (Yehuda)—established a language for and a body of research about post-traumatic stress disorder in the 1970s, some literary critics—most notably Cathy Caruth—have sought to forge connections between trauma theory and literary theory. The experimental writing techniques utilized by twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors can meaningfully reflect the disruptive, intrusive, and haunting nature of the trauma experienced by their subjects. Among the modernist and postmodernist writers who have made their mark with experimental writing techniques, two contemporary American authors have used experimental narrative, structural, and typographical techniques in narratives about overwhelming personal trauma: Dave Eggers in his “memoir” *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) and Jonathan Safran Foer in his novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). This thesis explores the connections between these authors’ narrative techniques and the trauma their characters experience.

Eggers’ and Foer’s work both fits within and departs from the modern American literary practice; their narrative experiments are a postmodern tangent. Modernist writers of the early twentieth century rejected literary realism—narratives adhering to, for example, chronology and continuity—in favor of crafting narratives that utilized formal experimentations. Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Franz Kafka, and Virginia Woolf are among the modernist writers who experimented with form by offering unexpected connections

or sudden changes of perspective within their narratives, using inner monologues and free associations to reflect the “rhythms of consciousness” (Lawall 1625), blending fantasy and reality, and using questionable narrators. Modernist writers’ rejection of literary realism, however, elicited nostalgia for the solidity of that realism. Postmodernist writers viewed modernists as artists who experimented with form while “preserving traditional roots in mainstream thought,” while postmodernists themselves have sought to “create a network of allusions, interruptions, contradictions, and blurred reference as if to disorient a reader who seeks to reduce human events to one demonstrated meaning” (Lawall 1625). Therefore, postmodernist writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Joseph Heller, Jack Kerouac, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez embrace experimental forms as a welcome departure from literary realism, with no traces of the nostalgia modernists experienced. Eggers’ and Foer’s work—along with that of contemporaries such as Mark Danielewski and Chuck Palahniuk—constitutes a postmodern tangent that utilizes the strategies of fragmentation, temporal discontinuity, and shifts in narration thorough extreme structural and typographical experiments.

Eggers’ and Foer’s formal experiments lend themselves to an effective and genuine representation of the trauma their characters are experiencing. According to Cathy Caruth, a modern understanding of trauma is defined by an “overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (*Unclaimed Experience* 11; see also Radstone 89). While Eggers’ narrative centers upon personal trauma, Foer’s treatment of trauma ranges to the scope of national tragedy. Trauma dramatically and irreversibly alters one’s world. In narratives that

recount these traumas, technical and structural experimentation is both useful and necessary to adequately represent the shattered, fragmented worlds the characters have been thrust into and to demonstrate the omnipresent fact that these characters' worlds have changed irrevocably. There is a spectrum of issues raised by the concept of trauma in the modern age, and there is therefore "the absolute indispensability of the concept for understanding the psychic harms associated with certain central experiences of the twentieth [and twenty-first centuries], crucially the Holocaust but also including other appalling outrages" such as the September 11th terrorist attack (Leys 2). Trauma theory, with the language and understanding provided by the recent focus on post-traumatic stress disorder, is thus a timely and essential lens for the study of contemporary postmodern narratives like Eggers' and Foer's.

In the nineteenth century, at the inception of the modern understanding of trauma, symptoms of trauma were attributed to shock or concussions of the brain or spine (if a bodily encounter was involved). Trauma did not acquire a more psychological than physiological meaning until later in the nineteenth century, with the work of Alfred Binet, Josef Bruger, J. M. Charcot, Pierre Janet, Morton Prince, and Sigmund Freud (Leys 2-3). While earlier theories of trauma are based on a clear separation between the "surface" consciousness and the "buried" unconsciousness, modern theory acknowledges that this separation is less definite and more permeable. Contemporary trauma theory also emphasizes the communal experience of trauma—an idea which advances the application of trauma theory to literature (Crownshaw 169). A literary theorist whose most influential work deals with psychoanalytic theory, Cathy Caruth has built upon the research of Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Paul de Man to pioneer the field of trauma studies in literature.

Caruth explains that “literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet” (*Unclaimed Experience* 3).

Those who have suffered trauma may alter or fabricate memories to help them cope with the distressing truth. Caruth acknowledges that this is not a new concept; Freud wrote about the tendency of individuals to blunt the force of painful memories by attaching them to less offensive or completely false “memories,” which he calls associative memories (Caruth, *Trauma* vii). However, creating or linking associative memories is not a flawless or consistently effective process; what Freud does not address is “the difficulty that many people have in believing memories that seem to be false simply because they do not appear in easily recognizable forms” (Caruth, *Trauma* viii). This delay in being able to identify and categorize memories defers, in turn, the healing process of the victim. How authors choose to depict both the actual and the associative memories of their traumatized characters—and how readers are sometimes unsure about whether the memories and events depicted are actual or fabricated—marks another intersection of trauma theory and literary studies.

Trauma is paradoxical in nature. “Freud seems to describe... trauma as the successive movement from an event to its repression to its return,” but contemporary theorists such as Caruth do not see these as clear, independent stages, and certainly not as stages on a linear timeline (*Trauma* 7). If individuals are “possessed” by their trauma, then it is a history that they carry with them that is inextricably linked to their existence. The repression, return, and distortion of traumatic images and events may occur in any

order, and may in fact occur simultaneously. “For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (Caruth, *Trauma* 8). This paradox means that “what trauma has to tell us... is intricately bound up with its refusal of historical boundaries,” despite the fact that the trauma *is* historical (Caruth, *Trauma* 8). As a result, individuals may delay the surfacing of traumatic images for indefinite periods of time or may fail to recognize these images for what they are—especially since these images may not fully adhere to reality. Furthermore, after the onset of the reoccurrence of traumatic images and events, more paradoxes arise. Trauma is a possession of the individual—a haunting—but this haunting is necessary for healing to occur. The trauma, then, once it begins to manifest itself, “is a repeated suffering of the event, but also a continual leaving of its site” (Caruth, *Trauma* 10). Returning to the pain is the only way to move through it. Authors addressing the theme of trauma must attempt to capture the circuitous and fragmented paths their subjects may take.

Many, although not all, traumatic events are linked to death, whether the traumatized individual experienced the sudden and catastrophic death of a loved one, experienced an unusual proximity to death, as veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder have, or witnessed the loss of human life on a large scale, as witnesses to terrorist attacks have. The protagonists of both *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* have endured the former, and the main characters in Foer’s novel have also witnessed the latter. Traumas related to death are enveloped in an additional layer of complexity: the tension between death and survival. According to

Freud, one of the ego's drives is the "death-instinct"; because death marks the end of life, a person can see death as one of his "goals" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 48).

Therefore, not only do these traumas result from death, but also continue to revolve around death as the affected individual attempts to cope. Caruth explains:

Freud's difficult thought [i.e. the death-instinct] provides a deeply disturbing insight into the enigmatic relation between trauma and survival: the fact that, for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but the passing out of it that is traumatic; that *survival itself*, in other words, *can be a crisis*. (*Trauma* 9)

Trauma is both the encounter with death and the continuous experience of having survived it—even if the lives of those who undergo trauma were never directly in danger. At the cores of both *A Heartbreaking Work* and *Extremely Loud* is "a kind of a double telling, 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" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 7). This experience of survival is central to the very identities of the characters and is intertwined with their experiences of trauma.

Although surviving trauma is traumatic in itself, it is also cathartic. Here, perhaps, is the clearest, albeit the most obvious, connection between trauma theory and literature. "The inherent departure, within trauma, from the moment of its first occurrence, is also a means of passing out of the isolation imposed by the event: that the history of trauma... can only take place through the listening of another" (Caruth, *Trauma* 10-11; see also Leys 285). The story of the possessed individual is a story that must be told, making trauma and literature intimately linked.

However, the storytelling may be lost in translation due to the nature of trauma—another paradox, but one that Caruth does not explore as deeply as other researchers

building upon her theory have. According to literary critic Kristiaan Versluys, “trauma involves an event that cannot be spoken. The traumatic event is a blank, in the face of which words always and necessarily fall short. And yet trauma must be spoken” (79). Neurologists Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart posit that “traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language” (176). But because trauma shatters a victim’s cognitive perceptual capacities, traumatic memories are frequently unattainable through conventional recollections (Leys 9). Experimental narrative forms, therefore, mirror traumatic memories because they allow these “unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences” to be woven into the structure of the narrative without being fettered by chronology, form, or the voice of a single narrator. Eggers and Foer craft their narratives using the damaged psyche of the trauma victim as a lens. This lens bends and fragments the narrative, resulting in Eggers’ formal and temporal shifts and Foer’s typographical variations and addition of images.

