

ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: THE WORLD IS OLD AND NEW AGAIN: CULTURAL TRAUMA AND SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

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This dissertation explores the emergent cultural aftereffects of September 11, 2001. I consider how popular US narratives from the decade following that day's events evidence an ongoing, pervasive struggle with certain of the hijackings' especially troubling features, manifesting September 11 as a cultural trauma. I distinguish cultural trauma as an intersubjective phenomenon from psychological trauma and its individualized emphasis. I also distinguish my approach from the dominant ways historical, cultural and literary studies have typically conceptualized trauma as a primarily Freudian-theorized, pathological reaction to extreme happenings. Rather, drawing on Janoff-Bulman's shattered assumptions model of psychological trauma, I define cultural trauma as a radical disruption of basic, common, taken-for-granted, culturally-generated and -structured beliefs about what constitutes a community's ordinary life.

I focus on how the hijackings' shocking and well-publicized developments shattered assumptions fundamental to mainstream American understandings of daily life. To trace these shattered assumptions, I review ten popular culture texts: three popular press oral history collections – the 2002 *September 11: An Oral History*, the 2002 *Never Forget: An Oral History of September 11*, and the 2007 *Tower Stories: An Oral History of 9/11* – as well as the 2002 *Frontline* documentary “Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero;” the 2003 Tom Junod *Esquire* article “The Falling Man;” the mid-to-late-2000s television series *Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *FlashForward*; the 2008 Christopher Nolan film *The Dark Knight*; and the 2007 Don DeLillo novel *Falling Man*. By assessing and comparing these texts' primary thematic concerns, I outline how each narrative, situated in varying media and genres, engages vulnerability in the forms of existential insecurity and the troubling of meaningful and ethical choice, exposing fragmented foundational beliefs in the wake of September 11. However, instead of reconstructing these fragmented pieces into an unequivocal new whole, these texts ambivalently instantiate that day's unresolved cultural fallout, serving to document the still evolving structures of feeling constituting this cultural trauma. Accordingly, this study evidences how popular culture serves as a site for recognizing and negotiating September 11 as a cultural trauma while suggesting how cultural trauma might be recognized and negotiated at other times of stark cultural change.

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SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

by

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2011

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PREFACE

“Where were you on September 11?” Ask this question, and unless those whom you ask were very young at the time, you likely will receive detailed answers. People will tell you where they were and what they were doing on that day in the year 2001, regardless of how far removed they were from any crash site. This question has arisen consistently whenever I mention my research in conversation, helping me to cultivate a rich and dynamic sense of the shared yet individualized impact of September 11. This curious coupling of apparent distance from an event with a sense of deep involvement also characterizes how my own personal interests relate to this intellectual inquiry.

On September 11, 2001, I was twenty-six years old and on vacation in Rome, Italy with my immediate family: my parents and my two older brothers. In the late 1950s, my father had left West Germany while it was still rebuilding from World War II. My maternal grandparents had emigrated from Italy after World War I and the flu pandemic that plagued the beginning of the twentieth century. After avoiding airplanes for forty years from fear of flying, my mother had finally agreed to a second visit to the country where she traced her roots. Together, we enjoyed the middle class benefits of international tourism in relative comfort and safety, benefits my grandparents’ interwar and father’s post-war immigration to the US had made possible.

This personal presumption of security and autonomy, of a separation from past global upheavals, poverty in foreign lands, and the dependence on forces beyond ourselves that such conditions unveil, echoes the dominant narrative so central to American culture’s tenacious – however often belied – portrait of itself: the “American

Dream.” With my intimate identification with such a narrative, I nevertheless witnessed its graphic violation from afar, by watching CNN and BBC international news coverage of September 11 on a television in an Italian hotel room. Circumstance had positioned me on September 7 to leave the US as a nation considered at peace and re-enter it on September 17 as a state readying for war, highlighting the swift, drastic, confounding changes that explicitly challenged the dominant narrative of the “American Dream” and portended what at the time seemed to be possibly irrevocable alterations to daily life in the United States.

When flying back to Philadelphia on September 17, I tried to stay calm in the frantic European airports and suppressed in-flight inklings of doom at the imagined prospect of a bomb explosion. I was not a victim of September 11, but I felt that I could – like anyone else – by happenstance be the unsuspecting victim of whatever might come next. Afterward, I could remember exactly where I was and what I was doing on September 11, 2001, and others could as well. As time moved forward, I began to wonder in increasingly critical ways what it might mean to be simultaneously detached from and invested in this event – one that, by some accounts, changed very little, and by others, might even have “changed the world.”

DEDICATION

This project explores the cultural aftereffects of a large-scale crisis throughout a large and diverse population from the premised question: has the world changed as a result of September 11, 2001? If so, how, and for whom? However, my research on these terms recognizes that for many, there is no question of a changed world.

I write this dedication in honor of Salvatore Zisa and the 2,995 others who were killed that day, those who survived, and their loved ones, for whom the world has not been the same since.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following journals and collections for publishing portions of this dissertation and for permitting their inclusion in this project: *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture*; *Historia Actual Online*; McFarland & Company, Inc.'s *The 21st Century Superhero: Essays on Gender, Genre and Globalization in Film*; Fairleigh Dickinson University Press's *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture: September 11 and Beyond*; Greenwood Press's *September 11 in Popular Culture: A Guide*; and Brown Walker Press's *Engaging Terror: A Critical and Interdisciplinary Approach*. Full citations are footnoted within the text and listed on the Works Consulted page.

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Prologue: September 11, 2001¹

If you were living on the East Coast of the United States on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, you awoke to a day remarkable for its enticingly mild weather and still, clear blue sky. With autumn approaching, the at times oppressive humidity had dissipated, and like a weight lifting, the air was light. The morning began with business as usual, with New York City's mayoral primary elections slightly disrupting daily routines there and drawing local news coverage. The national media stories that had inundated the now-fading summer – shark attacks and the scandal of the missing Washington intern Chandra Levy, the apparent lover of Congressman Gary Condit – persisted in the stream of current events.

At 8:46 a.m., while morning talk shows offered weather forecasts and headline overviews of world politics, something interrupted the ordinary schedule. This “something” was abrupt, confusing, and destructive, and depending on where you were at the time, it seemed to be different things. If you were in the North Tower of the World Trade Center, between the ninety-third and the ninety-ninth floors, you might never have known what had happened. If you were above or below those floors and without a view outside, you felt the building shake, sway sharply, and right itself, and wondered if a gas line or bomb had exploded somewhere. In some places as remote as the tower's lobby or the shopping concourse at its base, you would have seen people stumbling from the

¹ I begin with this concise review to provide readers with an immediate historical reference for how principal events unfolded on September 11, 2001. This account, which includes both initial perceptual confusions and later confirmed facts, summons the complex interplay within lived experience of encountering both uncertain threats and actual horrors. This project's analysis of aftermath responses to that day is primarily concerned with how perception, experience, and understanding interact to produce “known worlds,” or in this case, what is known of “September 11.”

elevators suddenly and inexplicably badly burned. If you were in the South Tower, you might have started to leave your desk after hearing and feeling the mysterious collision next door, until a public announcement reassured everyone that their building was safe and the workday could continue. At the North Tower's top, fires erupted, smoke spread, and burst pipes threw water throughout your offices and down the stairwells. If you had a view outside of the building, you might have seen a passenger jet race into its façade, and watched in horror as a multi-floor gash in that façade gaped open with debris and office workers perched along its edges, surrounded by showers of paper flurrying in the exposed air. You might also have begun to see some of those office workers, who were crowding away from the heat for a cool breath outside, falling or – to avoid death by smoke and fire – jumping to their deaths on the distant streets below. In fact, later estimates suggested that as many as one in every six of the dead from the North Tower died by jumping (Junod, "The Falling Man" 180).

On television and radio, journalists with breaking news expressed initial concern that possibly a small plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. Cautious speculation about how such an accident could occur and research into precedents for such a calamity would pepper the coverage until 9:03 a.m. At that moment, while network news cameras broadcast live images of the first tower burning, a second plane swiftly burst into sight, only to disappear into the South Tower, with a churning ball of flames rolling out of the building's opposite side confirming that impact had occurred. Stunned journalists covering the unfolding events now began to speak of terrorism, talk that would eventually crystallize around the name Osama Bin Laden and his violently extremist global network, al-Qaeda.

In New York City, both on- and off-duty rescue workers, from city and Port Authority police officers to firefighters and paramedics, were scrambling to the two towers as their occupants slowly made their way down as many as ninety-one floors. Survivors would later recount their gratitude for the heroic selflessness of gear-laden response teams climbing past them on the narrow stairwells to reach victims still trapped on the higher floors. The equipment weighing them down would not suffice to extinguish the jet fuel-ignited fires sustained by flammable furniture and office supplies that were raging across the World Trade Center's wide-open floor plans, but responders would try to facilitate the evacuation. In the meantime, misinformed 911 operators were telling the many frightened employees around the crash zones who managed to get a call through overworked phone lines to stay put and await rescue. Most of these employees had no choice but to wait anyway; no route down past the impact area was available in the North Tower, and only one stairwell was passable for exit downward from the top of the South Tower. Rooftop rescues, which had occurred after the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, were impossible this time; doors to the roof were locked, and conditions outside were unfavorable for helicopter landings. Many of those trapped employees, like some aboard the doomed flights, would have brief phone conversations and leave voice messages with loved ones to share their fears and say good-bye, knowing they were about to die.

At about 9:40 a.m., another plane – now understood, like the others, to be a commercial airliner – crashed into a wall of the Pentagon. Shortly after, as a safety precaution, the Federal Aviation Administration grounded all 4,500 aircraft that were still in flight. At the same time, the US Capitol and the White House's West Wing, newly

recognized as potential targets for ongoing, unpredictable threats, were evacuated. It would later be learned that United Airlines Flight 93, which smashed into a field near Shanksville, PA, was likely headed for one of those crucial federal government sites. Passengers who had spoken via airfones and cell phones with loved ones on the ground realized that, unlike past hijackings which typically served as a platform for negotiation or simply publicity, this commandeering of their airplane would unavoidably end in death for all on board. As a result, they coordinated an attempt to regain control of the cockpit, provoking the hijackers into giving up their mission and downing the plane, killing everyone instantly, but potentially saving hundreds at the intended crash site.

Around this time in Lower Manhattan, first the South Tower, then the North Tower crumbled while unknown numbers of civilians and rescue workers remained inside. Along with those untold deaths, the towers' falls created a noxious footprint, unsettling nearby buildings, crushing everything on the streets and sidewalks below, and spewing into the air an unhealthy chemical and biological mix. New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani ordered the entire section of the city evacuated, with people heading uptown on foot or taking ferries across the river. For those in the area, survival of the plane impacts, the building collapses, and their dangerous debris clouds seemed haphazard and precarious. People credited everything from the mayoral primaries to their children's first day of school with sparing them from being in the buildings early and therefore at the wrong time. Many who had the misfortune of showing up for work before 9:00 a.m. but who fortunately managed to escape were aware of near misses, with disaster striking nearby colleagues and friends but somehow not them. It was a day of repeated shocks, ushering in a period of extended suspense, of waiting for the next shoe

to drop because, after all, shoe after unprecedented shoe had been dropping from morning until nightfall. Having known nothing of its beginning, there was no way for most Americans to know for sure when and how the danger would end, leading to a foreboding that, conceivably, more extraordinary perils could still lay ahead.

By the end of the day, all seven buildings comprising the World Trade Center complex had collapsed, as well as a section of the Pentagon. When asked at a press conference that evening how many people were lost, Mayor Giuliani had replied, ““The number of casualties will be more than any of us can bear ultimately” (Powell), despairing words reflecting a sense in that moment of overwhelming uncertainty, grief, and helplessness. In the end, a total of 2,996 people died in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania, with more to come in later years as the environmental dangers of recovery work in Manhattan fostered fatal health complications. The death tolls included 341 firefighters and two paramedics, thirty-seven Port Authority police officers, and twenty-three city police officers. As a result, much of the subsequent news coverage focused on the devastating losses for the tight-knit organizations of uniformed professionals whose members had known each other long and well.

One study has shown that ninety-eight percent of adults in the United States watched at least one hour of that day’s televised news (Schuster et al. 29). At first, reporting dominated even non-news channels and continued uninterrupted by commercials for several days. Unlike the comparatively isolated Pentagon and the rural Pennsylvania field, the urban World Trade Center was immediately visible to multitudes in its vicinity and almost immediately to anyone with a television, especially given the extensive media coverage that began soon after the first plane’s impact. For this reason,

American television viewers would not witness much at the other two sites, but they would witness the standing towers – first unexpectedly hit by planes, then with flames and smoke surging from the highest floors where people were trapped and often jumping – their collapse while civilians and rescue workers were still inside, and the resulting search-and-rescue efforts, which would produce only a dishearteningly meager handful of survivors. In fact, every day after September 11, newscasts persistently replayed images of the attacks and aired footage of the slow, gruesome recovery process in the World Trade Center’s rubble, a mass of human and architectural remains overshadowed by latticework steel beam fragments that became known locally as the “Pile” and generally as “Ground Zero.” A few statistics calculated within a year of the attacks evoke the grisly character of what transpired in New York: 19,858 body parts were found (“9/11 by the Numbers”) while only 291 bodies were found intact and only 1,102 bodies could be identified by the New York medical examiner (Templeton and Lumley). Also, 1,717 families had not yet received any remains of loved ones (“9/11 by the Numbers”). In fact, as of January of 2010, only fifty-nine percent of the remains collected at the site had been identified (Reuters). After that day, the date itself, “September 11,” and even more simply, “9/11,” entered circulation as the shorthand reference to the entirety of the simultaneous hijackings and their consequences. However, for the American public, the horror of what occurred at the World Trade Center figures substantially in what reference to “September 11” signifies.

Introduction, Literature Reviews, and Methodological Overview: Trauma, Culture and September 11, 2001

Figuring a Day and Its Aftereffects

The world changed on September 11, 2001. It also changed on September 10, 2001 and on September 12, 2001. The world changes every day, with every choice that directs human action in one way and not another, subtly shaping the form of what we all know to be. These choices crystallize out of contingency a previously-unknown present and an as-yet unfolding future that the evolving present makes newly possible.²

The butterfly effect offers one rationale. This is chaos theory's metaphor for how variations in initial conditions, no matter how seemingly insignificant, can produce crucially varying outcomes. For example, a butterfly flapping its wings in western Europe might contribute just enough energy to complete the atmospheric factors necessary to generate an east Asian tsunami – so that if there were no butterfly in Europe, there would be no tsunami in Asia. From such a perspective, even the most minute of our unthinking daily activities become ripe with portentous, world-changing implications, although we likely will not realize this, if at all, until much later, when consequences

² Martin Heidegger argues that time forms the transcendental horizon of all being, the limit possibility of understanding existence in our life-world. In more material terms, Raymond Williams conceives of culture as a fluid meaning-making process attuned to temporal constraints and developments, as indicated by how residual (traces of the past in the present) and emergent (future possibilities emerging in the present) elements inform any given contemporary cultural formation (*Marxism* 122-127). Different but compatible conceptions of how experience becomes known and understood deriving from phenomenology – particularly hermeneutic phenomenology (see Watson and Watson-Franke 39-50) – and cultural studies contribute to my implicit premises for this project.

come to fruition.³ Another explanation, focused less on the mechanics and more on the perception and understanding of material circumstances, derives from phenomenology. Within this framework, intersubjective processes structure each person's interpretive encounter with his or her environment. In effect, existence becomes comprehensible at all to people through a continual, mutually-constructing engagement between what their socially-produced subjectivities prepare them to expect and what a dynamic universe has to offer.⁴ From this perspective, the known world changes with every engagement that exceeds or confounds extant social constructions of reality (Berger and Luckmann; Kuhn). While rooted in different premises, disciplines, and applications, these theoretical conceptions draw on a similar appreciation for how ordinary human thought and action matter substantively to the world we apprehend and anticipate.

In these senses, then, the world changes every day. Notably, though, on September 11, 2001, many actually noticed this, and at the same time.⁵ Something

³ Jean Baudrillard notes, "the Manhattan attack...might be presented as quite a good illustration of chaos theory: an initial impact causing incalculable consequences" (23).

⁴ Stolorow, drawing on this kind of "phenomenological contextualism" (1), notes that horizons of understanding – possibilities and limits for knowledge of the world set by a subject's historical, relational circumstances – can seem incommensurable between those who have been traumatized and those who have not (15).

⁵ This assertion at its most sweeping has been contested in many ways, including in purely political terms (Cole; Dobson) and on the grounds of its problematic erasure of historical context (McAlister). Nevertheless, terrorism expert Brian Jenkins views September 11 as having altered the perceptions at least of those in the security community, who would now have to regard as possible scenarios once considered far-fetched. Analysis shifted from threat-based (countered by finite resources) to vulnerability-based (featuring infinite potential) assessments, through which the magnitude of consequences would trump uncertain likelihoods of an event occurring ("The Future Course"). Moreover, Baudrillard, claiming that "the whole play of history and power is disrupted by this event" (4), theorizes that a concentrated global system permits "a global catastrophic process" (8) and that, essentially, terrorism is endemic to

dramatic and terrible happened to a lot of people in front of a planet of witnesses, leading to speculation that things would be different, and not in a good way, even if those who thought so either did not agree or could not say with certainty how. At the very least, one cultural practice changed immediately, even as the hijackings were underway.

Conventional wisdom had held that hostages had a better chance of staying safe and keeping exigencies from escalating by discreetly awaiting resolution between hijackers and political or military authorities. However, once United Flight 93 passengers learned about the World Trade Center crashes through phone calls to loved ones on the ground, this common approach immediately and irrevocably altered to a mindset that civilians must get involved, that they form the last line of defense against harm, not only to themselves, but to others as well, because terrorists now seemed to seek destruction rather than negotiation. This approach manifested in travelers thwarting Richard Reid's attempt to ignite a bomb in his shoe on American Airlines Flight 63 in December 2001

globalization (57). On the other hand, according to Slavoj Žižek, the “greatest surprise” was that “America got what it fantasized about” (387), experiencing an event well-foreshadowed in the media-generated imaginary (385-387). However, according to another assessment, Lee Clarke argues that September 11 did not change everything, but it did change people's imaginations about their life possibilities, which influences their choices (x; 161). Yet fellow sociologist Bernhard Giesen contends, “The terrorist attack on the Twin Towers was such a traumatic event that it transformed collective identities, reshuffled international relations and inspired wars. After the triumphant celebration of the millennium, America and the West had to face the sudden and shocking experience of their vulnerability and even mortality. As many commentators stated: nothing was like it was before, the world had changed” (10). Similarly, from a psychology standpoint, Danieli, Brom and Sills contend that September 11 presented many with a “demarcating rupture” between an old and a new sense of normal (2). Importantly, psychologist Lenore Meldrum's informal surveying of clinical practitioners in countries such as Australia, Belgium, and Israel illustrates that personal experience and cultural/political contexts inflect interpretations of and responses to September 11 (63-81), leading me to conclude, in accord with the premise of this project, that someone's perception of “the world changing” and its attendant implications depends critically upon what that person's already-formulated viewpoints about the ordinary and the extraordinary prepare them to believe and expect.

and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab's attempt to ignite a bomb in his underwear on Northwest Airlines Flight 253 in December 2009. This approach also informs the "If You See Something, Say Something" campaign which current Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Janet Napolitano has exported nationally from its origins in New York City, where it prompted a street vendor's successful intervention against a Times Square bombing in May 2010 (Daly). This novel addition to the average person's repertoire of safety precautions⁶ poses but one of the many identifiable transformations to how we now view foreseeable urban dangers as well as our customary role regarding transportation and crowds, among other features of daily life.

Yet, while such shifts are important, might the "changed world" inaugurated on September 11 involve even more complex, pervasive alterations to the horizons constituting our self-world relationship? Commonly, those who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event – whether that event involves a deadly car crash or the live broadcast of the September 11 attacks – have responded, "The world is different now. It's like a whole new place, and things will never be the same." These entirely disparate events provoke a similar reaction because of the nature of trauma itself. As psychologist Ronnie Janoff-Bulman and others have argued, trauma shatters the most fundamental assumptions that govern functional daily living, leaving survivors and witnesses questioning what they really can know about and do in this world. This shattered assumptions model, developed in the context of psychology, seeks to articulate how

⁶ Baudrillard envisions as a "subtle mental terrorism" the idea of potential terrorists living clandestine among us, as did the September 11 hijackers for years, causing suspicion of all individuals, including the least conspicuous, and all situations, even the most benign (20). This reflects a recognized aim of terrorist strategy: to produce sufficient fear in a nation's population to erode social and political trust (Breckenridge and Zimbardo 116-118).

trauma affects individuals and what traumatic aftereffects indicate not just about the post-traumatic state, but also about the state of “ordinary” life, the state that trauma foregrounds as a shatterable world.

I propose that for this reason, trauma poses significant cultural implications as well. After all, culture serves as a site through which meanings about human life are produced, challenged, and negotiated (R. Williams, *Culture and Society* 282; Hall 228). Indeed, given that culture cultivates and supports meaningful human life, I argue that an event of sufficient scale and scope to shatter collectively-held fundamental beliefs can trigger a cultural trauma, wherein members of whole communities, whether neighborhoods or nations, must wrestle with similar meaning disruption and reconstruction.⁷ Unlike notions of collective trauma that tend to signal only that many people experience distress after encountering the same crisis, or that fail to account for the distinct ways individuals interact personally with seemingly impersonal crises, or notions of cultural trauma that overemphasize the psychoanalytic dysfunctions of melancholia and dissociation, my approach to cultural trauma focuses on why and how particular features of a crisis destabilize certain groups of people, leaving them in its wake susceptible to a spectrum of responses oriented specifically to the crisis’s self- and worldview violations. Accordingly, I adapt contemporary formulations of trauma theory to a cultural studies understanding of how trauma functions as a crisis of knowledge and

⁷ Putting this process in phenomenological terms, which more fully attend to how embodied subjects interact relationally with their environment, Stolorow regards trauma as shattering “absolutisms” that create the experience of a “stable and predictable” world, exposing the contingency of one’s dependence on the world rather than on one’s self” (16).

power for individuals in relationship with their communities, exposing fault lines within cultural formations and, in doing so, occasioning the need for alternative possibilities.

Ultimately, since daily life tends to become meaningful through narrative structures – since fundamental assumptions tend to be constructed through narrative forms that can also manifest in their disruption the shattering of these assumptions⁸ – I evaluate these interactions of injury and context through a study of various narrative responses to September 11. Specifically, the popular culture – which I view here as any cultural form readily-accessible to and readily-interactive with the average, or non-expert, person or people – of oral histories, magazines, television, film, and literary fiction provide useful resources for excavating meaning challenge and negotiation. Throughout these diverse texts linger both the threat to conscious intention that the butterfly effect poses – the idea that even our most inadvertent activities can shape our most consequential destinies – and the discomfiting ambivalence of living in a world where the day-to-day might largely seem quite similar to our pre-September 11 routines, even as the horizons for our existential stability have shifted to accommodate the post-September 11 possibility of sudden, unforeseeable, and utter calamity.⁹ Accordingly, in this project I study how September 11 functions as an instance of cultural trauma and, by extension,

⁸ The idea that narrative as a popular culture practice renders life meaningful, particularly when engaging crisis, appears in many forms. For example, Arthur Frank argues that “the figure of the wounded storyteller is ancient,” since mythological and Biblical figures have long used physical wounds to testify to their stories’ truth. Alternately, for the sick, anyone who can turn “illness into story transforms fate into experience” with the story enabling “the common bond of suffering that joins bodies in their shared vulnerability” (xi).

⁹ In a review of post-September 11 revisions in thinking, psychologists Gold and Faust note, “Suddenly, we are now confronted with the potential for a different type of catastrophic situation that is vastly greater in both scope and duration” than earlier crises such as the Oklahoma City bombing (4).

what September 11 as a cultural trauma suggests about general processes of cultural destabilization and change. In effect, through this dissertation, I explore how trauma exposes, tests, and reconstitutes how cultural subjects and worlds are constructed. First, though, I review the literature on current formulations of trauma in the fields of psychology, American Studies, sociology, and literary and cultural studies to outline the research from which I both draw my work and depart to delineate a revised theory of cultural trauma in relation to the September 11, 2001 hijackings and their subsequent narrative representations.

Psychological Trauma: An Introduction to Its Critical Features

Before more directly connecting the field of trauma studies to American Studies, I need first to lay some groundwork by outlining some basic, commonly-acknowledged features of trauma.¹⁰ Psychiatrist Judith Herman, drawing on research with populations as diverse as Vietnam veterans and rape survivors, distinguishes certain commonalities in their post-traumatic symptoms. From these commonalities, she formulates a view of traumatization as a process of injury and disempowerment through physical and volitional violation – that is, overpowering of a victim’s body and will – and recovery as a the struggle to integrate this experience into a meaningful world view (33-50, 133-236; see also Janoff-Bulman 169). Yet Herman also argues that this struggle proceeds differently for different people. She notes, “stress-resistant individuals appear to be those with high sociability, a thoughtful and active coping style, and a strong perception of

¹⁰ It is important to note at the outset that pathological reactions to trauma are noteworthy specifically because they are non-normative. Social scientists are attending increasingly to the notion of resilience, or a condition of healthful coping with stressful events (for a brief introductory overview, see Suedfeld).

their ability to control their destiny” (58). While she cites luck or fate and the material resources at one’s disposal among the salient, essentially uncontrollable factors mitigating or exacerbating traumatic recovery (60), and she acknowledges that the “character of the traumatic event itself” primarily determines the likelihood and extent of post-traumatic symptoms (57), she also recognizes palliative benefits for those who “struggled to construct some reasonable purpose for the actions in which they were engaged and to communicate this understanding to others” (59). For example, she reports, “Sometimes survivors attribute their survival to the image of a connection that they managed to preserve, even in extremity, though they are well aware that this connection was fragile and could easily have been destroyed” (60). In other words, under conditions that undermine both agency and bodily integrity, individuals who retained a belief in some measure of continued autonomy, however unfounded, suffered diminished psychological harm from the traumatic event. This strategy of traumatic coping points to the significant role meaning-making plays in moments of terror. Yet this strategy depends on an ability to find constructive possibilities under circumstances whose horror seems to preclude any such possibilities. In this sense, traumatic experience and recovery seem to revolve around how knowledge of, and power in, the world are confronted, with a psychologically healthful approach depending on a negotiation between overwhelming horror and the perseverance of some sense of subjective will.

Importantly, the premise for Janoff-Bulman’s 1992 book *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma* figures usefully for a wider application beyond psychology and into cultural studies. She writes,

The responses of survivors to extreme life events tell us a great deal about our common human needs, capacities, and illusions. The fundamental properties of a substance or object are often revealed through exposure to extreme conditions – for example, the familiar compound H₂O is more fully understood by its reactions to intense heat and cold...Traumatic life events involve reactions at life's extremes. By understanding trauma we learn about ourselves, victim and nonvictim alike...The survivor's experience tells us a great deal about the psychology of daily existence. A powerful lesson learned from working with victims is the extent to which we ordinarily rely upon – and take for granted – a few fundamental assumptions about ourselves and our world, assumptions that generally go unquestioned and unchallenged. (4)

In effect, Janoff-Bulman's theory of trauma depends upon a theory of everyday life; her exploration of trauma as violation and loss relates intricately to how daily life operates on the basis of assumptions that remain essentially invisible until their disruption brings them to the fore.

Janoff-Bulman centrally argues that trauma shatters three basic assumptions developed during the earliest stages of human development that establish human understanding of the nature of the world and one's place in it. These three assumptions, "The world is benevolent/The world is meaningful/The self is worthy" (6), at first might seem unwarranted universalizations, and in fact Janoff-Bulman admits that not everyone necessarily would have such assumptions (6); of course, those who suffer abuse and/or neglect since birth likely form different assumptions. However, her elaboration of these

assumptions suggests that they do play a meaningful role in most people's encounters with the world. In effect, they involve the presumption that the world is a safe place to move around in – maybe not for everyone, and for anyone watching the news, that becomes clear, but at least for one's self going about daily business (7) – that the world makes sense and as a result what a person does and what happens to that person will correlate causally (8-11), and that one is a good person, at least deserving of a continued, secure place in the world (12). Yet while such presumptions develop early in life in response to “good enough” support from care-givers (14), they are over-generalizations from these earliest experiences, and as such can be termed illusions as children grow to adulthood and apply these assumptions in broader, and less supportable, contexts (21-25). Still, even as illusions, Janoff-Bulman asserts they serve an adaptive function, providing “the means for trusting ourselves and our environment” (25). As a result, while lower-order, more specific generalizations – such as “I am a good cook” or “The Yankees always win” – are readily adjusted to conform to new information, these meta-narrative guiding principles for daily life persist stubbornly, amenable to gradual change over time but otherwise enduring to “provide us with an intelligible, comfortable, known universe” (45). In this way, human beings go about their lives with underlying beliefs about the world and their place in it that most of the time work well enough to enable them to function without having to second-guess themselves and others at every step.

However, such assumptions do register the immediate impact of a traumatic event. First, Janoff-Bulman cautions, “At the outset it is imperative to recognize that the response to any particular life event must be understood in terms of the particular victim or victims involved.” In other words, “It always comes down to a question of

interpretation and meaning,” and whether a person views an event as threatening to begin with (52). But given that an event is regarded as threatening, what is it that is threatened? Like Herman, Janoff-Bulman emphasizes the relationship between mind and body, in that trauma not only incurs physical injury and arousal (65-69), but also when “victims experience the terror of their own vulnerability[, t]he confrontation...breaks the barrier of complacency and resistance in our assumptive worlds, and a profound psychological crisis is induced.” It becomes clear that “They are not protected, safe, and secure in a benign universe” (61). With this realization that fundamental assumptions are illusions, “it is not only the external world that is perceived as threatening, but the internal world as well” (65). Like Herman, Janoff-Bulman locates within trauma an overpowering of the integrity of selfhood and a person’s ability to act and exist physically, unharmed. However, unlike Herman, Janoff-Bulman isolates the particular assumptions that contribute to this sense of functional selfhood: a benign and meaningful world in which a person expects a secure place for him- or herself, the very things a traumatic confrontation exposes as factually unrealistic.

Janoff-Bulman describes traumatic recovery as a virtually “untenable” confrontation with the contradiction of dearly-held common sense and its apparent replacement with new, undesirable knowledge:

Psychologically, victims are between a rock and a hard place. They are in a state of conceptual disintegration because the nature of the world and the self implied by the traumatic victimization – a helpless, weak self in a malevolent, meaningless world – contradicts the old, positively biased assumptions. To accept these new views entails embracing a wholly

threatening impression of self and environment, as well as catastrophic rather than gradual change. The victim is stuck between two untenable cognitive-emotional choices: preexisting assumptions that are no longer viable in describing the world and oneself and new assumptions that not only involve a total reworking of prior views, but are themselves extremely negative and threatening. (93)

Typically, post-traumatic symptoms such as denial, numbing, and intrusive thoughts about the trauma evidence the survivor's or witness's dialectical struggle to incorporate the experience into his/her worldview (95-114). Ultimately, incorporation strategies, or approaches to reformulating the traumatic experience in terms compatible with a functional worldview, include comparison, or attempts to minimize the event's impact by regarding it as relatively better than it could have been and thus preserving the world as benevolent (118-122); self-blame which, if behavioral rather than characterological, asserts some form of subjective agency and thus preserves the world as meaningful and the self as worthy (123-132); and constructions of purpose that render the event useful at least for prompting personal growth or altruism (132-141). As Janoff-Bulman points out, "Traumatic victimizations are unwanted and unchosen. Yet the cognitive strategies used by trauma survivors attest to the possibility for some human choice even in the face of uncontrollable, unavoidable negative outcomes. These choices reside in the interpretations...made of the traumatic experience and one's pain and suffering" (140). Consequently, traumatic encounters and post-traumatic recovery foreground the process of how human agency, expressed through powerful knowledge constructions, persists under constrained conditions.

Importantly, though, Janoff-Bulman emphasizes that social factors contribute to an individual's recovery as well. She explains, "The interactions of survivors with others provide crucial inputs into a system that is attempting to construct a valid, believable representation of reality" (142). In fact, it was through the earliest social interactions of infants with caregivers that Janoff-Bulman attributes the formation of an individual's initial worldview assumptions. Support, whether emotional or through the provision of other needed resources, instrumentally assists survivors recovering from vulnerable states in the achievement of more stability and security (142-147). However, she also notes that others might find interacting with survivors uncomfortable because these survivors evidence the violation of fundamental assumptions that others in their society share; such a threat could prompt avoidance and blame instead of the support so crucial to the survivors' recovery (147-154). Consequently, just as society mattered to the formation of initial knowledge about the self and world, society matters to the formation of post-traumatic formations of knowledge and self as well.

What, then, does it mean to have recovered from a trauma? Like Herman, Janoff-Bulman underscored that recovery cannot mean a return to pre-trauma life conditions. She asserts, "Trauma survivors do not simply get over their experience. It is permanently encoded in their assumptive world...victims recover...when they reestablish an integrated, comfortable assumptive world that incorporates their traumatic experience" (171). In effect, "rather than overgeneralize from the trauma to all aspects of the world and self...survivors reestablish positive, yet less absolutely positive, core assumptions" (174). In this way, trauma provokes a disillusionment which, if confronted with social support and an ability to generate constructive possibilities out of the disintegration of

previous assumptions, provokes new knowledge about one's place and power in the world better attuned to the opportunities and limitations that place and power afford.

Psychologists following Janoff-Bulman's model of the assumptive world have contributed useful additional insights. DePrince and Freyd draw on this model to augment the fear paradigm governing research into the impact of trauma with a cognitive paradigm emphasizing the role of betrayal in traumatic circumstances. They contend, "With a focus on fear, mainstream psychology has tended to pathologize trauma survivors' reactions...Either implicitly or explicitly, responsibility for the experience of fear is placed on the individual survivor...[and so] research has often failed to examine the social context within which the trauma occurred and with which the survivor interacts after the trauma" (76), a context in which survivors likely encounter betrayal, by the traumatic violation itself and/or by the reactions of those around them to their traumatization. Moreover, Tom Attig moves away from a purely cognitive view of these assumptions to a recognition of how "we adopt ways of living and orient ourselves within the noncognitive, emotional, psychological, physical, behavioral, social, soulful, and spiritual forces and contexts" (60). His intervention facilitates productive engagement with the assumptive world model beyond the confines of psychological conceptualization, such as the field of cultural theory which attends to how multiple modes and structures of behavior matter to meaning formations. Similarly, Therese Rando centralizes the process of social formation of assumptions by positing that those privileged enough to avoid challenging assumptions of world benevolence for most of their lives might suffer more when trauma finally does confront those assumptions. Additionally, Jeffrey Kauffman focuses on "Assumption [as]...the *power* of making real,

constituting, constructing, or bringing forth, as in *bringing forth the human world*" (206). At the same time, he articulates a sense of the self as phenomenologically relational, "a reflexive act" (209), although he focuses on self-relations without attending to the multiple relations a self engages in its social and cultural formations. Nevertheless, his points about power and the self, taken together with the other contributions from within a psychological framework, gesture toward how theory beyond psychology can productively engage the assumptive worlds model of trauma.

Additionally, Terror Management Theory (TMT) focuses specifically on how our awareness of our mortality affects our daily lives, providing a core but largely unconscious concern that culturally-produced worldviews are constructed to submerge. Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg, drawing on Ernest Becker's work (11), argue that cultural processes "mitigate the horror, blunt the dread" (16) of our always possibly imminent demise. Resonating with Janoff-Bulman's outline of fundamental, illusive assumptions that guide functional living, TMT implies that, to remain constructively inattentive to their mortality, people must believe in a cultural worldview that "imbues reality with order, stability, meaning, and permanence" (16) and also believe that they themselves contribute significantly to this "meaningful reality" (17). Following this approach, Daniel Liechty locates mortality as the fundamental reality which cultural presumptions geared toward living seek to disguise in illusion until a traumatic encounter exposes these presumptions as the death-denying illusions they are. In other words, Liechty argues,

A significant and growing body of empirical research in social psychology strongly supports the hypothesis that the content of the unconscious is not

antisocial sexual or aggressive drives; it is not the will to power and domination...neither is it simple pleasure or conformity drives. Each of these is there in the human psyche, to be sure. But each in turn can best be understood as manifesting specific applied strategies for expression of that even deeper psychological drive, the denial of death. (87)

Liechty's arguments, putting the avoidance of death at the root of thought and behavior, pose an interesting consideration about how and why power and other cultural processes and formations operate, and when they are likely to prove most and least effective.

Overall, this review summarizes traumatization as the forceful disruption of an individual's socially- and culturally-shaped worldview, and accordingly his or her sense of safety and control, which prompts a recovery process directed at recalibrating that person's worldview and recovering from a new, intimate awareness of ultimate vulnerability.

American Studies, Power and Knowledge: A Review of the Literature

Using the assumptive worlds model as a framework for understanding trauma necessarily directs attention to cultural theory; after all, culture serves as the site for meaning and knowledge production, contestation, and negotiation. Fundamental assumptions underlying our worldviews, whether or not limited to the three that Janoff-Bulman articulated, and post-traumatic interpretations geared toward recovery develop in a social and cultural context, as Janoff-Bulman argued, and not in the isolation of an individual's mind.

Janoff-Bulman's terming of these assumptions as functional illusions resonates with theories of knowledge in other disciplines. Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas

Luckmann are centrally concerned with how knowledge – “the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics” – and reality – “phenomena that we recognize as...independent of our own volition” (1) interrelate in everyday life, which they assert is privileged as “paramount reality” (21). In everyday life, they argue, individuals ordinarily unreflectively regard the world in which they live as coherently and independently (of their own subjectivity) ordered, immediately available, and therefore readily navigable (19-22). Berger and Luckmann identify this unreflective knowledge as “commonsense,” a socially-enabled sense of reality that can be taken-for-granted – that does not require validation to be accepted as real – to the point of integrating phenomena which seem incompatible with this knowledge on terms that render such phenomena compatible (23-25). Again, this formulation resonates with the way Janoff-Bulman describes the functioning of the assumptive world, including the relative conservatism of this meta-narrative worldview that changes only gradually and reluctantly to accommodate new or discordant information. Thus, as Berger and Luckmann contend, even when dreams, or mystical experiences, or theoretical physics, suggest alternate realities, the “common language in interpreting them” still derives from the everyday life in which the dreamer, mystic, and physicist are grounded, accommodating the apparently incomprehensible to comprehensible reality (26). In this way, language incorporates even “transcendences” within the “spatial, temporal and social dimensions” (39) that characterize the coherently and independently ordered, immediately available, and readily navigable everyday world.

Moreover, Berger and Luckmann argue that objectivation, or what externally manifests human expression to make possible shared subjectivity and therefore common

reality (34-46), persists across generations through legitimation, a process of producing meaning that maintains the relevance of institutionalized objectivations under new circumstances (92). In this sense, plausibility becomes crucial; if neither “the totality of the institutional order” nor “the totality of the individual’s life” make sense in relation to the world as then known, if they appear implausible, then what is known of the world risks implausibility as well (92-93). When the alternate realities of dreams, mysticism, physics, etc. signal potential disjunctures in the known world, symbolic integration connects these “unintelligible enclaves” (98) back to the known world by subsuming all within an “overarching universe of meaning” (97). Berger and Luckmann assert, “This integration of the realities of marginal situations within the paramount reality of everyday life is of great importance, because these situations constitute the most acute threat to taken-for-granted, routinized existence in society” (98). Indeed,

the institutional order, like the order of individual biography, is continually threatened by the presence of realities that are meaningless in *its* (sic) terms...[Because] *all* (sic) social reality is precarious...[t]he constant possibility of anomic terror is actualized whenever the legitimations that obscure the precariousness are threatened or collapse. (103)

The symbolic universe supporting such an alternative reality is especially threatening “because its very existence demonstrates empirically that one’s own universe is less than inevitable” (108). Consequently, integration matters as much to the stability of an individual’s subjective identity as to the stability of institutions as a whole, since all depend on social interactions within a commonly understood reality (100-101). These

arguments integrally connect a model of sociological knowledge formation and maintenance to Janoff-Bulman's psychology-based model.

Berger and Luckmann directly address the social implications of human mortality:

A strategic legitimating function of symbolic universes for individual biography is the "location" of death. The experience of the death of others and, subsequently, the anticipation of one's own death posit the marginal situation par excellence for the individual...[D]eath also posits the most terrifying threat to the taken-for-granted realities of everyday life. The integration of death within the paramount reality of social existence is, therefore, of the greatest importance for any institutional order...All legitimations of death must carry out the same essential task – they must enable the individual to go on living in society after the death of significant others and to anticipate his (sic) own death with, at the very least, terror sufficiently mitigated so as not to paralyze the continued performance of the routines of everyday life. (101)

Essentially, Berger and Luckmann argue that institutional social order, and functional individual subjectivity within that order, depends upon the effective integration of human mortality within the symbolic universe that meaningfully coheres disparate and unfamiliar realities within the commonsense of everyday life. This view accords with Terror Management Theory's contention that denial of death operates at the ground of human motivation and behavior. At the same time, Thomas Kuhn's outline of scientific knowledge production generally centered on the theoretical crisis of recognizing and being unable to reconcile experimental anomalies against the backdrop of accepted paradigm-generated expectations. Although directed at science, Kuhn's formulation

resembles Berger and Luckmann's overall social framework in that both attribute significant epistemic trouble to the emergence of disparities between institutional assumptions and phenomenological experiences. In fact, Janoff-Bulman references Kuhn, evidencing the affinity of her psychological theories with other theories of knowledge formation through crisis. Such arguments socially frame the individual living through and making sense of both ordinary and traumatic conditions. Indeed, such arguments indicate how trauma foregrounds, by challenging, the knowledge formations that characterize and matter most to ordinary life. In this sense, trauma foregrounds knowledge as the power to make, and unmake, the world (for a related, but importantly different, use of this phrase, see Scarry).

Interestingly, though, the assumptive world model could potentially apply not just to particular individuals situated within certain knowledge and power formations, but also to societies and cultures as collectivities. Drawing parallels between the conservatism of the worldview constituted by Janoff-Bulman's foundational assumptions and the notion of hegemony, connections could emerge between the flexible yet insistent recuperation of power that hegemony exerts to rationalize and maintain the dominant group's position (Lears) and the flexible yet insistent recuperation of knowledge that assumptive worlds exert to rationalize and maintain a dominant meta-narrative. Indeed, Raymond Williams outlines hegemony as an ongoing process with residual and emergent elements that evidence the slow and stubborn character of hegemonic cultural development, lived out with uneven commitment in daily life by individuals at varying levels within the hegemonic structure (*Marxism* 122-127). This formulation attends to formations, or culturally influential movements or bodies less formal than institutions (119), and

structures of feeling, or how cultural life is actually lived with change and contradiction (128-135). In this context, a shared trauma – such as that made possible by the daily televised reports of the Vietnam War or the live broadcast of the attacks of September 11 – poses an immediate threat to dominant paradigms of meaning and power that, like an individual’s recovery, only subsequent time and effort could integrate into newly meaningful cultural constructs. In such a case, if the parallel to individual recovery from trauma were to hold true, the likely outcome would involve adjusted, but not wholly new, cultural formations of knowledge and power, and the stakes for developing constructs that reinstate meaning and security for starkly threatened communities would be just as high as (if not higher than) the stakes facing a lone individual in the aftermath of a personal trauma. This view of cultural trauma would underscore the political complications that shared trauma generates; like individuals, communities – whether towns, nations, or alliances – would face difficult, and given the traumatic circumstance less than ideal, options for productively integrating a past, and preventing a new, traumatic threat.

