Deflecting Absence: 9/11 Fiction and the Memorialization of Change

ABSTRACT: "Deflecting Absence: 9/11 Fiction and the Memorialization of Change" is an interdisciplinary examination of the way in which post 9/11 texts have been instrumental in memorializing the event as a moment of radical historical departure. Focusing on fiction through the reading of seminal 9/11 literary texts including *Falling Man*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and Amy Waldman's *The Submission*, the article deals with the internal contradictions at work both in reading and writing about works of 9/11 fiction and the way in which such texts eternally memorialize the discourse of change. Examining these literary texts alongside "Reflecting Absence," the 9/11 memorial site, Spike Lee's film *25th Hour*, and a broader discussion of the implications of the cultural discourse offered through these texts, the article exposes the disjuncture between 9/11 texts' desire to memorialize the event as the moment that 'everything changed' and the missed opportunities for radical political change which followed.

KEYWORDS: 9/11 Fiction; Memorial Culture; Reflecting Absence; Falling Man; Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

"It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night."

Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*

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The opening line of Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* evokes a moment of apocalyptic reckoning. Recalling the imagery of Pompeii, it asks the reader to envision the victims of 9/11 fossilized in their moment of terror as they flee screaming from the suffocating cloud of ash and dust created in the wake of the towers' collapse. Like the people of Pompeii they too have been frozen for eternity, memorialized as they are in the footage of the attacks and in the swathe of cultural re-imaginings that followed. Akin to that archetypal disaster scene, it is not so much the eruption itself which is recalled but those who were left behind; the powerful image of the town's ashen people who, like history's messengers speaking their warning of the sublime power of the world over the individual, retain a resonance long after their departure.

This image articulates a constant tension between the desire to memorialize 9/11 and attempts to move beyond the tragedy into the wider expanse of the twenty-first century. That this street stretches far beyond its bounds, reconfiguring the world as it goes, demonstrates the hyperbolic way in which 9/11 is defined in such texts. Indeed, in post 9/11 narratives the date has tended to be employed as a structuring device in order to establish the moment as a kind of temporal impasse. We are reminded of this overtly in *Falling Man*'s Chapter 9 which concludes with, "thirty-six days after the planes," an indication that time is stratified, leaving behind only a before and an after (170). It is as if the planes themselves have forcibly split time, cleaving it in two as they hurtle towards historical destiny and inevitable catastrophe.

This device is used by DeLillo on multiple occasions to bridge between passages of time but the compulsion towards measuring elapsed time since 9/11/2001 is not an attempt at temporal distancing as it may, on the surface, appear to be (8, 34, 170). Instead, it reinforces the notion that not only is 9/11 present in the text at that

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moment, the planes seeming to erupt from some subconscious space in order to *inter*rupt the narrative flow, but that it has always been present in the text to the point at which these eruptions structure the text's very existence. There is no indication that this counting will ever stop. What happens when the characters reach hundreds and then thousands of days after the planes? It is as if, in order to imbue meaning, a myth is developed around the event which perpetuates this distinction in time epitomized by that popular claim that on 9/11/2001 'everything changed.'

This claim is described by David Sterritt as "conventional wisdom," (64) but has been challenged by critics such as Isabelle Freda who suggests that, "While everywhere people felt that "everything had changed," this sense of a break was far in excess of the attacks" (238). In "Melancholic and Hungry Games: post 9/11 Cinema and the Culture of Apocalypse," citing Barrack Obama's 2008 election campaign slogan, "Change we can believe in," I argued that the recent growth in apocalyptic culture can be linked to a catastrophic loss of belief in political change caused directly by the missed opportunities for progressive and utopian rebirth in the aftermath of 9/11. Here I wish to take that argument further in order to consider the way in which post 9/11 texts often use the moment as a disjuncture, in doing so justifying the ongoing memorialization of 9/11 and actively historicizing it as the point of rupture, the point at which, rather than meekly bleeding into the twenty-first, the twentieth century instead literally erupts in a radical transformation of the socio-political landscape of the 'West.' Through the readings of a number of post 9/11 texts, focusing on *Falling Man*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, *25th Hour*, *The Submission*, and "Reflecting Absence" (the 9/11 memorial site), I argue that post 9/11 texts, even when attempting to critique the myth of 9/11, serve only to reinforce that

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myth through the memorialization of the event as the defining moment of the twenty-first century.