The challenge an author faces in attempting to honestly capture the experience of trauma is great. As Caruth puts it, “the traumatized... carry an impossible history within them” (*Trauma* 5). Formal experimentation is the vehicle that Eggers and Foer use to attempt to articulate their characters’ “impossible” histories. The chapters that follow analyze the varieties of experimentation the authors employ and contextualize these narrative techniques through trauma theory.

“I Want You to Share My Suffering”: Formal and Structural Experimentation and Trauma in *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*

Dave Eggers' literary debut, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), recounts the death of the author's parents within the same year and the choices he had to make thereafter. Eggers' father and mother both had cancer—lung and stomach cancers, respectively—and their deaths occurred one month apart. Although he was 21 at the time and had two older siblings, Eggers adopted his eight-year-old brother, Toph. Eggers' older siblings were unable—or perhaps unwilling—to care for Toph, and Eggers had been “chosen for a future that remains, in its promise, yet to be understood. Chosenness is thus not simply a fact of the past but the experience of being shot into a future that is not entirely one's own” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 71). Of course, the death of one's parents is a reality that many experience, and that experience alone does not automatically cause trauma as defined by Caruth. But because Eggers' parents' deaths were concurrent and disastrous, resulting in not only the emotional pain that follows the loss of one's parents but also the complete shattering of Eggers' known world and a new identity as foster parent that he is thrust into, Eggers' reality after his parents' deaths is true to the experience of trauma. Both the pain of this loss and the redefining of the brothers' relationship as Eggers attempts to evolve into a father-figure serve as the foundation of this memoir.

The classification of Eggers' text as a memoir is a potentially problematic distinction—especially since this text employs formal innovations that are atypical of autobiographies and other nonfiction—but yet is purposeful and appropriate. The terms “autobiography” and “memoir” did not originally have overlapping definitions or

connotations. An autobiography was and is a book about a person's life written by that person. In a memoir, on the other hand, the narrative's attention was focused not on the writer himself but on another person or multiple other people in the writer's life (Yagoda 1-2). This definition held true through the latter part of the twentieth century, but in recent decades has evolved into something quite different. The contemporary memoir is "resolutely focused on the self, [but] certain leeway or looseness with the facts is expected" (Yagoda 2).

Eggers utilizes this "leeway," pushing his narrative into realms that are very clearly not reality, but the designation of *A Heartbreaking Work* as memoir instead of fiction is nevertheless not only acceptable but also entirely appropriate. Daniel Mendelsohn explains that memoirs can "accurately reflect a reality present not in the world itself... but in the author's mind." This assertion is particularly apt for works by authors who, like Eggers, are writing about personal trauma. These authors encounter an "unremitting problem of *how not to betray the past*" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 27). At first glance, it seems logical that relating a story as honestly and accurately as possible is the *only* way to avoid betraying the past, but Caruth counters that the fictionalized elements of a story are not only permitted but also necessary to convey the truth of the experience of trauma. Caruth uses Alain Resnais's 1959 film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* to illustrate this paradox. Resnais had initially been commissioned to create a documentary about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. He collected archival footage for months, but he eventually refused to carry out the project. Instead, he produced a film about a French woman who visits Hiroshima on business and has a chance romantic encounter with a Japanese man. During her brief time with this man, the French woman tells, for the first

time in her life, the story of her affair with a German soldier during the war—an affair that ended with the soldier's death on the day the two were planning to elope, which also turned out to be the day of liberation. The film opens with a shot of two interlaced arms with sagging skin covered with ashes, followed by a frame of two sweaty arms—the arms of the French woman and the Japanese man locked in a passionate embrace. Here, Resnais visually connects the tragedy of Hiroshima to the romantic experiences of this woman. By refusing to make a documentary on Hiroshima, Caruth argues, Resnais suggests that it is through the fictionalized story taking place in Hiroshima, rather than through direct archival footage of the Hiroshima bombing and its aftermath, that historical truth can be conveyed. “The interest of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* lies in how it explores the possibility of a faithful history in the very indirectness of this telling” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 25-27). It is in this way that Eggers conveys the truth of his experience. It is impossible to simply retell one's history of trauma and “not betray the past,” because the retelling can never adequately represent the reality. It will be nothing more than a shadow of the truth. Eggers therefore recreates his experiences through an indirect telling, by overtly and fantastically fictionalizing elements of his history.

Another similarity between Resnais's film and Eggers' memoir is that both illustrate—albeit conversely—the narrative connection between personal and communal trauma. Resnais attempts to relate the truth of a multinational tragedy through the telling of one individual's trauma. Eggers attempts the reverse transmission, sharing his personal experience of trauma through his memoir to forge a universal experience with his readership. The communal resonates through the personal, and the personal can become

communal. The importance of the concept of shared trauma in the twenty-first century is one I will discuss more deeply in the chapter analyzing Foer's novel, but it is a concept that also explains the function of the modern memoir. The "trajectory of trauma could not take place without those who listen" (Crowshaw 169), and the memoir, like Eggers', is a vehicle through which this transmission occurs.

Before Eggers' narrative even begins, readers are already thrown into a different experience from that which a more conventional narrative offers. The tone of the copyright page—if one can imagine a copyright page having a tone—is lighthearted and entertaining. "Random House is owned *in toto* by an absolutely huge German company called Bertelsmann A.G." Eggers writes, "which owns too many things to count or track":

That said, no matter how big such companies are, and how many things they own, or how much money they have or make or control, their influence over the daily lives and hearts of individuals... who limp around and sleep and dream of flying through bloodstreams, who love the smell of rubber cement and think of space travel while having intercourse, is very very small, and so hardly worth worrying about.

Eggers' physical attributes, like his height, weight, eye color, and the size of his hands, are also included in the copyright information. This page exemplifies Freud's concept of the *uncanny* as an image or experience that is simultaneously familiar and foreign (*The Uncanny* 7). Every book must have copyright information, but Eggers draws this publisher's necessity into the folds of his narrative by using it to unsettle his readers, by shattering their expectations of what a text should be (Malpas 306).

Eggers continues this unsettling tactic following the copyright page with a preamble titled "Rules and Suggestions for Enjoyment of This Book," which sarcastically

recommends skipping portions of the book, including pages 239-351, entirely. Next, Eggers includes 27 pages of “acknowledgements”—which barely acknowledge anyone. Instead, he lists the symbolic people, places, and motifs in the memoir and their respective meanings (see fig. 1), rants about the demotion of Pluto from its status as a planet, itemizes his gross and net book advance (see fig. 2), and sketches a stapler (see fig. 3).

(Fig. 1)

INCOMPLETE GUIDE
TO SYMBOLS AND METAPHORS

Sun	=	Mother
Moon	=	Father
Family room	=	Past
Nosebleed	=	Decay
Tumor	=	Portent
Sky	=	Emancipation
Ocean	=	Mortality
Bridge	=	Bridge
Wallet	=	Security
		Father
		Past
		Class
Lattice	=	Transcendental-equivalent
White bed	=	Womb
Furniture, rugs, etc.	=	Past
Tiny stuffed bear	=	Mother
Toph	=	Mother
Dolls	=	Mother
Lake Michigan	=	Mother
		Past
		Peace
		Chaos
		Unknown
Mother	=	Mortality
Mother	=	Love
Mother	=	Rage
Mother	=	Cancer
Nancy	=	Past
John	=	Father
Shalini	=	Promise
Skye	=	Promise
Me	=	Mother

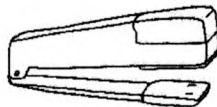
Note: No symbolism is meant by the use of Journey's "Any Way You Want It."