Cultural Trauma: A Review of the Literature

A concise overview of contemporary theories of “cultural trauma” evidences this area of study’s interdisciplinary embeddedness.¹¹ To begin, as already noted, in the field

¹¹ The following provide much more extensive background into the term’s theoretical roots: Judith Herman traces “trauma” within psychiatric theory and practice, while Karyn Ball outlines its institutionalization within the humanities as “cultural trauma” and Roger Luckhurst conducts a genealogy to address its multidisciplinary histories and trajectories, reasoning that trauma breaches borders not only as a lived experience (3) but also as an area of study (4), including psychiatry, literature, cultural studies, medicine, and law. All refer to trauma’s modern origins in the nineteenth century with intensifying

of American psychology, the term “trauma” has come to signify essentially how painful life-altering events can produce lasting challenges to individuals’ mental and emotional well-being and therefore their ability to participate productively in daily life.

Specifically, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR) itemizes clinical criteria for identifying patients with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), providing clinicians (and insurance companies) with a standardized formula for recognizing a traumatized client and trial-tested treatments for returning him or her to functional health. However, theory within psychology has also addressed the dynamics of traumatic impact beyond the confines of the official PTSD diagnosis.¹² First, Fullerton et al. point out that PTSD is not the only, nor even the most common, “trauma-related disorder,” citing “depression, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and increased substance use” among the other susceptibilities that extreme events can trigger (6).¹³ In effect, an individual’s and an event’s characteristics mediate

interest through successive twentieth-century wars, as well as domestic American political struggles.

¹² As the term “trauma” weaves its way across disciplines, at times it seems it can become indistinguishable from the PTSD criteria: someone is traumatized only if s/he has PTSD, specifically symptoms of dissociation and repetition, which seem to be the disorder’s most often emphasized features. However, PTSD is supposed to categorize a related set of pathological responses to a traumatic stressor, which suggests that the originating event and its effects, though at times conflated, are in fact two different things. This is an important distinction since it preserves the sense that an event can be understood as horrifically disruptive even if its survivors happen to manage to cope effectively, or even just differentially, in its aftermath.

¹³ Pfefferbaum echoes this corrective, which she views as particularly salient when attempting to assess indirect victimhood via the media (185). Sprang specifies that terrorism, by intention, is a traumatic occurrence; however, not everyone reacts in the same way (134-135). These reactions include, but are not limited to, PTSD and other anxiety disorders, “mood disorders, substance misuse disorders and disorders of extreme stress not otherwise specified (DESNOS)” (137), as well as complicated bereavement over sudden, unexpected death (140-141).

reactions, with a person's vulnerability and an event's cause and scale, with the extent to which it could have been anticipated, all affecting the development of post-trauma symptoms (Sprang 135). At the same time, Schuster et al. note that those not present at a site of trauma can still present stress-related symptoms if they view themselves as similar to the actual victims (25). Additionally, psychology research is increasingly recognizing that cultures that do not subscribe to a Western medical model dependent upon mind/body duality organize health interventions tailored to different symptomatology (Hassani 7). Moreover, as noted in the previous section, Herman, Janoff-Bulman, DePrince and Freyd, and others have recognized and explored the social and cultural contexts in which individuals experience, interpret, and recover from traumatic encounters. These efforts have opened the door to detailed work beyond psychology on how communities and individuals interrelate to form around a trauma sometimes constructive and sometimes problematic meanings and responses.

However, I should also add that research in psychology suggests that the character of the originating event does play a role in shaping possible aftereffects. For example, Fullerton et al. term intentional interpersonal violence "perhaps the most disturbing traumatic experience" (3), with terrorism distinctly occasioning "characteristic extensive fear, loss of confidence in institutions, unpredictability and pervasive experience of loss of safety" (5). Hassani asserts, "Terrorism erodes, at both the individual and the community level, the sense of security and safety of daily life. It defies our natural need to conceptualize life on earth as predictable, orderly, logical, and controllable" (1). Trappler elaborates,

The goal of terrorism extends beyond damage to a specific victim, since its ability to violate traditional boundaries enables it to produce overwhelming psychological and behavioral shock-effects that also are capable of disrupting socio-economic functioning and destabilizing society.

At the community level, one could define terrorism as the source of *the* ultimately effective psychological trauma, since it violates any human sense of safety and integrity, replacing order and stability with fear and immobility...Portraying graphic trauma imagery on a world stage violates the individual's boundaries by personalizing the experience for the viewer, who identifies with the victim but is, at the same time, deprived the opportunity of being debriefed and reassured about his or her own personal safety. (ix)

Accordingly, trauma deriving from terrorism – as intended – touches witnesses as well as survivors, a strategic targeting of an entire community's psychological composure.

If terrorism does pose a particularly potent threat of psychological traumatization, then how might September 11 be understood as a particular instance of terrorism? Referencing Janoff-Bulman's shattered assumptions theoretical model for individuals, psychologists Gold and Faust list the following developments as having been previously conventionally inconceivable within the United States: witnessing live the Pentagon's vulnerability "to direct attack," the World Trade Center's swift and total collapse, the coordinated hijacking of domestic commercial aircraft, and the foreign organization and perpetration of such attacks within American territory (2). They assert, "The

attacks...and the subsequent threat of acts of biological, chemical, and nuclear warfare, immediately and drastically created a shift in perspective...the constantly looming specter of sudden, large-scale terrorist assaults arouses the potential for a type of trauma that is relatively new and about which, therefore, little is known” (3). According to Gold and Faust, September 11 shattered assumptions not only for Americans in general, but also for the psychologists who must anticipate for effective rehabilitation the kinds of traumatic disruptions that might afflict their future clients. At the same time, Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg, drawing on Terror Management Theory, argue that “reminders of death should lead people to increase their defense and bolstering of their cultural worldviews” (45). Yum and Schenck-Hamlin’s research confirms the TMT-oriented anticipation that September 11 would prompt individuals toward the psychological defensive measures of strengthening their self-esteem and reinforcing their worldview (266). With September 11 having showcased sudden, inescapable death, mortality becomes consciously salient for individuals who ordinarily do not think about it (94), prompting defensive reactions – such as trading freedom for security – against the now-present sense of looming vulnerability (98-100). From this standpoint, September 11 operates as a shared trauma, a psychological disturbance affecting many people at the same time.

However, while accommodating the possibility that many people – even from afar – can be traumatized by a single event, with symptoms manifesting not only according to PTSD criteria but also through a variety of other debilitating behaviors, this standpoint falls just short of recognizing the cultural processes that make possible the kinds of shared perspectives and practices that a large-scale trauma can shatter. The term that

would attempt to address such processes, “cultural trauma,” takes us beyond psychology, and has long been used across multiple disciplines. Both Ball and Luckhurst have emphasized how political struggle (Ball 4) and identity politics (Luckhurst 2) during the latter part of the twentieth century increasingly helped to define the parameters and implications of diagnosable psychological traumatization, especially through the work of theorists such as psychiatrist Judith Herman. However, once extrapolated to literary and cultural studies as “trauma studies,” the field of inquiry has tended to sediment into paradoxical tropes¹⁴ of trauma’s unrepresentability – the impossibility of re-presenting an overwhelming, ineffable horror – and its historical specificity – a perhaps overwhelming and ineffable horror that human beings have nevertheless actually experienced and that calls for responsible witnessing (Ball 10). Luckhurst attributes this theoretical evolution partly to the influence of literary theorist Cathy Caruth, whose thoughts about cultural trauma reflect a convergence of Adorno’s cautions about the limits of representation, Derrida’s conceptions about deferred meaning production, and Freud’s formulations about dissociation and melancholia, all contributing to a view of trauma as a forever-delayed originary experience that impels subjects to compulsively re-stage the trauma without ever achieving resolution or full understanding (4-10). Interestingly, these emphases foreground literary and cultural studies’ departure from psychology (211), according weight to a Freud relatively shunned by the contemporary social sciences (12), envisioning a necessarily “ethical” component to any response to trauma (211-212), and failing to appreciate the significance of resilience, a much more common post-traumatic phenomenon and one greatly interesting current clinical research (210).

¹⁴ Ball worries that such efflorescence has contributed to an oversaturation of trauma within the humanities (16).

E. Ann Kaplan outlines additional ambiguities discussions of cultural trauma commonly raise. She notes that questions abound regarding what constitutes a trauma. For example, she argues that the daily terror of postcolonial displacement and victimization qualifies as a trauma, though perhaps of a different kind than the direct experience of war (1). Similarly, she notes questions about individual positions relative to an event, acknowledging a need to clarify, but not disqualify, various degrees of immediacy to a crisis to understand its impact (2). Kaplan also makes clear that traumas occur in cultural and political contexts, through which individuals with complex psychic histories and institutions with interpretive power interact to produce collective meanings about the trauma (1). Although she does not adopt this observation as central to what comprises a trauma, she acknowledges, “The destruction of the symbolic order within which people live and can make sense of their lives can have devastating results (67). However, Kaplan does identify vicarious trauma – whereby one’s receptive attention to another’s struggle with trauma can generate within the attentive listener his/her own traumatic symptoms – as her principal concern, since her work in literary and media studies more likely involves this kind of communicated, rather than directly encountered, experience (41). Importantly, though, she distinguishes vicarious traumatization, which requires empathy, from witnessing, which she claims does not, and therefore accommodates consideration not just of the victim but also of the situation to be remedied. She asserts, “ ‘Witnessing’ is the term I use for prompting an ethical response that will perhaps transform the way someone views the world, or thinks about justice...witnessing leads to a broader understanding of the meaning of what has been done to victims” (123). Such a position of witnessing that would prompt action depends

upon an individual's subjectivity being sensitive to the Other's subjectivity. In instances of trauma, the Other's subjectivity might encompass experiences one cannot fathom, but which one must nevertheless still recognize as compelling responsibility (123-124). In this way, Kaplan interweaves a broad sense of cultural trauma with grounds for ethical response.

Nevertheless, Luckhurst voices a common criticism that expansive definitions of trauma can become all-too-inclusive (13), whereby everyone can be a survivor of something, even of the twentieth century, if not of its particular horrors. Such expansiveness, he argues, risks prioritizing individual self-expression and actualization over substantive collective political action (213). However, Ball does perceive one opportunity in the core character of trauma as extraordinary human experience:

by highlighting the aftereffects of the past as they play themselves out in the cultural sphere, the institutionalization of trauma studies may provide cultural critics with a paradigm for attending to structures of feeling.

When it is conceived with this end in mind, trauma studies follows through on a desire to think the 'materiality of affect' and thereby unsettle the false opposition between the subjective and objective dimensions of existence. (28)

In this sense, trauma as a cultural phenomenon permits exploration of socially constructed knowledge and being, with attention paid both to the materiality of a fraught world and to the intersubjectively-created, fluidly developing but contextually-grounded ways we come to know and be in it.

Yet one other critical disciplinary approach to trauma remains to be mentioned: sociology. Through his field research with communities damaged by floods, fraud, radiological and chemical taint, and other large-scale hazards, Kai Erikson has developed a clear sense that “Trauma...has a social dimension” (“A New Species” 231), theorizing “communal trauma” as both damage to a community’s relational ties through the exigencies of disaster and the creation of new bonds based on shared experiences of catastrophe (237). In effect, trauma can both separate survivors from the uninvolved, and also bind them together with one another as having been “similarly marked” by their experiences (231). Ultimately, Erikson argues that collective trauma produces within survivors “a *changed sense of self...a changed way of relating to others...[and] a changed world view* altogether” (241). In a sense, he contends, disaster really uncovers “fault lines” within social groups (236), exposing vulnerabilities where community structures can fall apart.¹⁵ Importantly, Lee Clarke views disasters as actually relatively normal – that is, frequently occurring – phenomena, but what’s “special about them is the searchlight they throw upon power, politics and imagination” (24). Moreover, while what he calls “worst cases”¹⁶ do cause substantial, real harm, they also turn out to be among the few “noticed” occurrences among many equally horrific high-casualty events because

¹⁵ Erikson later writes that “The attack on the World Trade Center was a deliberate effort to do harm, and it had much in common with heat-seeking devices in the sense that it was designed to search out sections of maximum vulnerability in the larger landscape. Disasters in general, and perhaps acts of terrorism in particular, are like X-rays that reach through the surface membranes of things and disclose the hidden fragilities within” (“Epilogue” 351-361).

¹⁶ Clarke includes among the principle circumstances creating “worst cases” for survivors and witnesses a lack of control, a sense of social similarity with the sufferers, and the unthinkability of the situation (9-16).

of “what people *think about* the event” (16).¹⁷ Such arguments support Erikson’s point about fault lines and changed world views, indicating that calamity can reveal, by disturbing, the social structures and meaning formations that render ordinary life orderly and comprehensible.¹⁸

However, through *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Alexander, et al. collaborate to generate a thorough sociological theory of trauma’s effect on communities, announcing,

We may now advance a formal definition of cultural trauma: a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or 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. (Smelser, “Psychological Trauma” 44)

They link psychological with cultural trauma at what they regard as the indispensable and universal juncture of affect, a Freudian concept which signals the positive or negative associations an event poses for an individual’s identity. Often, individuals have informed

¹⁷ Writing about the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in Manhattan, in which dozens of people, mostly women, jumped to their deaths to escape fire (a morbid prefiguring of the gruesome deaths at the World Trade Center in 2001), Von Drehle notes that there had been numerous workplace deaths in the past. However, this event had a national impact (3) since it happened at a moment of burgeoning feminist activism while the Democratic Party was moving to adopt some of the socialist agenda, trajectories that caused a catastrophe that, like other catastrophes, might have been forgotten to instead become the catalyst for workplace safety improvements (267).

¹⁸ Neal’s conceptualization of a “national trauma” echoes these outlines of “communal trauma” and “worst cases,” featuring “events that had a major impact on the institutional structure of society and fed into overriding forms of collective fear and anxiety” (x), although not necessarily for all individuals (x-xi), leading to a permanent change in the nation (4).

and invested their personal identifications through a larger collective; so, these sociologists argue, when threats to a collective also threaten the identifications individuals have developed in connection with that collective, cultural trauma emerges (Smelser, “Psychological Trauma” 39-41). Moreover, Sztompka asserts, social change can prove culturally traumatic given four conditions: (1) rapid change (2) of comprehensive scope that (3) alters fundamental constructs (4) provoking a shocked reception (158-159). In effect, this framework establishes the relationship of psychological and cultural trauma through the locus of personal identity, accounting for the reach and character of cultural trauma by stressing individuals’ dependence on social structures of identification and belonging. Above all, this framework construes trauma as a constructed, rather than a natural and given, phenomenon.

I draw in varying ways on the foregoing work in psychology, literary and cultural studies, and sociology to inform my own premises, which recognize the socially-constructed, or culturally contextual, aspect of traumatic occurrences. However, I draw particularly on Janoff-Bulman’s shattered assumptions formulation to examine the unique phenomenological, epistemological, and existential vulnerabilities trauma exposes within individuals and cultures. Indeed, the questions psychologists who were deployed to Ground Zero had anticipated from the survivors and witnesses they would treat point to specific phenomenological, epistemological, and existential quandaries: “What happened to me (us)?...Why did it happen to me (us)?... Why did I (we) do what I (we) did during and right after this disaster?...Why have I (we) acted as I (we) have since the disaster?...Will I (we) be able to cope if this disaster happens again” (Gold and Faust 20-21)? Consequently, while I share with Kaplan an interest in how cultural trauma

warrants responsibility and ethical action, I assert the intense challenges trauma poses to ethical choice by virtue of its essential threat to conceptions of intact subjectivity and plausible agency. Additionally, while the sociological model of cultural trauma effectively delineates conditions under which communities can be considered traumatized, it lists the destabilization of cultural meaning formations as one among other factors occasioning a cultural trauma. However, I argue that such a destabilization is the fundamental threat of a traumatic event from which all other conditions flow. It is just such a threat that prompts the negative affect the sociological model locates as crucial, that seems to augur indelibility, and that, again, complicates the very notions of intact subjectivity and plausible agency through which any sense of identity can be imagined. Likewise, I view this threat as the grounds from which traumatic social change flows; rather than one among other elements, the compromise of core cultural beliefs can force members of a community into revisiting and reconstructing their self- and worldviews. Moreover, my focus on worldview as the crux of what a cultural trauma disrupts moves attention away from the dominant concerns within literary and cultural studies on Freudian notions of dissociation and melancholia. Instead of dwelling on the enduring inaccessibility and compulsive repetitions of traumatic experience, which anyway form only part of what psychology has acknowledged as an individual's possible post-traumatic reactions, I am interested in how cultural trauma renders an effable and explicable daily life suddenly inexplicable and unpredictable.

Cultural Trauma and September 11: A Review of the Literature

Extensive scholarship on September 11 from multiple disciplines has already begun addressing the complex cultural aftereffects for those whose positions relative to

that day's attacks vary from in-person experience to witnessing via the media. With an estimated 15,552 people in the World Trade Center on September 11 (J. Murphy 66), the attack directly affected approximately 160,000 people in the New York area (Rosack, "Post-911 'Symptoms'") but induced PTSD in an estimated 530,000 New Yorkers (Rosack, "Psychiatric Symptoms"). Two to three years later, 95.6 percent of World Trade Center civilian survivors reported at least one PTSD symptom, with an estimated fifteen percent suffering from diagnosable PTSD. While a lower income presented the greatest demographic risk factor for development of PTSD, researchers also found – in accord with previous studies – that women, African-Americans, and Latinos suffered higher rates of the disorder, possibly as a result of pre-existing vulnerabilities. However, also in accord with other studies, the degree of exposure to the event itself mattered, with witnessing horrors among the compounding elements of PTSD (DiGrande, et al). Moreover, hundreds of the city's firefighters and police officers, groups that suffered unprecedented casualties that day, were no longer active two years later (Lipton and McIntire).

Although psychological studies tend to focus on individual struggles with PTSD, the unprecedented scope of exposure resulting from broadcast images of the World Trade Center have prompted exploration of traumatization among those witnessing at a distance nationally and even internationally (Gold and Faust).¹⁹ Silver et al. found that many people who encountered that day's events only at a distance, such as through television viewing, experienced significant symptoms (139). Indeed, Suvak et al. concluded that

¹⁹ German psychoanalyst Hans-Jürgen Wirth has used Freudian theory to characterize not only individual, but also communal, reactions to the "collective trauma" of September 11.

indirect exposure does produce low-level, PTSD-consistent symptoms. Some estimated that as many as twenty percent of Americans knew someone injured or killed that day (“9/11 by the Numbers”) and one study showed that ninety-eight percent of adults in the United States watched at least one hour of the news coverage (Schuster et al. 29).²⁰ PTSD-associated symptoms were connected to the amount of time national television viewers watched coverage of September 11, with television viewing interpreted as a coping mechanism rather than an added stressor (Schuster et al. 33).²¹ A recent health study reports a twelve percent jump in miscarriages across the United States in the month of September 2001, substantiating the notion that what happened in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, DC produced considerable stress even in witnesses from afar (Perone). Other national studies conducted within one to three months of the attacks indicated that a peak of seventy-one percent of Americans reported depressive feelings (Huddy, Khatib and Capelos 422); forty-four percent were substantially troubled by at least one of five PTSD symptoms and ninety percent were troubled by at least low levels of stress (Schuster et al. 29), and a majority had cried, felt anxious, or found sleeping difficult (Schlenger 98). A peak of fifty-eight percent of Americans were at least somewhat worried that they themselves would become victims of terrorism (Huddy, Khatib and Capelos 422), and by October, as many as eighty-eight percent of polled Americans regarded another attack on the United States as at least somewhat likely (420).

²⁰ Interestingly, a 2009 British survey reported that eighty-two percent of those polled could remember September 11 in detail – in contrast to sixty-five percent who could remember the birth of their first child and fifty-eight percent who could recall the July 7, 2005 London bombings in similar detail (Barrett).

²¹ Researchers were careful to distinguish qualitatively between the diagnosable disorder of PTSD, prevalent among those with more direct experiences of trauma, and normal reactions to a crisis, evident among those more distant from the traumatic event (Schuster et al. 33).

Also in the three months after the attacks, traffic deaths rose, apparently reflecting increased volume as many turned to driving out of fear of flying. Ironically, the increased automobile deaths numbered more than those killed on the doomed September 11 flights (Gigerenzer). Moreover, church and synagogue attendance rose by as much as twenty percent (Templeton and Lumley). Although studies conducted in later months evidenced more normative levels of distress (Schlenger 103),²² up to three years later, researchers found a “53% increased incidence of cardiovascular ailments” that they linked to stress induced by watching the September 11 attacks on television (Holman et al. 73). Such numbers indicate the extent to which the attacks provoked some kind of initial psychological disturbance with which not only New Yorkers or Washington DC-area residents, but also others across the United States, had to contend. In effect, because of television, radio, and the Internet, the hijackings singularly exposed millions of people to the same threat and its consequences at the same time, creating a shared touchstone for what ultimate helplessness is all about. At the same time, counterterrorism researchers and policy advisers have described the kind of terrorism introduced on September 11 as a menace endemic to our new reality (Jenkins, “How a Decade of Terror;” Treverton), echoing (and likely informing) the Bush administration’s position after that day. A San

²² Sensations and circumstances in later years that resonate with the original trauma could still produce acute discomfort. For example, in April of 2009, a military-authorized photo shoot unannounced to the public of a Boeing 747 (used for Air Force One) and an F-16 fighter jet flying low over Lower Manhattan frightened witnesses mindful of September 11. Offices were evacuated, and the White House Military Office ultimately apologized for the disturbance (Eyewitness News). On the other hand, in what came to be known as the “miracle on the Hudson,” pilot Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger successfully crash-landed on the Hudson River a passenger-filled US Airways Airbus A320 after a flock of birds shut down both engines upon take-off. All aboard survived. News reports acknowledged that, had the plane actually crashed, the psychological devastation would have been compounded by resemblances to September 11 (MSNBC.com Staff and News Service Reports).

Antonio, TX news report in 2006 evokes this lasting pall, noting that even five years later, many in that community – geographically distant from the crash sites – had unresolved feelings about September 11, complicated in the time that had passed by political, military, and other responses (Stoeltje).

As a resident of Lower Manhattan, literary and media theorist E. Ann Kaplan reflects on her personal connection to a trauma she regards as collective both for her local community and for the larger national community (2-19). Situated at a geographical remove, sociologists Alexander et al. survey the national narratives mobilized to organize the crisis's otherwise potentially widely divergent characterizations and responses.²³ These disparate approaches, initiated within a year of the attacks, indicate the first efforts to understand September 11 as both an individual and a collective trauma. While Kaplan's positioning enables her to emphasize the nuances of an individual's perspective, the sociologists focus on trends in mass reactions. These explorations of the cultural trauma of September 11 introduce some critical issues pertinent for further study while instantiating the difficulty of balancing the individual and the collective in understanding cultural trauma.

Additional considerations of September 11 as a cultural trauma dwell more deeply on the particularly troubling aspects of that day's crises. Greenberg suggests the intimately disturbing dilemma for witnesses of identifying with those whose fates you would not wish to share (24), while Bennett invokes Kaja Silverman's work on empathy, which is premised on identification with those whose wholly alien subjectivities we

²³ In political theory terms, Jack Holland argues that September 11 created a "discursive void," a phase during which the event's meaning remained inadequately understood under existing political frameworks and therefore unfixed (275-276), until institutional actions "fixed" the meaning of the event as a "crisis" that compels resolution (283-284).

nevertheless must access to fully appreciate and adequately attend to their unique traumas (134-135). At the same time, Brooks identifies American vulnerability to attack as the principal challenge to individuals' worldviews (48). Such views reflect the different levels at which individuals have felt themselves to be threatened – at the levels of both personal safety and national security – that nevertheless are still rooted in taken-for-granted, culturally-formed assumptions about themselves and the world in which they live. Since the trauma has contradicted these taken-for-granted assumptions, the aftermath of September 11, like other traumas, involves an arduous process of meaning re-formation, which tends to respond dynamically to the provoking crisis, although not always in productive ways (Berger 52-59, Lubin 124-131). Such views proffer a sense of the problematic terms on which attempts to witness and understand September 11 as a cultural trauma occur.

Moreover, the processes that structure and shape other cultural formations similarly structure and shape how September 11 can be understood as a cultural trauma. For example, the extant vulnerability of certain groups intensified nationally, including for refugees whose pre-existing psychological symptoms were aggravated by the horrors of September 11, a day that exposed the United States as potentially unsafe as the countries from which they had fled. More broadly, aftermath responses differentially left Arab and Muslim Americans and immigrants feeling particularly unsafe and insecure (Kinzie 413).²⁴ Beginning immediately after September 11, Arabs, Muslims, and those

²⁴ National poll data taken at intervals after September 11 led Panagopoulos to conclude as of 2006 that “Americans possess lingering resentment and reservations about Arab and Muslim Americans” (613; see also Ahmad). Consequently, although the 2001 spike of 451 reported hate crimes against Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim significantly declined to 155 in 2002 – an especially positive trend considering that during this time,

who seemed either Arab or Muslim – and particularly who were young and male – drew high levels of suspicion from other Americans, both those with and without legal authority. The phenomenon termed “Flying While Brown” (Polakow-Suransky) illustrates how such suspicion can permeate a prominent arena, such as an airport or airplane, and prompt removal of individuals from services on the basis of race, religion, and other identifications creating a very public performative of implicit social hierarchies. Peek’s fieldwork study of New York City Muslim college students’ experiences after September 11 documented the daily challenges resulting from post-September 11 backlash, including navigating the complex positioning of both grieving losses from the World Trade Center while also being perceived as a potential perpetrator of a similar future attack (282). Moreover, Assensoh and Assensoh point out the difficulties for African immigrants after September 11, many of whom were undocumented workers and therefore overlooked victims at the World Trade Center and many of whom share fears with African-Americans and others that “terrorism legislation...would eventually take away many of the rights and freedoms for which blacks and other U.S. minorities have fought relentlessly” (612). Assensoh and Assensoh reference Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in their article’s concluding plea for a peaceful and just response (613), a move echoed in the collection of African-American responses to September 11 by Simmons and Thomas (xi). Indeed, as Harlow and Dundes’ survey and focus group study of black and white college students and Mattingly, Lawlor and Jacobs-Huey’s study storytelling among working-class and low-income African-American mothers suggests, those who have been

the number of Jewish- (1,043 in 2001 and 931 in 2002) and LGBTQ-directed (1,393 in 2001 and 1,244 in 2002) hate crimes remained relatively stable (J. Kaplan 21) – other, more pervasive and likely institutionalized, concerns remain.

situated historically subordinate to dominant social, political, and economic formations tended to harbor more nuanced, critical assessments of US power and what kind of reaction exposure of US vulnerability might warrant.

Similarly, Monisha Das Gupta's study of predominantly immigrant South Asian and Middle Eastern – primarily Muslim – New York City taxi drivers “draws on frameworks that treat race, class, ethnicity, and citizenship as organizing principles” (209). These frameworks elicit how “structural locations inform not only the degree to which certain social groups are vulnerable but also how they respond to disaster,” thereby determining these groups' traumatic and post-traumatic experiences (210). Importantly, she notes how September 11 has exacerbated pre-existing conditions, exposing the already-vulnerable to intensified threats along their specific axes of vulnerability (209-210). Pointedly, then, Das Gupta situates her approach among cultural theorists who have similarly attended to how disasters in general and September 11 in particular have affected those with multivalent narratives of loss that persist unrecognized in the undercurrents of dominant discourse (233-235). In this way, she outlines a method for analyzing trauma and its aftereffects through skepticism and critical questioning, asking: How does what we know of a disaster come to be known? Who becomes what kind of a critical figure in disaster memorialization, and how? With these meanings attaching to the disaster, what are our understandings of community and responsibility?

My interrogation of September 11 as a cultural trauma posits a version of cultural trauma that attends to trauma's implicit, forceful disruption of culturally-produced meaning and its provocation of new meaning productions under circumstances confounding subjectivity, agency, and responsibility. I explore this conception of cultural

trauma by beginning with the dominant cultural constructs within mainstream popular culture. While Das Gupta's questions resonate with my own premises for this dissertation, her study as well as the others discussed here suggest a fraction of the cultural groupings that fall outside of the mainstream and about whom substantial critical work can be done to excavate cultural trauma's dynamic and condition-specific features. In this sense, my research serves as a pilot project whose future iterations can contribute progressively more finely-tuned assessments of how differently-situated communities understand September 11 and its fallout. In this way, my work contributes to ongoing conversations within cultural studies, literature, and sociology about the cultural character and effects of unexpected and comprehensive – or traumatic – change, while adding insight into the active practices and structures of feeling that shape emergent early twenty-first century popular understandings of a singular event in American history.

Methodology: September 11, Narrative, and Culture

In *Time, Narrative, and History*, David Carr explores the lived experience of time, a phenomenological approach that attunes usefully to the exigencies of narrating trauma. He argues that narrative does not necessarily impose an artificial link between sequenced occurrences. Contrary to theorists who view narrative essentially as an artful effort at making meaning of what could merely be chronicled (15), Carr argues that narrative operates intrinsically within the act of living (16-17; see also Funkenstein 66-67). In effect, past, present and future considerations (i.e., the retention of memories, the protention of intentions, etc.) intermingle as a person acts within the present (29-31) to produce immediately meaningful events – narratively-structured events with recognizable beginnings, middles, and ends (46-52), as well as actors conscious of real or potential

audiences to their actions as stories (61). Such an argument advances narrative as in fact constitutive of action (61) and the self (73). In effect, then, narratives not only provide access to cultural formations of self and world, they in fact produce cultural selves and worlds.

Consequently, it is important specifically to attend to the kinds of self and world cultural contexts enable as evidenced and constructed through narrative. After all, it is these culturally-produced meaningful selves and worlds that traumatic events disrupt and reveal as contingent and vulnerable. As noted earlier, in instances of trauma, psychologists have observed that violent disruption shatters survivors' and witnesses' extant narratives about who they are and how the world works (Herman; Janoff-Bulman). In such cases, trauma has thwarted the coherence of action, self, and world that any narrative fosters, provoking fundamental questions of how any story – whether film, fiction, or life history – might communicate the *incoherence* of action, self, and world that could, if not represent, at least summon, the lived trauma.²⁵ Such a quandary persists even as witnesses, survivors, and others struggle to return to meaning that more adequately addresses the “new version” of the known world.²⁶

²⁵ Luckhurst points out that “In its shock impact trauma is anti-narrative, but it also generates the manic production of retrospective narratives that seek to explicate the trauma” (79).

²⁶ Interestingly, Casebeer and Russell advocate a counter-terrorism strategy based on narratives that counter or disrupt the stories that terrorist groups use to organize, recruit, act, and justify their actions, while also attending to how narratives construe American action (see also de Graaf; Jacobson; Leuprecht et al.; and Quiggin).

To address these challenges, fiction writers have sought to reproduce traumatic symptoms stylistically,²⁷ “so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised (*sic*) by repetition and indirection” (Whitehead 3) as well as “intertextuality...and a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice” (84). At the same time, Whitehead asserts, “reading is restored as an ethical practice” (8) as readers wrestle with how to encounter these provocative texts. With both writers and readers engaging with horror and its aftereffects, therapeutic possibilities emerge; writers and readers of these texts can uncover, confront, and work through dark historical moments, perhaps locating opportunities for contemporary remedy or change (82). On the other hand, such attempts at “working through” can become problematic, perhaps glossing over genuine harm or enabling the appropriation of others’ suffering. Moreover, as each new, unique, and unprecedented horror becomes more familiar through storytelling, its incomprehensibility and incommensurability can recede and its status as a benchmark precedent for future horrors often develops (Tal 7-8). Ultimately, however, traumatic events prompt among producers of both fiction and non-fiction an urgent need, even an obligation, to bear witness to what the uninvolved nevertheless will never fully grasp (1-2). Threaded through narratives of trauma, Lawrence Langer finds an underlying dilemma: “You won’t understand” but “You must understand” (xiv). This compulsion drives choices about both the form and the content of traumatic narratives – narratives responsive to the

²⁷ Luckhurst argues that such specific narrative techniques have become recognizable tropes of trauma (105), compromising the effects of singularity, liminality, and extremity they are intended to generate. However, he also asserts that “if trauma is a crisis in representation, then this generates narrative *possibility* just as much as *impossibility*” (83), and “the anachronies of novelistic narrative make the form an important site for configuring (and therefore refiguring) traumatic impacts for the wider culture” (87).

tenor and fabric of story destruction and reconstruction that first arose through lived experience.²⁸

In effect, Janoff-Bulman's model of traumatic experience as a shattering of foundational, life-guiding assumptions – formed through research within a contemporary American population – resonates with diverse survivor accounts of trauma. Of course, Janoff-Bulman herself drew on Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl's contention that meaning-making figures crucially to life and to survival, even within the camps, a contention that figured centrally within his formulation of logotherapy, or therapy directed at developing a continued sense of purpose among trauma survivors and others in psychotherapy. Indeed, in *Auschwitz and After*, her trilogy about her own imprisonment in a concentration camp, Charlotte Delbo summoned the horrifying disruptions of knowledge and meaning that plague(d) and disempower(ed) victims and survivors by intermixing narrative voice, style, and temporality, provoking a disjunctive effect for readers as well. Additionally, in *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, Susan Brison specifically addressed how trauma – in her case, rape and attempted murder – forced her to reconstruct a whole new sense of herself and her world. Such accounts attest to the threat trauma poses to constructions of the world and one's place and power within it, and the power generated through a recovery process that recuperates

²⁸ Robinett makes this argument when noting similarities between the war texts *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Sorrow of War*. The former novel, published in 1929 and written by Erich Maria Remarque about his experiences as a German soldier in World War One, shares formal approaches with the latter novel, which was first published in 1991 in Vietnamese, then published in English in 1994 and written by Bao Ninh about his experiences as a North Vietnamese soldier in the war against his country's American-supported South. Robinett contends this interrelationship between lived experience and text complicate contemporary theoretical emphases on the “death of the subject.”

meaningful constructions of the world better attuned to the realities that survivors have faced and can no longer ignore.

Clearly, then, substantial critical work has recognized how writers and readers of literature respond to trauma's demands of narrative. However, less work has addressed how confronting trauma provokes dynamic interactions between other popular culture narrative producers and consumers. Even less work has addressed such dynamic interactions in terms of cultural rather than psychological trauma. Moreover, evaluating September 11 as a particular instance of cultural trauma as manifested through popular culture poses an as-yet developing field of study.²⁹ Here, I choose popular culture as the site for my study of cultural trauma and September 11 for the same reasons popular culture is otherwise studied: commonly-accessible texts such as television, film, and books foster distinct contact points for people from varied social locations to absorb, negotiate, and/or contest the dominant cultural meanings that such texts reproduce and reconfigure (R. Williams, *Culture and Society* 282; Hall 228). I begin to explore these complex interactions by focusing here on the dominant cultural meanings that popular culture texts have proliferated after September 11. I perform a close reading of each text, critiquing the narrative as a cultural artifact that produces meaning explicitly through its self-characterizations and implicitly through its thematic preoccupations. Such an

²⁹ Schopp and Hill's collection, *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture: September 11 and Beyond*, and Damico and Quay's educational resource *September 11 in Popular Culture: A Guide* are two examples of recent scholarship recognizing the critical ways that popular culture responded to September 11. At the same time, Smelser has evaluated whether September 11 constitutes a "cultural trauma" ("Epilogue"). However, the premise of this dissertation, using popular culture to explore constructions of September 11 as a cultural trauma, systematically links popular culture, cultural trauma, and September 11.

approach counters the tendency to emphasize “unknowability” that permeates the psychoanalytic perspective informing trauma theory in historical and literary studies.³⁰ Rather, such an approach reflects anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s “guiding principle” that “societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations” (29) and social practices, such as popular culture production and consumption, operate in a “way which opens [a participant’s] subjectivity to himself” (28),³¹ to which close reading can provide access (29). Accordingly, I use these popular culture texts to assess the extent to which dominant significations have been disrupted and reconstructed in the wake of September 11.

Although he does not situate his work in reference to trauma, political science scholar Stuart Croft asserts the political implications of popular culture in an attempt to join – with his work at the nexus – the disciplinarily separate fields of cultural studies, political science, and international relations (11). Of course, American Studies and literary and cultural studies already recognize popular culture as an implicitly political site of knowledge production and power negotiation. However, I reference his work specifically on popular narratives of September 11 because his book-length study argues for the consequential impact of a particular, institutionally-encouraged narrative that

³⁰ For example, Caruth (in the field of literary theory) and LaCapra (in the field of historiography) theorize predominantly from the premise of missing or lost experience and its inevitable, persistent recurrence as *the* characteristic dynamic of trauma. This emphasis troubles recognition of manifest traumatic aftereffects that apparently fully acknowledge and expressly respond to specific instances of cultural disruption.

³¹ According to Polkinghorne, Merleau-Ponty views language as a way “to descend into the realm of our primary perceptual and emotional experience...to bring forth a meaningful interpretation of this primary level of our existence” (29). In effect, “Life presents itself as a raw indication that needs to be finished by interpretation to make it meaningful” (30). This conception accords well with Geertz’s view of social practices as modes of subjective interpretation and self-understanding.

“creat[ed] shared meaning” through “a variety of cultural productions, so that the meaning penetrates to all parts of society” (93). He cites the

key elements of the narration of the crisis of 9/11 that paved the way for the development of the ‘war on terror’ as the dominant discursive structure in the security of the United States...[including] the construction of an enemy image; the avoidance of blame on any other than the enemy; a definition of core values that were at risk; and a claim to global leadership. (69)

Together, he asserts, popular culture discourses and Bush administration War on Terror discourses – what he terms the “decisive intervention” – mutually reinforced justifications for a response to the “shock” and “horror” of September 11 that, while not inevitable, was rooted genealogically (266). Overall, his point that September 11 did provoke substantive change, but that pervasive discourse determined what kind among an array of contingent possibilities, importantly conceptually separates the War on Terror from September 11, foregrounding how the War on Terror was a constructed and not inexorable post-trauma reconstruction of common sense.³²

With similar aims in mind I am exploring multiple sites of narrative formation, including oral history, television documentary as well as fiction, magazines, film, and literature, to analyze cultural processes of meaning disruption and development in

³² Holland, mentioned in an earlier footnote for his analysis of the political transformation of September 11 from a discursive void to a crisis, draws on Croft’s work (among others) to create “critical space” by similarly separating as not inevitably linked the day’s events from the subsequent War on Terror (277). He is concerned to show specifically the “contingency of foreign policy” (289). Similarly, McAlister outlines a “cultural history” of the War on Terror by tracing popular culture’s engagement with terrorism since the 1972 Munich Olympics.

relation to that day. In this way, I seek to underscore the structures of feeling that made possible, while not necessitating, eventual dominant responses, including the War on Terror, but also widespread conspiracy theory or “truth” movements, among others.³³ I regard areas of overlap and divergence among these different texts as particularly useful for signaling the parameters of cultural conceptions of existential safety; individual control in contrast to helplessness or fate; and vulnerability and victimization. Although I address dominant or mainstream discursive formations (those supported by substantial resources and made widely available to large numbers of readers and viewers) that focus on September 11 itself and its immediate aftermath, I have avoided narratives that transparently and uncritically either reinforce or contradict such discourses, opting instead for more nuanced texts whose ambivalences not only occasion but clearly invite reader and viewer interaction. Such texts more usefully register the ongoing relevance and complexity of the issues they raise and leave at least somewhat unresolved. Specifically, I am evaluating how these texts evidence and engage September 11 as a cultural trauma generating problematic subject positions that complicate agency and ethical response.

In Chapter One, “Lost and Found Selves and Worlds in Popular Press Oral Histories of September 11,” I have selected three popular press oral history collections about September 11: *New York Times* journalist Dean E. Murphy’s 2002 *September 11: An Oral History*, former *New York Daily News* gossip columnist Mitchell Fink and his wife Lois Matthias’s 2002 *Never Forget: An Oral History of September 11*, and writer, actor, and Drew University Theater Arts instructor Damon DiMarco’s 2007 *Tower*

³³ Hall regards popular culture as the site of both “containment and resistance” (228) since people are not merely passive dupes to cultural production (232).

Stories: An Oral History of 9/11. Each set of stories centralizes eyewitness accounts of in-the-moment action as the day's exigencies progress, particularly from witnesses and survivors who were present at the World Trade Center. As publications for mass, rather than academic, consideration, these September 11 oral histories self-consciously position themselves as contributions to an accessible public historical record. Accordingly, I assess the impact of offering as enduring documentation of September 11 narratives shaped by the experiential limitations of people caught in dire and chaotic circumstances. In effect, I consider how these anecdotes of discrete personal ordeals root a history of September 11 in radical unsettlements about safety and agency, unsettlements that intimate a culturally traumatic rupture of expectations about ordinary life.

In Chapter Two, "Witnessing the Fall: September 11 and the Crisis of the Permeable Self," I focus on Tom Junod's 2003 *Esquire* magazine article "The Falling Man" and the Public Broadcasting Service's (PBS) 2002 *Frontline* television documentary "Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero." From two different sites within popular culture, these texts show similar concerns with the effects on a generic American public of witnessing World Trade Center victims jump to their deaths. I examine what, according to this magazine and this documentary, these effects might be and how their shared concern reflects elements of existential insecurity and doubts about personal and ethical choice that characterize September 11 as a cultural trauma.

In Chapter Three, "Enduring Impact: The Crisis Fetish in Post-September 11 American Television," I look at television programs airing in the mid- to late-2000s, including ABC Studios' 2004-2010 television series *Lost*, British Sky Broadcasting's 2005-2009 science fiction serial *Battlestar Galactica*, and HBO Entertainment's short-

lived 2009-2010 fantasy *FlashForward*. As serialized fictions developed through the creative freedoms of the science fiction and fantasy genres, these series can summon real-world headlines to inform themes and plots for mass viewers without necessarily conforming to real-world factions and outcomes in partisan ways that might alienate some of those viewers. Accordingly, I explore how each show forms part of a sustained consideration of the possibilities, limitations, and ethics of human beings trying to nourish community and combat enemies under conditions of extreme threat and precarious survival, with oblique reference to these issues' real-world corollaries. In this way, I determine how unresolved tensions around notions of safety and choice point to traumatic fractures within post-September 11 cultural formations.

In Chapter Four, “‘Nothing To Do with All Your Strength’: Power, Choice, and September 11 in *The Dark Knight*,” I analyze producer and director Christopher Nolan’s 2008 film *The Dark Knight*. References to September 11 infuse this movie’s plot and images, which revolve around a city and its public servants virtually taken hostage by a sociopathic villain interested in escalating violence against law enforcers and civilians alike while engineering these crises in a way that permits only morally problematic responses. Accordingly, I evaluate how the film stages that day’s events and with what possible effects for viewers who, just seven years later, would most likely be witnesses if not survivors of the hijackings. In effect, I consider how the film dramatizes September 11-generated, culturally traumatic impasses about balancing public safety and justice.