In his foundational text *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes proposes that myth is a form of "depoliticized speech" suggesting that, "Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. . . . It organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth. . . . things appear to mean something by themselves" (143). Myth is "depoliticized speech" not because it does not have a political implication, or even sometimes motivation, but because it masks the political reality behind its construction. It may be the case that simply by "talk[ing] about" 9/11 these texts help to generate the myth they seek to expose, but not only this, by setting 9/11 apart from other events in the way that they do, post 9/11 works of fiction engage in a more universal effort to reclaim it as a moment which changed the world.

In John Duvall and Robert Marzec's "Narrating 9/11," which opens the *Modern Fiction Studies* special issue commemorating a decade of 9/11 culture, they are distinctly critical of the single-mindedness of many critics who they see as seeking to attack post 9/11 fiction. My intention is not to suggest that all of the works mentioned here lack nuance or that they do not at least attempt to critique the 9/11 myth. Indeed, a primary reason behind the canonization of DeLillo and Foer's texts in the fledgling genre of 9/11 fiction is the way in which their narratives challenge that very mythos. What I am proposing is rather that, inadvertently, such texts can only contribute to the preservation of the discourse they so keenly attempt to expose.

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Stephanie Hoth claims that: "When an event is declared to be historical, it gains the quality of a caesura which divides the world into a 'before' and an 'after'" (286). The texts in question here affirm this relationship in reverse, however, *declaring* the event historical *through* the division of their fictional world-spaces into a before and an after. In choosing to establish 9/11 as the fulcrum of a narrative the author is bound to the notion that the day is a point of change, an apocalyptic juncture after which the lives of the characters are turned upside-down. For example, Oskar, a nine-year-old boy whose Father died on 9/11 and who narrates Jonathan Safran Foer's 2005 novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, refers not to the event itself but more frequently to "the worst day," echoing DeLillo's refusal to name the day directly but in doing so reinforcing its continued centrality to the narrative's action (12).

In other texts it is what is *not* said about 9/11 which creates the impression of a deep and silent shift in the consciousness of those who happen to be close to the event. Joseph O'Neil's 2009 *Netherland* is an interesting example of this: a novel which, whilst seemingly indebted to 9/11, barely references the day at all. The novel, set primarily in New York, centers on the upheaval in the life of its protagonist, Hans van den Broek, in the wake of September 11, 2001. Importantly, it would seem that the break down of his marriage is in some way connected to that day as if it were the cause of a rift between Hans and his wife or the catalyst for the revival of some underlying problem. Perhaps Hans in seeking to cope with and explain his marital difficulties has merely projected them onto 9/11, or perhaps the attacks really did have an impact; this is left for the reader to surmise. What becomes important is the reader's desire to apportion blame for this breakup which leaves 9/11 as both a

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convenient point of historical departure and as the marker of a change in personal attitudes.

Similarly, in Mohsin Hamid's 2007 novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, 9/11 sits uncomfortably at the center as a tipping point for its protagonist, Changez's, experience of the American Dream, a multicultural paradise which is fractured by the racial divisions created by the day. But these fissures are already visible beneath the surface of a narrative in which, early on, he describes himself as "well-liked as an exotic acquaintance" (19). A further example can be seen in *Saturday*, Ian McEwan shaping his narrative around the idea that 9/11 has precipitated a fundamental adjustment in perception; "Everyone agrees, airliners look different in the sky these days, predatory or doomed," suggesting that after 9/11 'we' *see* the world as a more dangerous place (16). In both these narratives, then, it is not so much that 9/11 brings into being something entirely new, merely that it brings some underlying danger to the forefront of consciousness.

An alternative presentation, showing 9/11's potential for *positive* change, can be seen in long-time New Yorker Spike Lee's film *25th Hour*, an early response to the event in which the narrative is set overtly in a post 9/11 environment. After the protagonist, Monty (Edward Norton), finds and rescues a badly beaten dog, Doyle, the credit sequence begins laid over a series of images of the temporary 9/11 memorial.[1] 9/11 is implicitly made the point of departure in a film whose plot is centered on issues of crime and justice. Whilst its impact appears to be peripheral to the actual progression of the narrative, nonetheless, it represents the point of origin for an underlying division within the film (rather than a sense of unity like that which supposedly took over New York in the aftermath) which occurs not just in its

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temporality, but also in the relationship between characters and other characters, and characters and New York City itself.