(Fig. 2)

TOTAL (GROSS)	\$100,000.00
<hr/>	
DEDUCTIONS	
Agent's fee (15%)	\$15,000.00
Taxes (after agent's fee)	\$23,800.00
EXPENSES RELATED TO PRODUCTION OF BOOK	
Portion of rent, two years (b/w \$600 & \$1,500/mo) . . . approx:	\$12,000.00
Trip to Chicago (research)	\$850.00
Trip to San Francisco (research)	\$620.00
Food (consumed while ostensibly writing)	\$5,800.00
Sundries	\$1,200.00
Laser printer	\$600.00
Paper	\$242.00
Postage (to send manuscript, for approval, to siblings Beth (somewhere in No. California), and Bill (an advisor to the Comptroller of Texas, in Austin), Kirsten (San Francisco, married), Shalini (living at home in L.A., doing well), Meredith Weiss (freelance wardrobe stylist, San Diego), Jamie Carrick (in L.A., part of management team for Hanson, a popular music outfit), "Ricky" (San Francisco, investment banker—high-tech IPOs), etc. etc.)	\$231.00
Copy of <i>Xanadu</i> Original Movie Soundtrack	\$14.32
Information retrieval service (unsuccessful attempt to retrieve two years' worth of journal entries from external hard drive, expired)	\$75.00
<hr/>	
NET TOTAL	\$39,567.68

(Fig. 3)

Here is a drawing of a stapler:



To some, all of this may seem whimsical, ostentatious, and unnecessary. But these oddities continue the purpose of the copyright page: to completely destabilize the reader, just as Eggers himself has the metaphorical rug pulled out from underneath him in the first chapter of the memoir with the death of his parents. This destabilization is important because it immediately initiates the shared experience of trauma that is forged between the victim and the witnesses through the telling of that trauma. Also, as previously noted, it serves “to disorient a reader who seeks to reduce human events to one demonstrated

meaning” (Lawall 1625), and the disorientation of readers is one objective of the postmodern author. For Eggers, it is important that readers approach his narrative with open minds, ready to embrace and critique the formal and temporal shifts they will encounter.

The first chapter is entirely non-chronological. Eggers jumps around, beginning with a scene toward the end of his mother’s illness, then describing his father’s last trip to the hospital. Next, his mother is relatively well, going to work and visiting friends. Then Eggers’ describes his father’s memorial service. The chapter ends with a scene from his mother’s last hospitalization. Each of these events is written as a burst of memory, fraught with graphic and upsetting descriptions, but with no apparent logic or structure. Within the span of three sentences, Eggers jumps from seeing his father prostrate in the driveway to describing the wallpaper in the downstairs bathroom (6), and from one paragraph to the next, skips from explaining the significance of his mother’s white blood cell count to suggesting how Toph might get his Sega video game system, which has frozen, to work again (11-12). Of course, this non-chronological, fragmented style is not particular to Eggers; modernist writers have been experimenting with nonlinear modes of narrative since the movement’s inception, with authors such as William Faulker, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Virginia Woolf crafting narratives in stream of consciousness. These narratives are introspective, circuitous, and frequently reliant on unstated inferential connections and associations. For example, in his short story “Barn Burning,” Faulker intersperses straightforward descriptions of courtroom proceedings with the boy’s, Sartoris’s, fascination with the smells in the courtroom. The boy’s perceptions are written in lengthy run-on sentences, teeming with repeated images and hints of fear and

despair. Through these fragmented stream of consciousness passages, readers “are scrutinizing the impulse-driven flow of a character’s mental activity, put into words that are only partially ordered and marshaled: it is as if the character him- or herself has not really experienced these words as an articulated sequence ‘in the head’” (Toolan 122). A stream of consciousness narrative lends itself particularly well to relating the experience of trauma, because of the way in which trauma is processed (or not) cognitively. “It is not the [traumatic] event itself that returns in the dream, flashback, hallucination, or other form of intrusive and repetitive behavior, but rather the failure to process and consciously represent the event” (Crownshaw 168). The victim is unable to recollect and integrate the traumatic experience in normal consciousness (Leys 2), and fragmented, non-chronological, circuitous narratives are the aesthetic literary equivalent of traumatized cognition. Eggers, therefore, crafts his narrative to mirror his psyche, and readers are engaged in a twofold experience of his trauma: they serve as witnesses to the traumatic events, but they also absorb the linguistic representation of the victim’s traumatized thought processes.

Eggers uses a similar narrative strategy in a later chapter, when he describes hiring a sitter to stay with Toph for one evening, but is immediately struck with the irrational fear that Toph will be murdered. In one paragraph, Eggers walks out of his house and to his car; in the next, he feels sure that Toph will be molested, killed, and stuffed under the floorboards of the house. Then, Eggers merges onto the highway. He imagines returning home to a house with blood-smearred walls. He thinks of heading to his favorite bar. He includes a transcript of the conversation with the police officer after his brother’s inevitable murder. Finally, he describes the picturesque view from the Bay

Bridge and notices how small Toph's casket is (125-28). The notion of losing another family member, one who has been entrusted to his care, is so appalling that Eggers cannot address it in anything more than short, intermittent paragraphs. This fear surfaces to and interrupts Eggers' conscious thoughts in brief flashes of panic, as a victim of trauma suffers from vivid flashbacks that intrude suddenly and repeatedly, thwarting his attempts to maintain a balanced state of mind. As Eggers did in the first chapter of his memoir, here again he makes formal choices to represent the cognitive reality of one who endures trauma.

Throughout his memoir, Eggers frequently returns to the subject of death. He is fascinated by how silently death can sneak up on someone, the staggering variety of ways there are to die, and how fragile human life is. After the death of his parents, as he drives with Toph from Illinois, their home, to California, where they will attempt to start over, Eggers waits for death to find them, and ponders how they will make their escape:

The cars flash around the turns off Highway 1, jump out from cliffs, all glass and light. Each one could kill us. All could kill us. The possibilities leap into my head—we could be driven off a cliff and down and into the ocean. But fuck, we'd make it, Toph and I, given our cunning, our agility, our presence of mind... If we collided with a car at sixty miles per hour on Highway 1, we could jump out in time. (55)

Eggers follows this assertion with a lengthy and specific explanation of how he and Toph would survive if their car careened off the cliff and into the ocean. This abrupt break in the narrative exemplifies Freud's death-instinct. What Freud identifies "in the traumatic neurosis is not the reaction to any horrible event but, rather, the peculiar and perplexing experience of survival" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 60). Eggers is terrified of dying, and of Toph dying, as his parents have, but the idea still fascinates him. The tension

among the desire to survive and move on, the fear and sadness of death, and the relief that death would bring is palpable throughout the memoir. This simultaneous abhorrence of and attraction to violence and ruin, Caruth argues, is unavoidable in trauma narratives. “Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival. It is only by recognizing traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of the catastrophic experience” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 58). The inevitability of death makes it seem impossible that victims of trauma could ever hope to move on from the pain in their pasts, and yet the push to survive persists. Eggers’ structural experimentation relates this “legacy of incomprehensibility” by demonstrating the death-instinct’s intrusion into his thoughts through the fragments intruding into his narrative.

Eggers continues experimenting with narrative structures to tell parts of his story after his and Toph’s move to California. While describing Toph’s first school open house in their new hometown, Eggers explains how conversations with Toph’s classmates’ parents tend to go. He and a student’s mother “find [their] places and read the script” (99; see also fig. 4). Here, there is a double meaning: the conversation has become routine, as if scripted, but Eggers also uses a true dramatic structure to recount the conversation. With these words, Eggers simultaneously acknowledges the artificial feel of his conversation with this parent and marks the change in narrative structure. There is no narration on these pages, only dialogue and stage directions as in a play. As the conversation between Eggers and the student’s mother draws to a close, the scene

becomes increasingly fantastical, with Eggers and his brother performing a short dance before the curtain falls and the crowd gives them a standing ovation (103; see also fig. 5).

(Fig. 4)

science teacher who looks precisely like Bill Clinton and stutters. There is a girl in Toph's class who, at nine, is taller than her parents, and heavier than me. I want Toph to be her friend and make her happy.

A woman nearby is looking at us. People look at us. They look and wonder. They wonder if I am a teacher, not knowing how to place me, thinking maybe that because I have scraggly facial hair and am wearing old shoes that I will take and molest their children. I surely look threatening. The woman, this one looking at us, has long gray hair and large glasses. She is wearing a floor-length patterned skirt and sandals. She leans toward us, points her finger to me and to Toph and back, smiles. Then we find our places and read the script:

MOTHER

Hi. This is your... son?

BROTHER

Uh... no.

MOTHER

Brother?

BROTHER

Yeah.

MOTHER

(squinting to make sure)

Oh, you can tell right away.

BROTHER

(though knowing that it is not really true, that he is old and severe-looking, and his brother glous)

Yeah, people say that.

MOTHER

Having fun?

(Fig. 5)

telling him this knows their full biography and sometimes she or he does not. BROTHER doesn't understand the line, both what it means and when it became a standard sort of expression that many different people use. What a good brother you are! BROTHER had never heard the saying before, but now it comes out of all kinds of people's mouths, always phrased the same way, the same words, the same inflections—a rising sort of cadence:



What a good bro-ther you are!

What does that mean? He smiles, and if Toph is close, he'll punch him in the arm, or try to trip him—look at us horsing around! Light as air!—then BROTHER will say the same thing he always says after they say their words, the thing that seems to deflate the mounting tension, the uncomfortable drama swelling in the conversation, while also throwing it back at the questioner, because he often wants the questioner to think about what he or she is saying. What he says, with a cute little tbrug, or a sigh, is:

Well, what are you gonna do?