In Chapter Five, “Limning the ‘Howling Space’ of September 11 through Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*,” I review Don DeLillo’s December 2001 *Harper’s Magazine* essay, “In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of

September,” in connection with his 2007 novel, *Falling Man*, whose title echoes the predicament of victims who jumped from the World Trade Center, but whose main character is a survivor. Both texts grapple with envisioning the personal and public aftereffects of September 11. Specifically, as both the essay’s and the novel’s titles indicate, these texts dwell on how some of that day’s most troubling features can endure as ongoing, never-resolved crises for both survivors and witnesses. Accordingly, I explore in this chapter issues that have recurred throughout each of its predecessors: World Trade Center survivors’ compromised subjectivity and agency; witnesses’ ambivalent identifications with the plight of those who jumped from the towers; questions about choice and fate; and doubts about whether the aftermath of September 11 will ever reach a state of resolution. In this way, I consider how Don DeLillo’s writing further delineates the fissures that comprise the cultural trauma of September 11.

Ann Cvetkovich has voiced a common concern by asserting her resistance to “the idea that, after September 11, everything has changed and nothing will be the same again” (65). However, as the work on trauma across disciplines has suggested, what might be important is not whether such a reaction is socially, politically, or historically true, but what happens to social, political, and historical realities when survivors’ and witnesses’ lived experiences intimate that fundamental, however illusory, violation? How does that perception matter to what happens next? This project seeks to identify some of the cultural discordances that September 11 has provoked, topographically

delineating the still-emergent terrain from which the answers to the question of “what happens next”,³⁴ can be more distinctly framed and understood.

³⁴ In her *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, Hannah Arendt draws on the phrase “no longer and not yet” to characterize the experiential discontinuities between those whose subjective formation began before a great loss and those for whom subjectivity and this great loss have developed together, hand-in-hand (121-125) – “a kind of historical no man’s land” (121) in which each form of subjectivity can be considered effectively incommensurate with the other, and equally insufficient in relating integrally to the present moment. For me, the phrase usefully calls to mind the interstitial break awaiting resolution in-between what was lost – whether an object or a whole way of life – and what will replace it.

Chapter One: Lost and Found Selves and Worlds in Popular Press Oral Histories of September 11

Introduction: Individuals and Their Communities under Conditions of Terror

As noted in the introduction's literature review of cultural trauma, acts of terror can feel both incomprehensibly arbitrary and inescapably intimate to both survivors and witnesses, leaving them at a gross loss of trust in how they can know and act effectively in the world, especially in the service of a most fundamental need: self-preservation. Indeed, terrorism proves effective to the extent that it can disproportionately exploit horrifying actions against smaller groups to alter the attitudes and behaviors of much larger populations who can identify in some way with those smaller groups and their plight (Breckenridge and Zimbardo 116-118). In this sense, on September 11, 2001, the individuals who endured and interpreted lasting harm were not themselves the specifically-intended targets. Rather, their harm was incurred by their connection – however close or distant, secure or tenuous, assured or conflicted – to the larger, targeted collectivity of the United States. Accordingly, the hijackings of September 11 have generated complex interactions of personal injury and cultural context that foreground how individuals inter-relationally come to understand the world and their place within it.

Here, I examine how popular press oral histories have chronicled September 11 through narratives showcasing fears about personal safety and feelings of helplessness under conditions that inextricably link the individual's fate with the targeting of a national community. Specifically, three oral history collections produced for mass consideration have been overtly promoted as documenting history through the testimonies of "ordinary people" who witnessed the September 11 attacks in person: *New*

York Times journalist Dean E. Murphy's 2002 *September 11: An Oral History*, former *New York Daily News* gossip columnist Mitchell Fink and his wife Lois Matthias's 2002 *Never Forget: An Oral History of September 11*,³⁵ and writer, actor, and Drew University Theater Arts instructor Damon DiMarco's 2007 *Tower Stories: An Oral History of 9/11*. Although these books do not feature entirely the same kinds of stories – for example, some include perspectives from the Pentagon or from Ground Zero recovery and support services, and others do not – each collection includes anecdotes of how survivors escaped from the World Trade Center's vicinity before or during its destruction. Also, all of these texts' front-cover illustrations – even those that also mention other sites – in some way incorporate twin tower imagery, manifesting the World Trade Center as their dominant concern. At the same time, each publication also links readers' recollections – likely formed through that day's extensive media coverage, which also focused on Lower Manhattan – to these “at-the-scene” reports. By presenting such a publicly available and commonly accessible resource for shaping a communal September 11 history, this core set of stories offers a fruitful site for exploring mediations between individual and collective meaning disruption and reconstruction. In particular, I am assessing how these narratives supplement readers' memories of that day and anticipations of their own futures with professedly veridical tales of what has been, and continues to be, at stake for everyone. Given the respect generally accorded eyewitness historical testimony (White 306) and the respect these texts explicitly claim for their assembled testimonies, I am interested in evaluating how the arbitrary yet intimate

³⁵ Initial publication featured fifty-thousand copies of Murphy's book and seventy-five thousand copies of Fink and Mathias's book (McDornan 23).

suffering these oral histories recount wield credible authority about what constitutes September 11.

To do this, I first review how processes of traumatization and narrativization intersect to frame how September 11 trauma narratives can be understood. Next, I highlight how oral history theory and methodology have often regarded oral histories as narratives that intrinsically intertwine personal experience with communal history. In this way, I account for how September 11 trauma narratives permeate both individual and shared imaginaries. Then, I provide a brief overview of the many kinds of oral histories that have emerged after September 11 both to situate these three popular press collections within a broad field of similar projects of narrating that day's trauma through oral testimony and to differentiate them from the other collections on terms such as content, structure, intended readership, and professed purpose. Ultimately, I consider how these books' anecdotes' persistent depictions of vulnerability and powerlessness complicate how an initially incredible and incomprehensible crisis can become credible and intelligible by fostering, instead of a satisfyingly happy resolution to each recounting, a common radical unsettlement about personal safety and agency that persists as a cultural trauma.

Trauma and Narrative: Piecing Together Fragmented Knowledge and Power

As noted in the introduction's review of psychological trauma, traumatic events corrupt an individual's sense of intelligibly being and acting in the world, requiring reconstruction of that individual's subjective coherence, productive agency, and responsible orientation toward him- or herself and others. Basically, traumatic events subject individuals to the experience of not being able to protect themselves or others

when protection is most necessary, producing horror in the recognition of this utter powerlessness. Such ordeals undermine a person's understanding of him- or herself as capable of acting and willing constructively, without incurring substantial injury or that which a person would most want to avoid. Fundamentally, then, trauma disrupts the very premises of functional selfhood, bodily integrity and effective agency, by demonstrating that a person can be inescapably vulnerable to a greater power precisely counter to his or her own most vital interests. In effect, traumatic events impose tenacious forms of new, unwanted knowledge with obliterating power.

Accordingly, in the aftermath of trauma's disruption of trust in the world, oneself, and others, meaning-making and relationship-building in tandem prove integral to traumatic recovery. Herman has emphasized that recovery depends, as did the circumstances of the initial trauma, on social contexts and contributions (61-73; Janoff-Bulman 142-165; BenEzer 29-30). Distrust of, resistance to, and failure in social ties and structures become especially acute following intentional harm (Herman 8, 51-73). Perpetrators strive to take advantage of this communal crisis by marshaling support for their point of view, which can entice bystanders simply to look away and pursue the appealing option of pretending such terrors do not exist. In such cases, survivors remain ever more isolated within their fractured bodies and minds (7-8). For this reason, Herman urges, "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). Importantly, "reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between

survivors and their community” form part of the “fundamental stages of recovery” (3).³⁶ In fact, as Phelps argues with an illustration from *Hamlet* to support a case for state-sponsored truth reports, public storytelling of harm can thwart perpetuating cycles of violence and summon an audience of witnesses, whose positioning as witnesses would warrant a call to ethical action (33-37). Through narrative, survivors and witnesses can cultivate their reconfiguring senses of subjectivity, agency, and responsibility, and they can link with the social support that helps ground these reconfigurations.

Essentially, as addressed in the introduction’s methodology section, Carr has characterized narrative as constituting the meaningful world.³⁷ Importantly, historian James Young (*Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*) evokes this perspective in evaluating the historiography of the Holocaust, an historical trauma which Miller and Tougaw, among others, have argued has established the discourse on trauma within history and literature (4). Young essentially places history and interpretation in a hermeneutical circle, or feedback loop. He explains that events become meaningful to their participants in-process based on their given world views, leading to their actions at that time. Later narration of these events therefore not only necessarily reflects the interpretations that guided earlier actions, but also incorporates world views contemporary to the time of narration and generates the material that leads to future interpretation and action (2-5). In effect, then, narratives do not only represent cultural selves and worlds, they in fact produce cultural selves and worlds.

³⁶ Adler and Poulin have studied the salience of post-September 11 storytelling for both individuals and communities.

³⁷ For relevance to oral history, see also Blatti 623-624

This perspective resonates with the psychological models of trauma that emphasize the loss of meaning through traumatization. After all, it is these narratively-produced, culturally-intelligible selves and worlds that traumatic events shatter and expose as contingent and vulnerable, and also which recovery seeks to restore. However, traumatic conditions pose considerable challenges for narration. After all, how do you tell a meaningful story about an occurrence that has shattered your foundations for all coherence? How do you make others understand that which you yourself still wrestle to grasp? What about the “inarticulability of physical pain: when in pain we cannot accurately describe it to another nor can we fully understand another’s pain” (Phelps 40)? For those subjected to torture, “commonplace meanings have changed. The ordinary has become the horrible. The story that a victim has constructed about his or her own life is systematically destroyed” (42). Over time, these dilemmas have echoed through diverse survivor accounts of trauma. Typically, in trauma’s wake, survivors and witnesses “express themselves in stories containing elements which are imaginary, fragmented or disjointed, and loaded with symbolism” (Leydesdorff et al. 1), each recounting and illustrating the radical disjunctures that both complicate narrative style and manifest traumatic content. At the same time, though, in whatever form and however fractured, these narratives also mediate between survivors or witnesses and their listening or reading audiences, working toward fresh significations about what the event means, whom it affects, and why it matters.

Specifically, as Phelps articulates, “even as we narrate our individual stories, these stories we tell about ourselves and our lives are not autonomous, disconnected units. As we shape the discordant events of our lives into a coherent narrative, we also

discover our 'place' in larger units: in our families, communities, and nations" (58). In reference to truth commissions, although with relevance more generally to other contexts, she adds, "If the stories are told publicly, they...are remembered and told in a present in which not only a reconstructed self is possible, but also in which a new community necessarily exists, a community that can hear and acknowledge the stories" (60). Similarly, Miller and Tougaw argue, "In complex and often unexpected ways, the singular 'me' evolves into a plural 'us' and writing that bears witness to the extreme experiences of solitary individuals can sometimes begin to repair the tears in the collective social fabric" (3). In effect, "Testimony records a movement from individual experience to the collective archive, from personal trauma to public memory" (13). Accordingly, narrative fosters through interpretation the conversion of traumatic experience into new individual and collective meanings and identities.

For this reason, trauma narratives warrant responsibility. Indeed, such texts reach "living readers whose post-traumatic responsibilities are both retrospective and prospective" (Miller and Tougaw 7), which "should lead us to a more intense awareness of what implicates us in the lives of others" (5). Miller and Tougaw perceive an opportunity, that "any reader can take a first step toward collective self-consciousness by negotiating pathways of responsiveness and responsibility between what is both strange and familiar, distant and all too close" (20). Approaching trauma narratives from these perspectives suggests the potential for reaping from painful histories more hopeful future potential. However, such attempts at therapeutic reading can also become problematic. Phelps acknowledges the risks of "psychic numbing," whereby people become inured to overwhelming violence they cannot control; "premature closure," whereby the narrative

framework, conventionally replete with an ending resolving all matters, suggests that the recounted events have themselves reached resolution; and “appropriation,” whereby stories of suffering escape the immediate conditions of their creation and become co-opted for other purposes (124-128). In addition,

a reader’s involvement with the painful details of another’s story entails both the pleasures of the imagination and the defenses of personal boundaries – and these reactions shape the exercise of identification across the borders of the unfamiliar. Accounts of extreme experience set in motion an ambivalent desire to look, to grapple with real suffering, and at the same time to look away. (Miller and Tougaw 19-20)

To forestall such misuses, Phelps advocates that narratives be “incomplete, multivalent, heteroglossic” and serve as “tools of disruption” (128). Ultimately, then, traumatic events compel both fiction and non-fiction writers to produce texts that enable readers to witness what they nevertheless will never fully comprehend (Tal 1-2).

Perhaps uniquely, Miller and Tougaw argue, “If every century has been marked by extreme experience, it has become almost compulsory in ours to document the disaster” (11). These narratives all contribute to what Marita Sturken has termed cultural memory formations, or the “memory that is shared outside the avenues of formal historical discourse yet is entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meaning” (3). However, she emphasizes, “Cultural meaning does not reside with the text of a particular object...so much as it is produced in the act of ‘consumption,’ wherein the viewer/citizen engages with its meaning” (257). As noted earlier, traumatic disruption forces individuals to rebuild shattered fundamental assumptions about themselves and

their worlds. According to Sturken, cultural memory serves as “a field of contested meanings in which Americans interact with cultural elements to produce concepts of nation, particularly in events of trauma, where both the structures and the fractures of a culture are exposed” (2-3). Indeed, Sturken characterizes memory as “crucial to the understanding of a culture precisely because it indicates collective desires, needs, and self-definitions” (2), underscoring how memory as narrative reflects traumatic dissolution of meaning and community and enacts their post-traumatic reconstruction. Ultimately, she notes, “The survivors of traumatic historical events are powerful cultural figures. They are awarded moral authority, and their experience carries the weight of cultural value” (255). At the same time, Benedict Anderson has argued that claiming the dead similarly figures critically in building nationhood (205-206). Similarly, Geoffrey White has considered how ritualized mourning for those who have died in military service to the country fosters national subjectivity (296), while personal narratives of the survivors of events such as September 11 create the “conditions for empathy” (298). These formulations of the intertwined relationships between narrative, memory, trauma, and culture point to the complex processes through which individuals and communities inter-relate co-constitutively under conditions of trauma.

A traumatic event’s narrative response and cultural impact manifest in a variety of both formal and informal, but often conflicted, ways. For example, Sturken’s interrogation of how Americans remember the Vietnam War, the first Persian Gulf War, and the AIDS epidemic illustrates how both state-sanctioned and non-state groups create sites for remembrance – such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the AIDS quilt, and even innumerable, less revered, commodities – that serve as “technologies of memory”

(9-12) enabling individuals to participate in the public narrativization of traumatic events. Through this narrativization, meanings emerge that can reinforce, question, or unevenly engage the threatened dominant narrative, complexly knitting together – although, at times, also dividing – individuals and communities under conditions of trauma.

Similarly, David Simpson critiques the *New York Times* obituaries for the September 11 victims at the World Trade Center as supporting dominant national values and identities at a time when many were arguing that those values and identities were under attack (87-103). However, as Avery Gordon points out, often traumas are not registered formally, with memorials or any other kind of recognition and attempt at cultural integration. Indeed, as Miller and Tougaw note, “Stories that challenge the limits of representation and transmission resonate because they chronicle experience that has yet to be incorporated within the popular imagination” (19). In the case of September 11, Tom Junod’s “The Falling Man,” an *Esquire* article on those who jumped from the World Trade Center towers, dwells on the pervasive, unresolved unsettlement these jumping figures have posed. In such apparent narrative voids, dominant paradigms both encounter and elude troubling challenges to their integrity, leaving these horrific events to persist in areas of culture in which meaning remains both provocative and feared, signaling emergent structures of feeling.

James Berger captures the radical dumbfounding occasioned by the unfolding events on September 11 in his reflections on how those events at first eluded, then succumbed to, a stable nomenclature. He recalls, “When the planes hit the towers and the towers fell, it wasn’t clear what word to use. It was unclear what had happened – that is, what it meant – and so what name could designate it...At that moment, it had no

meaning. Something happened, was happening, was happening over and over..." (54). His recollections evince the knowledge and meaning effacement characteristic of any traumatic occurrence and especially characteristic of that day's ongoing, rapidly developing assortment of unforeseen terrors. At the same time, he recognizes the invitation a vacuum of knowledge and meaning extends to any number and variety of construals that would redress the meaninglessness, or rather from another view tame the proliferation of uncontained meanings (54-55). Ann Cvetkovich urges "resisting the momentum of the culture industry, which is eager to tell a story that glorifies heroes and stresses national unity...[so] that its many and heterogeneous meanings...will be displaced by a more singular and celebratory story" (61). Her vision for post-September 11 narrativization coincides with earlier noted conceptions that narrative responsively evokes the lived experience of trauma through complex, disruptive, and troubling, rather than simple, orderly, and conciliatory, storytelling approaches.

Cautiously, then, Cvetkovich looks toward oral history collections as popular modes for inclusively memorializing not only what happened on September 11, but also how that day and the people whom it has affected are rooted in specific histories and directed toward channeled, though not fated, futures (63-65). However, while she values the opportunity oral histories afford to "break out of that potentially obsessive focus" on the day's lived horror to consider instead meaning-making in its wake (65), I look to those popular oral histories that do dwell on the immediacy of horror. Regarding new historicism's uses of anecdotes, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt reference how the non-contextualized in historical writing signals the contingencies that mark the "real," the not-yet-fully-narrated intruding on the well-organized, authoritative rendering

(49-59). Such stories, recounting abrupt intrusions in the continuing flow of personal and communal histories, can conjure the intensities of subjective, volitional, and ethical crises that determine what kinds of subsequent meaning-making are possible, likely, feared, and preferred.

Joining Selves and Worlds through Oral History

Paul John Eakin approaches “autobiography in the spirit of a cultural anthropologist, *asking what such texts can teach us about the ways in which individuals in a particular culture experience their sense of being ‘I’ [sic]”* (4). I look at another form of life writing, the oral history, as a text that can teach us not only how individuals experience themselves, but also how they understand their worlds and the people around them (Thomson 293). Moreover, I consider how such a text can document the moments when these experiences and understandings are tested, reinforced, refined, overturned, and renewed. While historiography generally is concerned with factually-grounded interpretations and representations, the process of oral history is inherently subject to human error even under the most rigorous conditions, at times resulting in confused, misinterpreted, or forgotten facts. However, this process can offer the historical record insight into how individuals encounter and understand events, informing fact-based interpretations and representations with subjective perspectives of what it means to live through those “facts,” or historical events (Thomson 291). By effectively bracketing historical fact in favor of subjective perspective, oral history assumes a phenomenological orientation (Kirby). In this sense, oral history need not demonstrate flawless factuality because what it offers, that factually-oriented documentation does not, is the opportunity to understand an event’s human impact. Such an impact, as evidenced

by these subjective perspectives, includes individuals' senses – however accurate or inaccurate – as an occurrence unfolds of what is happening and how it might affect them, leading to their choices of whether and how to act from that time forward (Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* 2-5).

This evocation of what participants might think is happening matters substantially. After all, participants cannot know and act omnisciently; they can know and act only within the context and limits of their respective positionings (Portelli 85). As oral historian Alessandro Portelli explains, “as is always the case with the circumscribed point of view, the story is less about what is seen than about the act of seeing” (85). So it is these respective positionings, more so than factual accuracy, that materially shape individuals' worldviews and participation in and comprehension of those viewed worlds. As it turns out, readers of oral histories likewise occupy circumscribed points of view, contoured not only by what their respective lives prepare them to understand, but also by the perspectives the oral histories themselves provide. Importantly, though, as Paul Lauritzen emphasizes, “To be useful to moral deliberation, the appeal to experience must be more than a mere cataloguing of events in the life of the agent; the events must be drawn together in a meaningful pattern” (21). When this approach is taken, narratives that appeal to experience can uniquely expose information critical to evaluating an event's human effects,³⁸ such as suffering, while fostering an emotional connection between narrator and audience that invites the audience to take a moral stand (24). Such arguments point to how oral history can evoke a historical event's human weight and

³⁸ Grele notes that oral history can be used “to discover unfolding consciousness, to document the varieties of ideology, the creation of meaning and the more subjective aspects of historical experience” (570).

value, even when those assembling the oral histories (in the case of the three collections considered here) have unclearly or unevenly followed methodological conventions for preserving as much as possible the integrity of the eyewitness' voice.

For oral history to communicate this human weight and value, Portelli views as significant “less...the reconstruction of the average experience, than...the subjective projection of imaginable experience: less by what materially happens to people, than by what people imagine or know *might* [sic] happen. This horizon of possibilities defines the range of a socially shared subjectivity” (86-87). In this sense, what matters is not whether others actually experience what an oral history participant narrates, or whether an oral history somehow “objectively,” “accurately,” and “comprehensively” documents some past event, but whether others recognize the possibility that such things could happen, perhaps even to them. Portelli explains, “Oral history, then, offers less a grid of standard experiences than a horizon of shared possibilities, real or imagined” (88). Accordingly, oral history accounts not only instantiate subjective narratives, but also provoke responsive alternate scenarios wherein others envision their own subjective – as likely to be divergent as resonant – participation in the narratives' recounted decisions, actions, and effects. In this way, oral histories provide a site for complex meaning formations generated through interactive engagement among narrators, narratives, and audiences.

Portelli has been particularly interested in the “relationship between private and public histories, experiences, and narratives as a specific task and realm of oral history” (ix), since personal biography and public history intertwine when individuals' narratives recount experiences shared by or relevant to communities (6). He characterizes oral

history as a dialogic discourse, constructed not only through the participant's involvement in his or her historical context, but also through the participant's interaction with his or her interviewer who, as the one who gathers and presents them widely, ultimately wields substantial authority over the narratives' interpretation (3). At the same time, the participants' narrative texts "are both highly individual expressions and manifestations of social discourse," reflecting their development through individuals' experiences that are embedded in social and cultural constructs (82). Indeed, Portelli argues, "culturally shared symbolic structures and narrative devices" cultivate narrative intelligibility, rendering oral histories pertinent and meaningful to others within a common cultural framework (83). In this way, oral history texts manifest and perform culturally salient values and practices. In effect, then, oral history – and specifically, these September 11 oral histories – can serve as technologies of memory, offering personal stories as sites for public negotiation.

"We Are All Americans"? Individuals and Communities in the Wake of September 11

In the September 13, 2001 edition of France's newspaper of record *Le Monde*, editor Jean-Marie Colombani declared, "We are all Americans."³⁹ This transnational sentiment of solidarity seemed to echo the stunned rallying characterizing immediate public reactions within the United States. But, as Colombani's article itself indicates, what any post-crisis invocation of community might mean (and conversely, what firm rejections of any such solidarity might imply) depend complexly on what exigencies it recognizes and what purposes it might serve. Within the United States, the conscious

³⁹ This phrase also marks a Salon.com essay reporting on European, and primarily German, reactions of solidarity in the immediate wake of September 11, 2001 (Lindsey and Kettman).

recording of and engagement with this event as history began instantly with news media coverage, when commentators during live broadcasts struggled to contextualize within the conventions of journalistic objectivity developments they considered shockingly unprecedented. Not long after that day, numerous organizations began formally soliciting explicitly for the benefit of current and future generations eyewitness accounts and the reflections of anyone else who wanted to comment on how that day affected them, regardless of whether they were present at or in any way directly connected to any of the crash sites. These assorted projects evince a sense of September 11 as a communal event, confronted by individuals whose separate, unique experiences collectively generate a common significance for larger communities, even one defined as broadly as “Americans.”

I mention first only a sample of the larger-scale endeavors, which intimates the depth and breadth of resources available for future research. The American Folklife Center began on September 12, 2001 to organize for the Library of Congress the September 11, 2001 Documentary Project, an online assemblage of audio, video, graphic, and written reactions to September 11 “from Americans and others.” According to the project’s overview, “This collection captures the voices of a diverse ethnic, socioeconomic, and political cross-section of America during trying times and serves as a historical and cultural resource for future generations.” From September 7 to October 26, 2002, the Library of Congress presented a formal exhibition, “Witness and Response: September 11 Acquisitions at the Library of Congress,” displaying artifacts amassed partly from the public at large during the year after the attacks. The September 11 Digital Archive, which includes images as well as stories submitted online by the general public,

is also now affiliated with the Library of Congress. In addition, in 2005, the non-profit organization StoryCorps, which facilitates brief oral history-oriented conversations between people who know each other and who want to record each other's personal histories, has pursued a September 11 Initiative. Both the Library of Congress and the National September 11 Memorial and Museum at the World Trade Center will archive the interviews produced through the StoryCorps process, as well as the independently-funded documentary "Project Rebirth," which has annually revisited nine individuals directly affected by September 11 to chronicle the grieving process over time. Also, the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History September 11 exhibit, initiated on September 11, 2002, "emphasized each person – whether a visitor to the exhibit or an individual featured in the exhibit – as a singular 'witness'" (Fried 390). Like the Library of Congress-affiliated collections, this exhibit regards "average" people as witnesses to and participants in the historical production of September 11, both as originators of historical narratives and artifacts and as active interlocutors with those materials.

Each of these collections has expressly and critically depended upon contributions from "ordinary" people – those without any particular qualifications other than having lived through that day. Indeed, with the invitation to participate not only extended ostensibly to all, but also intentionally in some cases to a "diverse...cross-section" of "Americans and others," such efforts underscore a view of history-making as multivocal and broadly-construed. Of course, whether and how this principle is manifested in any of these instances remains a matter for closer future scrutiny. Nevertheless, the underlying impulse evidences a prevalent view of September 11 history as the evocation of disparate

experiences on common sites of meaning-formation, a field of opportunity for the individual struggle with that day's horrors to become communally relevant.

Columbia University's September 11, 2001 Oral History Narrative and Memory Project – one of five Oral History Research Office efforts related to September 11 – has conducted hundreds of life history interviews to create an archive that reflects the widely divergent implications of that day and its aftereffects, specifically beyond the bounds of official or institutionalized discourse (Columbia University). According to Mary Marshall Clark, project co-director with Peter Bearman, “The project’s purpose is to understand whether the catastrophe and its aftermath constitute a turning point in the lives and imaginations of those both directly and indirectly affected” (570). As Clark notes, “For most people, the interviews represented an opportunity to try to make sense of what was senseless where there was apparently no analogy...[T]hose we interviewed described a search for meaning that began with stories of survival of the September events but continued to define a social response weeks and months afterwards.” For many, “September 11 still stands outside history as we know it” as those it has affected in complex and multiple ways continue to construct its ultimate meaning(s) through narrative (576). These characterizations resonate with how trauma narratives frequently function. Through storytelling, worldview expectations and explanations disrupted by trauma can reconstitute, more finely-attuned to newly-perceived contexts and circumstances.

As a public resource, the Oral History Research Office provides yet another site for collective meaning development through interaction with personal stories of September 11. In fact, those conducting the oral history interviews found themselves

intimately invested in this meaning-making process. Since “9/11 was not really yet in the past when the team set out...[t]here were no safe and objective boundaries, no decades of detachment and distance to provide shelter.” This particularly vulnerable relationship between interviewer and interviewee on the terms of a mutually-recognized past becomes even more permeable through the work of the stories themselves, which link teller and listener in a communal bond. In the end, “project leaders say that an oral history of 9/11 is bound to...[have no] neat endings, no jump-cut transition to the final happy return to normalcy, just real life stumbling on with all its loose ends and complications” (K. Johnson B6). In effect, then, these oral histories occasion heterogeneous in-progress confrontations with September 11, abrupt life change and its aftermath. Individuals can use these disparate encounters with the same historical event to reflect on their own experiences and orient themselves to this event in relationship with others.

This potential for generating collective histories of September 11 from individuals’ stories sets the context for first-person accounts published through the popular press before the Columbia archives would become publicly accessible and, as popular press publications, likely to remain much more commonly available than those archives even after they have become public. Such first-person accounts abound, from widow memoirs to oral histories of specific populations like young journalists trying to cover the news at the crash sites. However, three collections explicitly profess themselves to be recording history in the form of “ordinary-person” eyewitness testimonies that link readers’ recollections – likely formed as media viewers from afar – to more authoritative, “on-the-ground” reports of those who directly encountered the September 11 attacks. In 2002, Doubleday produced Murphy’s *September 11: An Oral*

History and Regan Books produced Fink and Matthias's *Never Forget: An Oral History of September 11*. In 2004, Revolution Publishing first released DiMarco's *Tower Stories: The Autobiography of September 11th*, which Santa Monica Press revised and updated for a 2007 release as *Tower Stories: An Oral History of 9/11*. Although these books do not feature entirely the same kinds of oral histories, I focus on what they all do include: anecdotal narratives – concise, informal excerpts from the larger thread of ongoing life – of how World Trade Center office workers, building employees, rescue personnel, area residents, and passersby escaped from the towers' vicinity before or during their collapse. This core set of stories bounded by a singular time, place and event but complicated by multiple subject voices and orientations contributes to the attempt to render the World Trade Center's highly visible and initially incredible and incomprehensible crisis increasingly credible and intelligible.

Consciousness of how individual stories can inform collective memory formations infuses each book's self-presentation, cueing readers to consider these narratives as the raw data of history and their own reading practice as part of history-in-the-making. For example, the front book cover characterizes Murphy's offerings as "Real Stories from Ordinary People" and its back jacket describes the book as "The first and only oral history of September 11 that presents people from all walks of life...[whose] vignettes capture the grief, rage, and fear that gripped the nation – and offer an intimate, inspiring look at the strengths that enabled us to move on." This coupling of "ordinary" survivors' ordeals and a "nation's" emotions, between "intimate" stories and a nebulously inclusive "us" who can draw on such stories to "move on," connects personal involvement with community conceptions of that day. Specifically,

individual survivors are portrayed as embodying the shock that “gripped the nation” that day as well as the “strengths” that allowed those shocked others also to survive. This portrayal prepares readers to regard survivors as people just like them whose eyewitness testimony provides unique access to what actually happened at the World Trade Center but also, in doing so, clarifies what happened to readers themselves when witnessing events from afar. Similarly, while Fink and Mathias’s book title urges, “Never Forget,” its back cover claims, “This concert of voices shows, as never before, the heart-breaking grief and slow, but uplifting, healing process that the people of this nation have experienced individually and as one.” Again, the personal and the communal are figured as interchanging to articulate history through the edifying, palliative bond of storytelling.

Of the three texts, DiMarco’s book most vividly and self-consciously situates itself as an artifact and mechanism of historical production. While back cover descriptions term the collection a “literary time capsule” in the “tradition of Studs Terkel” that “eternally preserves a monumental tragedy in American history through the voices of the people,” its front cover points to a foreword by 9/11 Commission Chairman Thomas Kean, according bona fides to the book cover claims as historical documentation of September 11. In that foreword, Kean traces the collection’s effort to “allow...our American people to speak for themselves” to the Great Depression’s Federal Writer’s Project’s preservation of slave narratives, which he characterizes as “part of our cultural body of evidence against what was, and an inspiration toward a brighter future for what might be” (12-13). Following this tradition, he writes, “I hope this book remains in print for a very long time to come because everyone should read it. Our children should read it...We must ground ourselves in the reality of our pain if we have any hope of moving

forward.” To his use of the plural “we” and “our” to summon a collective effort at history formation, transmission, and redress, he adds, “I invite you this instant to clear your mind and think back for a moment. Where were you that day” (13)? After all, in the immediate aftermath of September 11, he suggests, “a new door was opened between us and we were able to share in a quiet secret that everyone suddenly knew – that we are all, in our own way, survivors. Move forward we must. For we are Americans. This is our story” (14). In this way, Kean’s foreword explicitly elides the individual survivor narrator and an American community readership, blending the two as a single body united in the task of making sense of a shared horror, with the narrator contributing the story that educates the reader not only about the narrator’s experience, but also about the reader’s own.

September 11: An Oral History book reviewer Jonathan Mahler acknowledges from his encounter with Murphy’s collection this elision between survivors and a larger community, writing, “Even for those of us who weren’t downtown when the planes struck, these oral histories trigger certain recollections, collective emotional muscle memories.” He highlights the imaginative relations between survivors and others, between others and the event, that these stories enable, recalling, “Reading these accounts, you can’t help wondering what you would have done.” On each of these books’ product Web pages, Amazon.com provides room for customer reviews. Purchasers can post comments anonymously, tagged only by self-selected usernames and locations that indicate nothing about the commenter’s identifying characteristics. For this reason, these comments’ value and quality are limited within a recognition that they could come from anyone for any reason, from an editor’s family and friends wanting to

boost sales to disgruntled competitors wanting to reduce this particular product's appeal. However, they do occasion an intriguing sampling of whether any readers besides Mahler consider the texts as involving them in the historical production of September 11, or at least whether any comments further promote this attitude toward the texts.

Interestingly, many entries do signal this approach. According to a customer identified as Bill Baker, writing about DiMarco's book, "Oral history is the purest form of history available," an opinion underscoring the authority oral history wields. Regarding Murphy's book, Iconophoric writes, "The stories in this particular book have become the 'real' September 11, 2001 to me as a distant observer, that is, the virtual physical space my imagination inhabits when I think of those buildings and the people and the day." For Iconophoric, these narratives have complemented or even supplanted his or her own recollections. To a much greater extent, the comments for Fink and Mathias's book reflect an incorporation of these oral histories as primary, privileged histories in which readers nevertheless participate. For example, CookieMonster writes, "it is something that Americans should read to know the true suffering and heroism that happened on that day. I did not know anyone in NYC personally, but I feel now after 5 years that I really understand the magnitude of this event." ideas [sic] equate writes, "It's almost an American obligation to read these personal accounts and ponder the gravity of that day for those who were there." Daniel Jolley "darkgenius" echoes the notion of "American obligation to read," and notes in 2005, "I have only recently been going back and reading about 9/11 – suddenly, I finally felt ready to revisit what happened that day. I am learning that the personal tragedy and horror was much more extensive than I realized." He adds, "I was actually most interested in the stories of regular people who

lived through the events...those are the stories I can most easily identify with, especially when I ask myself how I would have reacted in their situation.” Similarly, A Customer (“Reality Check”) writes, “I was nowhere near NY, but I think we all experienced a death that morning. I was compelled to read this book to somehow empathize with those who perished and those who survived. I was ‘safe’ on the west coast, but I wanted to know what my fellow Americans went through that day.” Another reviewer listed as A Customer (“You Probably”) writes, “Most of us will never experience the horror, terror, and physical calamity that these people witnessed and/or suffered themselves. Just reading these stories did such a good job of putting me in those moments.” Similar sentiments, marking the oral histories as authoritative perspectives to which Americans must defer to understand what “truly” occurred, suffuse other postings as well. They construct the narratives as technologies through which readers position themselves in a gesture of responsible community as potential or vicarious survivors to refine their knowledge of what happened on September 11 and how it should be remembered.

Importantly, however, even though marketing has entitled each text an “oral history” and has emphasized the legitimacy such a term connotes, none adhere rigorously to transparent scholarly conventions of oral history practice. As the product of communication between an eyewitness and an interviewer, with the interviewer wielding powerful analytical and distributive authority over this communication, oral history is implicitly a mediated form of the first-person account. In other words, what people encounter when they read, watch, or listen to an oral history can seem to be statements purely and only about what an eyewitness has experienced. However, an oral history actually depends on what that eyewitness could know at the time, and what s/he now

remembers and tells, as well as what an interviewer prompts, hears, and selectively records and reports, all dynamic elements that complicate any notion of a single, true, incontrovertible testimony, yet all elements that can remain deceptively undifferentiated once an oral history enters circulation in its final, polished form. Moreover, although standards exist to render this mediation transparent and manage its effects, the three September 11 collections considered here gloss over, to differing extents, important methodological concerns. Each addresses methodological issues in varying ways. In fact, Murphy notes in his Introduction, “It is an oral history in the most general sense. The narratives are first-person accounts of that day, but they are not verbatim transcriptions of tape-recorded conversations.” Rather, he assembles “composites” from a variety of communications with his sources, while still maintaining an “uncompromising” commitment to accuracy (5). He prefaces each participant’s story with a name, occupation, and enough additional personal facts to set the stage for his or her subsequent recounting of September 11. At the same time, DiMarco explains in his Introduction that the “stories you’re about to read are distilled from interviews conducted in the year following September 11th, 2001” – although he notes that the 2007 edition includes updates to some participants’ stories as well – and that “great effort was made to capture the speaker’s inimitable tone, viewpoint, and rhythm of speech” (16). Therefore, it remains unclear, though likely, that these stories, presented as if in participants’ own words, are in fact again not verbatim transcriptions but rather editor-assembled abstracts of different interviews. DiMarco does provide contextual information, whether explicitly or inferentially, to identify speakers by name, age, sex, sexuality, race, ethnicity, etc. However, he supplies this information inconsistently in his prefaces to each account,

which also feature other, somewhat arbitrary, background material such as whether someone “was a Yankees fan from the day he was born” (422). Similarly, Fink and Mathias’s participants are unevenly identified, with some but not all visible in undated photographs and all identified only by name, age, and occupation. Otherwise, Fink and Mathias primarily document only the emotional toll conducting these interviews has taken on them (1-5). On the whole, these approaches short-shrift to differing extents important methodological concerns relative to what would be required of academic publications.

As a result, in spite of each book’s claims to the legitimacy of firsthand descriptions, any differences between the eyewitness’s voice and that of the interviewer remain opaque. Nevertheless, such approaches would likely suffice for these popular press publications, which target general audiences interested in the emotional impact of September 11 stories, an interest that would probably overshadow investment in historiographical standards. In effect, these books can have their cake and eat it too, by invoking the deference typically granted eyewitness testimony without completely taking the steps necessary to secure the parameters of that credibility. Such steps would have fostered a tenor of heightened professionalism that could have diminished the common-person, community-bonding tone on which these oral histories have based their appeal. But what kinds of history do these traumatic excerpts of ordinary life experience create and what kinds of community do they summon?

History as Confusion, Vulnerability and Doubt

Murphy, Fink and Mathias, and DiMarco all acknowledge within their collected September 11 oral histories elements of disarray, fear, and chance. Murphy’s front jacket

prompts readers' recognition of this commonality among the stories by stating, "About 3,000 people lost their lives....Thousands more narrowly escaped, their survival a result of eerily prescient spur-of-the-moment decisions, acts of superhuman courage, the unflinching kindness of strangers, and, in some cases, fortuitous strokes of luck." Similarly, the back jacket refers to life-saving "unlikely coincidences and quirks of fate." Mention of narrow escapes, eerie prescience, superhuman effort, the kindness of strangers, coincidence, pure luck, and fate evokes an utterly uncontrollable scenario for survivors, who appear in this way distinguished from the dead only tenuously through their judgment, choice, and action. Similarly, Fink writes in his part of a joint introduction, "The subject matter, after all, is without precedent. No one alive that day had any prior experience in dealing with events like these, and as a result many of the images described herein had never been imagined" (4). Implicitly, then, this assortment of unimaginable and unprecedented experiences infuses these forms of historical documentation with confusion, vulnerability and doubt. For Fink himself, who attests, "The world indeed changed on the morning of September 11" (1) and for Mathias, who recalls, "September 11 changed my life and was yet another turning point for me. Any and all illusions of control were shattered...Life as I knew it had changed" (4-5), comprehensive conceptual dislocation was something they explored by interviewing survivors but felt for themselves as well. At the same time, Kean's preface to DiMarco's book directly addresses readers on the premise that they, like everyone else watching media coverage of the attacks, were during that time "wondering where your loved ones were. Wondering. Just wondering. You were scared. You were angry. You were vulnerable. We all were" (14). By asserting that "we all" shared reactions of wonder, fear, anger, and

helplessness, Kean joins the disturbed subjectivity and agency plaguing first-person encounters with challenges to subjectivity and agency for witnesses from afar. In effect, these characterizations imply that September 11 disrupted the ability to comprehend events and act within them productively not only for those “on the ground” whose stories testify to such disruptions, but also for those across the country who read these stories to better understand what could or seemed to have happened to themselves.

Confusion permeates every account in these books. As unforeseen events unfold, eyewitness after eyewitness reports an inability to readily understand what is happening to them and around them. For example, Saravanan Rangaswamy, an immigrant from India on his first day of work with Lehman Brothers, was still in the North Tower lobby when the first plane hit. He recalls,

I thought a bomb had gone off. Immediately, everyone around me started running toward the doors. I just followed them...I had only been at the World Trade Center twice before...so I didn't know my way around. I just followed the crowd. In less than a minute, I was about 50 yards from the building, where I stopped and tried to figure out what had just happened. (37-38)

Similarly, Gerry Gaeta, a Port Authority architect on the eighty-eighth floor of the North Tower – and therefore among the few closest to the impact zone to survive – remembers, “something ripping through the building...at that moment, I didn't even know about an airplane. My first reaction was that it was an earthquake. Then I thought of a bomb” (49). Port Authority Police Captain Anthony R. Whitaker, featured in both Murphy's and Fink and Mathias's books, was the commanding officer at the World Trade Center. He

was in the complex's shopping mall when the first plane hit and he began hearing roars and seeing fireballs and people on fire coming from the North Tower lobby (23). He explains, "It just occurred to me that whatever was going on – and I still didn't know what that was – was beyond my ability as a commanding officer of that facility to do anything about it" (24). These eyewitnesses range from someone relatively far from the impact and totally unfamiliar with the buildings to someone near the impact and familiar with the buildings to someone whose professional responsibility was to ensure safety throughout those buildings. From every one of these compromised subject positions, knowledge of what was occurring immediately around them and what was directly affecting their life chances remained inaccurate, misleading, or entirely absent. The very worlds these survivors inhabited had become inscrutable at a moment of the highest stakes, when their ability to interpret and navigate their place in their environment – the most basic threshold of subjectivity – would mean the difference between life and death.

This compromised subjectivity, under circumstances dominated by horrific violations of human bodies, produces intense awareness of vulnerability. David Kravette, a Cantor Fitzgerald employee – a financial services firm that became indelibly linked with substantial loss of life on September 11 – left the 105th floor of the North Tower to meet clients in the lobby just before the first plane crashed into the floors below his office, cutting off all escape routes. He notes the happenstances that meant for him averted death,

They [his visitors] were running late, obviously. They forgot their ID.

But they also went to 2 World Trade Center first. They went into the wrong building and waited on line for five minutes, and discovered they

were in the wrong building. Had they gone into the right building, I would have gone down, signed them in, and went back up with them. I would have either perished in the elevator, or we would have been back upstairs. Either way, I would have been dead. (45)

For John Abruzzo, a Port Authority accountant whose quadriplegia renders him reliant on a wheelchair, the 1993 World Trade Center bombing signaled how difficult an escape from danger in the towers could be for him. His six-hour descent that day was “labor intensive,” requiring assistance from multiple fellow employees, who first tried to move him down in his wheelchair, and then resorted to using a stretcher (125). As a result of this ordeal, by 2001, the World Trade Center supplied him instead with an evacuation chair that could glide rather than bounce down the stairwell (126). On September 11, fellow accountants assisted him out of the towers in the greatly shortened time frame that day permitted for a safe exit. Of his helpers, he says, “It’s impossible to describe what they did for me. It was a tremendous thing. If this had been like it was for me in ’93, I’m sure none of us would have made it, and possibly no one would have known what they attempted to do for me” (127). Like Kravette, his comments reflect his sharp awareness of the precarious turn events took for him and his work associates. Similarly, Florence Engoran, who was five months pregnant and a new hire at a securities firm on the fifty-fifth floor of the North Tower, fully recognized threat and safety as ultimately contingent on factors beyond any personal choice and control. She recalls, “I wasn’t exactly in the peak of health, I’d been having morning sickness. And I was thinking, what if I pass out? No one’s gonna help me” (50). Yet co-workers did assist her down the stairs and out of the building (50-54). However, she recalls, “my other source of guilt I have – there were

so many handicapped people left in the building. They couldn't get out. No one helped them. And they died" (57). Although Abruzzo's story offers a positive view of how human beings can help one another under conditions of a shared threat, Engoran's recollection suggests that awareness of a shared threat can also lead to prioritizing self-preservation. However, all of these excerpts indicate an understanding of threat and safety on September 11 as ultimately contingent on factors beyond any individual's choice and control.