During a monologue in which Monty speaks angrily in front of a bathroom mirror he attacks the people of New York and, eventually, Osama bin Laden. Although the rant is not exclusively racist, as he opens with, "fuck you and this whole city, and everyone in it," he goes on to express his anger at "Sikhs" and "Pakistanis" who he describes as "terrorists in training." His anger towards Osama bin Laden is no doubt a reflection of the feelings of many in New York after the attacks; Monty continues: "Fuck Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, and backward-ass cave-dwelling fundamentalist assholes everywhere. In the names of innocent thousands murdered, I pray you spend the rest of eternity with your whores roasting in a jet-fuel fire in hell." But the 9/11 attacks are merely a deflection, emphasized through the reflective surface of the mirror against which he spews his scorn, they are not the real focus of Monty's rage. However much he tries to redirect his anger, eventually he has to admit that it is his own life, his own choices and criminality that he should resent: "Let an earthquake crumble it, let the fires rage, let it burn to fucking ash, and then let the waters rise and submerge this whole rat-infested place. No. No. Fuck you, Montgomery Brogan. You had it all, and you threw it away, you dumb fuck!" Monty cannot escape the image staring back at him and he cannot blame 9/11 for all the problems in his life.

This aside seems to juxtapose the positive inflection of 9/11 as a moment with the potential for reshaping individual destiny presented in the rest of the film. Lee promotes an attachment towards Monty, established from the outset when he rescues Doyle. Despite the fact that he is obviously guilty of his crime as a drug dealer

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(notably we see little of this side of Monty – surely to protect the spectator/character bond), the spectator is left hoping for his escape, an option Lee crystallizes in an imagined possible ending during which we see him escape west with his Father and start a new life for himself with his girlfriend Naturelle (Rosario Dawson). His criminality is a specter from his time before he rescues Doyle and, importantly also, from before 9/11. It is tempting to see this time distinction as offering a *tabula rasa* to those in the wake of 9/11. Not only is it a departure in history, it is also a moment of real life change for those characters on a personal level. The one thing we are certain of is that Monty has changed, whether it is because of his impending prison sentence, his rescue of Doyle, or 9/11 itself, we cannot be sure.

At the same time as these works of fiction offer something concrete onto which can be projected the neuroses of a post 9/11 terrorized society, they are more explicitly works about fear and trauma and as such struggle to expand their scope outside that of the individual's experience of the event. Thus, these texts fail to define the post 9/11 age as anything radically different from the world that preceded it. 9/11 has become the frame or structure upon which to hang attempts to rationalize the present, and yet, like the World Trade Center buildings themselves, it is an empty signifier. The buildings may have been interpreted as a signifier of America's power and of the undisputed rule of capitalism, but their collapse did not instigate the collapse of that which was supposedly signified. Just as these fictional works fail to articulate any tangible difference outside of the lives of particular characters who may have been directly affected by the event, it is hard to identify exactly what has changed in its wake. 9/11 fiction, and not to mention much of the related non-fiction produced since, has not only proclaimed 9/11 as an event productive of change, but

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even more as an event which *changed everything*, that has, in effect, reordered the world. And yet, such a response is both disproportionate and restrictive of the resulting post 9/11 discourse.

To compound this, the reading of statements about 9/11 as indicative of the undeniable 'truth' of the 9/11 *changed everything* fiction has created a scenario in which it is impossible to disregard this myth without in some way contributing to it. Slavoj Žižek's notion of America waking up to the 'desert of the real' – through which he in fact argues not that America suddenly became aware of the 'real' in that the pain and trauma of the outside world was glimpsed and somehow assimilated on 9/11, but that 9/11, instead, changed America's experience of its own sense of 'reality' – has been hijacked and now often sits happily alongside *Washington Post* columnist George Will's assertion the day after the attacks that America's 'Holiday from History' was now over. It would, thus, seem almost impossible to make any kind of statement about 9/11 without, in doing so, adding fuel to the same tired argument. Of course, many of these statements were made in the immediate aftermath of the attacks when feelings were still particularly raw. Even DeLillo, in his article for *Harper's Magazine* on 21st December 2001 described the event on the scale of a grand-narrative, saying that: "All this changed on September 11. Today, again, the world narrative belongs to terrorists" (33).