(MOTHER smiles and squeezes BROTHER's forearm one more time, then pats it. BROTHER looks to AUDIENCE, winks, and then break into a fabulous Fossean dance number, lots of kicks and high-stepping, a few throws and catches, a big sliding-across-the-stage-on-their-knees thing, then some more jumping, some strutting, and finally, a crossing-in-midair front flip via hidden trampoline, with both of them landing perfectly, just before the orchestra, on one knee, hands extended toward audience, grinning while breathing heavily. The crowd stands and thunders. The curtain falls. They thunder still.)

FIN

As the crowd stomps the floor for a curtain call, we sneak through the back door and make off like superheroes.

Eggers is ridiculing the phony and forced nature of many such interactions, but this humor just barely overshadows the more serious reality that a night at Toph's school among all the students, parents, and teachers is a time when Eggers feels particularly strained in his role as Toph's guardian. He feels the need to defend his performance as a surrogate parent and is threatened by the advantage he believes biological parents to have. The surrealism of the scene allows Eggers' anxiety to surface—an even stronger anxiety than what might be felt by an actor before an important performance—while the dramatic structure conveys his belief that he and Toph are being watched, studied, by the parents, as actors are observed and evaluated by an audience. Assuming the role of an actor also represents Eggers' attempts to distance himself from the anxiety produced by his parental role, as if he can pretend for a moment that his new identity is just an act and not his reality. Eggers' trauma did not end with his parents' deaths; he continues to struggle with replacing them as Toph's guardian, and each test of his abilities as a parent is a wounding experience. Eggers marks these events in his narrative by shifting to a fantastical or fictionalized form.

Eggers employs a different experimental strategy to relate his continuing experience of trauma in the following chapter. After the open house, Eggers puts Toph to bed, saying, “Big day, huh?” Toph responds:

“Yeah. The half day at school, then the basketball, and then dinner, and the open house, and then ice cream, and a movie—I mean, it was almost as if it was too much to happen in one day, as if a number of days had been spliced together to quickly paint a picture of an entire period of time, to create a whole-seeming idea of how we are living...” (114)

It is therefore immediately apparent that Toph is no longer Toph, but has stepped out of character to critique Eggers and his writing. Furthermore, the not-Toph is also criticizing

every memoir writer who alters, condenses, and skips events in a timeline to create the illusion of the narrative arc that readers expect. And Eggers is indirectly defending his choice to fictionalize the nature of his narrative by reminding readers that it is a reconstructed reality; he is saying, *This is still my memoir, my life, even though it may not look like one.*

The rest of the not-Toph's rant critiques everything else about Eggers—that he is “paralyzed by guilt about relating all this in the first place,” that he never told anyone about his father's alcoholism until now because he “alternately rebel[s] against and embrace[s] that kind of suppression,” that he lives in perpetual fear of something happening to Toph or of a child welfare agency attempting to remove Toph from his care (115-16). Only with Toph as his megaphone does Eggers air all of his sadness, anger, and insecurities. Just as those possessed by trauma use associative memories to distance themselves from the truth, to make it more bearable, so Eggers creates a temporary, fictitious Toph to speak his deepest fears aloud. This third voice both temporarily absolves Eggers of his duty as a narrator and creates a protective narrative layer between himself and the truth. Eggers' use of the not-Toph exemplifies the paradoxical fact that “trauma involves an event that cannot be spoken... and yet trauma *must* be spoken” (Versluys 79, my emphasis). (In my chapter on Foer's work, I explore how Foer uses typographical experiments and images when words fail, illustrating this same paradox.)

In a later chapter of *A Heartbreaking Work*, with his most lengthy narrative shift, Eggers interviews with a producer of *The Real World*, an MTV reality show that features a cast of twenty-somethings in different cities throughout the U.S. After the interview begins, Eggers shifts his narrative to a question-and-answer format as he describes his

childhood in Illinois (184-96). The interview is both nostalgic and horrifying. Eggers recounts the comfort of growing up in a prosperous suburb of Chicago, but mentions some “‘terrible deaths tearing through this pristine community’” (196). Before Eggers’ parents’ deaths, there were suicides and accidents: a pile of firewood fell on a neighborhood boy and he suffocated; Eggers’ friend’s father doused himself with gasoline, set himself on fire, and ran through his backyard until he collapsed. Underneath the surface of the flawless suburban town was a darkness that could pervade any community. Eggers discusses these events to foster the shared experience of trauma with his readers—his witnesses. Most of his memoir focuses on the events that have surrounded him personally, but in this chapter he acknowledges the other traumatic incidents that extend beyond his family. Trauma—and each victim’s struggle to survive it—is an experience that is both universal and personally unique. The circumstances of each trauma are different. Losing a parent to suicide by burning is perhaps more traumatic than losing a parent to cancer, because the nature of the former is more violent and sudden than that of the latter. But Eggers’ telling of both losses links them. When his friend told Eggers about the father’s suicide, Eggers shared in his friend’s trauma because he became a witness to it. By extension, Eggers’ readers become witness to both events through Eggers’ telling, creating what Caruth and Leys identify as the shared experience of trauma.

In the midst of Eggers’ outpouring, the interviewer finally interjects, “So tell me something: This isn’t really a transcript of the interview, is it?” Eggers responds, “No.” The interviewer presses on. “It’s not much like the actual interview at all, is it?” “Not that much, no.” “This is a device, this interview style. Manufactured and fake” (196-97).

Just as when Toph steps out of character and breaks the fourth wall, so does the interview serve as a way for Eggers to discuss his childhood memories that are alternately comforting and haunting. The falsified interview continues for another forty pages, and Eggers becomes increasingly candid. He regrets selling his parents' possessions and moving away from his hometown; he feels as though he has abandoned his parents' memories (224). He expresses a fervent wish to dream of his parents more often, because he'd "love to see them walking and talking again, even if it was fabricated in a dream" (225). He also reveals more details about his father's alcoholism and its effects on his family. "Like all people who drink, and do so while successfully keeping a family and a job," Eggers explains, "[my father] was an extraordinary magician" (226), but John Eggers could not sustain the illusion indefinitely. There was screaming and chasing, slurred speech and loss of consciousness, the threat of divorce and eventual complacency. The moment that the "brittle rope of trust between a parent and a child snapped" is when Eggers' father kicked in Eggers' bedroom door in an alcohol-fueled rage (229-31). Just as the suicides and accidents disrupted the smooth surface of his community, so did Eggers' father's struggles with alcohol sully their otherwise satisfying family life. Until this point in the memoir, Eggers has illustrated only the love shared between his family members, a love that endured and sustained him and his siblings throughout their parents' illnesses. But despite now revealing these dark realities of his family's history, Eggers is still able to remember and appreciate the happiness and successes they shared. It takes the formal structure of the interview to enable Eggers to open up completely about his family. The literary function of the interviewer is to ask probing questions, to glean information from her subjects. Eggers' introduction of the interviewer suggests that the truths he shares

might not have been shared otherwise, that he wouldn't volunteer all this personal information without the encouragement of a third party, however artificial.

When asked by the "interviewer" why he wants to be on *The Real World*, why he is revealing these childhood memories that have hitherto remained unspoken, Eggers replies, "I want you to share my suffering... By sharing it I will dilute it" (209-10). One narrative shift that trauma theory precipitates is that the "burden of witnessing" can be "passed on to those who listen to the witness's testimony" (Crownshaw 169). This step is necessary for the experience of trauma to become actualized for the victim. Until the moment it is spoken of, the trauma "has not been witnessed yet, has not been taken cognizance of":

The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to—and heard—is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the "knowing" of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge [from the beginning]. The testimony of the trauma includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time. (Felman and Laub 79)

Felman and Laub's description of the telling of trauma is doubly appropriate, both because it explains how Eggers' testimony is inherent to his experience of trauma, and also because it is through a television show that Eggers hopes his story will be told again—the "blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed." On the surface, a show like *The Real World* is an ideal vehicle for the transmission of Eggers' story. The show's foundation is observation: seven strangers agree to live together in one house for several months. *The Real World* has been hugely successful—on air since 1992, it is America's second longest-running reality show (Hibberd)—and represents two fundamental human drives: the need to tell one's story and the desire to hear others'

stories. However, the melodrama with which Eggers exclaims “I want you to share my suffering” suggests that the pop culture universe of the *The Real World* may not be the most authentic or genuine place to share his story. In this moment, the persona of Eggers as a character and Eggers as an author diverge. Eggers the character is fascinated with television as the medium for sharing his story, but Eggers the author has chosen this experimental memoir as the vehicle for communicating his pain. As an author, therefore, Eggers criticizes the superficiality of popular entertainment media and asserts his belief in the power of narrative.