Given their senses of distraught subjectivity and heightened vulnerability, eyewitnesses express profound doubts about their survival. Teresa Veliz, who had just stepped off an elevator on the forty-seventh floor of the North Tower when the plane crash knocked that elevator down to the ground, also managed to survive the tower's collapse. She says, "I...have no idea how or why I made it out. That is what is most frightening now: Was I just lucky? I don't think there is any special reason that I am here today, alive while so many others are not. But it is a question that I can't quite get out of my mind" (15). Likewise, Alberto Bonilla, at the time an aspiring actor originally from Honduras (164), wonders about his own luck. He had stopped to get breakfast in the World Trade Center shopping mall, but after realizing he didn't have any money to make the purchase, he boarded a train and headed uptown to his temporary job at Morgan Stanley (165-166). He later thinks,

'I didn't have enough money to buy breakfast. And because of that, I didn't have to wait on line. And because of that, I wasn't directly under the Tower when the first plane hit. And all those people, those faces I can't remember. I wasn't with them when it happened. Did some of them

die?’ And I’d missed everything because I didn’t have \$3.45 to my name....Shortly thereafter, this feeling started to set in and it took me a few days to realize what it was. Guilt. The guilt of being alive. (169)

As Herman and Janoff-Bulman explain regarding recovery from trauma, the notion of luck and the presence of guilt signal attempts to regain feelings of control that the trauma has shattered. Without any apparent existential reasoning for why some lived and others died that day, many continue to grapple with the question: why am I still I alive, and what does this mean? Through such oral history accounts evoking experiences of fractured subjectivity, agency, and responsibility that have been linked even to those who witnessed September 11 only from afar, these collections form a disrupted and unsettled form of historical documentation that registers not only individual ordeals, but a communal crisis of cultural trauma.

Almost universally for those who were in a position to witness the sight, the survivors in all of these oral history collections cite people jumping as compounding their dumbfounding, terror and helplessness. Cathy Brown, who was staying with her husband and children at the Marriott Hotel at the World Trade Center, was trying to leave the area with them when, she recalls, “A man in front of us stopped and pointed, saying ‘Oh my God! There are people falling out of the building!’” Although she says, “I didn’t stop to look” (107), she also then says, “I will never forget that man in the blue suit and red tie. I think of him as my angel in heaven. I know nothing about him but seeing him jump to his death touched a human instinct in me. I started screaming” (108). Paul Engel, who was swimming at the Marriott’s health club just before the first plane hit, and who narrowly escaped the burning engine fuel that poured into that pool from the North Tower crash,

recalls, “I looked at the two burning buildings and saw things I can never forget. I could see little figures jumping to their death from the North Tower. I knew at that moment I had to get back there. I am a priest” (115). People jumping had formed part of the material dangers confronting those leaving the towers for safety and those approaching the towers for rescue operations, but it also clearly posed deeply-troubling conceptual problems as well. Confronting this phenomenon of irremediable despair remains, as those who say they will “never forget” affirm, a compelling matter of complexity and endurance. Clearly, both for Brown and for Fr. Engel, seeing these unknown people in extreme states of vulnerability fostered some kind of relational connection. For Fr. Engel, this meant a need to return to the crash site to provide spiritual comfort; for Brown, this meant feeling herself to have encountered an “angel” whose “death touched a human instinct.” For both, this meant a calling, an impulse – perhaps unsolicited and irresistible – of responsibility, to recognize and remember these figures and their plight. On the other hand, book reviewer Mahler’s sense of “collective emotional muscle memories” sparked by Murphy’s book specifically turned to “the anger, the desire for immediate revenge, but also that feeling of vulnerability.” For him, “A year later, it’s still the ones who jumped. Nothing else – not the planes slamming into the towers, not the buildings collapsing like sand castles, not the cloud of smoke and debris chasing throngs through the streets of Lower Manhattan – is as profoundly disturbing as the image of people stepping out of skyscrapers and dropping to certain death.” Of all the dangers that characterize survivors’ oral histories in Murphy’s, Fink and Mathias’s and DiMarco’s collections, perhaps this ordeal most fully embodies and provokes the confusion, vulnerability and doubt wrought by the September 11 attacks.

Conclusion: Selves, Communities, and Action after September 11

Each of these oral history collections has focused on in-the-moment personal experiences of the September 11, 2001 attacks, particularly at the World Trade Center. As noted in the review of trauma and narrative, such accounts tend to be disjointed and de-contextualized. But as noted in the review of oral history practice, such disjointed and de-contextualized testimonies nevertheless serve as sites for collective meaning formations, and as noted in the overview of September 11 oral histories, the wake of those hijackings occasioned a wide variety of such testimonies through a number of individuals, organizations, and institutions. Considering these popular press oral history accounts as technologies of memory, what can these chronicles of disrupted senses of safety and control come to mean? For Murphy's book reviewer Mahler, "Mostly...there is darkness." However, Amazon.com commenter Inglip writes, "most stories are about the strength of the will to survive, the bond we share that allow us to care for perfect strangers, and amazing luck...[it] fosters an appreciation for life." Similarly, tricia writes, "You'll come away saddened, but most likely, inspired." Martin A. Hogan "Marty from SF" writes of *Never Forget: An Oral History of September 11*, "Every walk of life is spoken here and every voice is full of a human spirit we all share...It is therapy." Regarding DiMarco's book, avid reader writes, "It is very touching and inspirational as well" and Alicia M. Seevers writes, "This book is a touching tribute to those lost, the heroes born, and the city that pulled it together to rise out of the ashes!" Nevertheless, such positive expressions of hope remained relatively few among customer responses, with most comments dwelling primarily on how each collection documents for them the historical horror of September 11.

Ultimately, Murphy, Fink and Mathias, and DiMarco reclaim their assembled stories as evidence of individual and collective courage, strength, and endurance. Murphy's front jacket describes the book as "at once a dramatic reminder of one of the most devastating events in the history of the nation and a tribute to the spirit of cooperation and the outpourings of empathy that marked that day for so many people in the United States and abroad." In fact, in his introduction he identifies his collection of oral histories as participation in the unevenly-achieved effort at post-crisis healing. He explains that while some were still too troubled by their personal memories to discuss them publicly, let alone view their pasts as history, "For many of the people in this book, the process of sharing their experiences was a profound and moving one...Afterward, the opening up, the sharing of deep thoughts and anxieties, was seen by most of these people as healing" (6). Similarly, Fink and Mathias's back cover announces, "As these unforgettable stories reveal, many Americans transcended their own confusion and despair to help one another escape, to offer one another kindness, and to affirm life in the face of catastrophe." Likewise, Kean writes in his preface to DiMarco's collection – again directly addressing his readers – "But after that initial shock passed, what did you do?...You hung on. You went back to work. You picked up the pieces" (14). Specifically, DiMarco designates his book as the way to move on, encouraging readers to use his text to educate their grandchildren about the history of September 11. He urges, "If we give our grandchildren free access to our history, maybe they'll come up with better answers than we have. We might just save them a few mistakes. After all, what else are we here for" (17)? At the end of the book, a page thanking the preceding contributors is left otherwise more than half-blank and offered "as a place for you, the

reader, to pause and reflect on the events of September 11, 2001” (527). In this way, the telling, the publishing, and the reading of these oral histories could become together instruments of meaning-making that render the cultural trauma of September 11 both individually and collectively recoverable, comprehensible, and amenable to future positive action. Yet DiMarco’s blank space, by remaining blank, is indicative of what each collection has asked of its readers: that they recognize how much remains unresolved, and write those parts themselves within the published pages.

Chapter Two: Witnessing the Fall: September 11 and the Crisis of the Permeable Self⁴⁰

Introduction: The Crisis of the Permeable Self

Osama Bin Laden, considered ultimately responsible for the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States (National Commission 47-70, 155, 172-173), issued a fatwa in 1998 urging Muslims to “kill the Americans and their allies – civilians and military” at every opportunity (“A NewsHour with Jim Lehrer”). He later justified this call to target non-combatants by contending that US democracy renders all American citizens mortally accountable for their elected representatives’ tax-supported policies (“Full Text”). Yet on that day, the choice of human targets proved even less discriminating than the designation of “Americans and their allies” would imply: after all, while hijacking airplanes and flying them into buildings within US territory maximizes the likelihood of killing American citizens, these actions encompassed non-American citizens among the foreseeable and unmitigated casualties.

Staff from South America, Africa, and elsewhere (Duffy) – many of whom were undocumented workers (Polakow-Suransky, “The Invisible Victims”) – and British professionals attending a business meeting (Reporters, Writers, and Editors) were among the 170 victims trapped in Windows on the World (Junod, “The Falling Man” 179), the restaurant topping the World Trade Center’s North Tower, after damage to the elevators and stairways foreclosed escape downward. According to the *New York Times*, “More

⁴⁰ Excerpts of this chapter have appeared in *Historia Actual Online*, Damico and Quay’s *September 11 in Popular Culture: A Guide*, and Schopp and Hill’s *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture: September 11 and Beyond*. Full citations are listed in Works Consulted.

than 1,000 people who survived the plane crashes, many on floors distant from the impact, had no way out.” In fact, “No one survived from the floors where people jumped” (Flynn and Dwyer A1).⁴¹ Estimates that one in every six of the dead from the North Tower jumped to their deaths (Junod, “The Falling Man” 180)⁴² suggest the probability that many of those who jumped⁴³ were the restaurant’s multi-national, multi-ethnic, multi-racial employees and patrons, men and women from diverse social, economic, religious, and political backgrounds.⁴⁴ Perhaps the September 11 attacks

⁴¹ This phenomenon, of victims jumping to their deaths to escape fire, has precedent. In 1911, a fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in Manhattan prompted dozens of such deaths. Witnesses recalled seeing women jump together (Von Drehle 157), and even a man helping a few women to jump individually before jumping himself (158). Dozens of people similarly died at the Winecoff Hotel fire in Atlanta in 1946 (Calfee). As on September 11, the falling bodies posed dangers to those on the ground (Von Drehle 128; Calfee). When thinking about the witnesses at the factory, sociologist Lee Clarke speculates, “It’s hard to imagine a situation in which you would feel more *out of control*” (13).

⁴² It is important to note that not everyone *chose* to jump. The impact of the plane crashes as well as the crowd of people gathered at open windows forced many out of the buildings against their will. Likewise, the essentially intolerable conditions within the buildings complicate the notion of agency even for those who did choose to jump, with the possible exception of those seen holding hands in the act of leaping (Flynn and Dwyer) – a gesture perhaps provoked, but not necessitated, by desperation that suggests a specifically intended course of action.

⁴³ Junod observes, “They were called ‘jumpers’ or ‘the jumpers,’ as though they represented a new lemminglike class.” I resist using the term “jumper” because doing so does seem to conflate the person with the action in a way that is dehumanizing, identifying each person only as part of an anonymous group recognizable solely in terms of a last moment constrained by pain and terror. By using terms such as “those who jumped,” I attempt to conceptually distinguish the person from the action, preserving some sense of individuality – and perhaps even choice – that precedes and supersedes this gruesome end.

⁴⁴ Bennett notes, “Far from typifying the World Trade Center victim as a racially and economically privileged ideal, both national and international media coverage of the attacks reminded us of the fact that World Trade Center employees were a racially and ethnically diverse group, emanating from all strata of society” (134). True, given the

targeted American citizens as undifferentiated personifications of US policy; nevertheless, they killed American and non-American citizens alike, as undifferentiated human beings.

According to *USA Today*, within the United States, “The story of the victims who jumped to their deaths is the most sensitive aspect of the Sept. 11 tragedy...Most newspapers and magazines ran only one or two photos, then published no more” (Cauchon and Moore). Likewise, US television networks covering that day’s events eventually decided not to include images of those who were jumping (Junod, “The Falling Man” 180). In a 2004 *New York Times* article, Flynn and Dwyer note, “Almost instinctually on Sept. 11, people recognized that they had an unfortunate view into an intensely private matter, an unseemly intrusion not just into someone’s death, but into the moment of their dying” (B8). They assert that “Since then...[those who jumped] have largely vanished from consideration” (A1). Indeed, once the American media self-censored their coverage, the nation’s news viewers and readers would likely not learn the distinguishing characteristics of most of those who jumped, not with sufficient clarity to identify them as particular individuals.⁴⁵ Rather, most people would know those who

kinds of businesses located at the World Trade Center as well as the large number of emergency response workers who arrived to help, about seventy-five percent of the victims were male, white, and born in the United States. Nevertheless, nine percent were Hispanic, eight percent were black, six percent were Asian, and twenty-five percent were not American-born (Beveridge). More to the point, none of these demographic attributes afforded any relative privilege under the circumstances; rather, geography proved the determining factor: everyone on a hijacked plane and most of those in the towers above the impact zones died.

⁴⁵ The Junod article in *Esquire*, discussed here, illustrates the complex considerations involved in identifying those who jumped. *New York Times* journalists Flynn and Dwyer note, “For the families of those who died, these uncertainties are bound to a sprawling spectrum of contradictory sentiments, impulses, and reluctance about examining this

jumped only as unspecified human beings characterized by their shared vulnerability, their shared mortality. On these terms, September 11 occasioned recognition that regardless of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, and all the other ways we are differentially identified and advantaged, we human beings are the same because we are vulnerable, because we die.⁴⁶

Here, I am interested in exploring the cultural aftereffects of witnessing the falls in such a way, by which we perceive those who jumped without perceiving the kinds of identifying markers that allow us to tell ourselves we are qualitatively different from them, different enough to distance us-the-safe from them-the-endangered, a position foregrounding how tenuous the separation between us, the safe, and them, the endangered, can be. In this chapter, I consider the extent to which witnessing this fall to imminent death provokes a traumatic crisis,⁴⁷ not only for those at the Manhattan crash

specific wound...A number of families discussed the questions in interviews, but asked not to be quoted, concerned with what children might think of a parent, or worried about causing distress to other families, or believing that any words would be inadequate.” Circumstances at the time rendered definitive identifications of those who jumped problematic, and future attempts at such identification are unlikely (A1).

⁴⁶ Terror Management Theory draws on this condition for its premise (Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg). Also, Stolorow, linking psychoanalysis with phenomenology, argues that trauma constitutes our life possibility (47), and we are “deeply connected” by our “common finitude” (49).

⁴⁷ Responding to the work of Susan Sontag and Barbie Zelizer, Carrie Rentschler contends that mainstream media treats viewers as image consumers rather than potentially politically reactive citizens, so that “people may simply not know how to act or what to do with their vicarious experience of others’ suffering, because they have not been taught how to transform feeling into action” (300). She adds that cultural processes tend to shape viewers who identify with victims rather than perpetrators, which leaves questions about causes and interventions unaddressed (301). On the other hand, as psychiatrist Judith Herman has observed, there are actually strong cultural compulsions for identifying with perpetrators against victims (7-8). In this chapter, I identify a

site who saw firsthand the horror of these gruesome deaths, but also for those of us who became aware through the media or only through word-of-mouth that many chose to jump rather than remain in the buildings' unbearable smoke and heat (Cauchon and Moore). Originally, I was partly compelled toward this interrogation by my own sense at the time of how, in the act of simply apprehending the choice between death and death, it was as if the moment of decision remained timelessly suspended between, yet inseparably linked with, its conditions and its consequences, creating space for witnesses to enter, and question ourselves.

Since that first impression, I have found that this idea of witnesses questioning themselves has recurred in many non-fiction and fiction works that consider the position of those who jumped (Brottman 173-174; Frost 188). Here, I focus on two contributions from popular culture – Tom Junod's 2003 *Esquire* article "The Falling Man" and the 2002 Public Broadcasting Service's (PBS) *Frontline* documentary "Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero" – that intimate that such witnessing prompts both identification with and resistance to the falling figures. I begin by reviewing the intense developments at the World Trade Center that led to these deaths and their witnessing. I then assess how such deaths provocatively engage and actually challenge cultural expectations about suicide, dying in public, and the role of witnesses to such troubling events. Next, I contextualize these problematic cultural encounters within broader processes of meaning production and disruption. Such discussions frame my subsequent analysis of two popular artifacts of differing genres, a television documentary and a men's magazine article, that suggest that the constrained choices and horrific end characterizing these particular deaths on

particular challenge for witnesses, whether of televised images, newspaper accounts, or in-person developments, who confront the possibility of identifying with victimhood.

September 11 have occasioned an enduring quandary within American cultural memory. Like a specter of what otherwise appears absent from the common historical traces of September 11, these texts indicate that witnessing the falls has produced a residue that informs even the silence that surrounds it, a residue of unresolved unsettlement. Specifically, as manifested in these texts, that day's most problematic losses have contributed to the cultural trauma of ongoing angst about deaths in desperation rather than heroic self-sacrifice that confound individualist principles of hardihood and self-reliance⁴⁸ and expose the limitations and risks of merely being and acting in daily life.

September 11 in New York

As recounted in this project's prologue, on September 11, 2001, hijackers flew passenger jets into each of the World Trade Center towers, a wall of the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania. To elaborate on those hijackings' impact in New York City, I reference an extended passage from the *New York Times* that notes,

The attack on the World Trade Center was one of the most observed catastrophes in history, and those who fell or jumped from the towers were, briefly, its most public victims. They emerged one or two at a time from a blanket of smoke and fire that rendered mass death virtually invisible. Nearly all the others killed that day – whether high in the trade center, on board the hijacked airplanes or deep inside the Pentagon – were beyond the sight of survivors and witnesses.

⁴⁸ Frost notes the difficulty of reconciling this frightful and fraught dilemma with that day's otherwise more straightforward and heroic narratives (200).

Those who came through the windows of the towers provided the starkest, most harrowing evidence of the desperate conditions inside.

(Flynn and Dwyer B8)

On one hierarchy ranking the elements comprising a traumatic experience, “seeing death” tops the list of factors contributing to the severity of a PTSD-inducing event (McFarlane 41-42). Although the reality of relative safety and escape remained for witnesses, they nevertheless beheld a violent, deadly, and inescapable situation for others, and as witnesses from afar, they could do nothing to alter the threat or help the victims. Moreover, this state of terror and helplessness was not merely vicarious; the sudden, rapid, and unforeseen transformation of World Trade Center occupants from people going about their daily lives to victims forced to choose not whether, but how, to die threatened even those at a distance who wondered what might be next, what might be in store for them or their loved ones.⁴⁹ After all, fundamental assumptions that underlie daily life had been disaffirmed, leaving open-ended even the least extraordinary predictions for the future (Herman 51; Janoff-Bulman). Generally, we used to trust, for example, that if we went to work in a restaurant or at a desk job, we would likely return home at the end of the day. We would presume that our workday in such an environment

⁴⁹ Figley and Kleber define trauma as “[p]owerlessness. An individual barely has any influence on the occurrence and development of the event...[and d]isruption. The situation crudely disrupts the course of daily existence” (78). In writing about her reactions after the brutal murder in their home of two close friends and Dartmouth colleagues, Irene Kacandes recalls a similar sense of newfound, pervasive insecurity: “The first change I consciously registered in myself was the attitude that I need to be ready to die at any moment...the attitude I developed and still have has more to do with the swiftness of their deaths. One moment they were there making lunch, and the next moment they were not” (177).

would not confront us with a profound mortal dilemma. We would anticipate that airplanes would transport passengers to their destinations and passengers would want to reach their destinations alive. Ordinarily, such trust, presumptions, and anticipations are affirmed, enabling us to operate effectively in our world and interact productively with those around us. However, as Arnault notes,

The September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon illustrate...the harmful effects of terrorism. In the months immediately following the terrorist assaults, many Americans showed signs of being less confident about their ability to have meaningful control over the “connection between what they do and what happens to them,”

leading unsurprisingly to security fears and measures – well-grounded or not – seeking to regain such control and restore a sense of predictability in the conduct of daily life.⁵⁰ In effect, in the wake of a traumatic event such as September 11, our range of expectations must be recalibrated to accommodate new possibilities.

Falling After: Dying in Public on September 11

The concept of suicide, or self-chosen death, figures prominently among the expectations requiring recalibration after September 11. In the course of therapy with the traumatized, Herman notes,

The confrontation with despair brings with it, at least transiently, an increased risk of suicide. In contrast to the impulsive self-destructiveness

⁵⁰ Brisson locates control as a principle concern in the wake of trauma. When victims admit they have no control over the harm they have experienced, they posit a dilemma: they are not responsible for it having happened, but they therefore also lack the ability to prevent it from recurring in the future (10, 73-77).

of the first stage of recovery, the patient's suicidality during this second stage may evolve from a calm, flat, apparently rational decision to reject a world where such horrors are possible. (193-194)

Similarly, when reflecting on the impulse for suicide among those who have been traumatically wronged, Brison argues, "It is not a moral failing to leave a world that has become morally unacceptable" (65). Later, she tries to understand her brother's suicide by reasoning that "The only way he could be master of his fate was to make sure no one – and nothing – else would be" (113). In these contexts, motivations for suicide among the traumatized range from inconsolable anguish in, to deliberate rejection of, life in this world. Accordingly, appropriately attributing agency in cases of suicide proves a complex undertaking; in either case, the traumatized act out of despair that their life circumstances are both unbearable and apparently unchangeable, a state that complicates volition. In this sense, the conditions that render suicide a possibility pose only extreme versions of the same questions typically probing the parameters of agency: what am I able to do under the physical, economic, social, and other constraints of my environment? Can I choose only how, but not whether, to operate under these constraints? In an environment with limited options – in effect, with no good options – what are my responsibilities?⁵¹

Such concerns occupied an intensified and conspicuous place on September 11. The hijackers' actions⁵² constitute suicide because they knew what they intended to do

⁵¹ A body falling from the World Trade Center killed a firefighter on the ground, an appallingly tragic incident evidencing the moral complexity engendered by these traumatic circumstances (Junod, "The Falling Man" 178).

⁵² The hijackers' choices and actions warrant in-depth examination at another time.

was both deadly and avoidable,⁵³ but these actions were visible to living witnesses only in their effects. However, compounding the moral contrast between the positions of perpetrators and victims, the predicament of those who jumped proved significantly troubling because witnesses could watch them in the very moment of their dying, and only try to fathom the conditions compelling such behavior. After the first plane's impact, the sight of individuals jumping from the highest floors of the North Tower to certain death terrified office workers in the South Tower into evacuating despite the presumed relative safety of their own building (Flynn and Dwyer B8). For newsrooms, the plight of these figures raised different concerns. Although live coverage of the towers aflame continued until they collapsed, and footage of the attacked, damaged, and fallen buildings persisted in relentless replay in subsequent days and months, as noted earlier, images of those jumping to their deaths quickly disappeared from US television (Junod, "The Falling Man" 180) and photographs of these victims appeared fleetingly even in print (Cauchon and Moore 5A). As publications such as *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, and *Esquire* have suggested, this most visible evidence of mortal human suffering provoked deep unsettlement among the living, whether bereaved relatives or unrelated witnesses (Cauchon and Moore 5A; Flynn and Dwyer A1, B8; Junod, "The Falling Man"). Scholars considering the subject have likewise noted how these and any other images graphically documenting that day's dead or dying have been sanitized or hidden from public view (Brottman 165) as among the most disturbing and least assimilated elements of victims' – and by extension, Americans' – vulnerability (Frost 180-183).

⁵³ Instructions found in the luggage of Mohamed Atta, one of the September 11 hijackers, outline religious preparations for "wholeheartedly welcom[ing] death" (Lincoln 98; 8-13, 93-98).

Similarly, efforts to represent the horror of these deaths through art, fiction, and other elements of popular culture evoked critical ambivalences. Writing about the ethics of representation, Maeve Cooke recognizes, following Theodor Adorno, “a concern that art – not just poetry but also music, painting and literature – instrumentalizes suffering by making it a vehicle for aesthetic pleasure or by attributing to it a significance within some greater scheme of things.” At the same time, she cautions, again following Adorno, “we have a duty not to forget the suffering of victims and that...art is the best way of allowing their suffering to speak with its own voice” (271). Yet, as Arnault argues, any artistic response to horror must also avoid the compounding harm of imposing any sense of unwarranted consequent redemption, which not only could subsume victims’ experiences within a larger, tangential purpose, but also could enable the uninvolved to appropriate those peculiar and intimate experiences for themselves (179). From these perspectives, endeavors to represent these individuals’ last moments direct attention to the most disturbing elements of their fate: its unforeseen onset and unavoidable outcome in the absence of any mitigating or compensatory consolation.⁵⁴

In Henry Singer’s 2006 documentary “9/11: The Falling Man,” which traces the story behind Junod’s *Esquire* article, footage of individuals jumping out of the towers is included, and their doom is reflected in the horrified stares of bystanders, eyes open wide, hands covering mouths, tears sliding down cheeks. Relatives of the deceased from the towers struggle to accept that their own trapped loved ones might have faced, and made, the choice to die in this way. In the format of a documentary, such reactions purport to

⁵⁴ Frost considers at length how the image of a body falling through air suspends in time, and thereby obscures, the most fateful moments: the instant of decision and that of impact (189).

evidence a fraught reality rather than narrowly construe its meaning. Such a journalistic approach poses one possibility for public acknowledgement of these public deaths.

However, other approaches have proven more problematic. In 2005, photographer Kerry Skarbakka performed multiple jumps, while wearing a body harness, from Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art (Marlan 28-29) to showcase his sense, drawing on Martin Heidegger's notion of human life as "perpetual falling," that the act of falling embodies and enacts fundamental human vulnerability (Skarbakka). His Chicago performance generated substantial objections from New Yorkers who, according to the *New York Daily News*, regarded his jumps as callous exploitations of those who had jumped on September 11 (Lisberg, "Go Jump" 5; "'Artist' Sorry" 7). The *New York Daily News* quoted New York Governor George Pataki as saying, "It's an utter disgrace that someone would try to turn horrible human suffering and tragedy into an act" (Lisberg, "'Artist' Sorry" 7), criticisms that echo Cooke's and Arnault's hesitations.

In Don DeLillo's novel *Falling Man*, discussed in this dissertation's Chapter Five, an artist performing such jumps in a business suit throughout New York City provokes similar resistance (DeLillo 33). A main character, Lianne, perceives "something awful about the stylized pose...But the worst of it was the stillness itself and her nearness to the man" (68). While the artifice repels her, her proximity to his suspension of fate proves the most troubling. It is as if this representation not only conjures the past, but prolongs its conditions through indeterminate time and space.⁵⁵ It is, perhaps, as if the public dying of those remote from and unknown to us nevertheless threatens vulnerabilities of a too-personal, intimate nature. Popular culture engagements with these deaths are

⁵⁵ For a resonant conceptualization, see Junod's "The Falling Man" (199).

challenged to negotiate in representation both the actuality of the Other's distanced endurance of horror and the possibility of our own resistant understanding.

Kahane construes the metaphor of falling as a "signifier of the ultimate loss of control, of loss of agency, of loss of boundaries" (110-111). When reflecting on the ramifications of these not metaphoric, but quite real, falls, Kahane surmises,

No wonder that the response of witnesses to the realization that it was not just debris but people who were leaping from the windows produced sheer terror; it was the terror of a radical ambivalence about life itself that was being experienced as we identified with those images on the screen. Was this one reason they were so quickly suppressed? Certainly to make a spectacle of those forced to jump is ethically repugnant, but it is also beyond the limits of what we can bear to see. The images of live people becoming falling bodies were too real, opening the viewer to a mimetic identification with trauma that was intolerable. (111)

Arnault asserts the moral utility of horror, considering the reaction an alarm alerting us to cruelty. She contends, "Horror signals that the norm whose violation we are witnessing or imaging is a prescription to which we are deeply committed" (168). Consequently, I argue that the horrified reactions to those who jumped point to norms valuing the control, agency, and boundaries Kahane has argued are metaphorically absent in a fall and were genuinely disordered in the conscripted choice of how to die. Moreover, as Kahane indicates, the possibility for witnesses to see ourselves in the falling figures exacerbates this horror.

On these terms, the position of a witness does not denote mere presence at or awareness of a particular event. Douglass and Vogler point out that

Only certain events have the power to interpellate witnesses; in ordinary life we look at things or watch the passing scene, but we *witness* an accident or a crime, incidents that seem to demand action and reaction, decision or judgment, where exactly what happened and how it happened are matters of extreme urgency. (22)

In this sense, then, to be a witness is to incur responsibility for what is witnessed; to be a witness requires a response to what is perceived.⁵⁶ Of course, the connection between perceiving a thing and responding to a thing depends upon the contingent link of understanding, of recognizing and morally assessing what is perceived in order to respond appropriately. In their mention of the conceivable Nazi satisfaction with the Holocaust, Douglass and Vogler argue that “What confirms it as a phenomenon beyond understanding is the decision not to look” (25). Likewise, I argue that the decision not to look at, or to dwell on, those who jumped on September 11 signals at least an inability, if not an unwillingness, to engage the contingent link of understanding required for a witness to formulate a moral response beyond the immediate sensation of horror.

Recalibrating a Sense of Self

This reluctant witnessing is understandable. The combination of disrupted expectations and compromised agency, as showcased by the figures falling from the World Trade Center on September 11, troubles our sense of ourselves as persons able to

⁵⁶ Ann Kaplan similarly asserts that witnessing requires an assumption of responsibility for the broader conditions producing victims (122-135).

direct and act in our own lives. On the one hand, as Herman points out, “Traumatic events violate the autonomy of the person at the level of basic bodily integrity. The body is invaded, injured, defiled. Control over bodily functions is often lost” (52-53). While witnesses did not physically experience this breach of bodily integrity or this loss of control, we realized such susceptibility for ourselves by watching its morbid effects on others. If anonymous World Trade Center occupants could be forced quickly and en masse to pursue mortal violence against themselves, we might ask, what power do we have over our own bodies? At the same time, Brison argues that “Victims of human-inflicted trauma are reduced to mere objects by their tormenters: their subjectivity is rendered useless and viewed as worthless” (Brison 40). In effect, their subjectivity is effaced because their own desires and intentions are made irrelevant to the desires and intentions of the perpetrators, who impersonally will precisely what victims have a most intimate stake in willing against: their suffering. Again, as witnesses we might ask, do we have any more power over our lives than the anonymous World Trade Center occupants who have been forced, en masse and without warning, to encounter the extremes of terror? We might view ourselves and our lives in the same way, in the way that Brison, in the aftermath of rape and attempted murder, describes: “The line between life and death, once so clear and sustaining, now seemed carelessly drawn and easily erased” (9).

Confronting this sense of instability in the basic premises of our personhood – our physical bodies and our autonomous will in moving through life – provokes an unsettling position. Such unsettlement derives not from any presumption that we experience the same breach as that which the victims have experienced; such a presumption would be

factually, as well as ethically, irresponsible (LaCapra 28).⁵⁷ Rather, this unsettlement derives from a realization that we could experience the same breach – that we cannot rely with uncontested confidence on assumptions of intact power and ability. In other words, as witnesses, we come to this realization not by ourselves, but by perceiving the suffering of others. In this context, as the conceivably vulnerable facing the actually vulnerable, we feel ourselves to be permeable, to be liable to the harms afflicting others. While recognizing these figures as human beings like ourselves, we at the same time recognize the dilemma facing these human beings as something we too would never want to face. Witnessing in this way the precariousness of others and so, conceivably, that of our own agency and bodily integrity, foregrounds our sense of self by violating it, by showing what is troubling to contemplate: that we cannot completely control our lives and the circumstances that affect them. I argue that his breach generates a sense of our selves as permeable. In effect, the permeable self is the experience of tension between identification with and resistance to those who are vulnerable because their vulnerability prompts consideration of our own contingent power and fortune.⁵⁸ The crisis of the permeable self can provoke divergent postures: we can identify with other human beings

⁵⁷ LaCapra cautions, “Unchecked identification implies a confusion of self and other which may bring an incorporation of the experience and voice of the victim...[O]ne possessed, however vicariously, by the past and reliving its traumatic scenes may be tragically incapable of acting responsibly or behaving in an ethical manner involving consideration for others as others” (28).

⁵⁸ Indeed, in writing about her survival from rape and attempted murder from the self-conscious position of a trained philosopher, Brison perceived this reaction among those who urged her to “move on” from her experiences: “The prevalent lack of empathy with trauma victims, which is reinforced by the cultural repression of memories of violence and victimization...results...not merely from ignorance or indifference, but also from an active fear of identifying with those whose terrifying fate forces us to acknowledge that we are not in control of our own” (x).

on the level of mutual susceptibility, which could prompt efforts to rectify their condition, or we can attempt to resist our own susceptibility by resisting those who evoke our potential misfortune, which could include ignoring or even exploiting their situation (Antze and Lambek xxviii).⁵⁹

In terms of witnessing the horror inflicted on human beings on September 11, the ordeal for the permeable self of committing entirely to either posture can be acute. As Danielle Gardner, the sister of a deceased Cantor Fitzgerald employee asserts,

I have learned that America could not deal with the massive murder of innocent, unwitting people just like themselves. I have learned that America needed to create an “other” – the firefighters – to distance death from their own lives. It is no longer “I” could have died; it becomes a more dealable “they.” Everyone goes to work in the morning, but everyone does not don a firefighter’s uniform. (Gardner 626)

And so, September 11 occasioned the conscious awareness of our shared mortality, an awareness of the unavoidable instant of human helplessness that is the confrontation with death, an awareness generally latent until an encounter with trauma insists that we confront it. This awareness insinuates our liability to the threats and misfortunes from which others suffer and subjects us to engagement with those others in terms of this mutual powerlessness. On such terms we can identify with other human beings by admitting our own susceptibility; we can also resist by ignoring or even exploiting those whose suffering disrupts our sense of personal security. In this way, then, the permeable self is a site for the struggle of compassion, a formidable process of negotiating the

⁵⁹ Also see Brison (9) and La Capra (133-134).

boundaries of one's person because to occupy a genuine posture of compassion, to earnestly suffer with even one other person, can be an arduous, if not at times untenable, exposure to trials that are preferably avoided. Instead, in the wake of this public trauma in its form as a cultural trauma, the crisis of unsettlement persists unresolved.

Culturally Incorporating the Instant of Powerlessness

The crisis of unsettlement for witnesses at a distance is of a different degree and kind than the crisis of visceral loss suffered by anyone intimately connected to the horror of September 11.⁶⁰ With this distinction in mind, however, the national witnessing of the ultimate vulnerability of those who jumped continues to figure significantly within American culture. As noted earlier, the act of witnessing – by definition a social act, a dependence upon and commitment to what transpires among others – involves not just perceiving, but also generating meaning from what is perceived to formulate an appropriate response. Accordingly, the act of witnessing depends upon context. As Brison points out, however, neither occurrence nor context is given (33). Instead, “[e]vents are experienced by means of representations – sensory perceptions, bodily sensations, and linguistic classifications...and these are all influenced by the perceived cultural meanings of the events” (31), while cultural context can be generated partly by pre-memory anticipation of potential scenarios that resonate with a current experience (87-89) – for example, an action movie portraying urban destruction could resonate with actual footage of the World Trade Center, and thereby inform the ways in which

⁶⁰ Gardner reflects, “As an American, I experienced Oklahoma City. I experienced it as a horrific bombing and a terrible loss of life, but above all, I experienced it as a news event. The next day I went on with my life. The news story continued...I never gave much thought to the family members left behind. I had no idea, no way to know, about the private grief that exists behind a public tragedy” (622).

witnesses try to make sense of September 11. Essentially, as McFarlane argues, “the representations or meanings developed for the traumatic experience play a central role in the incompatibility of the traumatic experience with the individual’s existing schemata and beliefs” (42).⁶¹ Because meaning formulations existing before and developing after an event contribute to formulations of the event itself, predicting the character and duration of a traumatic reaction proves difficult (42-44). In effect, then, context is crucial for those trying to come to terms with the trauma they have witnessed.⁶²

⁶¹ Arnault explores American cultural responses to cruelty, observing, “In US American mainstream popular culture, the idea that meaning can be reclaimed from even the cruelest of circumstances is highly cherished. For a myriad of reasons, many Americans are deeply invested in believing that there must be some good purpose and final ending to the suffering caused by cruelty” (156). Essentially, she asserts, “many people cherish the idea that good eventually triumphs over evil, thereby restoring meaning and purpose to our lives” (158).

⁶² Arnault wonders whether “people who occupy privileged social locations [are] more vulnerable to losing ‘trust in the world’ at the very first blow than those who experience dispossession regularly, that is, who occupy social locations where their subjectivity is routinely disrespected, violated, or severely circumscribed[.] Are the relatively dispossessed relatively immunized, not from utter dispossession, but from utterly overwhelming shock when” subjectivity is undermined (160)? In other words, “It is possible that the episodic nature of the terrorist attacks has had the effect of producing more deeply terrorized selves among those who occupy privileged social locations than among those whose expectations about what is possible or thinkable have suffered numerous reversals” (163-164). Parson reports that “Ethnocultural factors...shape common and unique human responses to psychological traumatization. They determine both normal and pathological post-traumatic formations and organize the expression of post-traumatic stress disorder” (223). Yet he adds, “The trauma responses of all survivors appear to feature a homogeneous set of symptoms comprised of biological, psychological, and sociocultural elements. The biological components of trauma response appear to be the most consistent across culture” (224). See the Danieli and Dingman collection for brief accounts of the fallout from September 11 for diverse populations, including those with disabilities; Latino, Chinese, Arab, and other immigrants; Muslims; federal prisoners; children; Holocaust survivors; Native Americans; and the LGBT community. Also, see Mukherjee for a discussion of ambivalence within the black community (31-36). See Abudabbeh for a brief, general discussion of trauma symptoms among Arab-Americans post-Gulf War that likely applies usefully post-September 11 (252-263).

Psychoanalysis relies upon the presumption that “[t]he ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*” (Herman 1). As a result, “The knowledge of horrible events periodically intrudes into public awareness but is rarely retained for long. Denial, repression, and dissociation operate on a social as well as an individual level” (2). Yet, as Brison attests, “trauma not only haunts the conscious and unconscious mind, but also remains in the body, in each of the senses, ready to resurface whenever something triggers a reliving of the traumatic event” (x). Likewise, Avery Gordon explores these processes culturally in terms of haunting, wherein “[t]he ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us” (8).⁶³ In other words, we seek to dispel what troubles us, but traces persist through gestures that conjure the ostensibly vanished. Psychoanalytically, “[r]emembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims” (Herman 1). Likewise, cultural memory formations seek to foster a coherent narrative of a disrupting event to restore cultural cohesion. American culture functions through the memories it embraces (Sturken 2), providing a means for the cultural construction of selfhood, interpersonal relationships, and meaning (Antze and Lambek viii, xviii). However, as Susan Sontag indicates through her discussion of photographic records of suffering in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, some events seem to pose particularly difficult questions:

⁶³ LaCapra advances a similar view, arguing, “Moreover, there is an important sense in which the after effects – the hauntingly possessive ghosts – of traumatic events are not fully owned by anyone and, in various ways, affect everyone” (xi).

“Such images cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn...Who caused what the picture shows? Who is responsible? Is it excusable? Was it inevitable? Is there some state of affairs which we have accepted up to now that ought to be challenged? All this, with the understanding that moral indignation, like compassion, cannot dictate a course of action” (117). In other words, trauma violates, and therefore warrants the reconstruction of, worldview assumptions – but it does not directly determine what form new assumptions might take; instead, an individual, or a culture, is left in the wake of trauma surrounded by shattered pieces awaiting reconfiguration. But at the heart of the trouble caused by regarding the suffering of others lies the threat their suffering poses to us, and the powerful urge that threat generates for self-protection, even if only through adherence to illusions of our own safe distance from those who suffer. This is the obstacle that productive – just and caring – reconfigurations of a worldview encounter. On these terms, how then does the unspoken, but unsettling, position of witnessing those who jumped from the World Trade Center haunt American culture?

“The Falling Man”

In September 2003, *Esquire* published an article by Tom Junod with additional reporting by Andrew Chaikivsky titled, “The Falling Man.” On its website, *Esquire* describes itself as “a magazine for men. Not a fashion magazine for men, not a health magazine for men, not a money magazine for men...it is all of them. It is...a magazine about the interests, the curiosity, the passions, of men.” Tom Junod is featured as a “Writer at Large” who has contributed interviews with public figures as diverse as former US Attorney General Janet Reno, the late children’s television host Fred Rogers, and

actress Ashley Judd (“What is *Esquire*?”). His columns have covered general cultural trends, including a May 2004 piece, “Jesus 2004,” structured in a question-and-answer format regarding the role of Jesus in American culture and religion. “Jesus 2004” illustrates Junod’s aptitude for irreverence even when writing about matters ordinarily taken quite seriously, such as the central figure of a major faith. For example, one of the questions pertaining to the Holy Spirit is whether “he – or it – ” has eyebrows (138). Accordingly, the magazine in which this article appears and its principle author seem an unlikely forum and an unlikely origin for a somber deliberation on such a sensitive topic. Why would a magazine professedly focused exclusively on satisfying the “interests, the curiosity, the passions of men” and a writer typically concerned with general cultural personalities and trends dwell on the horrifying predicament of many of the World Trade Center deceased? Perhaps in answer, the article that centers around attempts to identify a particular man photographed in the midst of his fall concludes: “we look at [him]...and make one simple acknowledgment. That we have known who the Falling Man is all along” (Junod, “The Falling Man” 199). Perhaps, then, the predicament concerns this magazine and this author because it is a predicament in which they can see themselves and their readers.

The article begins with, and revolves around, a photograph taken by Richard Drew on September 11 and released by the Associated Press through national and international news outlets the next day. Drew had captured an impossible moment on film, when in a single frame the solitary figure appears almost gracefully posed, in aesthetic alignment with both towers serving as backdrop (Junod, “The Falling Man” 177). The initial description of the photograph characterizes the pictured man as an

anonymous enigma glimpsed long and closely enough to see him as a distinct human being and to generate context for the captured moment, but briefly and distantly enough to preclude certainty about anything else. Although Toronto journalist Peter Cheney identified the man as Norberto Hernandez, a Windows on the World pastry chef, Junod challenges his conclusion, reporting evidence that the man was possibly Jonathan Briley, another Windows on the World employee. With this central concern of identification threaded throughout the article, Junod contemplates those who jumped as cultural phenomena, in that their personal dilemma has become a cultural quandary, their private terror has become a cultural horror, and their physical presence has become a cultural absence.