Fiction has subsequently, and often reductively, followed and echoed these early knee-jerk reactions to the event and continued to propagate this narrative. However, terrorism, fear, US imperialism, radical nationalism, religious fundamentalism, random acts of violence, restrictions of liberty: none of these concepts which have been used to define the post 9/11 era are new. In their book,

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America Between the Wars, Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier begin by stating that, "Although 9/11 created the illusion that America's purpose was once again clear . . . the questions America grappled with in the first decade after the Cold War remain unanswered" (xv). Indeed, the lack of coherency with regards to US foreign policy in the years following September 11 – the war in Iraq, President Obama's dropping of the term 'War on Terror', and his inability to close Guantanamo Bay standing as the most overt of examples – suggest rather that indecision and contradiction have been the hallmarks of the US political reaction to 9/11.

So, how is it then that post 9/11 fiction continues to obstinately claim that *everything changed*? The false predication of these works of fiction seems to be centered on their tendency to focus their stories on the individual only to then, as a kind of sleight of hand move, apply these individualized impacts outwards, projecting them onto an unsuspecting world in that very American way of claiming that 9/11 was not an attack on the US, or an attack on capitalism, but that it was an attack on 'freedom'. This is, surely, a displacement of convenience.

This type of projection is exemplified in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* which organizes its narrative around adventure and discovery. Oskar's search for the lock that fits his father's key is the spur for an exploration of New York City not as it was, but as it is after September 11: inhabited by the pain and individualized stories which grew out of the attacks. As Oskar, with the aid of his estranged Grandfather, traverses the city in an attempt to meet everyone with the surname Black (the name on the envelope in which Oskar finds the key) he uncovers a network of personal grief. To this extent, Foer's novel is representative of a widespread characterization of the 9/11 attacks as both a national trauma and yet at the same time as a vast web of

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individual tales of tragedy and heroism, recalling those faces of the missing which sprung up on posters all over Manhattan, or the "Portraits of Grief" printed in the *New York Times*.[2] This effaces the differing proximities of those who witnessed the event, blurring the lines between victims, survivors, those who saw it unfolding first-hand, those who lost loved ones, and the majority whose experience was *media*ted through television, newspaper, or internet coverage.

There is no doubt that 9/11 was a mediated event. It was an event that for most was experienced entirely through the media. To go one step further, as a mythic event perceptions of it have since been constructed and shaped by differing forms of media. Of the obsessive television coverage of 9/11 Winston Wheeler Dixon asks, "Is this catharsis or exploitation? Can one pay respect to the dead through silence alone?" (12). But perhaps here the point could be made that the television coverage never even made pretense towards paying respect. Neither, for that matter, was it necessarily intentionally exploitative. On some level, the camera's fixed gaze merely echoed the state of shock which gripped the nation and indeed most of the world. It was a candid response to the spectacle itself, mimicking the gaze of one so gripped by the sublimity of the scene that they cannot turn their camera away in order to flee.

The resulting coverage looked undeniably like a scene from a Hollywood disaster movie and several texts have attempted to deal with the perverse gaze of the spectators who it would seem share a sense of horror, repulsion, and simultaneous attraction upon witnessing the 9/11 act. In *Falling Man* we are told that, "Every time she saw a videotape of the planes she moved a finger toward the power button on the remote. Then she kept on watching" (134). And, in a more troubling adaptation of this moment, Mohsin Hamid has narrator Changez smile when he turns on the television

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and sees the footage in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (83). Such spectators are not simply passive receivers, but become in some way complicit in the destruction both for the fact that they were most likely the intended targets of the footage and also for the way in which they greedily consume the images.

Falling Man deals more explicitly with the contrast between those who experienced the event first-hand and those who were drawn to their television sets.[3] The novel isolates the survivor in several ways. Protagonist Keith's brief affair with Florence, another survivor of the attack with whom he subsequently shares a special bond despite their estrangement, differentiates them. Despite their obvious connection, Keith and Florence deal with the event in polar opposite ways. Florence obsessively retells the story of her journey down the stairs of the tower, saying that, "I feel like I'm still on the stairs. . . . If I live to be a hundred I'll still be on the stairs" (57). Keith, however, keeps his own experience bottled inside and *his* trauma is not revealed until the very end of the novel during which we return to the day itself and to a brutal account of Keith's attempt to rescue his mutilated friend Rumsey. It is not until this point that we are told he is "Keith Neudecker," as if the revelation of his full name in the final pages brings with it the understanding that it is during these moments in the tower when his true identity is shaped and established (239).