As the fabricated interview continues, Eggers goes on to reiterate his fear that people are watching him, judging him. His confessions are deeply paranoid and self-obsessive, so much so that the “interviewer” asks him if he really wants to share all of this. He replies, “What am I giving you? I am giving you nothing... I tell you and it evaporates” (214-15). Here, Eggers analogizes the paradoxical nature of trauma: he feels the need to open himself and share it, in hopes that he might alleviate the pain, but at the same time, he knows that sharing the trauma does nothing because it does not exist solely within him. “None of this is mine,” he explains. “My father is not mine—not in that way. His death and what he’s done are not mine. Nor are my upbringing nor my town nor its tragedies... I was born into a town and a family and the town and my family happened to me. I own none of it. It is everyone’s” (216). Therefore, even as Eggers feels the need to purge information about his past, to attempt to lift the burden of his pain, the experience is not fully cathartic, because the pain was not exclusively his to begin with. “It is that commonality” that facilitates trauma’s arrival “in a cultural memory of events not witnessed directly, making all of us survivors, and turning history into a memory in

which we can all participate” (Crowshaw 170). Eggers is haunted by history; he cannot escape it because it is built into the fabric of his existence and the telling is itself an experience of trauma. Because the representation of trauma through language is limited, and because a victim cannot fully grasp the traumatic event, the act of recounting trauma is in itself traumatic (Hungerford 81-83). Despite these limitations, the chapter ends with Eggers’ impassioned speech to the interviewer: “Reward me for my suffering... Let me share this with millions. I will do it slowly, subtly, tastefully. Everyone must know. I deserve this” (235).

New York Times writer Michiko Kakutani ventured that Eggers’ “experimental narrative” and “self-annotating mechanisms” are “defensive survival tactics... invoked to deal with [Eggers’] chaotic childhood and the horror of losing his parents. They are part of his constitution as a writer, enabling him to stand apart from his experiences and turn them into art.” I believe that Kakutani’s assessment is half correct. Eggers has certainly conveyed his pain through art with this memoir, illustrating the full truth of his experiences. But the experimental nature of Eggers’ narrative is not just a defense mechanism. The significance of *A Heartbreaking Work* is that Eggers seeks to narratively represent the cognitive experience of trauma. Though the narrative experiments discussed in this chapter, Eggers communicates the truth of his experience more authentically than he could have with a formally conventional narrative.

“I Broke My Life Down into Letters”: Technical and Typographical Experimentation and Trauma in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

While Eggers’ narrative experiments are mainly structural and formal, Jonathan Safran Foer expands his narrative choices by including technical and typographical experiments as well. Foer’s second novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), tells the story of a nine-year-old New Yorker, Oskar Schell, whose father died in the September 11th World Trade Center attack. In a vase on a shelf in his father’s bedroom, Oskar finds a key labeled “BLACK.” The book chronicles Oskar’s search throughout the city to find the lock the key was made for by visiting every person in the Manhattan phone book (and some residents of the other boroughs as well) with the last name Black. Interspersed with his story is that of his paternal grandparents: the history of their difficult marriage overshadowed by Oskar’s grandfather’s love for Oskar’s grandmother’s sister. With each chapter, Foer switches the narrator from Oskar to one of his grandparents, then back to Oskar again. Foer’s chapters are also non-chronological; most of the chapters that are not narrated by Oskar explore a moment in the past, before September 11. However, all of the characters’ pasts converge when Oskar’s search for the key’s lock begins, and this convergence is essential to the characters’ struggle to heal.

In *Extremely Loud*, Foer builds upon the narrative experiments of his first novel, *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002). The threads of trauma and survival run deeply through both novels, and in Foer’s debut, his experiments with form and typography are evident. *Everything Is Illuminated* is divided into two narratives with three contrasting voices. The central storyline follows the main character, Jonathan, on a quest to find the woman who might have saved his grandfather from the Nazi invasion of Ukraine. This story is told

from the point of view of Jonathan's translator, Alex. Some of these chapters chronicle Jonathan and Alex's mission directly, while other chapters are letters from Alex to Jonathan. These letters are printed in italics and their most notable feature is Alex's frequently improper—and frequently comical—overuse of a thesaurus as he tries to beautify his English. This central narrative is interspersed with an almost mythical story of the town of Trachimbrod. These chapters, written by Jonathan, are distinguished by curlicue titles. The dual narrative arcs juxtapose realistic and fantastical storytelling while intertwining three contrasting voices. Foer's strategy of refraction, in which the two stories eventually collide in the same time span, results in a confrontation of the characters' traumas (Collado-Rodriguez 55, 58). These dual and eventually merging narrative arcs and the use of multiple narrators and modes of storytelling are structures that Foer continued to utilize as he created his second novel. Furthermore, in addition to Foer's formal strategies, the typographical experiment that most clearly paves the way for the crafting of *Extremely Loud* is found near the conclusion of *Everything Is Illuminated*, where Foer uses a page and a half of ellipses to signify an impossibly suspended moment just before a bombing. This typographical choice reflects an effect of trauma: the distortion of time. Events that compose a traumatic experience are often remembered as part of a timeline that does not accurately reflect the reality of those events (Caruth, *Trauma* 4). The ellipses in the pages of *Everything Is Illuminated* extend the remembrance of an event that actually took only a fraction of a second into an event that resonates in time and is overwhelming in magnitude. In *Extremely Loud*, Foer continues to base formal and typographical choices on the desire to capture the experience of trauma.

Foer's narrative differs from Eggers' in that, while Eggers' trauma was a personal one, Foer's main character's trauma is born from a national tragedy. As Caruth would say, this is an experience that Oskar "cannot fully claim as [his] own" (*Unclaimed Experience* 67). Foer's narrative experiments are a reflection of Oskar's initial inability and eventual attempts to cope with his father's death, but are also a reflection of the public response to this unprecedented disaster. "If there was one thing writers agreed about in response to 9/11," critic Richard Gray explains, "it was the failure of language" (1). One of the writers Gray quotes is Toni Morrison; her prose poem "The Dead of September 11" appeared in *Vanity Fair* in November of 2001. Morrison writes, "I would like to speak directly to the dead... knowing all the time that I have nothing to say—no words stronger than the steel that pressed you into itself." Literary theorists Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida echoed similar pronouncements. "The whole play of history and power is distorted by this event," Baudrillard claims, "but so, too, are the conditions of analysis" (51). Derrida suggests that this distortion is due to the limits of language to accurately capture the truth of such a tragedy: "'Something' took place... But this very thing, the place and meaning of this 'event,' remains ineffable... Out of range for a language that admits its powerlessness and so is reduced to pronouncing mechanically a date, repeating it endlessly" (Borradori 86). If language fails, then post-9/11 authors need to find new ways to relate trauma, to tell the story that cannot but must be told.

In the first chapter narrated by Oskar's grandfather, Thomas explains how he lost his ability to speak. It was not an abrupt loss, but something that grew over the course of years, and began with the name *Anna*—the name of his first love. The next words were

and (“probably,” Thomas hypothesizes, “because it was so close to her name”), *want*, *come*, *fine*, *shame*, and *carry* (16-17). The silence was a result of the trauma he endured when Anna was killed in the Dresden bombings of World War II, a delayed reaction to the loss of his love. Now, Thomas communicates by carrying a small notepad with him and writing notes to others. The chapters from Thomas’s perspective are written in these notepads. “At the end of each day, [he] would take the book to bed with [him] and read through the pages of [his] life” (18). The pages that follow this statement (19-27) are all pages from the notepad, with one sentence centered on each page—for example, “I want two rolls,” “I’m sorry, this is the smallest I’ve got,” “Help,” and “Ha! Ha! Ha!” As it did for post-9/11 writers like Morrison, language had begun to fail Thomas after the onset of his trauma. Spoken language has escaped him completely and, in these first pages of the novel, his written language retains only the purpose of everyday communication, nothing deeper. “Read[ing] through the pages of [his] life” offers nothing more than a record of his daily superficial interactions. Here, words only serve to facilitate errands and run-ins with strangers and acquaintances, not to build lasting relationships, which is one of the most important purposes of language. At the beginning of the novel, Thomas is not able to use language in this capacity.