Junod writes, “They began jumping not long after the first plane hit the north tower, not long after the fire started. They kept jumping until the tower fell” (“The Falling Man” 178). The unbearable and inescapable conditions in the damaged towers provided the impetus for behavior unimagined only minutes before. Concentrating on the image presented in the Drew photograph, Junod observes, “Although he has not chosen his fate, he appears to have, in his last instants of life, embraced it.” He adds, “Some people who look at the picture see stoicism, willpower...resignation; others see...something discordant and therefore terrible: freedom.” Contributing to this appearance of conscious determination to assume whatever agency his unchosen exigency permits, he notices, “There is something almost rebellious in the man’s posture, as though once faced with the inevitability of death, he decided to get on with it.” In effect, Junod attributes to his position in the picture “a geometric balance” that imbues his fall with an aesthetic order. To these impressions, he contrasts “all the other pictures,

the people who did what he did – who jumped – [who] appear to be struggling against horrific discrepancies of scale...their shoes fly off as they flail and fall; they look confused, as though trying to swim down the side of a mountain” (177). Unlike the man in the photograph, these people seem to exhibit no hint of any agency at all, constrained or otherwise; their uncontrolled freefall evinces them at the full mercy of ineluctable and inexplicable fate.

Yet Junod admits that these distinctions are only misleading by-products of the photographic record. After all, “In the picture he is frozen; in his life outside the frame, he drops and keeps dropping....” (“The Falling Man” 177). He acknowledges, “In truth...[h]e fell like everyone else...trying to hold on to the life he was leaving, which is to say he fell desperately” (180). In fact, “In the rest of the sequence – the eleven outtakes – his humanity stands apart. He is not augmented by aesthetics; he is merely human, and his humanity, startled and in some cases horizontal, obliterates everything else in the frame” (180-181). From the perspective of witnesses, which is all the living in this instance can be, those who jumped appear by their acts to have confronted a challenge they could not circumvent; no trick of photography could finally efface the hopeless choice they encountered that day. When we look at the picture, we see someone in eternal flight, and that is the singular betrayal of all such images, of a person’s dying, of the planes nearing the towers, of the towers burning: passing instants whose pictorial record make them seem permanent, as if we could still say “No!” But of course, while the pictures remain firmly planted in discrete time and place, time itself does not stand still, and it does not move in reverse: the planes collide into the buildings, the towers collapse, and people die. What we see has happened, has passed, is past – fated deaths, once set in

motion, that victims could not avoid and witnesses could not avert. What the photographs can do is show the unmistakably human persons caught unawares within this double-bind – as Junod points out, “They were all, obviously, very much alive on their way down” (178). By focusing on the photographs, Junod’s account of those who jumped records the personal ordeal embodied in the moment of their fall.

In spite, or perhaps because, of the most personal nature of a person’s dying, this intimate ordeal draws those who have witnessed it into a crisis of their own. As Junod notes, “From the beginning, the spectacle of doomed people jumping from the upper floors of the World Trade Center resisted redemption” (“The Falling Man” 178-179). Rather, he asserts, “The trial that hundreds endured in the building and then in the air became its own kind of trial for the thousands watching them from the ground.” In describing the reactions of those in the immediate vicinity of the World Trade Center, he writes,

No one ever got used to it; no one who saw it wished to see it again, although, of course, many saw it again. Each jumper, no matter how many there were, brought fresh horror, elicited shock, tested the spirit, struck a lasting blow. Those tumbling through the air remained, by all accounts, eerily silent; those on the ground screamed. It was the sight of the jumpers that prompted Rudy Giuliani to say to his police commissioner, “we’re in uncharted waters now.” It was the sight of the jumpers that prompted a woman to wail, “God! Save their souls! They’re jumping! Oh, please God! Save their souls!” And it was, at last, the sight of the jumpers that provided the corrective to those who insisted on saying

that what they were witnessing was “like a movie,” for this was an ending as unimaginable as it was unbearable: Americans responding to the worst terrorist attack in the history of the world with acts of heroism, with acts of sacrifice, with acts of generosity, with acts of martyrdom, and, by terrible necessity, with one prolonged act of – if these words can be applied to mass murder – mass suicide. (179)

These descriptions attribute to the witnesses component features of traumatization: a consciousness of utter helplessness while watching the deaths of others; an unforeseen and appalling disruption of expectations that renders what they witness frighteningly incomprehensible; an inadequate attempt to comprehend what is witnessed in terms of the pre-memory template of Hollywood film; and an ambivalence about how to categorize this expectation-shattering phenomenon of compromised personal agency and bodily integrity. Is it suicide if it is coerced by attempted murder? Such profound uneasiness about the meaning and implications of people choosing to escape one form of death through another serves as a symptom of what is culturally problematic: witnessing, undeniably, in the instant of its happening, an unaccountable moment of the mortal crisis of others.

As Junod points out, “The resistance to the image – to the images – started early, started immediately, started on the ground” (“The Falling Man” 179). For those who lost loved ones, the notion that their loved one(s) was lost in this way proves intensely troubling. He reports that Christy Ferer, wife of a breakfast patron of Windows on the World, refuses to discuss specifics about her husband’s death, but as the liaison between the New York mayor’s office and September 11 families, she urged that television

memorials one year later refrain from broadcasting images of anyone jumping (181). Jacqueline Hernandez, the oldest daughter of the man Peter Cheney believed was photographed by Richard Drew, told Cheney, “That piece of shit is not my father” (179). Another daughter, Catherine, and Hernandez’s wife Eulogia reject the idea that he might have jumped because they know he “would not have been deterred by smoke or by fire in his effort to come home....” Catherine adds, “They said my father was going to hell because he jumped...I don’t know what I would have done if it was him, I would have had a nervous breakdown, I guess.” Perhaps due to this concern, this assignment of moral wrong to the decision to jump, Eulogia asks of the *Esquire* journalist, “Please clear my husband’s name.” As Junod writes, “The Hernandezes looked at the decision to jump as a betrayal of love – as something Norberto was being accused of.” On the other hand, he writes that the mother of two deceased sons, who recognized them in a photograph of Cantor Fitzgerald employees gathered at their shattered office windows, “looks at the decision to jump as a loss of hope.” According to Junod, she “chooses to live with it by looking, by seeing, by trying to know – by making an act of private witness. She could have chosen to keep her eyes closed” (198). In this way, the article navigates the kinds of judgments and responses, ranging from vehement resistance of the unacceptable to resigned acceptance of the unalterable, generated by the terrible awareness of a loved one’s tragic death. The characterization of the decision to look, to acknowledge the untenable reality of these tragic deaths, as an act of witnessing seems to suggest a way to pierce the isolation in which final moments are met. It is as if by not looking and by not acknowledging, the victim’s solitude is enforced; by witnessing, the victim’s space can be shared.

Yet, as indicated by the objections of some of the bereaved, the opportunity witnessing affords to share this space is certainly not appealing and not necessarily welcome. Junod notes that public criticism greeted the publication of the Drew photograph, objecting that the picture “exploited a man’s death, stripped him of his dignity, invaded his privacy, turned tragedy into leering pornography. Most letters stated the obvious: that someone seeing the picture had to know who it was” (“The Falling Man” 179). Nevertheless, Junod points out that “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” (180). Junod posits that this cultural resistance to witnessing denotes pride – a refusal to collaborate in exposing a person’s powerlessness by turning away from its clear manifestation – and produces an attendant taint of moral deficiency for those whose gaze serves to confirm this powerlessness. This impulse is understandable; it is tempting to think that we can mitigate the violation of their person by not witnessing it, by not confirming that it has occurred. Yet by not witnessing, as Junod indicates, a central horror of September 11 and those who suffered it become lost, and in this absence becomes possible the belief that the horror and the suffering were not so bad, because the evidence of how bad the horror and the suffering were for people is missing. As he asserts, the verifying power of witnessing has been considered crucial in other historical instances of cruelty, including the Holocaust. In effect, his article centers on this principle cultural challenge in the wake of September 11: how, and indeed whether, to witness what we wish was not there.

Early in “The Falling Man,” its author construes the photographed victim as “the essential element in the creation of a new flag, a banner composed entirely of steel bars shining in the sun” (177). By doing so, Junod construes his moment of dying – and that of the others in his situation – as an emblem integral to the culture within which his dying occurred and continues to reverberate. At the scene, a fire department official, soon before his own death in the buildings’ collapse, berated an observer videotaping those who were jumping and demanded, “Don’t you have any human decency” (18). His question invoked a norm based on nothing more than what the offender, the fireman, and the victims, despite their disparate contexts and characteristics, could be known to have in common: they are human beings. At the end of his article, Junod characterizes the “picture of [the]...man falling through the sky [as someone]...falling through time as well as through space,” as if the instant of specific vulnerability persists as a generalized peril. After his discussion of attempts to identify a particular person in the act of jumping, Junod concludes,

But the only certainty we have is the certainty we had at the start:...a photographer named Richard Drew took a picture of a man falling through the sky...The picture went all around the world, and then disappeared, as if we willed it away....Richard Drew’s photograph is all we know of him, and yet all we know of him becomes a measure of what we know of ourselves. The picture is his cenotaph, and like the monuments dedicated to the memory of unknown soldiers everywhere, it asks that we look at it, and make one simple acknowledgment.

That we have known who the Falling Man is all along. (199)

In this way, he makes clear that the ambivalences, unsettlements, disturbances, resistances, resignations, and acceptances traced throughout his article implicate not only the ones whose falls attest to their mortal vulnerability, but also the ones who have witnessed this vulnerability, and thereby perceive it in themselves. He makes clear that the absence of those who jumped from public consideration does not erase the existence of those who jumped. Rather, the mortal vulnerability of those who jumped remains as a suffused cultural presence awaiting acknowledgment as presences within ourselves.

“Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero”

Aired one year after the September 11 attacks, PBS’s *Frontline* documentary “Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero” pursues a self-professed “intimate and profound investigation of the spiritual aftershocks of September 11” (Helen Whitney Productions and *Frontline*). The award-winning documentary (“DuPont-Columbia Awards”), directed at American viewers, features reflections on personal experiences and questions of religious belief by survivors; victims’ grieving relatives and friends; professors, writers, and others who have not lost loved ones in the attack; and representatives from diverse, as well as no, religious traditions. Positioned as an ostensibly neutral, but contextually positioned, public affairs program, the documentary uses premise, tone, and editing to facilitate viewers’ participation in the interviewees’ meditations. In this way, viewers, recognized as witnesses to September 11, join those more directly affected by that day in the film’s portrayal of self-reflection and mourning (Helen Whitney Productions and *Frontline*). In fact, in her Producer’s Notes published on the *Frontline* website, Whitney asserts,

The catastrophe that turned the bottom of Manhattan into a gaping wound was an explosive encounter with our mortality. The visual impact of the planes hitting the towers and all the subsequent scenes only heightened our fevered sense of reckoning. The last words of the victims saying goodbye on their cell phones and in email fused with these images of destruction – and were seared into our psyches. They compelled us to imagine our own deaths. What would we say? What do we believe? (Helen Whitney Productions and *Frontline*).

In this way, similar to Junod, Whitney signals an unresolved cultural engagement with the horror faced by the World Trade Center victims on terms of shared human mortality.

As an alternative to the passive programming available through the major television networks, PBS began as an endeavor to educate viewers and thereby enhance their ability to participate in American civil society (Ouellette 63). In this sense, PBS has a tradition of offering content that self-consciously motivates particular viewer responses; specifically, PBS programming has sought to provoke viewer responses constrained within, rather than liberated from, the parameters of dominant American cultural values and practices (72-73). For twenty-six years, PBS has considered *Frontline* its “flagship public affairs series” (“Celebrating Twenty Years”). B. J. Bullert asserts, “*Frontline* programs are routinely reviewed in the nation’s newspapers, and they often become part of public debate. These programs set the standard against which other PBS public affairs documentaries – including independently produced documentaries – are often measured” (26). According to *Frontline*’s self-reported history, “By casting a national spotlight on complex and compelling issues, *Frontline* not only illuminates them, but also serves as a

catalyst for change, extending a documentary's impact far beyond its initial broadcast” (“Celebrating Twenty Years”). This statement underscores *Frontline*'s commitment to producing documentaries that engage and shape viewer deliberation and action on issues of national concern.

Who are these viewers? Based on research analyses, *Frontline* characterizes them as “social capitalists as PBS has defined them: Americans who are engaged in, contributing to, and participating in their communities. They are civic-minded and active in public affairs.” They are likely “affluent and well-educated. They are more likely to hold executive or professional employment positions than the general population and the average public television viewer,” and they tend to be younger (thirty-five- to forty-nine-years-of-age) than PBS's typical audience and the typical audience for other, similar national programs (“Celebrating Twenty Years”). Essentially, PBS's *Frontline* engages those with the initiative and the financial, educational, and professional resources and status to respond to public concerns through mainstream civic activism. In other words, *Frontline* viewers are able and likely to address social disruption or injustice, but they do so within existing structures of redress, rather than by challenging the structures that in fact sustain their own resources and status.

The recognition of viewers as witnesses recovering from trauma and the summons for them to participate in the documentary's work occurs as early as the *Frontline* introduction preceding the actual documentary. Images of the World Trade Center attacks accompany the announcer as he says, “And there are still so many questions.” The footage is edited so television viewers see on the right of their screens the faces of on-site witnesses staring captivated at the towers; to the left, superimposed, viewers see the

second plane approaching the South Tower – in this visual arrangement, it seems as if the plane is actually flying into those bystanders. In this way, witnesses are presented as incorporated in the experience of trauma and the necessity for recovery. Indeed, on the show's website, producer Whitney asserts, "I was struck by how insistently death seemed to be the text and the subtext of many of my conversations. Not only the deaths of the thousands trapped in the towers but one's own death," identifying witnesses with the victims of September 11 and the need of these witnesses for a process of post-traumatic recovery.

As the documentary continues, the subdued, benevolent voice of the female narrator begins to speak: "Almost everyone has a moment when they feel lost in darkness, a loved one snatched away, disease, natural disaster, human cruelty. Almost everyone at some point asks the question, 'Why me? Why her? Why, God?'" However, as she explains, "What made September 11 different from other dark nights was that so many Americans came away from it asking these fundamental questions at the same time, not only those who witnessed the slaughter at Ground Zero but those who watched in horror at a distance." In effect, as the ominous introduction preceding her comments intimated, she asserts that an entire community – not just New Yorkers, but Americans elsewhere as well – have all been exposed to the same crisis, and thus have all the same need to confront the existential challenges it poses. From this need, the narrator advances a rationale for the broadcast, for "document[ing] this national conversation." As the video complements these words with imagery of the sun peaking through dark, smoky buildings, and vibrant rays pushing past Manhattan's skyline, the documentary proffers light to the viewers as something sublime penetrating through shadowy, earthly forms.

Together, words and images communicate the multiple levels on which the documentary conversation will transpire, including as a more amorphous process for interviewees and viewers alike to work through their own spiritual introspection (Helen Whitney Productions and *Frontline*).

Specifically, the film's narrator declares,

The drama of faith and doubt began as soon as the first plane disappeared into the side of the north tower. In the silence that followed, America's sense of invulnerability was shaken. Many people were forced to confront their own deaths as they imagined the terror of those who jumped. (Helen Whitney Productions and *Frontline*)

The documentary singles out the plight of those who jumped as a point of entry through which witnesses access the suffering of others by realizing they must relinquish their own sense of control and security. While still and video images show people clustered at ledges and others falling through the air, photographer Luca Babini, a self-described agnostic, admits, "You know, how many times I have actually visualized myself in that situation, and I can't even imagine how to do that" (Helen Whitney Productions and *Frontline*). His subsequent comments evidence the challenge for witnesses of trying to understand how the particular circumstances of being trapped at the highest levels of the towers prompted a number of people to choose to die by jumping out of the building rather than by remaining inside, raising important questions: why jump? Was it an act merely of blind desperation? What else could they do? What would I do in the same situation? With the live coverage of the twin towers, the subsequent media repetitions of the coverage, and this documentary, the attack does not just affect those it physically

harmed; the attack threatens all viewers who, from apprehending these plights, not only sympathize with the victims, but also recognize that those victims could just as easily have been themselves. By the end of “Act One,” with the figures of the jumping office workers emblemizing the horror of September 11, viewers grasp what is at stake for themselves when negotiating their own issues of faith and doubt.

Yet, as the documentary intimates, discomfort with these grounds of mutual susceptibility can provoke significant, even violent, forms of resistance. National Public Radio correspondent Margot Adler speculates,

So maybe what evil is, on some level, is when you get – when you believe in something so utterly that you lose your sense that a human being is a human being, when you feel that you can go into a building and kill 3,000 people and it doesn’t matter...It’s a kind of estrangement, though. It’s an estrangement from your connection that these other human beings, the ones that are jumping out the window to the bottom, are just like you.

(Helen Whitney Productions and *Frontline*)

While recognizing within ourselves the powerlessness of other human beings involves an arduous confrontation with limitations we might prefer to avoid, entirely disavowing such a conjunction poses ominous ramifications. Such, it would seem, are the specters of anguish and fear haunting the aftermath of September 11.

The final words of “Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero” come from Catholic priest Monsignor Lorenzo Albacete, who deliberates on two people seen leaping from the South Tower hand-in-hand.

To me, that image is an inescapable provocation. This gesture, this holding of hands in the midst of that horror, it embodies what September 11 was all about. The image confronts us with the need to make a judgment, a choice. Does it show the ultimate hopelessness of human attempts to survive the power of hatred and death? Or is it an affirmation of a greatness within our humanity itself that somehow shines in the midst of that darkness and contains the hint of a possibility, a power greater than death itself? Which of the two? It's a choice. It's the choice of September 11. (Helen Whitney Productions and *Frontline*)

Like "The Falling Man," this film envisions witnesses in an enduring state of existential crisis provoked by perceiving the final moments of total strangers. Questions raised by the act of witnessing abound, all revolving around the central premise that the final moments of these total strangers matter intimately to us. As individual experiences – as individual as the solitary fall to personal demise – relegated to a finite time and place, especially in the absence of subsequent media coverage, they nevertheless insinuate profound quandaries for us yet to resolve. Regardless of whether we can find affinity with either the despair or the hope as outlined in Monsignor Albacete's formulation of September 11, we can admit the dilemma itself is relevant by the way it makes us uncomfortable. This is the symptom of unresolved unsettlement, the residue of what ostensibly is no longer a public concern. What preoccupies the cultural wake of witnessing September 11 is negotiating this unsettlement with the vulnerability of others, and of ourselves. In stark terms, Danielle Gardner cautions,

Perhaps another legacy for us is to wrest the event back from the realm of the purely symbolic that it resides in for the rest of the country and the world. Our legacy is to reinsert the victims into the tragedy; to clarify and remind that what really happened on September 11 is that people died. Everything stems from that – all politics, all artistic responses, all military initiatives, all rebuilding concepts. Yet it is continually forgotten. People died. (622)

Conclusion: Hope for Compassion

In this chapter I have considered how two distinct popular culture texts contend with the culturally problematic predicament of those who jumped to their deaths from the World Trade Center on September 11. In effect, both texts present these troubling instances of dying in public and the witnessing they provoked as signaling culturally traumatic ruptures in taken-for-granted understandings about personal safety and free choice. However, as indicated in my discussion of the permeable self, the unsettlement of witnessing others' suffering occasions the possibility for compassion. I concur with Arnault's contention from an ethical standpoint that

How we respond to the suffering of others, especially suffering as serious as that of shattered selves, is significant in terms of the moral content of our character and of our communities. In my opinion, having people who care about alleviating suffering and having institutions dedicated to the care of suffering people are necessary characteristics of a good society – whatever the cause of the suffering. (164)

When LaCapra advocates “empathic unsettlement” in historiography,⁶⁴ he advances an approach for scholarship that acknowledges and respects, rather than glosses or overlooks, the material implications of human suffering.⁶⁵ Judith Butler, David Simpson, and Susan Sontag are among those who have arrived at similar questions about how vulnerability, subjectivity, and human mutuality matter in post-September 11 American culture.⁶⁶ Clearly, the stakes, and the obstacles, are high. Ideally, a permeable self could endure in a state of equilibrium between protective self-possession and compassionate other-awareness. Such a state would render possible just and caring relations between people from the most dissimilar conditions under the most trying circumstances. Yet, as this discussion suggests, effecting such a posture involves an arduous negotiation with the worst experiences human beings encounter in this world. We would have to admit that while we are not the victims we witness, we could be. To adopt this posture on terms

⁶⁴ According to LaCapra, “empathic unsettlement poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit” (41-42), allowing horror to remain horrible and forcing discourse to confront it as such.

⁶⁵ LaCapra considers “the role of empathy...an insufficiently explored avenue through which one may inquire into the connection between historical understanding, social critique, and ethico-political activity – a key instance of the manner in which interest in the problem of working through may be seen as a renewal of the concern with the relation of theory to practice. In any event, the problem of empathy is a noteworthy, underexplored indicator that there is much remaining to be done in the attempt of historians and others to write about – and in some sense write – trauma” (219).

⁶⁶ Malpede envisions a productive role for empathy in world events (560-564), while Bergoffen references Bosnian Serb soldiers’ conviction of crimes against humanity for rape as a step toward recognizing the sexed female body as a site of “embodied subjectivity” (117) that brings together both the universal and the particular (117-1118). In this body’s susceptibility to violations of subjective will and bodily integrity in instances of sexual assault, it instantiates universal vulnerability, or “the lived vulnerabilities of the mortal body” (129).

of mutual vulnerability requires the adoption of this posture at all times, with all others, when we might as well just enjoy our relative security, even if only for a time.

Perhaps a genuine, relentless posture of compassion is not possible. But we can always try.

Chapter Three: Enduring Impact: The Crisis Fetish in Post-September 11 American Television⁶⁷

Introduction: Setting the Scene for Televised Crisis after September 11

Scenario One: A commercial airliner en route from Sydney to Los Angeles inexplicably breaks apart somewhere over the Pacific Ocean, marooning the surviving passengers on a remote and mysterious island. Under the shadow of their plane's wreckage on an unknown beach, these strangers from around the world must now confront fundamental tensions between individual and community, with survival itself at stake ("Pilot: Part 1"; "Pilot: Part 2"). This plight – in effect, what protagonist Jack Shephard characterizes as the choice to "live together or die alone" (Nigro 31) – forms the premise for ABC Studios' 2004-2010 television series *Lost*.

Scenario Two: Once enslaved cyborgs known as the Cylons engineer a successful coup over their creators and enemies, the human beings who live on twelve neighboring planets. After the Cylons' surprise nuclear attack renders these planets unlivable, the last remnants of the human species totter across space searching for a mythical refuge ("Episode #1.1"; "Episode #1.2"). This predicament, conjured by the tagline, "The world is over. The fight has just begun" ("Battlestar Galactica, 2004"), drives the plot for British Sky Broadcasting's 2005-2009 science fiction serial *Battlestar Galactica*.

Scenario Three: On an otherwise ordinary day, everyone on Earth passes out for 137 seconds. While unconscious, each person glimpses an excerpt of his or her life in the future, specifically beginning at 10 p.m. on April 29, 2010 (although some do not glimpse

⁶⁷ This chapter is included in Schaberg and Thompson's forthcoming special issue of *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* titled, "Cultural Productions of 9/11." Full citation is listed in Works Consulted.

anything at all, suggesting they will not live to see that day). When they regain consciousness, they return to a world marred by incredible destruction since the simultaneous global blackout disrupted all human-operated systems, most noticeably air and ground transportation. Civilians and law enforcement investigators alike fixate not only on the past cataclysm that has changed everything, but also on the certain future date that has become both a memory and an anticipation of grave consequence (“No More Good Days”). “No More Good Days,” the title of the premiere for HBO Entertainment’s short-lived 2009-2010 fantasy *FlashForward*, draws on a little girl’s ominous description of her future vision to endow with doom the deferral between D-Day’s inception and its fulfillment. Like the characters in *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica*, *FlashForward*’s survivors find themselves materially and existentially adrift in the thrall of extreme circumstances. Why the fascination with life- and world-altering calamity on primetime American television in the first decade of the twenty-first century?

When an event of large scale, scope, and impact occurs such as the September 11 hijackings, popular culture provides the medium through which individuals in relationship with their communities can try to make sense of that event and determine precisely what has happened and what it might mean for the future (Erickson 197-202; Schopp and Hill 13-16). Here, I am examining why and how post-September 11 television programs such as *Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *FlashForward* each feature prominently, as premises and/or ongoing plot devices, world-changing threats and calls for heroic response. First, I review the features of trauma that occasion the impulse toward compulsive, or fetishized, revisiting of an ordinary event, while pointing to the aspects of narrativization – specifically, televisual narrative – that both reflect and

attempt to resolve through reiteration these post-trauma preoccupations. Then, I focus on particular components of September 11, such as unforeseen and unavoidable calamity for unwitting victims, that concentrate post-September 11 concerns on the ability of individuals to fully understand and direct their own life trajectories. Ultimately, I consider how these concerns crystallize within these television series into a fixation with unsettled questions about personal agency in the wake of extreme events. In this way, I explore how these texts evidence a sustained fascination with the moment of impact as a crisis of knowledge and power. In effect, I examine how unresolved tensions between the possibility of choice and the imposition of destiny permeate these disparate series, exposing fractures within cultural formations – or cultural trauma – along the fault line of the concept of fate.

Trauma, Culture, and Fetishized Crisis

As a psychiatric diagnosis, PTSD recognizes human beings as socially and culturally contextualized by acknowledging that historical events and interpersonal exchanges matter to the onset of and recovery from traumatization (deVries 398-400). As noted in this project's introduction, Janoff-Bulman characterizes trauma as overpowering fundamental, taken-for-granted presumptions about life and selfhood formed during childhood development that frame how we all later understand the world and our place in it (4-25). She argues that this shattering of assumptions ultimately undermines individuals' trust in their surroundings and in their ability to act productively and responsibly, without incurring their own or someone else's harm (49-90). Although she develops her theoretical framework within psychology's disciplinary parameters, this field's research (28-45), as well as that of the philosophers of science on whose work she

also partly draws (26-28), depict knowledge construction as a social process (26-45), making possible extrapolation to a cultural studies approach that addresses how cultural constructs enable and contour the meaning formations that become elemental and common not only to individuals, but also to whole communities. In phenomenological terms, also explored more fully in the introduction, this cultural traumatization results when intersubjectively-formed horizons of understanding – the parameters of what is regarded as familiar, intelligible, and anticipated experience (Wilson 16-17) – are starkly contradicted, thereby undermining presumptions about what can be taken as familiar, intelligible, and anticipated. Typically, after a traumatic occurrence, deVries argues, “Cultural customs and rituals help individuals control their emotions, order their behavior, link the sufferers more intimately to the social group, and serve as symbols of continuity.” On the other hand, though, “Such processes of restitution...are disrupted when cultures as a whole are traumatized” (405). In this sense, as elaborated so far in Chapters One and Two of this dissertation, the notion of cultural trauma comes to signify the violation of deeply- and dearly-held shared conceptions of what we know and what we can do. Accordingly, cultural trauma and its aftermath concern survivors and witnesses not in isolation, but in relationship to their communities.

Commonly, traumatization subjects a survivor to the “tyranny of the past,” or a “fixation on trauma” (van der Kolk and McFarlane 4) characterized by compulsive preoccupation with an experience that has not been accepted and integrated into a person’s understanding of self and life trajectory (5-11). Interestingly, although the term “fetish” has also been associated with psychology, with its roots in Freudian theories about psychosexual neuroses, an anthropological approach more closely reflects how this

post-traumatic compulsion might manifest under communal conditions. William Pietz outlines how the fetish, across its interdisciplinary applications, relates specifically to the “problematic of the social value of material objects” (7). First, he notes the “irreducible materiality” of the fetish object, which signals that object as the end concern of attention, rather than as a reference to something beyond itself (7). Second, he describes the fetish object’s role as the integration site of heterogeneous impulses, beliefs, and practices; as a singular node for these disparate elements’ amalgamation, the fetish object also occasions perpetual revisitations to the original integrating moment (7-8). Third, he contends that the fetish object emblemizes the social construction of value, since cross-cultural estimations starkly differ about a given object’s worth and purpose (9). Fourth, Pietz points to the fetish as a locus external to the body that nevertheless has power over the body (10). In effect, a fetish emerges when “a crisis brings together and fixes into a singularly resonant unified intensity an unrepeatable event (permanent in memory), a particular object or arrangement of objects, and a localized space” (12). In this way, Pietz asserts that for the embodied subject, the fetish pins down in time and space and indicates as compelling complex processes of identification and resistance (14). Drawing on Pietz, I assert that a shared trauma can precipitate such a commanding fixation, with its showcasing of helplessness in the face of harm crystallizing in witnesses’ consciousness as an ongoing struggle with the parameters of potential victimization and chance survival. I argue that television shows centralizing crisis in their serialized iterations operate as fetish objects for the originating crisis of September 11, 2001.

Before saying more about September 11, I want to add that narratives, televised or otherwise, have long featured prominently in post-traumatic responses. For traumatized

individuals, treatment typically focuses on transforming obsessive memories into more constructive forms of meaning, forms that place the event into a discrete moment within personal history and into a productive role for future personal development (van der Kolk and McFarlane 19). In this sense, then, narrative plays an integral role in recovery from trauma. As discussed in the introduction, stories have produced the culturally-intelligible selves and worlds (Carr) that traumatic events disrupt and reveal as contingent and vulnerable (Herman; Janoff-Bulman). Likewise, stories provide a communally-accessible site for making sense of post-trauma knowledge and experience by serving as “technologies of memory,” or interactive mechanisms enabling individuals to participate in the public narrativization of traumatic events (Sturken 9). Through this narrativization, meanings emerge that can reinforce, question, or unevenly engage the threatened dominant narrative, complexly knitting together – although, at times, also dividing – individuals and communities.

Specifically, Wilson has argued that televised narratives occasion a hermeneutic circle of meaning formation, through which viewers move back-and-forth between the parts, or the individual episodes, and the series as a whole, and from their personal life-world horizons to the show’s horizon of meaning, to actively construct and revise their own interpretations in negotiation with the series’ dominant or preferred readings (51). For this reason, although a show must involve a sufficiently conventional set of plots, themes, etc. to be intelligible to a broad audience, the dynamic composition of such a broad audience ensures that meaning will never fully be contained or restricted to a specific, stable reception (21). He adds that production techniques that generate in viewers senses of alienation, distance, and/or defamiliarization from what they might

otherwise consider to be recognizable and commonplace promotes critique of the televised exigencies' real-world corollaries (182-191). Moreover, a series that features contentious, unresolved moral dilemmas creates space for viewers to formulate their own particular judgments and responses (97). In the case of September 11, the initial crisis's component conditions – vulnerability, exposed mortality, and heroism-at-a-price – seem to dominate television shows such as *Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *FlashForward*, suggesting that these narratives might be enacting or fetishizing disaster in ways that complicate their contribution toward therapeutic recuperation and instead simply instantiate the culturally traumatic aftermath of September 11.

Choice, Fate, and September 11

As recounted in this dissertation's prologue, on the morning of September 11, 2001, news coverage initiated immediately after a passenger plane first hit the World Trade Center's North Tower afforded national, and even international, viewers a live view of the moment when a second airliner crashed into the South Tower and a day of relentless horrors accelerated. By the end of the day, all seven buildings comprising the World Trade Center complex, including most prominently the 110-story Twin Towers, had collapsed; a section of the Pentagon targeted by another hijacked commercial jet had crumbled; and yet another airplane had smashed into the ground in rural Pennsylvania ("September 11: Chronology of Terror"). Nearly 3,000 people died that day (National Commission 311), many of them visibly as they jumped from where they were trapped at the World Trade Center's highest floors (Junod, "The Falling Man"). Hundreds of first responders from the New York City Fire and Police Departments, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, and other agencies who were laboring to evacuate civilians

from the towers were killed when the buildings suddenly fell (National Commission 311). Since then, even more of these celebrated “heroes” have died of health complications stemming from the noxious environmental conditions pervading the rescue and recovery effort (“9/11 Health: Rescue and Recovery Workers”).

As I have argued through the preceding chapters, this rapid, devastating, and irreversible unraveling of what began as an ordinary, in fact beautiful, Tuesday morning poses daunting problems of meaning not only for survivors, but also for those who witnessed events from the distance of the news media. After all, this uncontained progression of unexpected destruction raises questions about how to live with the possibility of a final harm that we cannot foresee or control. While such a possibility always persists in daily life – after all, who can foresee or control the more commonplace misfortune of a fatal car accident? – the September 11 attacks showcased our ever-present mortality through the broadcast of thousands dying to an unprecedented number of witnesses who were in no position to help, fostering a common sense of ultimate vulnerability. At the same time, as that day became the past and the War on Terror became a daily and ongoing response to the hijackings, September 11 would seem to have incited a cultural struggle not only to make sense of the original crisis, but also to determine when that crisis ends, if at all.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens has argued that modernity generally, as a historical period distinguished by rapid, comprehensive change (*Consequences* 6), features a daily “sense many of us have of being caught up in a universe of events we do not fully understand, and which seems in large part outside of our control” (2-3), a sense that countermands modernity’s investment in rational control over life trajectories that have

not been predetermined (*Modernity* 75-80). This contradictory impulse is emblematic of an era imbued with uneasy balances between “*security versus danger* and *trust versus risk*” (*Consequences* 7; sic). In this formulation, Giddens defines risk as the possible unwanted outcome of our own choices (30-31). He points specifically to the persistent hazard of “low probability high consequence risks” (133), which at the time of his writing at the end of the Cold War essentially meant nuclear war between nations, a peril now also attached to non-state actors and coded within the calamitous catchall terms “Weapons of Mass Destruction” (WMD). From this persistent hazard emerge notions of fate (133), or pervasive feelings of “*angst* or *dread*” about an inescapably unsafe future (100; sic). Ultimately, Giddens contends, crisis or periodic upheaval is familiar to modernity, as is the existential anguish that results from the relentless shadow of a likely remote but nevertheless catastrophic unforeseeable and unavoidable future (*Modernity* 184-185). In this sense, “death is unintelligible exactly because it is the point zero at which control lapses,” and therefore poses the kind of “fateful moment” that renders modern subjects who ordinarily understand themselves as autonomous agents most susceptible to finding recourse in fate as an explanation or interpretation for the inevitable event (203).

Of course, the concept of fate is not new to modernity. The question, “Why me?” often appears as an appeal to purpose or reason when circumstances of great impact occur over which we have neither adequate control nor satisfactory knowledge of origins, causes, or meaning (Gelven 5-8; Solomon 436). When fate or destiny is proposed as an answer to this question, such an answer acknowledges human finitude, both in the short-term sense of a lack of omniscience and omnipotence, and in the long-term sense of

ultimate mortality (Gelven 27; 184-193). Theological frameworks within more traditional cultural structures could offer divine intention or even divinely-sanctioned human free will as a more organized alternative to the apparent whims of fate (18-19). However, the modern age that Giddens assesses has developed a view of human action and agency independent of any transcendent providential force. What remains discomfiting when at the mercy of the unknowable and uncontrollable, then, is not only the undesired experience of misfortune and suffering, but the uncertainty about why – not just why *me*, but also *why* me; what significance, if any, does my misfortune and suffering provide (Solomon 438-441)? In the 1990s, destiny-oriented apocalyptic and millennial movements intervened in a post-Cold War period of swift social transition to offer coherent, ordered, and compelling worldviews (Stewart and Harding 289-290). In the wake of the September 11 hijackings, the media dwelled both on fate's caprice through stories of happenstance escape and survival (R. Frank 646-647; see also DiMarco, Fink and Mathias, and Murphy) and on heroic rescue's price through stories of endless funerals and memorial services for the deceased and presumed deceased firefighters and police officers, along with ongoing reporting of the Ground Zero recovery effort. In effect, after September 11, preoccupations with fate resurfaced, but often in tandem with questions of choice, in a seeming negotiation of the limits of human power given the potential for utter helplessness.

Lost: “Live Together, Die Alone”

Lost premiered on ABC in the United States on September 22, 2004 (“Lost”). The two-part pilot begins with an extreme close-up shot of the opening eye of a man⁶⁸ in a business suit, who recovers consciousness while lying on the ground in a wooded area. After he gathers himself enough to get up and stumble onto a beach clearing, he (and viewers) starts to hear chaotic sounds, which intensify as the camera pans to pursue his perspective and reveal a commercial airliner’s wreckage. After overcoming the momentary shock of what he is seeing, the unidentified man rushes into the melee of panicked survivors, debris, and the bodies of the injured and the dead to help. He performs, essentially, heroically: as the burning and unstable airplane remnants continue to pose a danger, he responds to those most urgently needing aid, from a man trapped under a piece of the plane to an alarmed pregnant woman, even taking over a seemingly lifeless woman’s resuscitation when a man identifying himself as a trained lifeguard fails to administer proper mouth-to-mouth technique (“Pilot: Part 1”).

Viewers soon learn that he is Jack Shephard, an expert spinal surgeon. His characterization, as well as other survivors’ character development, becomes a centerpiece of the show’s exploration of how an island with mysterious properties and inhabitants affects and transforms a collection of stranded individuals with troubled pasts and uncertain futures. Yet this initial scene in disaster’s immediate aftermath has already showcased these transformations’ fundamental components, and almost all we need to know to frame what will happen on this island has already been told. In a September a

⁶⁸ Girard and Meulemans argue that this subjective view, which integrates characters’ pasts and presents and persists throughout the series for each of the main characters, foregrounds a preoccupation with the nature, possibilities, and constraints of choice (89).

mere three years after a real-world plane-centered catastrophe (Nilges 150), *Lost* dramatizes the complexities of individuals' and communities' post-crisis responses given the highest stakes imaginable: navigating the tenuous divide between life and death (Nigro 31). In the pilot episodes, viewers see exigent circumstances; calls for help; individuals too confused, scared, self-interested, or inexperienced to act effectively; individuals willing and able to act readily, effectively and selflessly; characters who do not speak English amidst otherwise entirely English-speaking travelers; characters with incommensurable backgrounds such as a con artist from the American South or a former interrogator for the Iraqi National Guard who harbor deep suspicions toward one another; and the arbitrary, unexplained and inexplicable distinctions between the living and the dead ("Pilot: Part 1"; "Pilot: Part 2"). Yet once these particular emergencies subside, these disparate passengers connected only by the coincidence of having boarded the same doomed international flight still must face a basic, commanding question that will loom over the rest of the series: what do we do now? Essentially, viewers encounter versions of vulnerability, exposed mortality, and complicated heroism that echo contemporary difficulties for real-world witnesses and survivors. This scenario, while not mirroring September 11, 2001 in any direct way, summons that day's horrific dilemmas as well as its most enduring, pressing and unsolved concerns about risks that derive from and affect global community collisions and formations (Nigro 31-32; Nilges 151; Blauvelt).

Later in *Lost*'s first season, as the remaining passengers begin to realize that the island itself is dangerous and that rescue is not coming soon, Jack provides an answer to that commanding question of "what next?" In a stirring speech about survival, he says,

It's been six days, and we're all still waiting. Waiting for someone to come. But what if they don't? We have to stop waiting. We need to start figuring things out... Every man for himself is not going to work... We need to figure out how we're going to survive here... Last week most of us were strangers. But we're all here now. And God knows how long we're going to be here. But if we can't live together—we're gonna die alone.

(“White Rabbit”)

This vision, of strangers brought together only by chance uniting to save one another in their mutually desperate circumstances, offers an inspiring approach to the environmental hazards they all face. Indeed, throughout the series, this island-formed community develops, fractures, and perseveres as its individual members wrestle with their commitment to the “live together, die alone” credo. However, this credo, while underscoring the extremity of their situation, addresses only *how* survival might be possible for most of these people. Ultimately, whether individual members actually do live or die always ends up raising the more profound question of *why*, of what Solomon, as noted earlier, termed “significance” (438-441) – whether an individual’s endurance or demise matters materially and metaphysically. As Solomon has also argued, fatalism often relieves this burden of wondering why, since it stipulates with certainty that it simply *had* to happen for that person’s life to make sense (450). As the show’s central thematic thread repeatedly foregrounds, significance typically wavers on the pivot of agency, between characters such as John Locke who view the way forward as destiny beckoning and those such as Jack who tends to see only hard choices with no guarantees. In effect, *Lost* continually interrogates without finally determining the extent to which

human beings can freely choose the direction, outcome and meaning of their own actions (see also Girard and Meulemans 89-101; Werther 221-230; Addey 231-240). In this way, the series focalizes ambivalence about fate in its dramatization of crisis-provoked practical and existential quandaries.

Tensions between fate and choice permeate all of the characters' preoccupations with how their past failures have shaped or even prefigured their future prospects. Indeed, the final season reveals that numinous island guardian Jacob has indirectly and anonymously influenced the main characters' lives since their childhoods to draw them to his island ("Lighthouse"). Such intervention, however oblique, indicates that the very fact that these people came together at all depends upon a complex interplay of their conscious intentions with the necessities imposed by forces beyond themselves. Specifically, though, I concentrate on Jack and Locke, whose rivalry is rooted in an explicit dispute about destiny that undergirds the entire narrative arc. Jack initially takes the island's perils at face value, as unwanted challenges to be overcome or at least endured until rescue for everyone can be secured. For Locke, however, who after years of paralysis instantly and mysteriously regains use of his legs on the island, the crash survivors clearly have some transcendent purpose for being there...he just never fully comes to understand what that purpose might be. The pair's polar positions⁶⁹, summed up by the second season premiere's title, "Man of Science, Man of Faith," constantly lead to arguments about how to handle the island's hazards. Their separate stances create a crucial turning point at the beginning of Season Four, when Jack convinces some of the

⁶⁹ Lee characterizes Jack as an "empiricist" committed to free will to a sometimes problematic extent, such as those times when he perseveres in lost causes to prove himself capable of heroism (63-66). In contrast, Lee notes Locke's tendency toward faith as well as, at times, gullibility (66-70).

survivors to make their way to a freighter that could rescue them, and Lock convinces other survivors that they should stay on the island (“The Beginning of the End”). This divergence directs the remainder of the show’s plot, placing characters on paths that only the series finale entirely clarifies. By that time, John Locke has long been confirmed dead, his last thoughts in befuddlement as he is murdered without having fulfilled what he thought was his destiny: to save the island (“LA X”). But interestingly, in the final episode, Jack dies having willfully sacrificed himself for that very same goal, a goal he once derided as reckless fantasy: fulfilling a destiny of saving the island (“The End”). Such a denouement threads a careful course between choice and fate, suggesting that rather than being opposed, one commitment to some extent invokes the other. In this way, by instantiating as unsettled the boundaries of vulnerability and heroism under mortal conditions, the six-season serial proffers a fetish for a post-September 11 era in which such concerns remain both vital and in doubt.

Battlestar Galactica: “The world is over. The fight has just begun.”

Battlestar Galactica debuted in the United States as a mini-series on December 8, 2003 on the Sci Fi Channel (“Battlestar Galactica, 2003”), since rebranded as SyFy. The mini-series re-envisioned a science fiction show that had lasted a single network television season, from 1978-1979 (“Battlestar Galactica, 1978”). According to this newer version of the story, human beings had long ago created Cylons as sturdy robots that could perform military and labor functions that people wanted to avoid. However, the Cylons rebel, leading eventually to a truce that enforces separation between Cylons and people. During this time apart, Cylons evolve into a more advanced, life-based form – cyborgs with bodies and behaviors effectively indistinguishable from those of human

beings – that could reproduce with humans and feature a shared, renewable or downloadable consciousness across similar networked models that essentially nullifies death. In this more durable, formidable condition, they determine to wipe out humanity (“Episode #1.1”; “Episode #1.2”).