It is the graphic nature of this final scene which underlines the different levels of experience. The novel rejects the sanitized version of the event presented by the media in favor of, on occasion, gruesome detail. Whilst Keith is at the hospital we are told, in disturbing fashion, the literal way in which the terror gets under the skin:

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"In those places where it happens, the survivors, the people nearby who are injured, sometimes, months later, they develop bumps, for lack of a better term, and it turns out this is caused by small fragments, tiny fragments of the suicide bomber's body. The bomber is blown to bits, literally bits and pieces, and fragments of flesh and bone come flying outwards with such force and velocity that they get wedged, they get trapped in the body of anyone who's in striking range. Do you believe it? A student is sitting in a café. She survives the attack. Then, months later, they find these little, like, pellets of flesh, human flesh that got driven into the skin. They call this organic shrapnel." (16)

The effectiveness of the novel relies on its ability to interchange between the mundane lives of its characters, as they seek to renormalize their existence, and these kinds of detailed and horrific narrative interruptions which lay embedded in their psyches.

Importantly, Keith *is* a survivor and, thus, his children in the novel do not suffer in the same way as Oskar Schell in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. The children in *Falling Man* instead participate in the construction of the 9/11 myth themselves by knowingly creating the false character of Bill Lawton:

"He was hearing Bill Lawton. They were saying bin Laden. . . . So, together," he said, "they developed the myth of Bill Lawton."

"Katie's got to know the real name. She's way too smart. She probably keeps the other name going precisely because it's the wrong name." . . .

"Searching the skies for Bill Lawton." (73-74)

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What is particularly interesting about this is that Bill Lawton is not really the children's mythical creation at all, but rather the creation of the media. To an extent the children are satirizing the media's coverage of bin Laden. It is through the television that the children mishear the information and construe further meanings from it, but their myth reads just like a tabloid newspaper cutting: "Bill Lawton has a long beard. He wears a long robe," he said. "He flies jet planes and speaks thirteen languages but not English except to his wives. What else? He has the power to poison what we eat but only certain foods. They're working on the list" (74). As the children compile ways in which bin Laden can threaten them in their daily lives, so too do the media and the US government. Their mishearing also serves to highlight the cultural gap between Islamic nations and the US which on its own terms cannibalizes the names of its attackers through mispronunciation and in doing so entirely fails to understand its 'enemies'. The myth extends beyond simply the name to an implication of polygamy that is not just restricted to bin Laden himself but is also used as a model for the figure of the Arab more generally in US culture. Whilst there is evidently a lack of understanding about terrorism and Islam portrayed here, it is also intentional: Katie is "too smart" not to know the truth behind the myth, but she plays along with it simply because myth building is self-perpetuating. In a similar way, the idea of creating a list of certain foods that Bill Lawton has the power to poison is not done out of fear but is instead rather playful. The children turn the politics of fear in operation after 9/11 into a game and in doing so are able to expose its falsity.

Whilst reducing 9/11 to a moment of light satire may also be seen as a coping mechanism, it serves to simultaneously distance and reaffirm the event's cultural

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value. The same can be said for the culture of memorialization which has grown up around 9/11. The need to measure temporal distance in these works of fiction establishes them as part of a larger network of memorial structures which outwardly appear to function as symbols of an emotional purging, but which, in fact, more strategically, keep wounds open in order to continually replenish the supply of public anger and resentment. Writing as far back as 2002 Peter Brooks was imploring Americans to "look up from the wound" and yet this constant need to relive the nightmare of 9/11 through its continued memorialization has instead been crystallized in "Reflecting Absence," the Ground Zero memorial site (51).

"Reflecting Absence" is the huge memorial project at the former site of the WTC which opened to the public on the tenth anniversary of the September 11 attacks. In 2003 the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation launched a global competition to design a 9/11 memorial. The competition received 5,201 entries from artists and architects around the world. As the name suggests, the winning memorial design is certainly somber. To this extent, the architect has resisted the temptation to eulogize the dead, but the language of loss and absence used to describe the memorial is also a retreat, or a recoiling, from the event. An examination of the language used in the proposal shows us just that: "This memorial proposes a space that resonates with the feelings of loss and absence that were generated by the destruction of the World Trade Center" (Arad 2010). It is interesting to note the reference not to those victims of 9/11 but to "the destruction of the World Trade Center" itself. This is an early indicator as to the general philosophy of the 9/11 memorial and its concern with the materiality of destruction. Absence and loss are writ large in the language of the proposal but are not attached to any concern for the human cost.