The details of the Dresden bombings found in these first chapters are offered not simply to provide a foundation for Thomas’s character. They serve to reinforce one of the realities of trauma, a reality that Eggers also highlights through *A Heartbreaking Work*: that experiences of trauma have many commonalities, that the telling of a trauma expands it into a universal experience by forging connections between the victim and the witnesses. These connections complicate and break down the self-perceived separation

between the victim and the other, and one of the ways in which the novel “blurs these identity lines is by focusing its gaze on [both] the traumatic U.S. bombings of Dresden during World War II [and] the details of the attacks on the World Trade Center” (Mullins 299). By exploring the aftermaths of these two tragedies, one in which the U.S. is the actor and one in which it is the target, the novel “blurs lines of demarcation between victims, perpetrators, and witnesses” (Mullins 299; see also Leys 297). These seemingly clear-cut categories assume that the innocent are always innocent and that the aggressors will always remain so, but history has demonstrated that those who inflict trauma can easily become victims, and vice versa. And just as Resnais relates the truth of a multinational tragedy through the telling of one individual’s trauma in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Foer draws parallels between the experiences of national tragedies and personal trauma. As a result, one message of Foer’s novel is that trauma can transgress identity borders and can also be a unifying experience.

Shortly after losing his ability to speak, Thomas meets Oskar’s grandmother—who is in fact Anna’s sister. The two become friends because the most significant thing they have in common is losing Anna, the most important person in each of their lives. Oskar’s grandmother is losing her eyesight, and the loss of one of the senses is another shared experience that brings her and Thomas together, corporal symbols of the emotional losses that she and Thomas have sustained. They are eventually married, but it is a strained marriage overshadowed by Anna’s death. Thomas encourages Oskar’s grandmother to write; he gives her his old typewriter and she begins her autobiography. Later, she proudly brings the finished product to Thomas, and Foer includes all that

Thomas is able to see: blank pages (121-23). Following this white space, Thomas explains:

I wanted to cry but I didn't cry, I probably should have cried, I should have drowned us there in the room, ended our suffering, they would have found us floating face-down in two thousand white pages... I remembered, just then and far too late, that years before I had pulled the ribbon from the machine, it had been an act of revenge against the typewriter and against myself...—the future homes I had created for Anna, the letters I wrote without response—as if it would protect me from my actual life. (124)

For Thomas, the typewriter is a painful reminder of what he has lost. And so he hoped to turn this pain into something productive—not for himself, but for his wife. The experience of surviving trauma is not just cognitive, but performative. Survivors are driven to produce and enable change (Felman 56). But Thomas's attempt to create positive change for his wife is only half successful: Oskar's grandmother's eyesight has deteriorated to the extent that she cannot recognize the absence of ink on the pages. She believes she has written her life story, unaware that her typing was futile. In order for the experience of trauma to be told, there must be a witness, but Foer's blank pages physically signify the complete absence of the witness. At this point in the novel, therefore, the telling of Oskar's grandmother's trauma is incomplete.

When Thomas and Oskar's grandmother married, they agreed they would not have children. Obviously, Oskar's existence lets the reader know this agreement did not go as planned. When Thomas found out that his wife was pregnant, he left her, only to return many years later, after his son's death. One of the chapters in *Extremely Loud* is a letter from Thomas to his unborn son, a chapter titled "Why I Am Not Where You Are." When Oskar's father was alive, he had a habit of circling the grammatical mistakes he found in everything he read—everything from *New York Times* articles to magazine

advertisements to hardcover novels. Foer's chapter "Why I Am Not Where You Are" is saturated with red ink (208-16; see also fig. 6).

(Fig. 6)

WHY I'M NOT WHERE YOU ARE

4/12/78

To my child: I'm writing this from where your mother's father's shed used to stand, the shed is no longer here, no carpets cover no floors, no windows in no walls, everything has been replaced. This is a library now, that would have made your grandfather happy, as if all of his buried books were seeds, from each book came one hundred. I'm sitting at the end of a long table surrounded by encyclopedias, sometimes I take one down and read about other people's lives, kings, actresses, assassins, judges, anthropologists, tennis champions, tycoons, politicians, just because you haven't received any letters from me don't think I haven't written any. Every day I write a letter to you. Sometimes I think if I could tell you what happened to me that night, I could leave that night behind me, maybe I could come home to you, but that night has no beginning or end, it started before I was born and it's still happening. I'm writing in Dresden, and your mother is writing in the Nothing guest room, for I assume she is, I hope she is, sometimes my hand starts to burn and I am convinced we are writing the same word at the same moment. Anna gave me the typewriter your mother used to write her life story on. She gave it to me only a few weeks before the bombings, I thanked her, she said, "Why are you thanking me? It's a gift for me." "A gift for you?" "You never write to me." "But I'm with you." "So?" "You write to someone you can't be with." "You never sculpt me, but at least you could write to me." It's the tragedy of loving, you can't love anything more than something you miss. I told her, "You never write to me." She said, "You've never given me a typewriter." I started to invent future homes for us, I'd type through the night and give them to her the next day. I imagined dozens of homes, some were magical (a clock

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lope in my pocket, where the future home had been, I heard your grandfather's voice as I walked away, he was still at the door, "I almost forgot." When your mother found me in the bakery on Broadway, I wanted to tell her everything, maybe if I'd been able to, we could have lived differently, maybe I'd be there with you now instead of here. Maybe if I had said, "I lost a baby," if I'd said, "I'm so afraid of losing something I love that I refuse to love anything," maybe that would have made the impossible possible. Maybe, but I couldn't do it, I had buried too much too deeply inside me. And here I am, instead of there. I'm sitting in this library, thousands of miles from my life, writing another letter, I know I won't be able to send, no matter how hard I try and how much I want to. How did that boy making love behind that shed become this man writing this letter at this table?

I love you,
Your father

Many of the mistakes Oskar's father has circled in the letter are grammatical, such as comma splices and titles of books that are not underlined. But others are statements that Oskar's father is calling into question or negating entirely. "You can't love anything more than something you miss" (208), "life is scarier than death" (215), and "I'm so afraid of losing something I love that I refuse to love anything" (216) are all circled in red ink. As Oskar's father reads Thomas's letter, he is shooting down the excuses that Thomas made for abandoning him and his mother. The closing of the letter—"I love you, Your Father" (216)—is also circled. Foer uses the red ink to promote questions about what's real and what isn't, what is true and what is a lie. Oskar's father, haunted by the trauma of his father's abandonment, struggles with these questions as he reads the only words his father has ever shared with him, and Foer's red ink is a bold and jarring representation of the inability of Thomas and his son to connect. This lack of connection is exacerbated by the fact that Thomas never sees the markups on his letter, nor does he receive a response from his son. The red ink on these pages is the closest that the two men ever come to interacting.

Years later, when Thomas learns of his son's death, he returns to visit his wife. He first calls her from a payphone at the airport, despite the fact that he cannot communicate verbally. Thomas explains:

I assumed she would come pick me up and everything would begin to make sense, we would mourn and try to live... we would forgive ourselves, it rang, a woman answered, "Hello?"... I wanted to reach my hand through the mouthpiece, down the line, and into her room... I asked, "4, 7, 4, 8, 7, 3, 2, 5, 5, 9, 9, 6, 8?"... I knew it wouldn't help, I knew no good would come of it, but I stood there in the middle of the airport... and I told her everything: why I'd left, where I'd gone, how I'd found out about [our son's] death, why I'd come back... I broke my life down into letters." (269)

The next two and a half pages are only a series of numbers (see fig. 7), Thomas's attempts to communicate with his wife using the payphone's keypad—"a long passage presumably of great import but wrapped in an unbreakable code" (Versluys 90).

(Fig. 7)

4, 8, 3, 3, 2, 8! 3, 3, 4, 8, 3, 3, 2, 8, 3, 4, 3, 2, 4, 7, 6, 6, 7, 8, 4, 6, 8, 3, 8, 8,
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Thomas's keypad confession mirrors Oskar's grandmother's futile attempts at typing her autobiography. If the history of trauma can only take place through the listening of another (Caruth, *Trauma* 10-11), then the outpourings of both characters are incomplete, as the intended listeners are unable to receive the messages.

The events that occur before Oskar begins his search for the key's lock are fraught with failures in communication. Thomas's notebook, Oskar's grandmother's invisible autobiography, the corrected letter from father to son, and the keypad code are all devices that demonstrate that the characters are arguably well-intentioned, but are unable to connect in any meaningful way. Foer uses these devices to chronicle each attempt to forge connections—attempts that are initially fruitless. It is not until each character becomes involved in the search for the lock that understanding and community begin to develop. These devices also serve to envelop Foer's readers in his characters' traumas. The visual representation of each failure of language draws the reader in "as a participant in its action and as a part of the complex attempt to know" the characters' pain" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 44). Thomas's keypad message, for example, is visually overwhelming to Foer's readers, a numeric representation of the panic that Thomas must feel in trying and failing to convey his thoughts to his former wife.