Battlestar Galactica premiered as a regularly-scheduled Sci Fi series on January 14, 2005 (“Battlestar Galactica, 2004”). Since that time, popular press and academic criticism has consistently regarded the series as a thought-provoking exposition of the social and political concerns dominating American life in the wake of September 11 (Marshall and Potter 1). Arguing that “Science fiction is meant to be provocative; it is meant to make us question aspects of the world in which we live” (9), Marshall and Potter note that *Battlestar Galactica* raised such questions by showcasing exigencies in which main characters must negotiate the parameters of fraught contemporary issues, including terrorism, torture, and religious fervor (5-8). In effect, Ott contends that “science fiction is inevitably about the culture that produced it” (16) and this show “furnishes viewers with a vocabulary and thus with a set of symbolic resources for managing their social anxieties” (14). Similar to what happened on September 11, the series begins with a pivotal, destructive moment in the history of a people (17) whose aftermath response is determined not only by this fundamentally changing event, but also their continued engagement with its perpetrators. With this premise in mind, *Battlestar Galactica*’s plot unfolds with explicit attention to contemporary concerns as well as a fixation on fate and choice manifested through debates about the extent and limits of any individual’s or community’s control over their own circumstances and future (Casey 237-250).

Over the two nights of the mini-series, viewers watched as the Cylons almost entirely obliterate humanity by nuking the “Twelve Colonies,” or the twelve planets that human beings inhabit. Characters regard this devastation as unimaginable, unforeseen and unprecedented for a civilization complacently prosperous from a long period of peace, as evoked by frequent references to “the end of the world” as well as – for contemporary viewers – the eerily reminiscent scene of Gaius Baltar watching chaotic newscasts of the attacks on his vertical, oblong, twin-paneled television screens. Yet as Commander William Adama presages in the calm of a ceremony before the onslaught, we – certainly the collective of the Twelve Colonies but also perhaps viewers as well – can never truly avoid the consequences of our actions. Indeed, with personal memories haunting him and the other protagonists, and aesthetic traces of the original series haunting the new show’s sets, costumes, and props, the past seems inseparable from and formative for the present, however extraordinary the present might seem (“Episode #1.1”; “Episode #1.2”).

As the show progresses, viewers learn that the Cylons had developed a deep faith in a single God that not only countered human beliefs in multiple gods, but also justified for them their decision to exterminate what they regarded as the faithless betrayers of this one, true God. Yet, on the other side of the coin, among the few human survivors who now wander through space seeking shelter, religious conviction proves an equally compelling concern. On the side of faith resides Laura Roslin, a relatively low-level cabinet appointee who becomes the Twelve Colonies’ president after the Cylon attack kills all the other candidates above her and who has just prior to that attack been diagnosed with terminal breast cancer. Her leadership and very life status seem to

depend on sheer chance, unless of course there is a higher purpose guiding these developments, and she is open to trusting that a mythical planet called Earth, long revered within their belief system but never historically validated as a real place, is their destined home. At the same time, hardened personalities like the fleet's new military commander-by-default Admiral Adama long doubt not only that Earth exists, but also that cultivating hope in its promise can be productive. These elements – cataclysmic destruction, summed up by the tagline, “The world is over. The fight has just begun” (“*Battlestar Galactica*, 2004”); conflict between the once exploited and their former exploiters; and high-consequence investments in divergent worldview certainties, from religious to secular absolutism – provide parallel, though not necessarily mirror, reflections of real-world, post-September 11 anxieties about unprecedented destruction, its causes, and its implications for the individual wondering what influence he or she, or any other guiding force, has over these life- and world-altering events (see also Edwards; Gilmore; Ryan “Even in the Darkest Times”; Weiss).

Like *Lost* in many ways (see Gilmore; Havrilesky; Weiss), *Battlestar Galactica* persistently echoes the same preoccupations with the notion of fate. All characters in *Battlestar Galactica*, like those in *Lost*, wrestle to some extent with existential uncertainties about how they ended up where they are and where they will be going. However, as noted earlier, disagreement over the relevance and force of destiny fuels an ongoing dispute, reminiscent of that between Locke and Jack, between President Roslin and Admiral Adama about how to safely direct the fleet preserving the last of the human race. For Roslin, like *Lost*'s Locke, some transcendent power supports and guides these endangered individuals toward an ideal fulfillment, a redemption that will render

meaningful the suffering they have endured. For Adama, like *Lost*'s Jack, responsible guardianship of the endangered individuals in his care means *not* presuming there can or will be any deus ex machina to solve or compensate for the threats they have faced. "Sometimes a Great Notion," a dark episode in the final season of a dark series, showcases the despair pervading the dwindling survivors when choice guided by destiny seems to lead them to a literal dead end, a barren, uninhabitable Earth marred by an ancient nuclear war. In this instance, Officer Anastasia Dualla stages her resistance to such dependence on cruel fortune by enjoying a last, joyful meal with her love Lee Adama and later savoring the memory of that joy as she takes her own life. Her choice of suicide from the heroic posture of self-determination poses a problematic defiance of fate. Yet, like *Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica* concludes with an ultimate recognition and acceptance of fate as both initiating and ending the characters' journeys, both physical and metaphysical – with the sense of eternal recurrence, or the plot of destruction as endlessly reiterated, consciously articulated by the characters of *Battlestar Galactica*, whose scriptures have stipulated that "All this has happened before, and all this will happen again" ("Sometimes a Great Notion;" "Daybreak: Part 1;" "Daybreak: Part 2"). And so, *Battlestar Galactica*'s serial re-presentations of this fundamental tension between fate and choice under life-, even species-threatening, circumstances afford a fetishized crystallization and repetition of September 11's component horrors of vulnerability, dubious heroism, and looming mortality.

FlashForward: "No More Good Days"

FlashForward's single season premiered on ABC in the United States on September 24, 2009 with an episode titled, "No More Good Days" ("FlashForward").

Like *Lost*, the series begins with a close-up shot drawing viewer attention to a man's face. He comes to consciousness on a pavement littered with broken glass in a silence soon broken by the troubling distant sounds of car alarms and screaming. This man, the show's protagonist, FBI agent Mark Benford, then scrambles to emerge from an overturned vehicle to gain an unobstructed view of total, baffling urban chaos. He eventually learns that while he was pursuing a terrorist suspect with his partner Demetri Noh on the L.A. roadways, he, and everyone else in the world, inexplicably blacked out for two minutes and seventeen seconds. During that time, each person glimpsed a two-minute, seventeen-second clip of their life on the same day, April 29, 2010. Each person, that is, except for a few like Noh who saw nothing at all, and are later understood to have died before that future date ("No More Good Days").

After regaining consciousness on this otherwise ordinary but beautiful, clear-blue-sky September morning, characters feel they have returned to a changed world. Planes crashed into skyscrapers and cars driven off bridges during humanity's incapacity are among the most visible, immediate emergencies. But equally compelling become the blackout visions themselves, which present each character with a personal future that they either welcome or fear. For example, while misgivings plague those like Noh who are presumed to be deceased by April 29, Dr. Bryce Varley foresees a rendezvous with an as-yet unknown love interest, giving him a reason to live just as he was about to commit suicide. As a result, as the FBI begins investigating what caused the blackout and all main characters begin questioning whether what they have seen for themselves is inevitable, they all become concerned about whether or not the future can be revised. Individuals want to know whether the fortune or misfortune they have foreseen is

guaranteed, and investigators want to know whether the blackout itself might recur (“No More Good Days”). For the blackout’s survivors, seeing the future has imbued the intermediate days with a sense of predestination. For those who do not like what they have seen (or have not seen), that sense of finalized fate feels like the doom of “no more good days.”

Co-creator David S. Goyer, a story writer for *The Dark Knight*, discussed in this dissertation’s Chapter Four, explicitly roots his vision for *FlashForward* in his own memory of September 11, 2001. He recalls being in France and encountering an “outpouring of sympathy...I thought, obviously, it was horrendous, but it was also, for this one moment...this profoundly kind of connecting experience for a lot of the world.” In this way, by focusing the series on that “one moment...[that] brief period of time” (qtd. in Topel) that produced substantial global consequences, Goyer states directly that this show is engaged in reproducing such a scenario and the communal and existential implications it poses (see also Singh). Often compared to *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica* as a science fiction or fantasy consideration of contemporary, real-world events through the lens of at-risk individuals and communities (Bellafante; King; Ryan “Will Time Be Kind”), *FlashForward* showcases the crisis-generated fixation on fate that it shares with those shows (the shows also share actors: Sonya Walger and Dominic Monaghan appeared in *Lost* and James Callis was *Battlestar Galactica*’s Baltar). However, unlike those series, *FlashForward* foregoes prominent rivalries based on polarized positions to highlight individuated angst, with all characters struggling similarly between the extremities of absolute choice and absolute destiny without embracing either with total surety. This pervasive ambivalence about a potentially self-fulfilling future, as well as

the overall plot concern with whether other blackouts will occur to cast anew these individual existential crises, infuses the series with a sense of compulsive, or fetishized, fascination with an unresolved state of constrained choice and personal insecurity.

FBI agent Al Gough's actions present the grimmest example of this struggle. In an episode featuring the bureau's investigation of the "Blue Hand" movement, an underground community whose clubs accommodate the extreme, flirting-with-death indulgences of those seemingly fated to die before April 29, the show centralizes the question of whether anyone can escape the flashforward-revealed future. While the apparently doomed "already ghosts" of the Blue Hands embrace fatalism with abandon, Gough becomes committed to finding "a way to change the game." In a note to the presumably ill-fated Noh, Gough insists, "There is always a way out." Afraid of a future in which he has accidentally killed a young mother, Gough himself turns to suicide as the only way to ensure this does not happen. After spending an evening carefully preparing and relishing his favorite homemade meal – a gesture reminiscent of Officer Dualla's pre-suicide celebration of life – Gough shows up for work the next day only to jump off the roof of his office building. As one among many characters carrying a gun, in a series that begins with another character attempting suicide with a gun, the choice to jump seems somewhat unusual ("The Gift"). Yet this ultimate sacrifice – through an action troublingly reminiscent of the very public, disconcerting deaths of those who jumped from the World Trade Center towers on September 11 – demonstrates the complexity of negotiating choice versus fate. After all, he feared that any choices he made while alive would fatefully lead to the young mother's death, so he decided instead to remove himself entirely from any possibility of choosing wrongly. Does his ability to circumvent

a predicted future evidence free will? Or does the fact that he felt only death could prevent him from fulfilling his destiny make the case for determinism? In light of his act's resemblance to what many people had chosen to do on September 11 to escape certain death by smoke and fire, such questions pose particularly relevant contemporary quandaries. Although the show was canceled after only one season, the finale ended with another blackout fostering more flashforwards ("Future Shock"), suggesting that the similar philosophical impasses that permeated every week of this show would never fully be resolved, perpetuating a fetish that incarnated repeatedly core September 11 quandaries of helplessness, imperfect heroism, and inescapable mortality.

Conclusion: Enduring Crisis in Post-September 11 American Television

Mainstream audiences and critics have often regarded science fiction, like the fantasy genre that might more accurately apply to *Lost* and *FlashForward* (although the boundaries can be fuzzy), with skepticism, if not outright scorn, for depicting unrealistic settings and situations. Yet as Nancy Franklin argues in a 2006 issue of *The New Yorker*, "If you switch to the term 'speculative fiction'...the genre seems more interesting." Such an imaginative, alternate-reality framework affords greater leeway for fiction to draw mainstream audiences into pursuing questions like "'What if?' and 'What then?' and 'Who are we?'" to their most expansive and possibly controversial limits (Franklin; see also Havrilesky; Ryan "Even in the Darkest Times"). In its 2006 debut season, the series *Heroes* sported the tagline, "Save the cheerleader. Save the world" ("Heroes"; see also Stabile 88; Stanley; Owen) while dwelling on the kinds of questions regarding fate and choice (Shores 66-78; D. Johnson 110-122) that have preoccupied the three series considered here. And in 2009, *V*'s premiere explicitly invoked a preoccupation with the

fallout of a certain day after which the world will never be the same by prefiguring the fictional appearance of alien spaceships over major international cities with references to the real-world crises of President John F. Kennedy's assassination and September 11, 2001 ("Pilot"). These shows are only a few among many interested in the "What if?" and "What then?" and "Who are we?" questions under the highest-stake circumstances that aired on television in the wake of September 11 in the first decade of the twenty-first century (see also Zurawik).

Lost, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *FlashForward* emblemize this fascination within popular culture with the nature and fallout of extreme crisis. They also emblemize popular culture's ability to occasion for mainstream viewers engagement with the most crucial and disturbing dilemmas that extreme crisis raises. Their reiterations of the core horrors dominating September 11 – utter helplessness, unavoidable mortality, and heroism-at-a-price – effectively fetishized catastrophe by repeatedly foregrounding without resolving the tensions between choice and fate, between incidental survival and inescapable death, without purporting to offer any clear therapeutic value. Indeed, each show ultimately concludes with an only ambivalently happy or decisive ending: *Lost* ends with its characters reunited, but in a post-death limbo perhaps preceding reincarnation into another shared life ("The End"); *Battlestar Galactica* finishes with its characters reaching their mythological destination, Earth, but only after a few more deaths and with survivors facing the hazards of survival under prehistoric conditions ("Daybreak: Part 1;" "Daybreak: Part 2"); and *FlashForward* ends with the apparent death of protagonist Mark Benford while everyone else on the planet succumbs to another round of angst-producing flashforwards ("Future Shock"). Such stories suggest it might sometimes be all

right that things are not all right or not put fully to rights. Instead, as I have argued here, these three television series airing in the mid- to late-2000s have served as extended engagements with the particular dilemmas of existential insecurity and doom showcased by the public deaths of September 11. In this sense, they have signaled emergent structures of feeling that imbue the first decade after September 11 with a pervasive unsettlement I characterize as cultural trauma.

Chapter Four: “Nothing To Do with All Your Strength”: Power, Choice, and September 11 in *The Dark Knight*⁷⁰

Introduction: Ambivalent Heroics, *The Dark Knight*, and September 11

Bruce Wayne is not a well man, and the city he tries nightly to save made him that way. Over a casual dinner conversation in the 2008 Warner Bros. film *The Dark Knight*, when someone doubts that corrupt and violent Gotham City could be a healthy place for raising children, Wayne jokes, “I was raised here, I turned out OK” (Nolan). The irony succinctly and playfully summarizes the billionaire’s evolution from child victim to adult vigilante. One among the many of Gotham’s criminals had robbed and murdered his parents as he, a mere child, stood beside them. Soon after, the young Wayne vowed vengeance by committing his life to fighting crime (Vaz xiii-xiv). His sweeping vendetta, a choice to act against all criminals in response to the violation of one, commuted his personal loss into a grander purpose: to thwart the very possibility of victimization from violence. Accordingly, it could be viewed simply as a selfless and civic-minded approach, if not for the form “this weird figure of the dark..this avenger of evil” (xiv) later takes. Ultimately, his methods in disguise as the Batman, an incarnation of fear to intimidate vice, unsettle any reassurance that his post-traumatic endeavors fully redeem his orphaning or entirely forestall the injury of others. After all, his investment in perpetually re-engaging with the criminal encounter – albeit to change the outcome he could not alter in his youth – necessarily implicates him in the moral quandaries any use

⁷⁰ Much of this chapter is from *The 21st Century Superhero: Essays on Gender, Genre and Globalization in Film* © 2011 Edited by Richard J. Gray II and Betty Kaklamanidou by permission of McFarland & Company, Inc., Box 611, Jefferson NC 28640. www.mcfarlandpub.com.

of force entails. For this reason, the ongoing tale of the superhero driven to make right what long ago went drastically wrong has raised lasting questions about the scope and limits of ethical power.

The 2005 film *Batman Begins* introduces director and screenplay co-writer Christopher Nolan's conception of how these questions drive the Batman narrative while resonating with contemporary viewer concerns. This "reboot," or updating of the now 70-year-old comic book character,⁷¹ focuses on how Bruce Wayne comes to develop a sense of justice to undergird actions that began, and could still be construed, as vigilantism. The story follows Wayne's maturation from frightened, vengeful boy to disciplined, principled man, with his wealthy parents' celebrated altruism eventually superseding their fate as the legacy that haunts his behavior. In the end, Wayne decides to look to the well-being of his community, rather than the settling of an individual score, as the measure of fulfillment of the vow he spoke on his late parents' behalf. However, the film concludes with the newly-minted Lieutenant Gordon, Batman's lone ally on the compromised Gotham police force, wondering after they have just narrowly averted an evil master-minded plot against the city: "What about escalation?" Pointing to the as-yet unnamed Joker's "calling card," Gordon speculates that Batman's fierce and uncompromising assault on criminals could actually heighten the modes and the stakes of combating crime (Nolan). In the context of any "war on crime," and certainly in the midst of the War on Terror, Gordon's caution strikes a certain resonance for audiences familiar with the arguments for and against "taking a hard line" to promote security. In

⁷¹ For a discussion of revisionism as endemic to superhero comics and indicative of cultural identity and meaning formations, see Wandtke (5-6).

the context of Batman's freelance interventions, the final scene throws this film's resolution into doubt, setting the terms for the next installment's crises.

Indeed, the Catch-22 of escalation dominates *The Dark Knight*⁷², particularly in the context of September 11, 2001 and its aftermath, a context acutely attuned to predicaments of power and ethics. Allusions to September 11 abound in *The Dark Knight*. A promotional poster for the film's theatrical release, which now serves as DVD cover art, featured a bat-shaped fiery crash zone penetrating the upper floors of a skyscraper's façade. The image, reminiscent of the plane-produced penetrations of the World Trade Center towers, appears nowhere in the actual film, foregrounding a provocative self-consciousness in how the project invokes September 11 (Cox; Dawson; Dudley; and Moore). In fact, as I will explore here, settings and scenarios persistently echo the crises of Manhattan on that particular day and throughout its wake, which many movie reviewers acknowledged (Stevens; Tyree), with a few considering such references somewhat heavy-handed (Cox). Specifically, some argued fervently that its themes transparently favored the Bush administration's War on Terror in response to September 11 (Ackerman; Klavan), and some argued just as fervently that the film exposed this response's flaws (Baker; Binh; Dray; Orr). These divergent perceptions of a single text point to the richness of a narrative that can elicit entirely opposed, yet equally committed, reactions. Importantly, for many – including myself – this richness reflects a text positioned in the unkempt middle, where patently right answers fail to reside and choices must be made without the luxury of self-righteous reassurance (Bradley; Crouse; Dargis;

⁷² Nominated for eight Academy Awards and winner of two, the film has grossed over one billion dollars worldwide, ranking seventh all-time at the box office (Box Office Mojo), indicating a large and appreciative audience.

Eisenberg; Kerstein; Rickey; Schager; Stevens). Indeed, director and screenplay co-writer Christopher Nolan has demurred about deliberately producing an explicit September 11 text (Eisenberg).⁷³ Instead, he has portrayed the film as an evocative medium through which viewers can struggle with issues well-grounded in Batman's fictionalized history yet well-suited to our own historical realities (Boucher "Christopher Nolan on 'Dark Knight'"; see also Kerstein).⁷⁴

In effect, I argue that references to September 11 infuse *The Dark Knight's* plot so the film can serve as a fraught confrontation with that event as a cultural trauma that has confounded conventional moral certainties. Almost all viewers, depending on their experiences of that day, can be considered witnesses if not survivors of September 11. Accordingly, the film's numerous, direct parallels with that day's images and challenges impel viewers to bring their experiences with September 11 into their encounter with the film's fictional traumatic moments. However, *The Dark Knight* avoids offering the audience any "feel-good" or ethically satisfying resolutions to the troubles it dramatizes through this connection between the film, the viewers, and September 11. Instead, I will show how this connection incites viewers to interrogate their own moral orientations in relationship to the film's staged exigencies and, by extension, their involvement in or even contributions to counterpart real-world exigencies: the kind of complex, ambiguous choices or even lose-lose scenarios that September 11 has occasioned. To do this, I begin

⁷³ Eisenberg also mentions that "British actor Michael Caine [who portrays Alfred in this film] has observed that Superman is how America sees itself and Batman is how the rest of the world sees America." This quote opens the door to one way of understanding the film's politics.

⁷⁴ For a discussion of how comics generally have served as cultural texts, see Kaveney (267). For a critical, in-depth consideration of how this film resonates with September 11, which shares many of my concerns, see Kerstein.

by noting that, independently of September 11, trauma is already fundamental to the Batman story. With this extant tradition established, I am then able to demarcate how distinct features of the cultural trauma of September 11 manifest in this particular iteration of the superhero's adventures. Specifically, I demonstrate as integral to this demarcation the depiction of The Joker as a terrorist, the protagonists as constrained by problematic choices, and the city of Gotham itself as implicated in its own vulnerability and potential for strength. In effect, I will show that the film openly alludes to September 11, links these allusions to Gotham's security concerns and moral susceptibilities as well as to "good guys" Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale), Jim Gordon (Gary Oldman), and Harvey Dent's (Aaron Eckhart) repeated struggles with The Joker's (Heath Ledger) relentless morally taxing scenarios – which are sustained, if not propelled, by the city's ambivalences – and uses these depictions of the Gotham community's risks and responsibilities to implicitly call on viewers to recognize their own risks and responsibilities in the analogous crisis of September 11. I argue that in this way, this popular culture text explores and involves its audience in the culturally traumatic complexities of agency and accountability in the wake of September 11.

Trauma as the Batman Origin Story

In Bob Kane's inaugurating comic, "The Legend of the Batman – Who He Is and How He Came to Be," the panel following Thomas and Martha Wayne's murders records that their "boy's eyes are wide with terror and shock as the horrible scene is spread before him" (qtd. in Vaz xiv). Similarly, in *Batman Begins*, young Bruce Wayne is stunned by his parents' deaths beside him. Yet three additional factors, not presented in the original comic, intervene in the film between this crisis and Wayne's consequent simmering

impulse to battle crime: his loving relationship with a father devoted to the care of both his family and his suffering city; a murderer evidently driven by desperation; and a boy's self-blame for his parent's demise. After all, Wayne's fear of bats, aggravated by the set and costumes of an opera his family attends one evening, leads him to plead for an early departure from the performance. Just after they emerge onto the deserted nighttime city street, a jumpy mugger ends up pulling his gun's trigger when he misinterprets Thomas's effort to shield his wife from harm as a threatening gesture. Immediately after, Martha's frantic reaction to her husband's shooting provokes the same panicked response from the apparently inadvertent killer. And so Bruce Wayne is orphaned in a robbery gone awry, by the kind of destitute man his city's financial woes have created and his family's philanthropies have striven to support, in a time and place occasioned by his own vulnerabilities.

There are no easy explanations or justifications for this sort of misfortune, especially for a child. Yet Wayne finds one way for it all to make sense: he tells the family butler Alfred it was his fault for putting them at risk. Alfred immediately corrects him, insisting, "It was him, and him alone" (Nolan, *Batman Begins*). However, in adulthood, Wayne admits only that his anger has since overshadowed his guilt, revealing a qualified acceptance of Alfred's admonition. At an impressionable age, Wayne has been introduced to the murky morality of a world in which – wealthy and poor, privileged and disadvantaged – we are not entirely free actors, with options constrained often by circumstances or resources, yet in which we still must live with the consequences of the choices that we make. What kind of an impact could such a revelation have on a young

boy, especially one with the means to pursue or indulge any and all forms of solace, regardless of whether they prove salutary or licit?

Interestingly, Bruce Wayne's trajectory from child victim to adult crimefighter accords with contemporary understandings of the traumatic recovery process. As reviewed in this project's introduction, traumatic ordeals prompt within survivors a need to re-calibrate their life expectations in light of their newly intimate awareness of living in a world of risk. In particular, in the wake of perpetrated violence, Janoff-Bulman points out that survivors particularly confront "a breakdown in interpersonal trust, a newfound perception of the interpersonal world as hostile and dangerous" (79). They must "suddenly confront the existence of evil...question the trustworthiness of people...and question their own role in the victimization" (78). They now recognize through personal involvement, however unwitting, something most stable social orders seek to manage or at least to mask: that human beings harm, and mean to harm, other human beings. From this perspective, traumatic events corrupt an individual's sense of being and acting in an intelligible world, requiring reconstruction of that individual's subjective coherence, productive agency, and responsible orientation toward him- or herself and others.

In the fallout of this radical uncertainty about who one is, what one can do, and what one should do or should have done, survivors and witnesses develop feelings of self-blame and guilt. Janoff-Bulman distinguishes between "characterological self-blame," through which individuals attribute their traumatic harm to their own enduring, inherent, deficient personal qualities, and "behavioral self-blame," through which individuals attribute their trauma to their own errant choices. While characterological

self-blame reinforces individuals' views of themselves as helpless and therefore troubles recovery, behavioral self-blame enhances individuals' views of themselves as autonomous and in fact can aid their recovery (125-130). After all, a survivor might reason, what could have been avoided in the past can be avoided in the future, a vision much more encouraging than the sense that harm can happen at any time to anyone, without warning or hope of evasion. For Bruce Wayne, continually re-entering moments of danger as a well-trained, well-armed combatant capable of single-handedly defeating criminals seems to offer the chance to nullify his childhood's paradox of feeling both responsible for his parents' fate yet also unable to prevent it.⁷⁵ Yet, as *The Dark Knight* dramatizes, vindication through Batman's crimefighting proves problematic for him, his friends, and the city of Gotham.

Staging September 11 as a Cultural Trauma

Understandably, then, Bruce Wayne's world could be described as irrevocably altered by the trauma of his parents' murders. Their deaths ensured that his family life would be materially different, and his subsequent vow to fight crime signaled the direction his radical new view of the world would take. Yet after September 11, as addressed in this project's introduction, many who were not immediately affected by the attacks reported the same stunned sense that "the world had changed." This notion of cultural trauma, as already engaged by Chapters One, Two, and Three, invokes questions of subjectivity, agency, and responsibility under conditions of imposed constraints and limited, perhaps exclusively adverse, options – the very concerns that dominate Bruce

⁷⁵ For a consonant observation regarding the specific psychological dynamics of Wayne's traumatization, see Reynolds 67.

Wayne's dilemmas as Batman, albeit manifesting in *The Dark Knight* in forms attuned to real-world precipitating crises.⁷⁶

Resonances with September 11 permeate *The Dark Knight* from the start. The film begins outside of time and place with a frame-consuming, slow-motion, blue-tinted and melancholy chiaroscuro of dense, roiling fireballs. We have seen this before, in the telltale flames bursting from the sides of office towers confirming the impact of passenger planes. We could not see what we knew they obliterated: the whole bodies of human lives, vanishing in an unexpected instant. Even in that day's replayed video coverage, the planes perhaps travel too inconceivably for our minds to register what they are doing as they are doing it, with disbelief and fear inciting our mental resistance as they seem to, but surely could not, be heading for a collision with occupied skyscrapers. But the fireballs mark the undeniable and irreversible moments from which the post-September 11 world starts to unfold. They form the threshold between what possibly could have been averted and what can now never be undone. In *The Dark Knight*, balls of flame, accompanied by a faint, asynchronous, apprehensive undertone of a sustained note, introduce the subsequent action. Rather than disappearing through a straightforward fade-out or dissolve, the flames seem to push toward the audience, displaced in the montage by a dark void at the center of the frame as it expands into the familiar Bat

⁷⁶ In regard to cultural memory, Marita Sturken writes, "Crisis occurs when cultural rules are broken – when both the structures and the fractures of a culture are most visible" (258). In the aftermath process of meaning formation, she argues that cultural memory links the past with the present through the production-through-consumption practices of a diverse and often divergent American public (257-259). Similar to what Sturken notes about the Vietnam War and the AIDS epidemic, "America is inconceivable without" (14) September 11. In this sense, *The Dark Knight* serves as a "technology of memory," or a mechanism by which audiences can negotiate the implications of a shared experience (1, 9-10).

Symbol, the gloomy emblem of a haunted hero flying forward and looming larger until viewers see only black (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). It is a bleak beginning with its oblique reference to a September 11 context of foregone doom and foreclosed hope, with the fireballs having suspended us within the instance of awareness that sometimes we have fear and few, if any, options.

Yet such references become increasingly more direct. The film jump-cuts from the almost ethereal hushed blaze to an IMAX – and in appropriately-equipped theaters, an engulfing – aerial shot steadily zooming in on the upper floors of one among a cluster of skyscrapers in a dense cityscape. As the continuous undertone crescendos – now clearly audible and supplemented by brisk percussive beats that intensify anticipatory tension, as well as distant street noises that ground events in their contemporary urban setting – the building fills the frame, its windows reflecting the city skyline until one of them explodes outward. Indoors, from the opening of the blown window, two men soon launch and secure a cable to another building. The camera, situated behind the men as each latches onto the cable, pursues them with a swift tracking shot as they jump into the air to glide toward the neighboring rooftop. However, at the ledge, instead of following the men as they slide forward along the cable, the shot abruptly becomes a tilt-down to show the street traffic several stories below, creating a point-of-view that enables viewers to feel as though they have followed the men out the window and into their own freefall (Nolan 2008). These images are also not new; we have seen people clustered at blown-open office windows, and some jumping out of them. Yet there is one difference: the IMAX filming and the camera's positioning draw audiences into a perspective they did not have on September 11, one located within the building that drives outward into a stomach-

sinking plunge (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). Associations can be made between what we have seen on the news and what we see in the theater, with the act of witnessing in the theater intensified through the IMAX effect of immersing its audience in the staged action. We have been invited to experience ourselves as more than just passive observers, who can watch from afar without connection or consequence.⁷⁷ With this invitation, the film occasions for viewers the opportunity to recognize within the September 11-related predicaments it dramatizes our own susceptibilities, complicities, and responsibilities.

Details throughout the film promote further correlations between Gotham, New York City, and September 11.⁷⁸ When The Joker is guarded in jail by a veteran cop, he taunts the officer, “How many of your friends have I killed?” The question chills, coming from someone other characters have termed a “terrorist” (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). In the aftermath of September 11, the staggeringly high casualties to close-knit communities like the New York City police and fire departments were evident in the hardships of survivors who lost multiple colleagues and friends in a single morning, who afterward would attend an almost endless progression of funerals and memorial services. Indeed, the police commissioner’s funeral, set in Gotham but filmed near Ground Zero in Manhattan (Tyree 32) – while other city scenes were filmed in Hong Kong, Chicago and London (*The Dark Knight* Production Notes) – features marching rows of solemn uniformed officers to the mournful sounds of bagpipes as a somber echo of real-life commemorations. Later, during the car chase among The Joker, an armored police van

⁷⁷ See Lovell and Sergi for an analysis of how sensual stimuli viscerally immerse audiences in the not just viewing, but more broadly sensing, experience of encountering this film.

⁷⁸ For background on how and why fictional cities in comics have typically stood in for New York City, see Reynolds (18-19).

transporting Dent, and Batman, a burning fire engine blocks the van's route, detouring them to more dangerous streets (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). The now-recognizable image, a fire truck crushed and ablaze, poses a warning far exceeding in its portentous overtones any significations independent of September 11 (Tyree 32). Additionally, when Batman returns to the site where Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal) was killed, he hangs his head in the foreground of a smoldering pile of debris, with firefighters in the background sending arcs of water over collapsed steel beams, a scene evocative of Ground Zero (Tyree 32). Moreover, Gotham is overtly connected to Manhattan when The Joker addresses the "bridge-and-tunnel crowd," a reference to those who commute to the island from the city's other boroughs and New Jersey (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). Indeed, when Gordon must call the National Guard to assist throngs of people gathering at the water for ferries toward safety, memories of the unprecedented, "like a movie" evacuation of Lower Manhattan might surface. Such allusions, integrated seamlessly throughout the narrative, create a context for the story that couches interpretative possibilities for the film's staged exigencies in terms of a particular exigency, September 11, in viewers' own recent past.

Similarly, throughout *The Dark Knight*, interiors feature floor-to-ceiling windows, reminiscent of the World Trade Center's design, which permit the uninterrupted presence of Gotham (Nolan). These settings foster suggestively porous boundaries between a city's interiors and exteriors, which September 11 frighteningly showcased when planes rent open enclosed spaces, around which office workers crowded for air and relief. Notably, when Batman pushes The Joker over the ledge of a construction site, he uses a grappling hook to retrieve the villain (adhering to his rule never to kill) and suspend him in mid-air

upside down, a precarious position from which The Joker reveals his anticipated victory in spite of his capture and his ferry plan's failure. He explains, "I took Gotham's white knight. And I brought him down to our level. It wasn't hard – see, madness, as you know, is like gravity. All it takes is a little push" (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*).⁷⁹ His characterization of Dent's devastation as a downfall while he himself hangs in the air facing downward (although the camera vertically rotates, ultimately positioning the audience with him in head-first suspended freefall) eerily summons and preserves the moments of descent of those who jumped from the World Trade Center, moments frozen in time by, among other records, the "Falling Man" photograph by AP photographer Richard Drew, which is discussed in this dissertation's Chapter Two. They were fearful moments to witness, embodying our shared ultimate vulnerability in their evidence of utter despair and powerlessness, and in their prelude to a horrific end. And The Joker has put his finger precisely on this shared vulnerability: that madness, like gravity, takes only the right push. Cultural theorist Raymond Williams' concept of "structure of feeling" signals specificities in the variables of shared experience (*Marxism* 128-135). *The Dark Knight's* historical associations with the context of September 11 evoke a structure of feeling of contemporary angst as the film's conundrums unfold before an audience immersed in its own lived experience of perceived threats and moral uncertainties.

⁷⁹ The Joker's efforts to expose the delicate nuances and contingencies separating the virtuous from the malicious, what he has characterized as "one bad day" (Anders 17-33), is familiar to the world of Batman comics. For a discussion of how The Joker's fascination with corrupting others has driven his behavior in other stories, see Anders (29).

Expectations, Obligations and Risks: The City at the Center of the Fight

Insinuations of causal connections between Gotham's populace and the city's perpetual troubles in the context of these historical associations afford viewers the opportunity to reflect on their own relationships to September 11 and its aftermath. In the film's middle pivot (unrelenting, staccato-paced action disrupts any sense of a narrative arc), Gotham's brash, idealistic District Attorney Harvey Dent reluctantly presides over a press conference he has convened at Batman's insistence. In front of a shoulder-to-shoulder crowd, he stands behind a microphone-packed podium situated in the corner of a room with wall-to-wall windows exposing the city outside, a setting that figuratively suggests through framing his cornering by Gotham's norms. The Joker has been fulfilling his promise to kill Gothamites until Batman reveals his secret identity, and the masked crime fighter has decided to meet this demand to attempt to forestall the further murder of innocents. Dent, angered by what he perceives as "giving in," proceeds with the media event, but tries to use the opportunity to boost public morale and enlist the city's support in resisting The Joker's ultimatum. However, a reporter characterizes Dent's reluctance to expose Batman as protecting "an outlaw vigilante" over "citizens," with which the crowd agrees. Soon after, a heckler yells that because of Batman, "Things are worse than ever." After Dent pleads for calmer reflection about the fate of Batman and of Gotham, a police officer shouts, "No more dead cops," an invocation of legitimated authority, supposedly endangered by Batman, which fully divests Dent of any power to win over the assembly on his behalf (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). These voices for Gotham have clearly deemed Batman the root cause of, and certainly not the solution to, the city's worsening violence, demarcating the public as hapless sufferers and Batman as

irresponsible adventurer.⁸⁰ Given this characterization of Gothamites as blameless victims uninvolved in the crises that threaten them, Dent can expect little participation from them in their city's salvation; corrective action, like the threats it strives to counteract, seemingly must occur without them. This detaching of accountability for corrective action from those for whom it is purportedly taken not only limits Dent's options, but also, given the film's allusions to September 11 and its aftermath, poses real-world challenges as well.

However, Dent's comments in this scene make clear, as he tries to dissuade public opinion from pushing the Batman into The Joker's hands, that Batman's behavior does not occur in a vacuum of reckless self-indulgence, and The Joker's cunning does not occur in a void of freewheeling aggression, from which Gotham can free itself by scapegoating someone already risking himself on their behalf. After all, as he points out, Batman's activities are not the proximate reason for the public's turn against him. He says, "We're doing it because we're scared. We've been happy to let the Batman clean up our streets for us until now." Indeed, earlier in the film, over dinner with Wayne, Dent, and their (not fully known to Dent) shared love interest Rachel Dawes, Wayne's date Natascha (Beatrice Rosen) refers to Gotham as "the kind of city that idolizes a masked vigilante," to which Dent responds, "Gotham City is proud of an ordinary citizen standing up for what's right." At this point, it would seem from their comments that the average man and woman have welcomed Batman's arrival. Yet Natascha counters, "Gotham needs heroes like you – elected officials, not a man who thinks he's above the law," with which Wayne concurs, asking, "Who appointed the Batman?" Dent's answer,

⁸⁰ For a discussion of similar public ambivalence about Batman in Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, see Reynolds (105).

“We did. All of us who stood by and let scum take control of our city,” catches Wayne’s attention (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). For him, a new prospect unfolds: the possibility that Gotham could render Batman obsolete by accepting some answerability for – and accordingly, some risk to – itself rather than allowing a shadowy figure to shoulder the entire burden of rescuing a community gone awry. Dent’s perspective fosters an alternative vision, one that encourages citizens to recognize their own responsibility for their community’s well-being.⁸¹ In this view, effective citizenship involves actively cultivating democratic principles throughout daily public life, rather than just through an occasional vote. Such a view raises useful questions about the contours and implications of explicit consent, implicit acquiescence, hesitant resistance, and firm opposition in a post-September 11 environment of hard choices, a disconcerted populace, and a federal government willing to act audaciously.

Indeed, the urgency for Gothamites to accept some accountability and participate more fully and directly in their own governance becomes progressively clearer throughout the film. After all, while Gotham is not a perfect city, neither are its most devoted caretakers. The violent and disturbed Batman works closely with Lieutenant Gordon, the solitary man of integrity embedded in a crooked police force, and eventually with District Attorney Dent, a fresh-faced, charismatic, but cocky legal crusader whose reservations about police corruption put him at odds with Gordon about how to handle the police department. When they first meet, Gordon warns Dent, “In this town, the fewer people know something, the safer the operation,” evidencing a customary, general wariness about who can be trusted around him. But Dent tells Gordon pointedly, “I don’t

⁸¹ Kaveney notes that in comic books generally, “reliance on superheroes [is n]ever shown as a substitute for collective action” (20).

like that you've got your own special unit, and I don't like that it's full of cops I investigated at internal affairs," placing the dishonesty within intimate range of Gordon's daily work. Gordon replies, "If I didn't work with cops you'd investigated while you were making your name at I.A., I'd be working alone. I don't get political points for being an idealist. I have to do the best I can with what I have" (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). Gordon's comments duck the possibility Dent has raised of his reliance on bad cops by characterizing Dent's interest in his closest colleagues as mere political gamesmanship, on the one hand glossing over possible wrongdoing he himself might have overlooked and on the other hand construing Dent as an opportunist. At the same time, though, these comments indicate Gordon's sense of vulnerability as the lone law enforcer with an unadulterated commitment to justice. He indirectly admits some truth to Dent's suspicions by suggesting that his isolation in virtue requires him to compromise in his actions; if he did not attempt to enforce the law with the help of those less committed, he would likely achieve no justice at all. From Gordon's experience, the luxury of idealism, of finding for the problems at hand faultless means toward perfect solutions – actions that lead to desired, foreseeable, wieldy outcomes – has no place in Gotham.⁸² Lacking Batman's superheroic skills, his reaction, like everyone else's in Gotham, must remain more mundane and therefore less readily disentangled from the inertial city's ethical mire.

⁸² Earlier, Dent had made the ominous and foreshadowing comment, "You either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain" (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). Such a formulation leaves no room for compromise, but it also undercuts idealism. After all, to *not* compromise, you have to be a martyr, which in the context of a film and a contemporary culture struggling with terrorism, could be construed as critiquing absolutist idealism on both sides of the struggle.

Through most of the film, Gotham's principled yet pragmatic District Attorney presents an alternative to Batman's freelance crimefighting: an aboveboard, legally-sanctioned and therefore legitimate approach to the city's rehabilitation. Similarly lacking superhero capabilities, Dent nevertheless behaves with a bold abandon evidencing full confidence in his public and firm battle against crime, earning him the nickname "Gotham's White Knight," a critical comparison to Batman considering the film's title. Such courage is remarkable in a criminal justice system known for its risks and compromises, but his valor borders on swagger. At critical junctures, he flips a coin to choose his course of action, claiming every time that he actually makes his own luck. The coin is rigged, with a head on each side, corroborating his claim that he neither believes in nor succumbs to chance. However, when Dent and Rachel are kidnapped by corrupt cops and hidden in separate parts of the city, they are each bound to explosives with timers and provided with speakerphone access to one another. As a result, when Batman reaches Dent just in time, they both hear Rachel die without being able to do anything to stop it. For Batman, this is understandably excruciating; he has known and loved Rachel for most of their lives. However, this mortal helplessness, the kind that first propelled Wayne's development into Batman, devastates Dent. Having suffered burns on half of his face when his own building exploded, Dent's very features now manifest his own post-trauma adoption of a new persona, a "Two-Face," someone who eschews ideals and determines murderous action according to the toss of an unpredictable coin (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*).

Although Dent first targets those directly culpable for his maiming and Rachel's death – their abductors Detectives Wuertz and Ramirez and the mafia don Maroni whom

The Joker terms the plan's organizer – he especially targets his former ally Gordon, whom he considers ultimately responsible. Dent had doubted the advisability of keeping the gangsters' money launderer Lau in custody at the Major Crimes Unit (MCU), but Gordon had insisted, regarding the county jail alternative as even less secure. Yet The Joker later takes Lau with him when he himself escapes MCU, proving Gordon wrong and undercutting their single grand victory against crime since only Lau's testimony could have enabled convictions against his associates. Most importantly, when Dent had first warned Gordon about Wuertz and Ramirez, Gordon refused to believe they had links to Maroni, instead blaming the district attorney's office for leaking information (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). But Gordon's good-faith intentions coupled with an inability (or refusal, according to Dent) to operate independently of Gotham's flawed legal order lead to dire results for his friends.

Dent is determined to force Gordon to confront intimately the horror his mistakes have permitted. Dent kidnaps Gordon's wife and two young children and holds them hostage on the site of Rachel's murder, ready to use his family to punish him.. The punishment crystallizes into a single concept, one not unfamiliar to those who recall from September 11 how those trapped on the hijacked planes and in the World Trade Center towers had connected to loved ones through last phone conversations and messages. Dent had first alluded to his particular pain when he found Maroni, referring to the mobster's wife when he asked, "Can you imagine what it would be like to listen to her die?" When he faces Gordon, he elaborates,

Have you ever had to talk to the person you love most, wondering if you're about to listen to them die? You ever had to lie to that person?

Tell them it's going to be all right when you know it's not? Well, you're about to find out what that feels like. Then you'll be able to look me in the eye and tell me you're sorry. (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*)

For Dent, being present to a loved one's last moments without being able to alter them constitutes a catalyzing harm, an experience of utter helplessness that marks the pivot on which he turns from aggressive but earnest law enforcer to reckless and amoral avenger. His transformation, embodied in the grotesque exposure of bone and muscle on half of his face, crystallizes physically the unsightly variations of "gloves-off" retribution that offered to those disconcerted by the tragedies of September 11 the dubious comfort of a deceptively facile forceful response.