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"Reflecting Absence" is essentially two pools of water situated where the towers once stood, described as: "large voids, open and visible reminders of the absence" (Arad 2010). These pools are surrounded by an arrangement of trees forming small clearings and groves. David Simpson explains that, "Reflecting Absence," mimics and pays homage to Lutyen's great memorial at Thiepval, also composed of names where no bodies could be found, also evocative of an emptiness both physical and metaphysical, an "embodiment of nothingness" [Jay Winter's phrase in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*] (78-79). But, in the case of the 9/11 memorial, does it mourn the absence of bodies or the absence of buildings? While the names which appear on the memorial represent a human loss, the fact that the waterfalls are effectively the sunken footprints of the former WTC towers suggests an ambiguity as to which is being memorialized.[4]

In architect Michael Arad's proposal he describes how the designs are meant to portray a sense that the destruction of 9/11, and the deep outpouring of emotion which followed, is somehow unattainable; that it cannot be assimilated into consciousness. In his short description of the experience which the memorial would offer, Arad says that: "At the bottom of their descent, they find themselves behind a thin curtain of water, staring out at an enormous pool. Surrounding this pool is a continuous ribbon of names. The enormity of this space and the multitude of names that form this endless ribbon underscore the vast scope of the destruction. Standing there at the water's edge, looking at a pool of water that is flowing away into an abyss, a visitor to the site can sense that what is beyond this curtain of water and ribbon of names is inaccessible" (Arad 2010). Note how it is the "enormity of this space" as much as the names on the walls which signify the "scope of the destruction." This is

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because the space is directly representative of the size of the towers themselves. Here Arad also refers to something "beyond" the names. Whilst he quite rightly recognizes that 9/11 has, as an event, transcended the death roll which accompanies it, by seeking to reflect a wider context outside of those deaths the memorial risks becoming embroiled in the rhetoric of the post 9/11 moment.

For all the sense of beauty, of peace, and of respect that the site does offer, it is the concept which is troubling. "Reflecting Absence," both in its name and its design, seems to suggest a void which can never be filled. It is this very design which came under attack from some victims' families because of what Marita Sturken describes as its "modernist aesthetic of emptiness," an "aesthetic of absence" which recalls explicitly the buildings which became the killers themselves (266-267). In its very name "Reflecting Absence" speaks less of mourning than it does of a demand that we are somehow indebted to loss. It suggests that by reflecting the absence we are not able to deal with it and move on. Furthermore, it walks the tightrope between the personal and the public, risking becoming a glorified tourist attraction at the base of the new WTC buildings, its presence there a lasting reminder of the thing which can never be replaced.

"Reflecting Absence" represents only the second major attempt to memorialize the towers themselves. In the immediate aftermath of September 11, and before an official memorial could be built, six designers worked together creating a $500,000 tribute to the World Trade Center. This temporary memorial consisted of 88 searchlights pointed towards the sky to create the illusion of what Dixon describes as two "phantom towers" looming over the Manhattan skyline (37). The memorial proved so popular, in fact, that when it was finally removed many complained: "they

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had become accustomed to the phantom towers, as if they represented an actual structure" (37). The idea that these were ghostly towers personifies the buildings in such a way as to question again whether it was the buildings themselves, those massive monuments to wealth and success, which became the objects of grief in the days after 9/11.[5]

Sturken claims that it is this very desire to re-imagine the towers which "disavows" the truly horrific tale of September 11 itself, "The mourning of the loss of the buildings [acting] to screen out the deaths of those who died there" (242-243). The favoring of images of valor over those of direct victims of the attacks is just one way in which the myth of 9/11 was being willfully constructed, and it is understandable since there was, perhaps, something comforting in the towers of light, a sense of that indestructibility that was lost the day the towers, in their corporeal form, collapsed. As Jean Baudrillard poetically describes, the collapse of the towers was not the end for them but, rather, part of their transformation: "although the two towers have disappeared, they have not been annihilated. Even in their pulverized state, they have left behind an intense awareness of their presence. No one who knew them can cease imagining them and the imprint they made on the skyline from all points of the city. Their end in material space has borne them off into a definitive imaginary space. By the grace of terrorism, the World Trade Center has become the world's most beautiful building – the eighth wonder of the world!" (48). This imaginary space is what the temporary memorial seems to project itself onto, mourning the loss of what was in effect a very cinematic monument. The two beams of light recall the image of the movie projector and with it the glory days of the Hollywood film industry. To this extent it is a memorial inclined towards nostalgia rather than the healing of grief, and

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one that fits clearly with Susan's Faludi's vision of an America buried beneath a nostalgic yearning after the attacks.