Foer's use of these devices—the notepad pages, the blank pages, the red ink corrections, and the keypad digits—speaks to the failure of language in a post-9/11 world. The Schell family, Versluys points out, is "so traumatized by the events of history that conventional utterance is no longer possible":

Language is strained to the breaking point... It is barely capable of serving its traditional function as a vehicle of communication between the generations. This is a tale of people who struggle to stay in touch against the fact that their capacity

to relate has been seriously compromised by misfortune. Their family history is so cut through with trauma that their pain, if it is expressible at all, can only be expressed extravagantly. (Versluys 80)

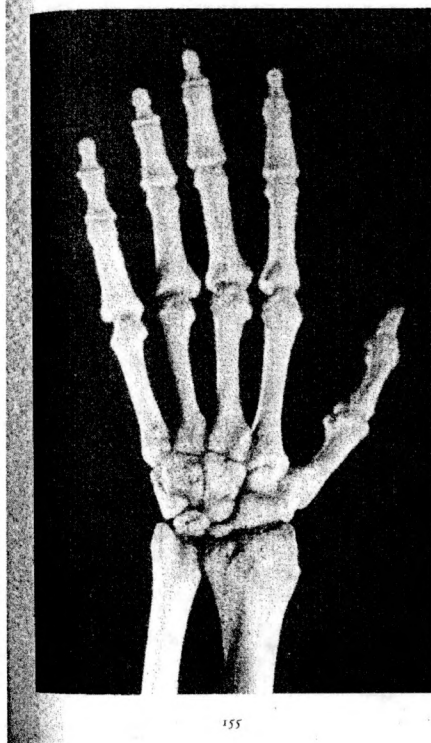
Caruth echoes this link between language and trauma. Trauma is “always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language” (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). Foer’s typographical choices speak to both the failure of language to adequately capture the truth of traumatic experience and the fact that the truth of those experiences is not always known. Foer’s readers will never know what Oskar’s grandmother wrote in her invisible autobiography, nor will they hear what Thomas tried so frantically to say as he pounded the keys of the payphone. The full truth of these characters’ traumas will remain lost. And so Foer’s use of these devices not only illustrates his attempts to truthfully represent the experience of trauma, but also, paradoxically, demonstrates the limitations of such representations.

Language and its failure are not the only ways in which Foer attempts to represent the experience of trauma; he also uses photographs. The photographs appear exclusively in chapters narrated by Oskar. Oskar’s trauma is so complex because it is not simply a result of the loss of his father. His pain is aggrandized by the painful past of his grandparents and the national tragedy of the September 11th attack. The “past has imposed itself upon [him] as a history that [he] survives but does not fully understand” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 68). The “historical specificity” of each event becomes a shared experience because of their combined impact on Oskar, and therefore each historical trauma resonates in the other (Crownshaw 169). The point at which the

characters' traumas converge is Oskar's search for the key's lock. He is attempting to cope with his father's death, one of the thousands of lives that ended on September 11, 2001. But he is also navigating the strained relationship of his grandparents by involving his grandfather in his search before knowing that this man is actually his grandfather. Oskar is consequently faced with the challenge of coming to terms with multiple traumas simultaneously.

Some of the photographs in Oskar's chapters are meant as little more than illustrations, the way children's books use both words and images to create meaning. For example, Oskar describes the hands of one of the Blacks he visits, and comments that the man's hands remind him of those of a skeleton he saw earlier that day in a scientific equipment catalogue. The facing page is a photograph of a hand's bones (see fig. 8).

(Fig. 8)



Other photographs that Foer uses, however, are images that haunt Oskar, or images on which Oskar is fixated. Photographs are particularly appropriate in attempting to capture the struggle of surviving trauma, because they do not rely on words to convey meaning. As literary theorist Paul de Man explains, theories of linguistic terminology show the “referential function of language,” which means that reference is not necessarily a product of intuition:

Intuition implies perception, consciousness, experience, and leads at once into the world of logic and of understanding with all its correlatives, among which aesthetics occupies a prominent place. The assumption that there can be a science of language which is not necessarily a logic leads to the development of a terminology which is not necessarily aesthetic. (de Man 8)

De Man means that the relationship between the signifier and the signified can be arbitrary, and that one person’s understanding of a signifier may differ from another person’s perception. By using images, Foer eliminates the representational distance between the signifier and the signified. There is no arbitrary referent for an experience; there is only the image. Foer thus has the ability to more truthfully capture the experience of trauma. He avoids the potential failure of language by using images that do not rely on words to convey meaning.

Furthermore, images are especially useful symbols to represent experiences of the September 11th attack. The attack was captured on film and watched repeatedly, obsessively. The whole world was able to see the Twin Towers collapse over and over again, the reverberating loss of both human lives and an American icon. Photographs capturing the moment before the second plane collided with the south tower, the thick smoke that poured out and up from each building, and the collapse of each tower were unavoidable in the hours, days, and weeks after the attacks. This visual experience of the

September 11th attack is analogous to the relationship between trauma and time. Caruth explains that trauma is a result of an event that “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again and again” in the thoughts and actions of the victim (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). Mitchum Huehls, contributor to *Literature after 9/11*, explains this temporal phenomenon further:

Because consciousness cannot absorb the traumatic event in the moment of its occurrence... the time of the original event inflects all future times, thereby skewing temporal experience in general. Trauma is thus not of a moment, but instead spans an individual’s temporal continuum, constituting [one’s] past, present, and future. (42)

Images that are repeated, such as the photographs described below, can therefore visually represent the cognitive reality of a traumatized individual as the past imposes itself upon the victim’s present experiences again and again. Each photograph is a moment frozen in time, and the repetition of that photograph demonstrates the reemergence of the moment of trauma in the victim’s day-to-day life.

Many of the photographs Foer uses throughout the novel are in Oskar’s journal, titled “Stuff That Happened to Me.” If to be traumatized is “to be possessed by an image or event” (Caruth, *Trauma* 5), these are the images that possess Oskar. For example, after Oskar finds the key in his father’s bedroom and decides to undertake the mission of locating the key’s lock, he is overwhelmed by the sheer impossibility of finding that lock. According to Oskar, “every 2.777 seconds another lock was born in New York” (52). The next page is a photograph of hundreds of keys (53; see also fig. 9).

(Fig. 9)

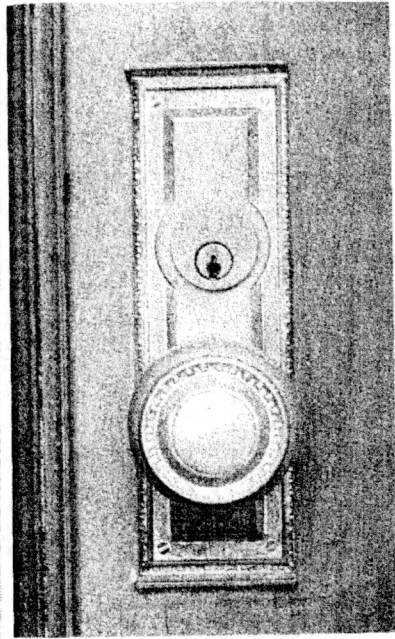


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Foer uses this photograph to visually represent one of Oskar's stresses that overshadows his journey.

Two photos in particular are repeated throughout the novel. The experience of trauma is intrinsically circuitous, involving the "uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations or other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 11). These phenomena usually include one or a few central recurring images. The two repeated photos in *Extremely Loud* are crucial to understanding Oskar's experience of trauma. The first photograph is of a keyhole (see fig. 10). If the photo of the keys represents Oskar's anxiety about his quest, the photographs of the keyhole symbolize Oskar's destination, the intended result of his search for answers.

(Fig. 10)



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Ultimately, the key from his father's bedroom does not lead Oskar to any answers about his father's life or death. It was simply left behind by the vase's previous owner (298-302). At first, Oskar is crushed by the fruitlessness of his search. After the senselessness of the World Trade Center attack, it is almost doubly traumatic that an experience Oskar hoped would bring him closer to his father's memory proved to be a dead end.