Of course, since this is a superhero fiction, Batman intervenes. At this critical moment when the incorruptible vigilante comes face-to-face with the now-corrupted civil servant, Dent accuses his former counterpart of advocating what he once also believed but now regards as insidious folly, that "we could be decent men in an indecent time." Gotham's cycle of violence afforded abundant occasions for compromised values in return for questionable gains in safety and stability, occasions The Joker exploited by manufacturing lose-lose scenarios that showcased to what acts of desperate brutality the most fearful and vulnerable might succumb. By the end of the film it is a toss-up indeed between virtue and infamy, between the White Knight's fatal disillusionment with the rules of law and the Dark Knight's survival in the shadows of an improvised moral code. When Dent articulates his newfound belief in the dominance of chance, especially as the cause of Rachel's death, Batman corrects him, "What happened to Rachel wasn't chance. We decided to act. We three. We knew the risks and we acted as one. We are all

responsible for the consequences.” Here Batman voices the dilemma that has plagued his own efforts throughout the film, that even necessary actions can produce unwanted outcomes, for which the actor nevertheless remains responsible. With Dent holding a gun to the head of Gordon’s son, Batman adds, “you’re fooling yourself if you think you’re letting chance decide. You’re the one pointing the gun, Harvey.” His admonition underscores his own realization that the impact of chance does not provide an excuse from personal accountability. In the end, the stand-off comes to a bleak resolution: Gordon and his family are spared, but Dent is killed and, given his crime-spree, potentially disgraced. Both Batman and Gordon realize that, should the public become aware of his escapades as Two-Face, Dent’s work as an inspiring and effective district attorney will unravel, as will Gotham’s hope for real and lasting change. Consequently, the film ends with Batman taking the blame for Two-Face’s misdeeds, preferring a fiction that rouses a city to the possibility of good to the disheartening truth of fallible heroes operating within an imperfect world (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). The city must be saved from itself.

Given such scenes, The Joker’s and the Batman’s antics seem to occur in the conditions of a community whose long-term welfare and principles yield to the short-term demands of exigency and expediency. Accordingly, plot developments depend on how expectedly the general public responds to The Joker’s exploitation of a guiding dynamic to Gotham’s social structure: the belief that dirty work is necessary, and that somebody else should be doing it. Such a belief forms the core enticement for The Joker’s manipulations, a chance to test investments in individual interest, the common good, and the social order. Such a belief rings familiar in a post-September 11 world, in

which viewers themselves have wondered what is necessary and what is right, what threatens them and how they can respond, in the aftermath of a calamity that has showcased the high stakes of these very questions.

Escalation, Or the Art of Picking a Fight

Recognizing these contradictions in Gotham's mores and reveling in their fecundity for engineering mayhem, The Joker excels at tailoring interventions that maximize dissension and hopelessness and expose the delicate perforations separating the upstanding from the prone. Connections of every well-intentioned crimefighting effort to disastrous, unintended consequences drive the plot, causing Gordon's anxiety about escalation as voiced in *Batman Begins* to proliferate among its sequel's characters. Batman's intense vigilance practically incapacitates conventional gangsters, convincing them that drastic measures require drastic resistance. As a result, they hire a literal and figurative stranger, The Joker, to kill the Batman. A wild card – unpredictable, of obscure origins, prone to cruel pranking, and fond of using playing cards as cryptic dispatches – The Joker immediately follows his own skewed interests, outstripping his co-conspirators' control and expectations for contained action and eluding rationalizing behavioral explanations. His delight in fomenting chaos, disrupting business-as-usual among Gotham's law offenders and enforcers, is unexplained in terms of either benefit or back-story.⁸³ He embodies an extremity that the gangsters, the police department, and

⁸³ For a discussion of the evolution in how the comics have dealt with The Joker's background, see Kaveney (239). For a prescient discussion, preceding the film's release, of how *The Dark Knight* might deal with The Joker's background, see Spanakos (64). Tyree regards *The Dark Knight's* handling of the notion of The Joker's back-story as "a fairly pointed mockery of the need for back-stories for villains in the first place, the easy psychoanalysis that reduces every choice to an after-effect of some early trauma.

the people of Gotham – but not Batman – lack. In fact, the gangsters’ turn to an extreme response out of frustration with a threatening climate mirrors Batman’s own development, albeit in an opposite direction. In effect, The Joker counterbalances the Batman, a lone, mysterious actor committed to doing wrong as forcefully as Batman has committed to doing right (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). As a result, The Joker and others come to see the two as important, if not necessary, to one another’s evolution in actions and purposes (Reynolds 67-68, 103; Kaveney 109-110), leaving bystanders, innocent and guilty alike, caught in the crossfire.

Repeatedly, this engagement manifests in his fabrication of no-win scenarios that test others’ resourcefulness and resolve. When Dent and Rachel disappear immediately after The Joker’s arrest, Batman grills him for their whereabouts in a monitored police interrogation room. The Joker goads Batman doggedly, relishing and fueling the anger that drives Batman further along the fine line of torture as he slams the prisoner into a table, the wall, and the two-way mirror, then delivers successive blows to the face. In the end, these assaults prove gratuitous, since The Joker wants to reveal the captives’ locations. “That’s the point,” he explains, “You’ll have to choose.” He has told Batman, “Killing is making a choice...you choose between one life or the other. Your friend, the district attorney, or his blushing bride-to-be” (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). With Dent and Rachel in distant parts of the city, Batman can rescue only one of them, knowing that the police, who cannot move as decisively, will likely fail to save the other. Hence, The Joker’s taunt that “killing is making a choice”: Batman must choose at all in order to save at least one of them, but by choosing to save one, he by default has chosen to “kill” the

Actually, it is precisely for this reason that Bruce Wayne, who is controlled at his core by his back-story...is less intriguing than The Joker” (31-32).

other. Christopher Nolan has characterized this interrogation scene as crucial (Boucher, “Christopher Nolan Revisits”). After all, the quandary it dramatizes, that even formidable power can be hamstrung and sabotaged and choice can sometimes lead only and inevitably to problematic outcomes, permeates the entire film. The Joker tells Batman, “You have nothing, nothing to threaten me with. Nothing to do with all your strength,” savoring how well his design to incapacitate the dominant has worked (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). In The Joker’s terms, even as Batman uses all of his strength, he can accomplish nothing, and in fact it is specifically *by* using all of his strength that Batman generates futile results. The ability of a determined few to expose the powerful as vulnerable, and therefore to incite ever more desperate reactions, resonates with other references to the film’s September 11 context.

Interestingly, then, both Dent and Wayne’s butler Alfred (Michael Caine) expressly call The Joker a “terrorist,” an attribution unique among cinematic incarnations of the oft-nicknamed character. Is he? He introduced his first demands for Batman’s unmasking via the broadcast of a tortured, eventually murdered, copycat vigilante whose dead body he hung outside the mayor’s (Nestor Carbonell) office window. He holds a city hostage by fulfilling his promise to kill until Batman surrenders, starting with a judge and the police commissioner, as well as with unsuccessful attempts on the district attorney’s and the mayor’s lives. He blows up a hospital when the general public fails to fulfill his request that they assassinate a lawyer (Joshua Harto) who knows Batman’s identity (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). Although formally defining “terrorism” launches a loaded task far too exhaustive for this particular paper,⁸⁴ for most people’s comfort

⁸⁴ See Pfefferbaum for discussion of this issue (176).

levels, perhaps he fits the bill insofar as he targets the unsuspecting and unarmed so fear can amplify his efforts to tilt power relations in his favor.⁸⁵

But if so, what kind of a terrorist is he? Defining terrorism frequently stalls at the point when one person's "terrorist" is another's "insurgent," "rebel," or even government (Banks, Nevers and Wallerstein 5-9). In cases of insurgency and rebellion, the reasoning goes, on a playing field where the motives and means of the dominant players are suspect, why should the rogue contestant be singled out for reprobation (5-6)? In this sense, corrupt Gotham City could represent the kind of failed system that needs replacing, and the extremity of its opposition is the measure of its failure. Yet this approach presumes actors with political aims: even if some such actors use reprehensible methods to achieve their ends, ends still matter, actions are undertaken toward the achievement of *something*. On these terms, there is a certain logic to these actors' deeds, according to which meaningful outcomes can be imagined and effective interventions can be calibrated (8-9). On these terms, an interested public can sense some kind of stable foundation for whatever policies they endorse or reject.

However, some have contended in real-world debates over terrorism that for certain groups, there is no end in sight, neither legitimate purpose nor feasible cessation (Juergensmeyer 148-166). Indeed, regardless of what we might infer about possible motivations given US political and economic involvements overseas, no messages and no demands accompanied the suicide plane crashes on September 11 taking thousands of lives. At the time, there were no strings attached. The event occurred as an end in itself, massive destruction as self-sufficient spectacle, rather than as overt advancement of a

⁸⁵ See Breckenridge and Zimbardo for a related view (116-118).

specific cause or interest. In such cases, the argument goes, modes and drives lie outside reason, refusing negotiation and confounding ordinary forms of counteraction (Juergensmeyer 148-166). If so, all the old rules of engagement, principles that might be effective and justifiable against, say, criminals or combatants with decipherable operating principles of their own, would seem no longer to apply. In their absence loom alternatives with burgeoning and disquieting practical and moral implications (Stern 288-296). Under such circumstances, for those interested in a way forward that offers both peace and justice, no clear and easy path readily presents itself. As The Joker would say, “Nothing to do with all your strength” (Nolan 2008). In this sense, The Joker surpasses the threat that any individual terrorist might pose, which can be delimited within calculable estimations of goals, damage, and containment. Instead, he embodies the kind of peril terrorism writ large poses, which menaces a perpetual state of untold danger undermining the premises of any functional community by propagating profligate and exploitable uncertainties and fears, the kinds of uncertainties and fears that can amplify distrust and soften receptivity to extreme responses.

At first, though, Bruce Wayne regards The Joker as no different from the gangsters driven by greed whom he battles nightly in the guise of Batman. As he tells his butler Alfred, “Criminals aren’t complicated...We just need to figure out what he’s after.” In his experience, it is a straightforward matter: once you know what an adversary wants - and they all want something – counter them at that point. But Alfred considers The Joker of a different sort altogether. He cautions Wayne, “perhaps this is a man you don’t fully understand.” He explains, “Some men aren’t looking for anything logical, like money. They can’t be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with. Some

men just want to watch the world burn.”⁸⁶ Later, The Joker himself effectively corroborates this assessment, telling Dent, “I’m a dog chasing cars. I wouldn’t know what to do with one if I caught it....I’m not a schemer, I try to show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are” (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). His ability to frustrate others’ plans with the intricate strategizing of a chess match belies his denial of scheming. Nevertheless, his intention, to provoke disorder rather than erect an alternative form of order, as might be the goal of an insurgent or rebel, lays bare a thoroughgoing nihilism.

However, in spite of his quip about being “ahead of the curve,” The Joker is not of the *Übermensch*. He is not about mastering human potential as a model to supersede the nihilist condition and regenerate a humanity bogged down by its inauthentic values. The Joker is only about subversion, about instigating an equalizing chaos by exploiting those inauthentic values to expose human potential itself as a fragile fiction. As he announces early in the film, “Whatever doesn’t kill you simply makes you stranger” (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). This twist on Nietzsche’s famous proclamation, citing the bizarre rather than empowerment as the outcome of mortal struggle, trumps the nineteenth-century philosopher in its twenty-first-century vision of absolute futility.

Perhaps, then, The Joker stands for something more than just a terrorist, just as – according to Alfred – Batman stands for something more than just a hero, in keeping with the tendency throughout Batman’s fictional life for his exploits to match, if not generate, the enemies he fights (Kaveney 109-110; Reynolds 67-68, 103). In this film, when Wayne complains that the mob has “crossed a line,” Alfred corrects him, “You crossed a

⁸⁶ For interestingly similar terminology in reference to the September 11 hijackers, see Sacks.

line first, sir. You squeezed them, you hammered them to the point of desperation. And in their desperation, they turned to a man they didn't fully understand." The Joker himself confirms this dynamic of escalation, telling Batman, "I don't want to kill you. What would I do without you? Go back to ripping off Mob dealers? No...you complete me." Batman's successful targeting of more traditional gangsters has upped the ante, his theatrical heroics have produced adversaries up to the challenge rather than eliminated opposition altogether (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). For this reason, according to this mutually constituting framework within which the notions of "villain" and "hero" become meaningless in isolation, I must also address the nature and responsibilities of the heroism that correlates with Gotham's villainy.

Wayne had developed his alter ego Batman to combat out-of-control crime, with an anonymous theatricality that could symbolize incorruptibility in a way not possible for a recognizable individual, who could be directly identified with personal interests and susceptibilities. Alfred projects the possibilities of this role when The Joker makes his first demand for Batman's unmasking; he tells Wayne to resist, explaining, "that's the point of Batman. He can be the outcast. He can make the choice that no one else can make: the right choice." Similarly, when Dent's imposture as Batman maintains Wayne's anonymity, Alfred tells longtime friend Rachel Dawes, "Batman stands for something more important than the whims of a terrorist...even if everyone hates him for it. That's the sacrifice he's making. He's not being a hero. He's being something more" (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). In this formulation, selfless, good-faith work to serve justice and save others *does* constitute heroism; heroism *is* about doing what is both necessary and right, as illustrated by the fruits of his labors: arrested mobsters, deterred criminals,

and district attorneys emboldened to enforce the law. But Alfred asserts that sometimes performing these feats of necessity and right do not *appear* heroic, do not garner the praise and acclaim that we typically shower over our celebrated heroes. Essentially, being *perceived* as a hero is a little different than doing heroic deeds, because that perception signifies the endorsement of those on whose behalf the hero is acting. And sometimes those people would rather not be associated with what they nevertheless are asking him – implicitly by their own inaction – to do. In this sense, then, heroics, terrorism, and escalating violence remain incompletely understood without considering the city itself. And so we return, once more, to Gotham.

“Giving someone else a chance”: Involving Gotham in the Battle for Its Soul

Ultimately, The Joker attempts to fully sabotage any remnant of Gotham’s civic virtue. Early in the film, after Batman has had to wade through vigilantes – including some in Batman-like costumes – to finish a fight with drug dealers, Wayne tells Alfred unhappily that the “copycats” are growing in number. “This wasn’t exactly what I had in mind when I said I wanted to inspire people,” he explains, disappointed that they are the only Gothamites who seem to be contributing at all to their city’s protection.⁸⁷ However, The Joker readily understands them as rudimentary but important examples of the evolving potential of Batman’s relationship with Gotham. After all, when The Joker announces his ultimatum to unmask the Batman, he starts by broadcasting his taunting of the now bruised and terrified impersonator and then by hanging the dead man’s body outside the mayor’s office (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). Accordingly, The Joker focuses not

⁸⁷ For a discussion of how other Batman comics have registered concern with how his exploits could spur others to circumvent the law, see Spanakos 58.

only on those like Dent and Gordon who directly work with Batman, but also on the city dwellers for whom Batman fights and from whom he draws either support or rejection. The Joker recognizes that Batman might seem to work alone, but he does not operate in isolation; Gotham has the power either to enable or to deter his efforts, and he has the power either to embolden or to discourage Gotham's better inclinations. Yet, until now, rather than act on their own behalf, which would require direct accountability and therefore personal consideration of the possibilities, limits, and ethics of any action, Gotham has permitted someone else, the Batman, to shoulder the burden and worry about the details, thereby never themselves confronting the incompatibilities between what they expect in terms of public safety and what they are willing to avow openly in terms of security measures.

During the interrogation scene between him and Batman, The Joker tells Batman, "They need you right now. But when they don't, they'll cast you out like a leper. You see, their morals, their code – it's a bad joke. Dropped at the first sign of trouble....I'll show you: when the chips are down, these – these civilized people, they'll eat each other." He later makes good on this threat by creating a no-win scenario involving two ferries, the Liberty and the Spirit (perhaps the Spirit of Liberty?), whereby one ship carrying prisoners and another carrying assorted others leaving the city are both rigged to explode by midnight, with passengers able to save themselves only if they detonate the other ship. When the free passengers vote to blow up the ship of prisoners, seemingly proving The Joker right, no one actually moves to activate the detonator. So a white, apparently straight (a close-up shot provides a full view of his wedding ring), middle-aged, middle-class businessman – the figure of relative privilege in the Western world –

steps up to take the detonator, irritated that “No one wants to get their hands dirty” (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). Yet, when he holds it in his hands, he feels the weight of the decision that only direct action can convey. It is one thing to vote for others to kill on your behalf; it is another to become a killer yourself and live your life as such. The Joker has touched on a danger of democracy, the temptation for individuals to vote their own interests at the expense of others. It is this vulnerability that has permitted his escalating antics, halted only when the democratically-minded fully value the lives and the interests of others as commensurate with their own.

Critically, on both ships, individuals choose not to kill others in full awareness that such a choice would lead to their own deaths (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). Gothamites have, for the first time in the film, accepted the predicament that Batman has shouldered on their behalf, the sometime incompatibility between ideal and action that well-meaning people should perceive as not precluding responsibility for the consequences of their behavior. In this instance, to The Joker’s dismay, they opt for self-sacrifice over self-preservation, finally putting a brake to the violence that has continued to escalate when no one else had been willing to take such a stand. Their decision halts The Joker’s devastating run as effectively as Batman’s coincident hand-to-hand combat with the villain. The passengers and Batman prove mutually indispensable to one another, with the passengers’ intervention in their own fates offering mundane, risky, but recognizable hope for stable civic virtue rather than a further call for the kinds of extraordinary measures that tend to lead to uncontrollable outcomes. Although, in the end, the ships do not explode since Batman successfully defeats The Joker before he can trigger the explosives, the decisions on the ferries are made in ignorance of any way out. As a result,

they serve as an unenviable but powerful model of the modes, the stakes, and the negotiations of living as a free – that is, safe, autonomous, and responsible – individual.⁸⁸

In this context, allusions to the War on Terror, the historical but not inevitable consequence of September 11, resonate as real-world parallels to the film's staged no-win situations. Batman's abduction of Lau from Hong Kong to Gotham to deliver him to law enforcement invokes the notion of extraordinary rendition, with Batman circumventing laws the police cannot. Moreover, Lau's use as the center of a RICO case against the city's mobsters calls to mind the legal means that might successfully combat ordinary crime, but perhaps falter when targeting adversaries with more complex motives, means, and resources. Similarly, Batman's construction of a city-wide surveillance system, which he enlists Lucius Fox's (Morgan Freeman) help to operate to locate The Joker, immediately appalls Fox, who sees the system as "unethical...dangerous...wrong." However, in this case, its one-time-only deployment, since Batman arranges its implosion once The Joker is captured, evades any resolution of ethical dilemmas. At the same time, the video-taped torture and killing of the vigilante Batman impersonator (Andy Luther) reminds us of similar tapes of ill-fated security contractors in Iraq, while The Joker's cell-phone activation of a bomb, a kind of improvised explosive device (IED), likewise draws on once alien tactics and concepts that have become, only through the War on Terror's

⁸⁸ The civilian response here supports Arendt's claim that violence and power are absolute opposites, that "the extreme form of power is All against One" (*On Violence* 41). She premises her position by contending that although violence provides a strength-multiplier (46), its effects are unpredictable, and therefore under violent conditions goals become almost subsidiary to the means taken to secure them (4). Accordingly, she warns, "The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world" (80), leading to the escalation rather than the resolution of conflict. For this reason, power, or the impact of collective "support and consent" (49) rather than of singular aggression, affords more equitable stability.

progression, commonplace. In the concluding scenes, when both Batman and police SWAT teams seek to rescue hostages at a construction site, only Batman realizes quickly that the victims have been disguised as their victimizers, and vice versa. The ensuing tangle, with Batman trying to free the real hostages, unmask and defeat the real hostage-takers, and prevent the SWAT teams from accidentally killing the innocent, instantiates the troubles contemporary, especially non-conventional, conflict causes when distinctions between civilians and non-combatants cannot be clarified (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). In each instance, the film evokes the terrain of contemporary dilemmas that, in their action-film setting, duck direct commentary on real-world solutions.⁸⁹ Instead, these performances of viewers' current landscape's pressures and constraints occasion our consideration of how to weigh and reconcile our own risks and duties in a post-September 11 world.

Conclusion: The Dark (K)night of the September 11 World

This chapter provided a close reading of the Batman legacy and its adaptation in *The Dark Knight* to address post-September 11 cultural fractures around notions of meaningful and ethical choice. In effect, I have shown here how this film documents and involves its viewers in confronting the culturally traumatic persistence of doubts about the possibility of effectively balancing public and personal safety with justice and civil rights. One of the film's most evocative moments in summoning these doubts occurs in the scene of Dent's press conference. In his attempt to foster hope among frightened and disillusioned Gothamites and rally them to resist The Joker in a city where, they protest,

⁸⁹ For a discussion of how comic book victories tend to be partial or provisional for the practical reason of needing to preserve continuity, see Reynolds (81-82) and Kaveney (140).

“things are worse than ever,” Dent tells his audience, “the night is darkest just before the dawn. And I promise you, the dawn is coming” (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). The sixteenth-century Spanish, Roman Catholic saint John of the Cross originated the term “the dark night of the soul” to characterize the fraught paradox afflicting the most committed of spiritual devotees: the closer they get to God, the more they feel his absence. This conception has emerged in present-day headlines with the revelation of Mother Teresa’s decades-long crisis of faith, during which she performed world-celebrated acts of social service in the name of Jesus, all the while suffering secretly from an acute sense of his abandonment (Van Biema). According to John of the Cross and contemporary theologians, this dark night signals the sacred process by which God’s love purifies souls and draws them to him, an encounter between divine infinity and human finitude of such overwhelming disproportion that the unfathomable connection is experienced as a lack. For those in the throes of such an ordeal, perseverance in benevolent action evidences the faith they doubt within themselves. According to skeptics, however, the experience of lack is, quite simply, only that: a realization that in fact nothing does lie beyond the material world to defend the belief in something more (Van Biema). Either way, the dark night of the soul marks a turning point for those who operate on the edges of human possibility. After all, who but the exceptional will stake their very souls on doing the right thing, even when doing that right thing offers no reward, neither material nor spiritual benefit, and especially at times when “the right thing” itself seems too precarious a concept to justify obligation?

In its immediate aftermath, September 11 was perceived as a social purgation, with the day’s horror and its aftermath’s uncertainties suddenly (and ultimately only

temporarily) rendering obsolete arbitrary preoccupations, such as the preceding summer's media obsession with shark attacks and Congressman Gary Condit's illicit and, as ceaselessly surmised but later disproved, possibly criminal relationship with the missing Chandra Levy (Rutenberg). Yet as the aftermath continued to unfold, attention to serious concerns ended up raising more questions than answers, with controversial War on Terror measures at sites like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay belying any notion of the United States as a nation that holds itself to a higher standard. The dark night of the September 11 world is one in which threats showcased by the attacks on New York and Washington, DC persist, but also one in which a both effective and just response seem to many at best elusive, at worst impossible. What we can do and what we should do have seemed to pose often incompatible options, obscuring the substance of perseverance through action in lieu of belief that sustains those who muscle through more traditionally spiritual crises.

In *The Dark Knight*, The Joker capitalizes on such a crisis of faith, his villainy manifesting in opportunistic leveraging of desperate moments. In *Batman Begins*, the film that launched Nolan's Batman narrative, Rachel Dawes tells her long-time friend Bruce Wayne, as he struggles as an adult to find the right response to his parents' murders in his childhood, that "it's not who you are underneath, it's what you do that defines you" (Nolan, *Batman Begins*). Her admonishment focalizes Wayne's iterations of his alter ego, Batman, who combats criminals according to a moral code superseding personal interests and prohibiting killing that Wayne believes separates him from common vigilantes. In other words, he commits to the principle that his actions must speak for themselves, and they must speak for a better alternative than the forces he is battling. Even before Rachel's corrective, he articulates this conviction to the mentor,

Henri Ducard, who has trained him to fight in the name of justice but then requires him to kill an untried prisoner, also in the name of justice. Ducard rebukes, “Your compassion is a weakness your enemies will not share,” to which Wayne replies, “That’s why it’s so important. It separates us from them” (Nolan, *Batman Begins*). In this way, Wayne demarcates a dividing line, not only between hero and villain, but also between hero and vigilante. However tenuous the thread, it is the one he holds onto. Whether a weakness in fact or a survivors’ sustaining strength, it is a thread of choice as well for those wearied and troubled in the wake of September 11.

Chapter Five: Limning the “Howling Space” of September 11 through Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*⁹⁰

Introduction: The Cultural Aftereffects of September 11

The popular culture texts examined in each of this dissertation’s preceding chapters have shown that the September 11 hijackings provoked a public catastrophe whose most troubling components have fostered unresolved ruptures of cultural understandings of personal safety and meaningful and ethical choice. Here I consider how two of Don DeLillo’s post-September 11 writings – the December 2001 *Harper’s Magazine* essay titled, “In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September” and the 2007 novel *Falling Man* – similarly address what these other texts have evoked: enduring unsettlement about survivors’ and victims’ arbitrary fates, the predicament of those trapped in the World Trade Center and forced by smoke and heat to jump to their deaths, and the seemingly irresolvable moral quandaries that the day’s display of compromised subjectivity and agency underscored. In doing so, I approach literature as a form of popular culture that instantiates while further shaping the concerns permeating the consciousness of contemporary readers. However, by attending specifically to DeLillo, I have the unique opportunity to assess this process as both anticipatory and retrospective. That is, given the expectations critics explicitly harbored for DeLillo’s response to the hijackings, these texts, unlike the previous works addressed

⁹⁰ An excerpt of this chapter appears in Brown Walker Press’s *Engaging Terror: A Critical and Interdisciplinary Approach*, the proceedings of the Second Annual Human Condition Series Conference: Terror. Full citation is listed in Works Consulted.

in this dissertation, occasion awareness of how a narrative's reception takes shape before the narrative is even created.

Accordingly, I preface my discussion by contextualizing DeLillo's writings within the phenomenon of passionate contemporary (and largely disappointed) hopes that his post-September 11 contributions would provide especially cogent analyses and interpretations of the day's attacks. Then, I move forward in my own assessment of what view of September 11 and its aftermath his work might in fact be constructing by previewing his writings' underlying preoccupation with crisis persisting through time, particularly as evidenced by his first response to the hijackings, an essay whose title features the phrase, "the ruins of the future." Next, I foreground how notions of fate permeate his novel *Falling Man* – whether relating to the onset of Alzheimer's disease, a suicide hijacker's preparations for his final mission, or a survivor's perpetual tempting of chance through gambling. I focus on these notions of fate to assess how these pervasive engagements with the prospect of inevitable endings for each of the book's prominent characters reinforce the sense of enduring and unavoidable crisis. In particular, I examine how these representations of fate insinuate that limited choice consistently constrains not only an individual's immediate circumstances but also the entire worldview orienting their life trajectories. At the same time, I explore how these representations point to an ultimate concern with mortality, the single inarguably universal human fate emblemized by the figure of the unidentified "falling man," or World Trade Center victim jumping to his death. In this way, I evaluate how DeLillo's essay and novel weigh the possibility of death itself as the only sure common ground for ethical community in the wake of September 11, a possibility whose apparent complex

and problematic implications are illustrative of ongoing disturbances in cultural formulations of existential safety, ethics and community.

September 11 as a Once and Future Crisis in Don DeLillo's Writings

Tom Junod, who authored the 2003 *Esquire* article "The Falling Man" (which I considered in Chapter Two), penned a review of Don DeLillo's 2007 novel *Falling Man* titled, "The Man Who Invented 9/11." In that piece, Junod argues that DeLillo "has been writing the post-9/11 novel for the better part of four decades, and his *pre-9/11* novel...*Underworld*, was prescient enough to put the looming towers on its cover, standing high and ready to fall." Junod adds, "He has been insisting...that humanity has turned into a mass-organism, twitching with the plots and conspiracies hatched by loners desperate for connection, and so 9/11 stands...as...the fulfillment of all his foreboding." In effect, "It was a day he himself might have authored, 'DeLilloesque'⁹¹ not only as the end-point of a conspiracy but as a mass-event witnessed by billions" (2-3). The notion that DeLillo's earlier works had prefigured in fiction what actually happened in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington DC on September 11, 2001 formed the premise of many popular press commentaries (Franklin and O'Rourke; Kakutani; Litt; Miller; Rich). *Slate's* O'Rourke even "wondered, half-seriously, if Mohamed Atta and crew had been studying DeLillo." However, she immediately corrects herself, contending,

Of course, it's the other way around: It is DeLillo who has been studying us, and America's place in the world, for more than 30 years now. He is our great late-20th-century chronicler of the hallucinatory realities that make up American history, and he has always viewed terrorism as one of

⁹¹ Miller also uses this term.

the prime tools of nations and entities jockeying to have a role in global politics.

In other words, these reviewers credit DeLillo with uncanny foresight when the real-world social, economic, and political conditions he has narrativized for critique turn out to be the very conditions that fuel and typify the September 11 attacks. In these instances, DeLillo draws acclaim as a visionary writer whose fiction forecasts history. Yet, rather than expertise at reading tea leaves, his genuine, only slightly less-wondrous, talent lies in accurately and astutely assessing his contemporary global context's character and implications.⁹² Effectively, through his writing, he has been able to sagely link on an unflinching trajectory the past, present, and future along a continuum of material causes and effects, whose intricate and implacable origins imbue the past-shaped future with the aura of inevitability.

Immediately after September 11, journalists turned to other writers for insightful assessments of that day's events and their impact (Versluys 12). *The New Yorker*, for example, published short reflections by figures such as John Updike, Jonathan Franzen, Aharon Appelfeld, and Susan Sontag, who recounted everything from their own stunned experiences as witnesses to their sharp outrage at the response within mainstream media and politics. Many of these writers would eventually produce more sustained individual works engaging September 11 and its fallout. However, in contrast to these writers' particular interests in the September 11 historical landscape, DeLillo's extant preoccupations with terrorist conspiracies, televised spectacle, mass audiences, and

⁹² While alluding to literary theorists' similar attributions of DeLillo's "prophetic foreknowledge," law and literature scholar Adam Thurschwell traces these prophecies' "roots in the deep structures of Western culture – economic, technological, and symbolic" (280).

global capital's tinderbox potential have apparently led readers not only to praise his prescience, but also to expect his actual post-September 11 novel to be somehow retrospectively prophetic, or oracularly insightful about what that day finally, truly means for all of us. Such expectations, paradoxical and unreasonably ambitious, would of course be impossible for DeLillo to fulfill. Indeed, Junod concludes that *Falling Man* is "another beautiful artifact made exquisitely of ash," incommensurate with the circumstances it depicts ("The Man Who Invented").⁹³ Likewise, Michiko Kakutani characterizes the novel, "even within...parameters of reduced expectations," as "small and unsatisfying and inadequate." While Miller speculates whether "DeLillo's prophetic moment had passed," O'Rourke thinks he simply does not have sufficient personal distance from the event to grasp and articulate its full context. In a sense, many critics have viewed September 11 as the realization of DeLillo's fiction, and the fiction of *Falling Man* as a failure to realize September 11.⁹⁴ But what about these critics – do they

⁹³ To be fair, in his review Junod deems a number of post-September 11 novels to have fallen short in representing the compelling emotional realities that he feels documentary-style journalism powerfully and effectively communicated ("The Man Who Invented"). On the other hand, DeLillo ventures – as did Junod – to dwell on what *New York Times* critic Frank Rich terms "the third rail of 9/11 taboos:" the people who jumped out of the towers to their deaths to escape the horrific conditions inside. Literature scholar Frost asserts, "The real dreadfulness of the 'jumpers' is not captured by the still frame. It is what comes before and after: the drama of the compelled choice or suicide. The falling bodies have been seen, but they have not been understood; and their representation, by news sources and artistic forms alike, suggests a general desire that they remain beyond the reaches of understanding" (189). Considering Rich's evocative terminology, which accurately reflects cultural discomfort and ambivalence about these figures, DeLillo might be considered more ambitious than these other writers, setting himself a more delicately complex task and therefore a greater chance of alienating readers or at least failing to satisfy their expectations.

⁹⁴ *Slate* critic Franklin explains that the challenge with writing and reading a "9/11 novel" lies in the predicament that "we all agree it exists but have no idea what shape it ought to take or what its purpose should be." For literature scholar Benjamin Bird, the task is

themselves have sufficient personal distance to recognize whether a writer has produced a commensurate novel that largely, adequately and satisfyingly grasps and articulates the full breadth, depth and reach of September 11?⁹⁵ Assessing a recent historical crisis on such a comprehensive scale under as-yet unfolding circumstances poses a tall order for novelist and analyst alike.⁹⁶ But are such requirements of objectivity and omniscience ever possible or even necessary or desired for cultural exegesis? The practice of cultural literary studies presumes not (Shirane 513-514; Glass 20-21)⁹⁷; accordingly, I return

clear that “the role of contemporary fiction writers [is] to enquire into the character of the loss America has experienced and the ways in which it might be addressed” (562). However, Marco Abel credits DeLillo’s *Harper’s Magazine* essay with “demonstrat[ing] the impossibility of saying anything definitive about 9/11 – especially anything that captures the event’s meaning” (1237). Keniston and Quinn outline the delicate terrain for negotiating representations and interpretations of the event’s historical materiality: “there remains a desire to be true – to the calamity itself, to the feelings of the victims’ families, to the collective need to mourn. But...no one wants 9/11 to be misrepresented, politicized, co-opted, or distorted. Yet, it seems difficult not to do just this” (1). Additionally, such responses must also navigate the tensions between private experience and public reaction, and senses of rupture as well as continuity (3).

⁹⁵ As Rich notes, “Today 9/11 carries so many burdens – of interpretation, of sentimentality, of politics, of war – that sometimes it’s hard to find the rubble of the actual event beneath the layers of edifice we’ve built on top of it.”

⁹⁶ Versluys characterizes September 11 as “unpossessable” in the “instantaneity of its horror and in its far-flung repercussions” (1) – in effect, a semiotic crisis (2) which ultimately, nevertheless and necessarily, does become subject to interpretive schemes (3) which can anchor in narrative –whether exploitive or constructive – the traumatic event for survivors and global witnesses (3-4).

⁹⁷ Shirane speaks generally about how literary studies, as a form of cultural studies, valuably contributes to post-September 11 understanding by both catalyzing analysis of, and educating people about, cultural processes – affinities as well as frictions in multi- and cross-cultural settings. At the same time, author Julia Glass acknowledges the oft-repeated fear about fictional representations of September 11 coming “too soon,” as if later in the future “the dust of 9/11 will settle” and all will become clear. This caution again evidences a sense that proximity to an occurrence precludes constructive and relevant critical responses to it. While Glass herself admits to feeling a “sense of futility, even shame,” as if writing “fiction...seemed all at once trivial, quaint, indulgent; worse,

consideration of *Falling Man* to the narrower terms that had prompted these critics to view DeLillo's other novels as eerily perceptive: how does this work envision the links between past, present, and future in relation to a contemporary event comprised of material and contingent, though seemingly determinate, causes and effects?

The December 2001 issue of *Harper's Magazine* published an essay by DeLillo titled, "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September." In this piece, just three months after the World Trade Center has fallen, DeLillo observes, "There is something empty in the sky" and he outlines the writer's task as trying "to give memory, tenderness, and meaning to all that howling space" (39). While the author offers reflections in immediate response to September 11, he also ends up previewing the themes that would become central to his 2007 novel, presumably part of his own effort to confront "all that howling space." In a sense, the essay prologues in the form of non-fiction deliberation the concerns with time and consequence that order *Falling Man's* fictional confrontation with an historical trauma's aftermath. The essay's ruminations about terrorism's resistance to capitalism's colonization of the future, with the present lost in the struggle, manifest in *Falling Man* through both the main characters' post-September 11 dissociations and the story's temporal structure, which intersperses a hijacker's years-long preparation for September 11 within the larger, also temporally-disjointed, narrative of the day's fallout. Effectively, as the title itself suggests by figuring a never-ending plummet, DeLillo's post-September 11 novel explores how this crisis can stall the present in a helpless interstice lodged between

it seemed irrelevant," she counters this fear with the idea that writers can usefully help to recalibrate shared cultural expectations by responding in the very moments of significant change (21). Versluys offers similar concerns as well as hopes for fiction after September 11 (1-17).

entrenched roots and their proliferating effects. For DeLillo, then, the howling space has been, is, and will be occupied by the specter of the individual's ultimate vulnerability in total exposure to the forces grappling for preeminence over contemporary global consciousness.

The Future as Ruins: *Falling Man*'s Thematic Preview

DeLillo's *Harper's* essay begins with the somewhat grandiose notion of "global consciousness," which he claims "the surge of capital markets" had shaped over the previous decade. Such a consciousness, colored by "the utopian glow of cyber-capital," orients "us all to live permanently in the future" where "markets are uncontrolled and investment potential has no limit." He immediately contrasts this limitless and uncontrolled capital-built future with the "danger and rage" generated through September 11: the "world narrative" terrorists have introduced to counter "the power of American culture to penetrate every wall, home, life, and mind" so "It is *our* lives and minds that are occupied now" (DeLillo, "In the Ruins" 33). For DeLillo, only the turn-of-the-century's anti-globalization protesters seemed "to be a moderating influence, trying to slow things down, even things out, hold off the white-hot future" (34).⁹⁸ Otherwise, within such a framework, individuals seem to have little choice, with discourse dominated either by the false siren lure of a rapid-paced, "high gloss...modernity" through which "the chance of self-determination [is] diminishing for most people in most

⁹⁸ Paralleling DeLillo's appreciation for anti-globalization's efforts to lengthen the present and moderate any heedless, headlong future plunge, Abel argues that this essay itself, by "foregrounding the event's how" to defer response while contemplating conditions and causes, attempts to "slow down the rapid speed of judgment" about September 11 (1237). Versluys contends that novels similarly occasion ethical responses to September 11 by engaging non-partisan, contextually-situated viewpoints that avoid swift, thoughtless oversimplifications (17).

countries” (33) or by past-grasping terrorists’ violently furious resentment (33-34). Either way, individuals are subject to “a narrative that has been developing over years, only now becoming inescapable” (33), whose deep, intricate origins orchestrate an increasingly certain future, entangling bystanders – “most people in most countries” – powerlessly in risks of the highest stakes. Moreover, even if such bystanders could meaningfully contribute to this rivalry for global temporality, with capitalism and terrorism the only two contestants, which side would anyone actually want to prevail? This forbidding dilemma, a genuine no-win scenario, signals a certain measure of helplessness in a present determined by profit-driven enterprise and its ideological outsiders, forces that are contouring the future as well.

For now, at least, DeLillo imputes to suicide terrorists an “edge” in this contest: “they are willing to die” (“In the Ruins” 34). This impulse, described by bin Laden as desiring “death more than you desire life,” slims what DeLillo terms “the wide world, routinely filled with exchange...an open circuit of work, talk, family, and expressible feeling” into the confines of a terse, directed “plot” (34). According to DeLillo, “Plots reduce the world,” enabling their participants to “know who we are and what we mean in the world,” but not to see that there is a “defenseless human being at the end of [their] gaze.” Fixated on a mission, its justifications, its expected outcomes, and the comrades it organizes together, the suicide terrorist has no room for outlying concerns, extraneous information. As a result, DeLillo claims, “The sense of disarticulation we hear in the term ‘Us and Them’ has never been so striking, at either end.” All that remains is an “apartness” (34), a separation within the same time and space between what terrorists are arranging for the future and what future victims and survivors cannot know awaits them.

Such disconnection permits thinking about the future as already a ruin, a *fait accompli* toward which perpetrators advance and an ineluctable fate into which the unfortunate recede. Even the simple act of a terrorist's embrace of stark finitude implants an ominous anomaly within globalization's otherwise dominant momentum of consumption and expansion. Indeed, because the attacks eliminated the architecture that dominated and defined New York's skyline since the late 1960s, DeLillo claims, "We have fallen back in time and space" (38). Even when the future is anticipated, DeLillo asserts it is "not in our normally hopeful way but guided by dread" (39). These are tugs-of-war between past and future (40); once again, it seems, the present serves merely as suspense between what has happened – what has been plotted – and what will happen: the plot coming to fruition.

DeLillo does recognize some measure of agency for those otherwise at the mercy of this tug-of-war between global capital and terror. He claims that while that "narrative ends in the rubble...it is left to us to create the counter-narrative." In the day's immediate wake, he points to the impromptu, local memorializations, consisting of home-made artifacts and communal gatherings; the missing person photographs; and the ruins and rubble itself as the diverse, generative, and bearable parts of this "counter-narrative," what can be "set against the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practiced response" (DeLillo, "In the Ruins" 34).⁹⁹ But he also points out "stories of heroism and encounters with dread. There are stories that carry around their edges the luminous ring of coincidence, fate, or

⁹⁹ Kauffman characterizes DeLillo's conceptualization of the counter-narrative as "the realm of the unspeakable, the unfathomable" (354) – in a sense, the gestures that acknowledge non-meaning or at least forestall fixed meaning.

premonition” (34). Such stories bear the tinge of temporal captivity: while “heroism” suggests a self-sacrificing choice, conditions of dread, coincidence, fate, and premonition suggest dependence only on what time has in store for them. These kinds of formulations evidence ambivalence about individuals’ ability to act with truly free choice. As DeLillo observes, “For a hundred who are arbitrarily dead, we need to find one person saved by a flash of forewarning” (34) – in effect, to balance the weighty reality of many helplessly and meaninglessly killed with the meager but more appealing promise that someone could be singled out for special favor, signaling that individuals still retain power and significance. This tension, between recognizing one’s self as a near-member of the helplessly and meaninglessly killed and preserving a sense of self as powerful and significant, as well as the earlier-noted concerns about a plot-shaped future, informs DeLillo’s September 11 counter-narrative *Falling Man*.

Fate and Terror in *Falling Man*

Two thin parallel lines bifurcate the title words *Falling Man* on the hardcover front of the US edition of DeLillo’s 2007 novel. On the back, an aerial perspective shows the top halves of the World Trade Center twin towers like the tips of an iceberg, emerging in lonely solitude above a thick carpeting of cloud cover. Unguarded in the empty expanse of a grainy blue sky, their exposure occasions a provocation: after all, vulnerability invites the possibilities of both compassion and exploitation. In effect, the buildings seem to lie in wait for whatever will come to them, while the roots of their fate, like the towers’ lower floors beneath the clouds, stretch in structural continuity to firm, determinative, but unseen foundations, biding a time of their own. The double lines and paired buildings that pierce and separate words and space evince the fluid but manifest

distinctions between one thing and another, here and there, before and after. The prospect of crossing into troubled territory from which there is no return pervades *Falling Man*, and these pictorial components of the book's production evoke the formidable boundaries that infuse with a sense of forced and inevitable conclusion the way the narrative's three main characters understand the relationship between past, present and future in their own lives. As Lianne confronts her father's death from, and her own susceptibility to, Alzheimer's disease, Hammad embraces predestined jihad, and Keith loses himself in endless, timeless, anonymous rounds of poker, daily life seems bounded by structured but uncontrollable peril, where the end is destined by causes taking hold long before their effects are realized. Before these individuals might seize any opportunity for intervention or recognize whether any such opportunity even exists, and before the final instant actually arrives, circumstances have predetermined available outcomes. With *Falling Man* beginning and ending in the immediate aftermath of the towers' collapse, and the title summoning the enduring suspense of a continuous fall, past and future become a never-ending present, a condition of perpetual risk and foreclosed options – effectively the state of mortality, which is endemic to life and formative of all its prospects and limits.