The sense of grief without an end, which is so clearly articulated by "Reflecting Absence," is concurrent with the same principle as Bush's War on Terror: just as the war could have no end, since terror itself is an abstract concept and therefore not a force to be defeated, neither too can an absence be made present since attempts to do this meet with reflection. Both the continual cycle of the waterfalls and the "endless" ribbon of names continue the theme of an unanswerable absence. The 9/11 memorial designs invert space itself, locating the pools in recesses where the towers previously stood. Here the landscape appears to shadow the loss of the towers, leaving two quite literal abysses.

Amy Waldman's novel, *The Submission*, which depicts an America embattled by conflicting ideologies, fictionalizes the narrative of the 9/11 memorial. In doing so it politicizes its process of construction and reflects many of the issues which surrounded the controversial design. In the novel, which takes place only a short number of years following 9/11, an anonymous competition is launched in order to design the memorial. After a jury, made up mostly of artists, is persuaded by Claire Burwell, the jury's lone widow to the attacks, to back a design known as "The Garden," there is shock in the room when the chairman finally reads out the name of the architect behind the design; American Muslim, Mohammad Khan.

Ultimately Khan's selection becomes the scapegoat for a re-ignition of the hatred and division within America between the American Muslim population and those who see their religion as responsible for the attacks of 9/11. The novel itself is filled with the hyperbolic language of conflict, but the division becomes much more

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complex than Muslim versus Christian, or Muslim versus victim. When racial hatred begins to spill out onto the streets, with Muslim women having their headscarves pulled from their faces, groups of Muslims themselves make public their desire for Khan to withdraw his entry.

Both Mohammad Khan (Mo) and Claire find their principles severely tested by the situation. Mo is a challenging hero character, if indeed he can be described in this case as a hero at all, who, at times, struggles with his own motives; is his relentless pursuit of his right to design the memorial based on his own ambitions as an architect, a move to further his career, or is it a statement of the liberal sensibilities he believes should be the foundations of America? As one character puts it, "There's more, much more, at stake here than a memorial" (201). By the time Claire and Mo finally meet, Mo's cynicism, justifiable after his brutal treatment at the hands of both the press and public, has hardened him beyond the reach of Claire: "She didn't understand her own country, he [Mo] thought: it would take more than a new memorial to unite it" (274). His simple explanation of The Garden barely becomes an issue as both his name and heritage overwhelm most talk of the design itself.

Explaining the design, Mo describes it as having an "order" which is, "an answer to the disorder that was inflicted on us." He continues that, "It's not meant to look like nature. Or like confusion, which is what the attack left behind. If anything, it's meant to evoke the layout of the city it will sit in" (139). This stands in stark contrast to the alternative memorial fought for by some members of the jury, the name of which, "The Void," seems to evoke "Reflecting Absence" in both its darkness and in its suggestion of a hole rent in the American psyche which can never be filled. Whilst "Reflecting Absence" seems to combine elements of both these designs, the

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novel carries with it at least some form of implicit criticism of the design process itself. The novel ends by jumping some twenty years into the future to a student, Molly, who has decided to make a documentary about "The Garden" and the struggles involved. Through her visit to Mo, the reader hears how the story eventually unfolded. We discover that Mo eventually withdrew his plans in response to relentless public pressure but, in an interview with the now ailing Claire Burwell, Claire describes with distaste what was built in its place: "A Garden of Flags? Hideous. As ugly as the whole process. . . . And so many more Americans ended up dying in the wars the attack prompted than in the attack itself that by the time they finished this memorial it seemed wrong to have expended so much effort and money" (295). Although not clearly specified, it can only be assumed that this "Garden of Flags" is a rather "hideous" spectacle in Burwell's estimation because of its connection with symbolic nationalism.

Such jingoism was, of course, rife post 9/11 but also extremely damaging to internal relations between many Americans and the US' Muslim population. *The Submission* suggests in its finale that the sacrifice made by Khan is indicative of a 'submission' of the American Muslim who must give up certain rights in order to reside in a post 9/11 USA. Although it appears that, in the twenty years after Khan withdraws his design, relations have healed considerably, it would seem that it is largely through the 'submission' of the American Muslim population than the giving of ground by the majority of the US public.