Nevertheless, the search for the lock that matches the key is an undertaking that helps Oskar heal after the trauma of the September 11th attack and his father's death, because the search enables Oskar to connect more deeply with the people in his life. Language has failed the Schell family since the beginning of the novel, and most of the characters' attempts to communicate have been unsuccessful. The search for the lock is the experience that brings Oskar and his grandfather—and, as a result, both of his

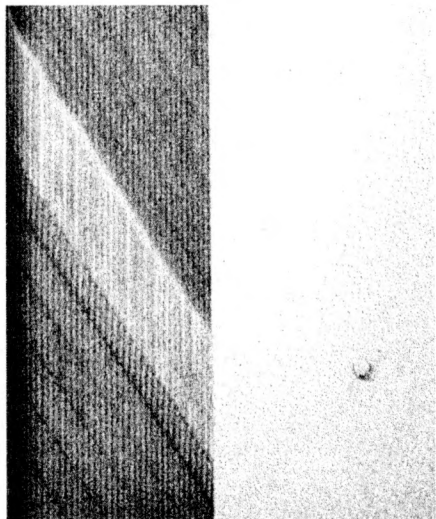
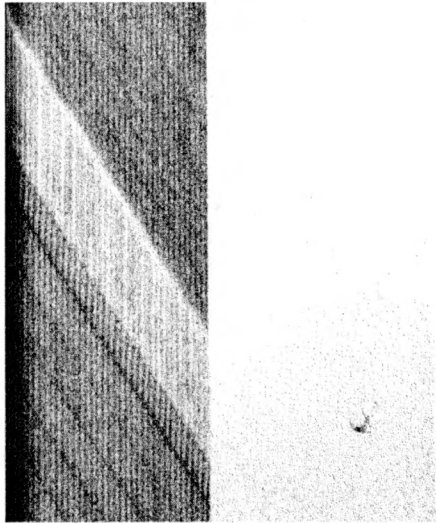
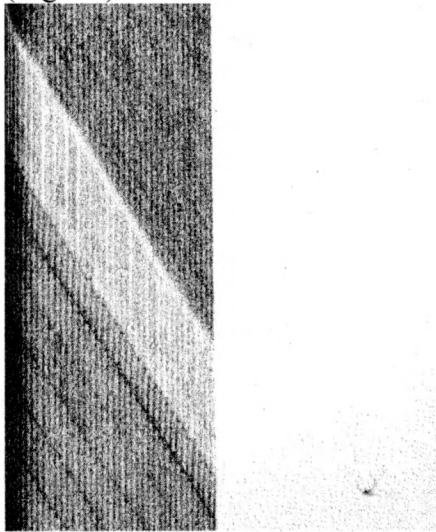
grandparents—together. So while Thomas's interactions were limited to errands and run-ins with strangers and acquaintances at the beginning of the novel, now Thomas is able to build a relationship with his grandson through their shared experiences. In the process, he begins to repair the relationship with Oskar's grandmother and atone for abandoning his son. Whatever differences these characters may have had in the past, this shared experience forges a connection and an understanding between them. This is not an uncommon occurrence among survivors of trauma. Psychologist Kai Erikson explains that "trauma shared can serve as a source of communality in the same way that common languages and common backgrounds can" (186). It's interesting that Erikson mentions language as a common thread, while it is a mode of communication that has so far eluded the Schell family. The shared experiences of the September 11th attack, the loss of Oskar's father, and the search for the lock are the experiences that have *become* their common language. The photograph of the lock is a symbol of both the trauma that Oskar and his family have endured and the experience that brings them together. It is both a haunting and a healing image. Oskar's search brings him closer to coming to terms with his father's death, and these are not steps that could have been taken in isolation. His journey is intertwined with the journeys of those around him. *Extremely Loud*, therefore, is not simply the story of three individuals in relation to the events of their past, but a story of "the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another," how trauma may lead "to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of *listening to another's wound*" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 8, my emphasis).

In addition to the photograph of the keyhole, Foer also includes a photograph of a person falling—or jumping—from one of the Twin Towers, and this is the second image

that is repeated throughout the novel. Oskar obsesses about exactly how his father died, whether it was from smoke inhalation or the impact when the towers collapsed. Oskar also considers the horrifying question of whether it would have been better to jump from the towers and face certain, immediate death than to wait inside, unsure of what would happen and when. The image of the falling/jumping man represents the border between life and death. Oskar's life is so closely bound to his father's death and guilt from Oskar's own survival that the photograph capturing the last moment of a man's life, the image of the moment right before death, is an image that Oskar is both fascinated with and haunted by. Just as Eggers' obsession with him and Toph dying in a car accident exemplifies Freud's death-instinct, Oskar's fixation on this image is "the continual reappearance of a death [he] has not quite grasped, the reemergence, in sight, of [his] *not knowing* the difference between life and death" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 37). Oskar is unable to view his life after September 11th without the context of his father's death. That trauma has become an intrinsic part of the fabric of his existence. The image of the falling/jumping man, marking the border between life and death, represents how life and death have become linked in Oskar's mind.

The photograph of the man in midair is included throughout the novel, but appears consecutively on the last several pages of the book (326-41; see also fig. 11). The image is altered from one page to the next so that the man is in a slightly different position on a vertical axis in each photograph; thus the pages function as a flip-book, creating the illusion of movement. However, the pages are not ordered so that the person is falling from the tower. On the contrary, when the pages are flipped quickly, the person appears to be ascending into the sky.

(Fig. 11)



Oskar explains:

I felt in the space between the bed and the wall, and found *Stuff That Happened to Me*... I found the pictures of the falling body. Was it Dad? Maybe... I ripped the pages out of the book. I reversed the order, so the last one was first, and the first was last... If I'd had more pictures, he would've flown through a window, back into the building... The plane would've flown backward away from him, all the way to Boston... We would have been safe. (325-26)

Reordering the photos is a way for Oskar to impose order on the chaos that arose from his father's death. He cannot change the past, but he can change the images that represent the past in *Stuff That Happened to Me*. So although his reality remains the same, his art affords Oskar an opportunity to exercise some control over how that reality is represented. And as Oskar adds images and stories related to his search for the lock to his journal, the title becomes less fitting. He is no longer just chronicling "stuff" that happened to him, but instead includes "stuff" that he has done. Letting go of this passive role and embracing a more active one is the closest that Oskar will come to rewriting his "impossible" history.

In *Extremely Loud*, Foer illustrates how the Schell family builds relationships through their shared experiences, not through language and conventional communication. The failure of language is not confined to the problems that Oskar's family has. It is indicative of the potential of language to fail in a post-traumatic—and, more specifically, a post-9/11—world. One of the shared perspectives that brought the Schell family together is "an understanding that the laws by which the natural world has been governed as well as the decencies by which the human world has been governed are now suspended—or were never active to begin with" (Erikson 194). Foer uses technical and

typographical experimentation to convey the truth of his characters' changed worlds,
where conventional utterance is no longer possible.

Conclusion

In the early twentieth century, with the dawn of the modernist movement, came works of art, music, and literature that were new and unfamiliar to viewers, listeners, and readers. For example, Marcel Duchamp's cubist painting *Nude Descending a Staircase* was a jarring creation that was initially rejected by Duchamp's cubist contemporaries (Mackenzie). Igor Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring* was so unusual that Stravinsky's first audience bordered on rioting ("Stravinsky's Riotous *Rite of Spring*"). The experiments in works produced during this time were a result of the cultural shifts of the time, culminating with the First World War. At the time, French poet Charles Peguy suggested that "the world [had] changed less since the time of Jesus Christ than it [had] in the last thirty years" (quoted in Ball 6). It's not difficult to imagine this statement being made in reference to the twenty-first century world. Cultural critic Sara Fishko explained that the modernist movement was so significant because, in many artistic and literary movements, the *content* of art changes to reflect or respond to society. However, in the early twentieth century, "the *form* of art was not enough to reflect the content. [Artists] had to find a new form" ("Culture Shock 1913," my emphasis).

Just as the modernist era caused a seismic shift in art and literature, so have the societal and psychological changes of the past decades resulted in a shift in postmodern narratives in America, and part of this shift can be explained and contextualized through trauma theory. Only within the last thirty years through the study of post-traumatic stress disorder have trauma and its effects been in the forefront of our national conversation. Writers and artists are often among the first to register cultural upheavals. And just as the form of art changed in the early twentieth century to adapt to and reflect a changing

industrial and global society, so has the form of narratives like Eggers' and Foer's adapted to relate the experience of trauma as it is understood today.

Studies in trauma theory have suggested that "trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 4). In an era marked by the simultaneous interconnectedness and alienation of the digital age and overshadowed by American involvement in two wars spanning about a decade and involving tens of thousands of troops, there are many wounds crying out, and authors will continue to experiment with form in order to faithfully convey such experiences. Critic Richard Crownshaw explains that, "irrespective of our differing historical experiences, or lack of them," there is a universal trauma "that affects us all, at the core of our very being, and which makes us receptive to the historical traumas in this 'catastrophic age'" (170). Furthermore, as sociologist Theodor Adorno suggested, "It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, its consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it" (1). In narratives that recount this suffering, technical and structural experimentation is necessary to adequately represent the shattered, fragmented worlds the characters have been thrust into and to demonstrate the fact that these characters' worlds have changed irrevocably.

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