In other words, whether in the form of terminal disease, martyrdom, or surviving September 11, the specific end concerning each of these characters is the ultimate end: death. Psychiatrist Judith Herman has noted that experiences of powerlessness in the face of terror undermine survivors' and witnesses' ordinary notions of control, connection, and meaning (33). Similarly, psychologist Ronnie Janoff-Bulman has argued that traumatic encounters foreground human mortality, exposing what we ordinarily strive to

ignore in the pursuit of lives not paralyzed by fear: our inescapable vulnerability and our potentially imminent destruction (59-61). When individuals are unable to avoid the circumstances or antagonism that result in their personal harm, they begin to question their ability to act in and make sense of a world now comprehended as intimately perilous. After trauma's foreshadowing of death, survivors and witnesses must reconstruct a sense of life that responds to both the reality that existence is subject to circumstantial whim and antagonistic will, and the need to continue living productively within that reality (115-141). In his formulations of logotherapy, Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl termed the "will to meaning" the paramount human motivation, a drive that becomes particularly acute and urgent when circumstances such as suffering set conditions beyond a person's control with which she or he nevertheless must contend (119-157). In this context, meaningful action forms under the circumscribed conditions of mortality acknowledged as one's doom (Liechty 86-87).

Falling Man begins on September 11, 2001, with lawyer Keith Neudecker in shock navigating his escape from Ground Zero just after the tower in which he worked has collapsed. The novel follows him and his estranged wife Lianne in later days and years, as they initially seem to reconcile under the stunning exigencies of extreme crisis, but fade apart as time moves forward and their day-to-day interactions remain flat and aloof. Throughout the novel, several episodes chronologically depicting the previous years of preparation for Hammad, a fictional composite of that day's suicide hijackers, interrupt the forward-and-back-moving narrative of their efforts to recover from his operation's impact. The novel climaxes when Hammad completes his preparations and his plane collides with the tower in which Keith is working, prompting the story to

elaborate on Keith's repressed memories of that morning. This structure invokes the random but fateful simultaneity that characterized the September 11 attacks themselves. That is, suicide hijackers readied themselves for a specific plan for mass murder, but remained ignorant of any of the specific victims of this plan or the subsequent challenges survivors among them would face. At the same time, the victims of their actions remained entirely ignorant of these hijackers and the plan they would execute, requiring excavation of their identities in the days and weeks after the clandestine plot was accomplished, the first opportunity for most people to wonder and to learn, "who are these people?" Yet each character, each set of historical figures – hijackers and victims – through the coincidence of planning and fate, shared a single, passing alignment of time and place, an incidental, momentary conjunction, with grave and, for many, mortal implications. Again, this random but fateful simultaneity, this feature of September 11 itself, echoes in the way the novel alternates between narratives of the hijacker's preparations and his operation's aftermath, only to link them in the brief second of ultimate encounter.

That primary narrative tells the story of Keith, who with his co-workers, his friends, comprised those "others," the human beings on the receiving end of the hijacked planes' impact. The moment of conjunction erupts and ends instantaneously, described in the novel first from the perspective within Hammad's approaching plane:

A bottle fell off the counter in the galley, on the other side of the aisle, and he watched it roll this way and that, a water bottle, empty, making an arc one way and rolling back the other, and he watched it spin more quickly and then skitter across the floor an instant before the aircraft struck the

tower, heat, then fuel, then fire, and a blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall.

(DeLillo, *Falling Man* 239)

This seamless transition in perspectives signals the coincidental, but otherwise meaningless, connection of the hijackers and their victims who, unknown and unrelated to one another, share the time, place, and – for those who died – extreme outcome of fate. Of course, importantly, hijackers such as Hammad had foreknowledge that their victims were denied of what generally would happen that day; however, they lacked, as the narrative structure dramatizes, any awareness of the texture, the lived reality, of the individual lives that stretched before and after their attack.

Loss of Self and Time through Alzheimer's Disease

Lianne is among those whose unknown individual lives *Falling Man* chronicles. For the daughter of a now-deceased Alzheimer's sufferer, doom has its own specific shape. When she was younger, her father Jack received an Alzheimer's diagnosis. He eventually decided he "did not want to submit to the long course of senile dementia" and instead, shot himself with a rifle (DeLillo, *Falling Man* 40). Although "she tried to tell herself he'd done a brave thing [, it] was way too soon. There was time before the disease took solid hold but Jack was always respectful of nature's little fuckups and figured the deal was sealed" (41). In effect, the diagnosis forced him to confront the interconnections between contingency and destiny; although the nuances of the disease's trajectory might be open to chance and change, he knew the final result was certain and closed. Given this choice that was no choice, since he could not choose whether to die but only how, he

opted for a swift and comparatively painless finish rather than the slow and dire struggle determined by illness. “Died by his own hand” are the words Lianne uses to think about this decision (218), words that come to her mind the second time she sees a performance artist re-enacting a businessman’s jump from the World Trade Center towers (169). She has observed in her father and in the personated businessman a parallel dilemma: the choice that was no choice, a shared reaction to a sealed fate. Later in the novel, a few years after September 11, Lianne finds herself compulsively counting backward from one hundred in increments of seven, so even if her medical tests fail to indicate the onset of Alzheimer’s, she can detect early symptoms of mental falter (187-188). She is living “in the spirit of what is ever impending” (212), an interstitial float in a present marked by the residue of her family’s past that could presage her personal future. As an affliction with inherited risk factors, the seeds of Alzheimer’s lurk in a past beyond her will and contour a future she cannot fully control. For Lianne, for her father, and for the falling man, terror looms not in the crevices of what could happen, carved as discernible turning points with apprehended implications, but behind the solid door of what will be, the consummation of turning points that have already passed unrecognized and unavailable to cognizant contestation, subject instead only to negotiation within well-defined and immovable parameters.

In memory of her father and in consideration of her own susceptibilities, Lianne meets weekly with early-stage Alzheimer patients at an East Harlem community center. She guides this group as they write about their lives and share those writings with each other, an exercise in their self-preservation as they gradually yield to an illness that specifically compromises the memory and thoughtful reflection that typically constitute

conscious personhood. However, when she asks the supervising therapist if she could increase the number of sessions, he advises against it, cautioning her, “From this point on, you understand, it’s all about loss. We’re dealing inevitably here with diminishing returns” (DeLillo, *Falling Man* 60). His warning forecasts the course of the disease as an irreversible decline; once set in motion, progress moves in only one debilitating direction. From the therapist’s point of view, Lianne’s attempts to forestall the inevitable, to collect the matter of these patients’ lives before illness’ dissipation, arrive already too late. Every moment forward in time cements a further remove from the selves she wants to preserve; no present effort she makes can recover what has been lost or alter the path of decay, she and they can act only to collect the matter of life in the midst of its passing. For them, “The truth was mapped in slow and certain decline. Each member of the group lived in this knowledge” (125). In this way, an Alzheimer’s prognosis serves as a pronouncement of fate, of the insurmountable, accumulating damage long ago planted in a body’s history that culminates in a single predictable and unavoidable conclusion. Her exertions, like her father’s suicide, can address only what happens in the meantime, in the space and time separating a determining factor from its ultimate result.

The Hijacker’s Biding Time

DeLillo presents a different relationship between contingency and destiny through the character Hammad’s preparations to hijack an airplane on September 11. In the forensic scrutiny of that day’s events, investigators had found last instructions for the hijackers in the luggage of Mohamed Atta, which included exhortations to prayer and assurances that God’s will would determine the outcome of their actions (Lincoln 93-98). Apparently, predestination provided a rationale that the hijackers could internalize over

time to cohere as a group against dehumanized enemies whose own fate was also divinely preordained (Stern 261). This rationale could also have mitigated and contained any fear the hijackers themselves might feel during a murderous and suicidal undertaking; there might be comfort, after all, in feeling aligned with what God has prescribed. In *Falling Man*, DeLillo draws on excerpts of these instructions to suggest what might be going through the mind of a hijacker meeting his last moments (238-239). However, the principle of predestination also underlies the years of psychological training Hammad undergoes in anticipation of his mission.

Hammad first appears in *Falling Man* in Hamburg, Germany prior to September 11 as someone who listens attentively to other young men from his mosque as they gather together to discuss religion and politics. Although he harbors some initial uncertainty about their views (DeLillo, *Falling Man* 79), he listens particularly to Amir – the vocal leader in Hamburg, later identified as Mohamed Atta – who preaches, “The time is coming, our truth, our shame, and each man becomes the other, and the other still another, and then there is no separation” (80). This desired dissolution of any separation between them poses an alternative solidarity to the separation they feel from the rest of the world, “the all-enfolding will of capital markets and foreign policies” (80). However, contrary to this group’s professed values, Hammad at this time continues a sexual relationship with a woman, prompting Amir to ask, “What is the difference between you and all the others, outside our space” (83)? Hammad accepts the criticism, and commits more fully to a patent distinction, through values and through actions, between himself and his Hamburg confederates and everyone else: “there were rules now and he was determined to follow them. His life had structure. Things were clearly defined. He was

becoming one of them now, learning to look like them and think like them. This was inseparable from jihad” (80). In effect, he has encountered a more conscious turning point than Alzheimer’s has made available to Lianne, but the path of this jihad features its own specific design. Once committing to this path, Hammad’s opportunities for free choice fade in favor of a conformity in purpose and practice that accomplishes this group’s singularity, signals their faithfulness to God’s plan, and readies them for their final destination.

By the time Hammad and his co-conspirators begin living in the United States, he has embraced finitude, his own and that of the world receding from him, which he feels in his body with the weight and certainty of a bomb vest (DeLillo, *Falling Man* 172). At times Hammad senses that this outcome actually could be averted. One day he observes a car of laughing young people and imagines leaving his life and entering theirs, a volitional act that could have re-routed the progress of events in a different direction (172). Yet Amir manages to draw Hammad back to the furrows of a divine plan that renders human mortality a welcome duty rather than a dreaded horror. Amir insists, “The end of our life is predetermined. We are carried toward that day from the minute we are born....This is not suicide in any meaning or interpretation of the word. It is only something long written. We are finding the way already chosen for us” (175). Once he falls completely into the slotted folds of fate, Hammad ceases questioning the reasons for and the limits of his mission. His remaining days become not about thinking but only about doing, only about fulfilling the preordained plot. In this way, “Plot closed the world to the slenderest line of sight, where everything converges to a point” (174). Action accepted as destiny becomes its own justification; as DeLillo writes, “All he saw

was shock and death. There is no purpose, this is the purpose” (177). Indeed, in his *Harper’s Magazine* essay, DeLillo comments, “Plots reduce the world” (34), which Marco Abel understands as a recurring theme for DeLillo (1249) and which Abel explains by asserting, “Plots reduce the world because plotting constitutes the virtual seed of destruction: al-Qaeda’s plotting ended in the planes’ perfectly staged and executed double impact on the twin towers” (1243). Plots permit the sense that the future is formed and contained by the visions that precede it. Even if alternative choices in fact remain, they go unrecognized because they have become irrelevant.

At the end of the novel, as impact between his plane and the building approaches, Hammad recalls a story an Iraqi veteran once told him of Iranian Shia boys sent in mostly unarmed multitudes to martyr themselves as distractions from equipped soldiers organizing to attack elsewhere (DeLillo, *Falling Man* 238). The sight and sound of their sacrifice had horrified the Iraqi storyteller, for whom the boys’ cries were “Not like something happening yesterday but something always happening, over a thousand years happening, always in the air” (78). But Hammad “took strength from this” (238), perhaps finding himself aligned with them on the “way already chosen” that Amir had outlined (175). Elsewhere, according to Thurschwell, DeLillo has portrayed “the future as pressing in on the present,” but he has regarded “techno-scientific rationality[‘s]...overwhelmingly successful powers of prediction and control...[as rendering] the future, from the point of view of human knowledge and human doubt, the equivalent of the past” (287). Here, however, the very opposite principle – non-techno-scientific, non-rational mortality – effaces the distinction between what has happened before and what will happen again. As Thurschwell writes, “in DeLillo’s work, what is

fundamentally at stake for...ideal types of historical consciousness is not their relationships to chronological time, but rather their relationships to death – to their own death and that of others. What distinguishes the terrorist...is an indifference to her own death and to the death of those she kills” (290). In effect, death *is*, and because of its ever-presence, it suggests a transhistorical link among those who choose to identify themselves with it and against those whose mortality they will leverage. Echoing DeLillo’s words from the *Harper’s* essay, Hammad reminds himself of this principle mode of separation, that “We are willing to die, they are not. This is our strength” (DeLillo, *Falling Man*178). As impact between his plane and the building approaches, Hammad recalls piecemeal directives from the hijackers’ last instructions that focus his attention on the performance of martyrdom in a vacuum of completion apart from the immediate horror of its intended effects.

A Survivor’s Gamble: Dodging the Future While Trying to Prevent the Past

While death haunts Lianne’s future with the specter of prolonged suffering and anoints Hammad’s everyday routines with divine purpose, for Keith, it is a near-fact of his past that invades his present. His haunting by having only narrowly survived a day that killed his friends suggests that nothing is more fated than what has already happened. When Hammad had asked Amir about the people they would kill, Amir had responded, “The others exist only to the degree that they fill the role we have designed for them. This is their function as others” (DeLillo, *Falling Man* 176). Keith and his co-workers, his friends, are those “others,” the human beings on the receiving end of the hijacked planes’ impact who share with the hijackers the time, place, and consequences of their fate, but not their foresight. In a modern era idealizing personal autonomy, sociologist

Anthony Giddens characterizes fateful moments as “times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands, as it were, at a crossroads in his existence”

(*Modernity and Self-Identity* 113). However, Keith lacks the prescience of the hijackers and therefore any opportunity for conscious self-determination. Nevertheless, as Giddens argues, “They are moments when...a decision made, or a specific course of action followed, has an irreversible quality” (114). With or without awareness of implications, Keith’s presence at work on September 11 placed him on an irreversible track, a struggle with the aftermath of his friends’ gruesome deaths and his own chance survival.

Giddens also attributes to the conditions of modernity a preoccupation with circumstance. He asserts, “For where contingency is discovered, or manufactured, situations which seem closed and pre-defined can again look open...The capability to disturb the fixity of things, open up new pathways, and thereby colonise [sic] a segment of a novel future, is integral to modernity’s unsettling character” (*Modernity and Self-Identity* 133). Philosopher Nicholas Rescher conceives of luck as “destabilizing the balance between fate and merit,” superseding merit and suggesting fate because human beings choose and act with incomplete knowledge and power (4), leading to only partially controllable and at times wholly unforeseeable, yet entirely consequential, outcomes.¹⁰⁰ In other words, human ignorance and historical contingency thwart the possibility of accurately predicting the future, making room for the intervention of luck, or a force other than human agency and social determinacy, that can be used to account

¹⁰⁰ Philosopher Michael Gelven considers “fate...chance, destiny, and fortune” to be “kindred notions” (105). In this discussion I use them as distinct, though related, terms: while fate and destiny indicate trajectories toward unavoidable outcomes independent of human agency, chance and fortune, or luck, indicate the forces equally independent of human agency that channel human action.

for why one thing happens and not another, and to a particular person and not to someone else (42; Gelven 8-9). Rescher claims that “luck thrives on vulnerability” (39), noting that disasters, by separating victims from survivors on often seemingly arbitrary bases – such as “being in the wrong place at the wrong time” – especially foreground the kind of explanatory impasse at moments of greatest significance – life and death – that concepts of fortune and fate circumvent (21). In his brief history of probability theory, or “the calculus of chance” (116), Rescher discusses luck’s relationship to the practice of gambling (115-139). In this history, he points out philosophers’ optimistic view of probability theory as “a sign of the capacity of human reason to master the vagaries of uncontrollable circumstance” (138). However, he concludes,

while probability theory is a good guide in matters of gambling, with its predesignated formal structures, it is of limited usefulness as a guide amid the greater fluidities of life. The analogy of life with games of chance has its limits, since we do not and cannot effectively play life by fixed rules, a fact that sharply restricts the extent to which we can render luck amenable to rational principles of measurement and calculation. (138-139)

In effect, he determines that crisis unsettles an individual’s sense of meaningfully directing his or her own life, leading to a suspicion that other, more numinous elements – such as luck – play a decisive role. But any attempt to regain meaningful direction by wresting luck into a more contained framework of discernible cause-and-effect, such as the kinds of probabilities that govern one’s chances in gambling, will prove futile given luck’s characteristic association with the unruly dynamics of lived experience. On the other hand, Gelven also dwells on gambling’s connection to personal control (33-48). He

regards the gambler as possibly celebrating his or her “existence *as* [sic] autonomous from what he does and from those to whom he belongs and even from those by whom he is loved. He earns nothing, deserves nothing, owes nothing, is burdened by no obligation to repay or even to thank” (35). According to this formulation, fate and chance as courted by gambling provide a desired respite from the contained framework of discernible cause-and-effect. The gambler, then, in some ways welcomes the loss of responsibility following a worldview that affirms fate and accepts that “whatever happens must happen” (21). For Gelven, then, “The gambler who affirms the sheer lack of knowledge, determination, and control is delighting in the manifestation of this truth” (37). Although divergent, these views of gambling both posit the practice as a process through which a gambler can negotiate his or her sense of agency.

In *Falling Man*, a few years after September 11, Keith is spending days and weeks at a time in casinos playing poker. Even during his pre-September 11 games with friends, the play was described as “testing the forces that govern events” (DeLillo, *Falling Man* 96), with players “wait[ing] for the prescient moment, the time to make the bet based on the card they knew was coming” (97). These men enjoyed calculated risk under voluntarily- and self-structured conditions (96-99). However, an extended quote from *Falling Man* illustrates how the game enables Keith to compulsively re-enact his accidental survival of September 11, each hand reckoning anew Keith’s ability to influence the circumstances that affect him:

The cards fell randomly, no assignable cause, but he remained the agent of free choice. Luck, chance, no one knew what these things were. These things were only assumed to affect events. He had a measure of calm, of

calculated isolation, and there was a certain logic he might draw on...But the game had structure, guiding principles, sweet and easy interludes of dream logic when the player knows that the card he needs is the card that's sure to fall. Then, always, in the crucial instant ever repeated hand after hand, the choice of yes or no. Call or raise, call or fold, the little binary pulse located behind the eyes, the choice that reminds you who you are. It belonged to him, this yes or no.... (211-212)

At the poker table, Keith could tempt fate and assert choice over and over again, an intentional engagement with the incidental alignments that fell to him without warning at the World Trade Center. In this way, he could remain perpetually suspended between his own choices and any finality of consequence.

The Falling Man

In the first pages of *Falling Man*, when Keith is just making his way from the South Tower's collapse, he hears the second tower's fall and thinks, "That was him coming down, the north tower" (DeLillo 5). Even later in the comfort of home, while watching television footage of the towers' destruction with Lianne, he "thought there he is, unbelievably, in one of those towers, and now his hand on hers...as though to console her for his dying" (134-135). His identification with the building and its demise, the feeling that he came down with the tower even as he continues to move away from it or watch it as recorded history, feeds a specter of fatalism against which he struggles in the wake of survival. This specter manifests bodily in the figure of the "Falling Man," a performance artist who jumps with a harness from high places in public areas throughout the city to recreate the pose and revisit the predicament of the man AP photographer

Richard Drew photographed falling from the World Trade Center on September 11. As DeLillo traces Lianne's thoughts during the first time she witnesses this performance in person, he writes, "It held the gaze of the world...There was the awful openness of it...the single falling figure that trails a collective dread, body come down among us all" (33). For Lianne, this man's actions not only conjure the memory of what could have happened to her husband and might have happened to his friends (167), but somehow also forebode a "collective dread," or a doom permeating not just survivors' but also witnesses' understandings of their own possible fates. In some ways this plight materializes the Biblical fall's mythological recounting of humanity's exile into mortality at the moment of acquiring irreversible, condemning knowledge, or even the fall, as Shakespeare describes, "of Lucifer, never to hope again."¹⁰¹ The Falling Man recreates the horror on September 11 that caused Mayor Giuliani to say, "we're in uncharted waters now" (Junod, "The Falling Man" 179), the conditions contributing to a shared recognition that matters of life and death were, and could be, beyond anyone's power.

About mid-way through the novel, Lianne discusses with her dying mother a painting that reminds Lianne of the twin towers and her mother of something "coming out of another time entirely, another century." Despite the apparent disagreement, her mother asks, "It's all about mortality, isn't it?" to which Lianne responds, "Being human." Her mother echoes immediately, "Being human, being mortal" (DeLillo, *Falling Man* 111). The painting to which they refer is a still life, a genre that conjures in

¹⁰¹ *Falling Man* does make a vague reference to Lucifer, the fallen angel in Biblical mythology. When Lianne reads newspaper accounts of the performance artist's life and eventual death by natural causes, she recalls Drew's photograph as having "burned a hole in her mind and heart, dear God, he was a falling angel and his beauty was horrific" (222).

its oxymoronic moniker the ever-present specter of death in life (Thurschwell 288). Thurschwell reads into much of DeLillo's writing the idea that a "living still life" could be "assigned the task of slowing down the future in the name of the present of lived experience" (291). This approach would contrast with capitalism's occupation of the future, as noted in DeLillo's *Harper's* essay, as well as the hijackers' proud proclamation in *Falling Man*: that they are distinguished from their victims because "We are willing to die, they are not. This is our strength, to love death" (DeLillo 178). Such a claim nuances the choices each character makes when confronting mortality; such a claim conjures questions of what it means as a human being to recognize death, in others but also in one's self. Thurschwell argues, "Death, just because we know that it will occur but do not know when, encroaches on every present moment of our experience – again, if we follow Heidegger this far, it structures the very nature of experience." Moreover, he references Derrida's ruminations that names, by acknowledging a person in his or her absence even while alive, presuppose death, signifying the paradoxical interdependency between the caring reach for someone whose impermanence necessitates that they be reached for. In other words, he concludes, "Without mortality there can be no love" (292). In *Falling Man*, the plight of the trapped victim in freefall looms as the never-ending human condition of terror and doom¹⁰² that mortality poses, and which forms the premise of meaningful human life.

¹⁰² Versluys recognizes how *Falling Man* portrays a never-resolved, ongoing September 11 crisis (20). However, while this approach permits DeLillo to centralize the event's non-redemptive core, which official discourse sought to overlook (23), it poses a kind of melancholia, which in psychoanalytic frameworks contrasts with mourning to produce pervasive unsettlement susceptible to extreme and reactionary responses (48).

Conclusion: Fellowship with the Dead after September 11

I have reviewed here how two of Don DeLillo's post-September 11 writings evince and confront a sense of perpetual crisis in the wake of a day that showcased inescapable vulnerability. In his *Harper's* essay, DeLillo characterizes September 11 as instantly and comprehensively altering daily life, calling the attacks a "catastrophic event [that] changes the way we think and act, moment to moment, week to week, for unknown weeks and months to come, and steely years" ("In the Ruins" 33). In effect, it was a "phenomenon so unaccountable and yet so bound to the power of objective fact that we can't tilt it to the slant of our perceptions" (38-39). DeLillo speculates that "For many people, the event has changed the grain of the most routine moment" (39). His recounting of that morning effectively outlines the cultural trauma phenomenon:

First the planes struck the towers. After a time it became possible for us to absorb this, barely. But when the towers fell. When the rolling smoke began moving downward, floor to floor. This was so vast and terrible that it was outside imagining even as it happened. We could not catch up to it. But it was real, punishingly so, an expression of the physics of structural limits and a void in one's soul, and there was the huge antenna falling out of the sky, straight down, blunt end first, like an arrow moving backward in time.

The event itself has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile. We have to take the shock and horror as it is. But living language is not diminished. The writer wants to understand what this day has done to us...The writer begins in the towers, trying to imagine the moment,

desperately. Before politics, before history and religion, there is the primal terror. (39)

By tracing the intensifying dumbfounding among witnesses, even from afar, as destruction escalated, and describing it as a lagging behind – to the possible point of metaphorically (however inadequately, as DeLillo disclaims) “moving backward in time” with the falling antenna – DeLillo evokes the kind of worldview shattering that I argue constitutes cultural trauma. In effect, there is a present – “the primal terror,” as well as the “shock and horror as it is” – as well as a past that such experiences overtake and a future of interpretive frameworks such as politics, history, and religion that will overwrite those same experiences and render them meaningful beyond the raw moment, in the new world which such previously unknown elements have produced. DeLillo opens *Falling Man* just after the South Tower crumbles, writing, “It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night...The roar was still in the air, the buckling rumble of the fall. This was the world now” (3). He soon adds, “The world was this as well, figures in windows a thousand feet up, dropping into free space, and the stink of fuel fire, and the steady rip of sirens in the air” (4). Specifically for Keith, “These are the days after. Everything now is measured by after” (138). In this new after-world, DeLillo cautions in his 2001 essay, “We may find that the ruin of the towers is implicit in other things” (“In the Ruins” 39), intrinsic to the taken-for-granted cultural landscape that the ruins themselves have created. In fact, he notes, “We are all breathing the fumes of Lower Manhattan, where traces of the dead are everywhere” (39), so that communion with the deceased becomes a living legacy.

At the conclusion of his essay, DeLillo recalls having seen a Muslim woman in prayer facing a store front (but ultimately Mecca) on a Lower Manhattan street a month before September 11. She is expressing personal religious devotion in a space that radical Islamic forces will soon target as the wellspring of godless exploitation by indifferent economic interest. This incidence occasions in his reflection appreciation for “the daily sweeping taken-for-granted greatness of New York,” a city that “will accommodate every language, ritual, belief, and opinion.” From this point-of-view, this woman, at this time, simply by pursuing her own intimate, individual beliefs and practices, becomes part of the nameless, faceless expanse of human diversity that constitutes the city’s identity, and according to DeLillo, its superiority. But the author adds, “In the rolls of the dead of September 11, all these vital differences were surrendered to the impact and the flash...the dead are their own nation and race...a union of souls.” He concludes by characterizing the hadj as a ritual through which participants remember “in prayer their fellowship with the dead.” Of course, after September 11, this prayerful action by a Muslim would likely lose its innocent anonymity and accrue enhanced susceptibility to fear and prejudice, as would the essay’s final words: “*Allahu akbar*. God is great” (“In the Ruins” 40), also the final words of the United flight 93 hijackers (Hirschhorn). When annihilating violence – whether economic, political, or religious – overwrites any impulse to live and let live, perhaps death alone, as a universally shared and inescapable fate, can offer the common ground necessary to impel earnest community.¹⁰³ Indeed, as DeLillo writes, “People falling from the towers

¹⁰³ Thurschwell envisions a “loving acceptance of the mortality inscribed not only in our physical selves but in our language as well,” positing that DeLillo’s essay provides “an affirmation of mourning and imaginative identification with one’s other, and the potential

hand in hand. This is part of the counter-narrative, hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel” (“In the Ruins” 39). But as *Falling Man* illustrates, with its main characters retreating from their human connections before and after September 11, sometimes separation from others in denial of this commonality offers a tempting, phantom alternative: that we can forestall such an outcome, and arrest the present in never-ending suspense between conditions and their consequences.

for community that they offer” (297). In *Falling Man*, Nina’s lover Martin tells Lianne, “I am always your mother’s lover. Long before I knew her. Always that. It was waiting to happen” (DeLillo 193), a profession of destined, never-ending love that counterbalances the more sinister fatefulness coloring the other characters’ life trajectories.

Conclusion: September 11, 2001, Cultural Trauma, and Beyond

When hijackers seized and crashed four passenger-filled commercial aircraft on the morning of September 11, 2001, disaster struck literally out of the clear blue sky. Regardless of what those in positions of political, military, or intelligence authority might or might not have known about the possibilities for a domestic terrorist incident, ultimately the victims, survivors and witnesses most directly affected by these coordinated attacks – like the victims, survivors, and witnesses of many crises – never anticipated what would befall them that day and shape their subsequent life trajectories. As events at the World Trade Center unfolded on live television, an unprecedented viewing audience watched confounding developments lead to thousands dying or just barely evading death. Although most of these deaths and narrow escapes occurred invisibly within the airplanes, the Pentagon, the North and South Towers, and the dense debris cloud following those two buildings' collapse, witnesses both on site in Lower Manhattan and through the media would see one person after another jump to sure death on the streets below when conditions within the burning towers became untenable. Media audiences would also hear recordings or read transcripts of the last messages of trapped plane travelers or office workers left on their loved ones' telephone answering machines. They would also come to learn, through the cases of United Flight 93 and the hundreds of emergency responder casualties, that heroism is potentially both demanded of everyone and a posture with a costly price. By the end of the day, witnesses would have confronted relentless illustrations of unforeseeable and seemingly arbitrary fate under circumstances of the highest stakes: marking the difference between life and death.

While public policy makers determined and framed formal, institutional responses to this barrage, with the Bush administration terming its approach a “War on Terror,”¹⁰⁴ what was the broader cultural impact of this kind of mass witnessing? What were the dominant implicit concerns for an American public without whose support, or at least acquiescence, these more formal, institutional responses would have been less likely to emerge and be implemented? Here, I took one approach to addressing these questions by drawing on and eventually departing from trauma theory in the fields of psychology, sociology, and literary and cultural studies to refine a theory of cultural trauma. I began by examining particular psychological theories that conceptualize trauma as shattering fundamental assumptions about how the world works and where one fits within it as these have been formed through childhood development. I then presented a cultural conception of trauma as shattering fundamental assumptions formed throughout the belief- and practice-shaping processes of cultural groups. Rather than sharing the focus on melancholia and dissociation that pervades trauma scholarship in literary and cultural studies, this approach places meaning, knowledge, and power at the crux of traumatic rupture by articulating how an extreme event can disrupt a community’s worldview, leaving members in the aftermath vulnerably attuned to that event’s specific self- and worldview violations.

September 11 provoked among many Americans anxious attempts to reconcile themselves to the fact of living in a dangerous world. While the assumptions explored here about security and individual choice might not always be validated by reality, and

¹⁰⁴ McAlister observes that “the Bush administration...stress[ed] what many people in the United States already felt” (439), emphasizing a sense of shock at unprecedented events that could soften receptivity to unprecedented responses (440).

they might not be taken for granted outside of the US or within persistently unprotected American populations, they shape a sufficiently consistent set of longstanding expectations to qualify as the implicit presumptions underlying dominant views of everyday American experience. Indeed, the very fact that a crisis could notably invalidate these presumptions underscores both their existence and their always provisional reflection of reality.

While a variety of methodologies can be used to explore the worldview-shattering aftereffects of cultural trauma, I have chosen popular culture texts for my investigation of September 11 as a cultural trauma. As noted in the Methodology section of this project's Introduction, popular culture serves as a site for commonly-accessible meaning formations and negotiations. As a result, popular narratives provide a rich resource for recognizing and examining challenges to dominant cultural beliefs. Throughout my exploration I have drawn on a cultural studies understanding of popular culture as a site of struggle (Hall 237), where "cultural forms...[can be] deeply contradictory" (233) as their signs and their significations prove fluid and dynamic (237-238). While mainstream oral history collections, magazines, television series and documentaries, films, and novels sometimes participate in the dominant discourses of their conditions of production – namely, tendencies to reinforce prevailing beliefs and values and recuperate hegemonic stability (or to avoid "rocking the boat") by seeking to recover, however ambivalently and incompletely, notions of national community (popular press oral histories), individualism ("The Falling Man"), religious pluralism ("Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero"), and democratic values and civic justice (*Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *FlashForward*, and *The Dark Knight*) – they are not, as Hall advises, "purely

manipulative...because...there are also elements of recognition and identification, something approaching a recreation of recognisable experiences and attitudes, to which people are responding” (233). As I have demonstrated through my approach of cultural narrative criticism, each of these texts in somewhat different and complex ways shapes how September 11 challenged mainstream American beliefs. Importantly, then, which a phenomenological mode highlights (Carroll, Tafoya, and Nagel), readers and viewers can interact with these texts as if they offered something familiar while also, in the process of consumption, occasioning something new. In effect, these assumptions’ shattering suggests less a genuine change in the environment, whose broadest circumstances likely remain stable from the time preceding a trauma through its aftermath, and more a sudden change in people’s awareness of that environment’s habitually overlooked characteristics and possibilities.

Through Chapter One, I considered how three popular press oral history collections have narrativized September 11 with stories that foreground individual vulnerability and feelings of helplessness while explicitly linking the tellers of such stories, with their first-hand experiences, to their readers, who hail from throughout the United States. In this way, *New York Times* journalist Dean E. Murphy’s 2002 *September 11: An Oral History*, former *New York Daily News* gossip columnist Mitchell Fink and his wife Lois Matthias’s 2002 *Never Forget: An Oral History of September 11*, and writer, actor, and Drew University Theater Arts instructor Damon DiMarco’s 2007 *Tower Stories: An Oral History of 9/11* create sites of shared meaning formations around an occurrence recounted through anecdotes of existential insecurity and lack of personal agency. As such, these collections characterize September 11 as a national calamity with

as-yet unresolved implications for notions of personal safety and choice, signaling an ongoing struggle of cultural trauma for eyewitnesses and media witnesses alike.

In Chapter Two, I assessed how two popular culture texts, Tom Junod's 2003 *Esquire* article "The Falling Man" and the 2002 Public Broadcasting Service's (PBS) *Frontline* documentary "Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero," addressed the aftereffects of witnessing World Trade Center victims jump to their deaths. Specifically, I looked at how these sites within distinct media genres featured significant reflection about how such deaths exposed and disrupted cultural expectations about suicide, dying in public, and the role of those who witness such terrifying situations. I reviewed how this men's magazine and this television documentary both regarded these particular deaths as posing enduring, culturally-problematic dilemmas about the individual's ability to choose his or her own fate, especially under horrific circumstances, offering insight into why compassion in the face of vulnerability can prove challenging, if not unlikely.

For Chapter Three, I selected the post-September 11 series *Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *FlashForward* as a sampling from primetime television that indicates a sustained interest in the themes of world-changing threats and calls for heroic response. I noted that while a common post-trauma response among individuals features a repetitive confrontation with the original event, these shows facilitate a narrative fetishization through which features of the initial trauma of September 11 – such as sudden and inescapable death, even for rescuers, under extreme conditions – are instantiated repeatedly without resolution. In effect, I argued that these separate television series each fixate on fate as the principle sign of limited human agency, especially in the face of mortality. In this way, these fantasy and science fiction programs echo the preoccupations

of the other popular texts discussed in the preceding two chapters, namely pervasive, culturally traumatic concerns with constrained choice and inevitable death.

In Chapter Four, I evaluated the extent to which Christopher Nolan's 2008 film *The Dark Knight* serves as site for showcasing the ethical quandaries notably characterizing the September 11 attacks while drawing viewers, likely witnesses of that day – if only from afar – into engaging the dramatized dilemmas that have real-world corollaries. By staging exigencies with resonances to September 11 and few, if any, morally unproblematic solutions, I asserted that *The Dark Knight* invites viewers to weigh protagonists' responses to the film's "terrorist," The Joker, against analogous responses to the hijackings. In this way, I concluded, this popular culture text explores and involves its audience in the culturally traumatic challenges of responsible action in the wake of September 11.

Chapter Five featured discussion of two of Don DeLillo's post-September 11 writings: the December 2001 *Harper's Magazine* essay titled, "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September" and the 2007 novel *Falling Man*. I considered how this essay and novel touch on themes that resonate with concerns pervading the other texts discussed in this dissertation: perpetual irresolution regarding survivors' and victims' lack of control over their own fates, disconcertment with the dilemma of those who jumped to their deaths from the World Trade Center to escape death from the smoke and heat inside those buildings, and the ongoing moral complexities deriving from that day's display of compromised subjectivity and agency. I focused on how the idea of fate permeates his novel, with constrained choice as a way not only to shape the life trajectories of the book's principal characters, but also to summon a

larger sense of contemporary perpetual, pervasive doom. Ultimately, I explored how this approach foregrounds the ever-present doom of mortality, evoked in the novel by the figure of the “falling man,” or anonymous World Trade Center victim jumping to his death. In this way, I argued that DeLillo’s essay and novel suggest death itself could pose grounds for ethical community after September 11, a suggestion that reflects a fundamental troubling of cultural formations regarding existential security and meaningful choice.

Much more work can be done to flesh out September 11 as a cultural trauma. Although the texts evaluated here each featured oral history participants, documentary and magazine interviewees, and television, film, and novel characters from a variety of social locations, such efforts at inclusion seemed to be aimed most often at a “multicultural inflection,” or a gesture toward diversity rather than an interrogation of whether and how distinct racial, sexual, religious, or other differences might matter. Methodologies such as life history can further complicate the dominant narratives addressed here by fixing greater attention to dimensions of difference within these texts and within the broader appellation “American readers and viewers.” For example, I have already alluded in the Cultural Trauma and September 11 section of the Introduction to the specific predicaments of Muslim- and Arab-identified individuals in the wake of September 11, as well as to the situations of oppressed minority groups whose relationships to mainstream beliefs is already problematic. More work can be done to examine how the notion of cultural trauma might manifest within the particular circumstances and shared belief systems of groups who are alienated from the dominant culture. Such increasingly refined consideration of different cultural communities poses

an important next step for understanding in greater depth and breadth the cultural aftereffects of September 11.

This dissertation has introduced a theory of cultural trauma that helps contextualize how narratives within oral history, magazines, television, film and literature have confronted September 11, 2001 in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It also offers a model for using popular culture to investigate the effects of other instances of large-scale, large-scope cultural change. Specifically, this study suggests a possible way to understand cultural trauma by first describing a precipitating event, then looking to narrative as a mode of foregrounding and negotiating the features and aftereffects of the initiating crisis that disrupt a community's culturally-situated, foundational beliefs and values. I argue that popular culture forms provide sites for engaging cultural trauma by instantiating and spurring the recalibration and rehabilitation of thwarted expectations in the aftermath of meaning disruption. Assessing what expectations have been thwarted and whether they are restored or revised can offer enhanced clarity about a cultural group's interests, inclinations, and investments, fertile ground for identifying and generating support or resistance for future action.

This approach could be useful for other historical circumstances and other instances of cultural trauma. Early modern European confrontations with the revelation that the Earth revolves around the sun presents one possibility, but as a more recent, US example, the Civil War provoked stark changes for a variety of cultural groups, most significantly in the South among both former slaveholders and former slaves. Although Ron Eyerman has explored slavery and the formation of African-American identity in terms of his formulation of cultural trauma, what else might be said, particularly of the

post-slavery residue – Confederate flags, Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest license plates, and all – still permeating cultural representations of the “South?” What can be understood about the significations of the “South” through ongoing struggles to recalibrate or rehabilitate fundamental assumptions shattered over a century-and-a-half ago? Extrapolating from this example to envision other potential directions, what could narrative and popular culture evoke about the meaning for any cultural group whose role in victimization – either as victimizer or victimized – contradicts deeply- and dearly-held foundations for communal identities and practices? While post-World War II German and Jewish communities have wrestled with such questions, the terms of cultural trauma as articulated here contribute to the effort to recognize the historical and cultural specificity of a traumatic event while being responsive to its historically- and culturally-specific aftereffects. These are but tentative speculations about future contexts for examining the notion of cultural trauma.

To conclude, I select quotes from each chapter of this project that summon the haunting and foreboding corona of September 11, 2001:

“Either way, I would have been dead” (qtd. in Fink and Mathias 45).

“We have known who the Falling Man is all along” (Junod, “The Falling Man” 199).

“Nothing to do with all your strength” (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*).

“But if we can't live together—we're gonna die alone” (“White Rabbit”).

“These were the days after and now the years” (DeLillo, *Falling Man* 230).

However, I want to finish by revisiting DeLillo’s provocative vision for justice after September 11 partly because it aligns with the delicate ethics implicitly or explicitly

posited by each of this dissertation's preceding chapters and also because its irresolution or suspended response derives from a text that more committedly refuses recuperation of any kind. In effect, whether through post-September 11 oral history, television documentary and fiction, magazines, film, and literature, fractured senses of meaning, control, and responsibility have exposed both our common ultimate vulnerability in death and the challenging potential such universality poses for fostering ethical human relationships.

I had mentioned in Chapter Two that both David Simpson's *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* and Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* have called for a relational ethics that would anchor reactions to traumas such as September 11 in constructive, that is to say, just, postures for action. Yet while Simpson and Butler envision in different ways how human suffering and vulnerability can serve as grounds for ethical action, neither tailors such a vision to the ways in which a cultural trauma such as September 11 specifically problematizes how people see the world and their relationship to it, particularly in terms of their ability to maintain personal safety and productive agency. In other words, both Simpson's and Butler's ethical critiques depend upon clear, identifiable conceptions of "good" or "right" choices because they lead to intended outcomes; we have only to subscribe to an ethics that motivates us to choose correctly. To me, neither framework seems to fully take into account the aftermath of an event that features disproportionate and undesired outcomes for actors that undermine cultural frameworks for determining what constitutes "good" or "right" choices.¹⁰⁵ For

¹⁰⁵ In her 2002 *Social Text* essay, "Explanation and Exoneration, of What We Can Hear," Butler does briefly raise these kinds of questions – for example, "What can I do with the conditions that form me? What do they constrain me to do?" – in a discussion critiquing

example, on September 11, witnesses soon came to realize that Windows on the World employees showed up for work only to confront the previously inconceivable dilemma of whether to jump from the North Tower to their deaths or to stay within the building and die by smoke and fire. I have argued here that this profound dilemma of facing only “bad” or “wrong” choices (the Morton’s Fork scenario) persists as an unresolved anomaly within cultural formations of what individuals can know about and do in their world. From this juncture of trauma, culture, and September 11, my project has asserted that cultural trauma, characterizing survivors and witnesses born of fearful, helplessness-inducing threats, provides a volatile and dubious terrain from which to draw clear and constructive social and political responses.

Butler looks to the phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas to inform her approach to an ethics attending to the precariousness of human life (*Precarious Life* 131-146). Yet she qualifies her exploration of “the question of the human” by asserting, “We start here not because there is a human condition that is universally shared – this is surely not yet the case” (20). She then continues her arguments by summoning a “tenuous ‘we’” based on the common susceptibility to loss (20), I want to suggest that, as Becker and Liechty, even Berger and Luckmann, and to some extent also DeLillo, have claimed, death, and the fear and denial of death, in fact *do* comprise a common human experience however

the lack of US institutional recognition of how the nation contributed to the conditions that shaped the September 11 hijackers (187). However, she does not explicitly extend this recognition of conditions and constraints to an in-depth discussion of what kinds of limitations might complicate the possibilities, success and support of non-violent options of American foreign policy.

singularly felt and therefore *do* constitute a shared human condition.¹⁰⁶ It is this condition that underlies the horrific knowledge and power of trauma; the resistance of others to those who embody the world-shattering horror of trauma; and yet also the potential for mutuality through acknowledgement of this particular shared, inescapable vulnerability. Trauma exposes survivors and witnesses to the contingencies of human fate, which could produce, rather than resistant fear, compassionate engagement in hope with the vulnerable Other, who is also yourself.

¹⁰⁶ Giesen writes, “The fundamental certainty about our being born and our being destined to die contrasts strikingly with the inaccessibility of these events for ourselves.” In other words, we know these distinctly intimate ordeals only by watching others go through them, so that communal experience – at least regarding death – always precedes individual experience, and trauma occasions a brush with what was almost real for one’s self (8).

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