The Submission attempts to strike a balance showing sympathy towards the victims of 9/11 and those who lost loved ones, whilst centralizing Mohammad Khan and his struggle against prejudice. It cannot help but promote empathy for those

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whose religious beliefs have made them the target of much racial hatred in the aftermath of the attacks. Mo is presented as a headstrong yet likeable and contemporary character. He is distinctly unthreatening and barely even religious. It is for these reasons that his persecution appears so out of proportion. In the novel, Ansar, a member of the MACC (The Muslim American Coordinating Council), lays the blame for the difficulties squarely at the feet of culture declaring that, “when you watch the movies, you root for the cowboys, but when you read the history, you root for the Indians. Americans are locked in a movie theater watching Westerns right now, and we’ve got to break down the walls” (80). In referring the conflict back to the symbolic world of the Hollywood Western, the novel attacks culture for its establishment of a world of black and white binaries in which you are either a cowboy or an Indian, a patriot or a terrorist, a Muslim or an American.

Ansar’s statement suggests that 9/11 *did* precipitate a shift in attitudes and rhetoric, but certainly not a shift towards anything new. Rather, this shift is symbolic of a retreat into the binary language of good versus evil, an area which has also been the subject of a number of studies (Bernstein 2007 and Fitzsimmons 2010), which imagines the world neatly split along fault lines reminiscent of a Cold War era dichotomy. The 9/11 novel, by its nature, creates a schism. Its very existence is an acknowledgement that *something* was fundamentally altered on 9/11/2001. But it is from out of this existence that the greatest fallacy of 9/11, that oft-quoted myth that it was on this date that *everything changed*, is perpetuated. The signifier of 9/11 as a rupture, a moment of change, is itself empty. The cultural fictions produced post 9/11 which have attempted to articulate what can only be described as a world which was radically altered by the act of destruction witnessed on that day have, in this article,

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been analyzed as perpetuators of the myth rather than symptoms of it. It is these texts' obsession with repeatedly telling their reader that the world has changed, without ever being able to fully articulate or demonstrate exactly how, which marks the 9/11 moment itself.

Articles and books can and have been written on the significance of 9/11 as a global event; its spectacular visual appeal, its grotesque reinterpretation of the Hollywood disaster film; its symbolic value; and its collision with the dawn of a new millennium. But it is the memorialization of the event in culture which has truly led to its status as a generation defining moment. It is an event born of a cultural insistence that everything has changed, but that is always tainted by the knowledge that the events since have had an all too familiar pattern.

Returning to the point of origin, Ground Zero if you will, to that street on which DeLillo's America/Americans are trapped in a cloud of dust, the realization strikes that these people are not enshrined in amber. Their residence there is dependent on the culture through which they vicariously exist. They are, in fact, just as fragile as the cultural construction of 9/11 itself and, if one were to reach out and touch these people they would crumble into ash and be blown away on the wind before our very eyes. They are symbolic not of any hardened, concrete, historical disjuncture, but rather of a memorial culture which, when the dust finally settles, is little more than the repackaging of a tragedy as a global disaster and a call to arms.

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1. This was 88 search lights pointed skywards from the site of the former WTC to create two huge towers of light.

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2. These were obituaries to the dead of 9/11 published over a number of weeks after the attacks and included over 1,800 entries.

3. Although, it is interesting to note that the two share a certain overlap as many New Yorkers close to Ground Zero turned to their televisions in order to get information and attempt to assimilate what was going on around them. Such an impulse is fought by Oskar's mother in *Extremely Loud* when she instructs Oskar's grandmother not to let the child watch the news (225).

4. If we compare "Reflecting Absence" to the rather understated 7/7 memorial in London for those who died in the July bombings we see that here there is a much clearer emphasis on mourning the individual. This is not a site reflecting the grief of a nation, although clearly it must be noted that the death toll of 52 compared to the nearly 3,000 that died on September 11 makes this kind of memorial considerably more feasible, it is clearly for the families of those who died. It seems to make no statement whatsoever about Britain, or more broadly terrorism, but instead each of the 52 stainless steel cast columns was cast in a sand mold at high temperatures to give each a unique finish. This is a memorial for the victims of the bombings, not the kind of symbolic statement we see in the 9/11 memorial.

5. Ann Kaplan also describes how one newspaper printed a ghostly vision of the Twin Towers on its front page: "People tried to fill in or recover the absence of the Towers by creating images of them, *The New Yorker* created an unforgettable front page that was apparently totally black, but within whose dim darkness one could glimpse shadows or the ghosts of the Towers haunting the city" (13).

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