

Alterities in a Time of Terror: Notes on the Subgenre of the American 9/11 Novel

Hinting at the crisis in representation in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Jacques Derrida asserts that what he names “the event” is a dual-featured phenomenon constituted “of the ‘thing’ itself (that which happens or comes) and the impression (itself at once ‘spontaneous’ and ‘controlled’) that is given, left, or made by the so-called ‘thing’” (89). Driving a cleft between the thing and its impression, Derrida says that “the impression is ‘informed,’ in both senses of the word: a predominant system gave it form, and this form then gets run through an organized information machine (language, communication, rhetoric, image, media, and so on). . . . [which] is from the very outset political, technical, economic” (89). In contrast to the informed impression, the event is incomprehensible: “The event is what comes and, in coming, comes to surprise me. . . the event is first of all *that which* I do not first of all comprehend” (90). The responses to the 9/11 attacks, originating from both the state apparatus and the ethical-aesthetic sphere, belong to the realm of the impression and are thus attempts to appropriate the event into comprehensible modes of narration that serve the purposes of power, hegemony, and resistance.¹

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1. In using the term “ethical-aesthetic,” I subscribe broadly to Emmanuel Levinas’s

I wish to explore how the subgenre of the American 9/11 novel represents the event by “instantiating a narrative framework that could mark a separation between the event and its account” (Houen 422).² I intend to tease out the ways in which the subgenre responds, in an imperfect and oblique way, to the instrumentalization of the aesthetic by the state. In light of David Palumbo-Liu’s observation that after the attacks, the state has deployed the “Imagination for particular, antihumanistic purposes. . . into specifically strategic and destructive modes of thinking, even while appropriating the rhetoric of the aesthetic” (154), the issue, then, is in what ways the American 9/11 novel has adumbrated a response. I will focus on the concept-metaphor of the domestic to unpack the conflicted and often contradictory responses of the 9/11 novel produced in the United States.

In her nuanced analysis of the American cultural imaginary after 9/11, Susan Faludi, borrowing a zoological metaphor, argues that the nation’s responses to the terrorist attacks repeat a familiar pattern: “The ways that we act, say, in response to a crisis can recapitulate in quick time the centuries-long evolution of our character as a society and of the mythologies we live by. September 11 presented just such a crisis” (13).³ The 9/11 novel’s predilection for the concept-metaphor of the domestic, with all the attendant subthemes of “nesting,” “security moms,” female victimhood, and regenerated masculinity, is *prima facie* evidence of its participation in what Faludi calls a recursive process of “rewrite” (199) that is obliquely opposed to the ethical-aesthetic

formulation that in the ethical, “our relation with the other (*autrui*) certainly consists in wanting to comprehend him, but this relation overflows comprehension” (6).

2. I am using the term “American 9/11 novel” to encompass texts produced in the U.S. that feature the attacks as a thematic backdrop or a central element in the narrative structure. I am also drawing upon Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn’s idea of a “literature *after* 9/11—that reveals the instability of 9/11 as an event and the ways that literature contests 9/11’s co-option for narrowly political ends” (3).

3. Paraphrasing Ernst Haeckel’s theory that “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny,” Faludi writes, “an embryo as it develops repeats in compressed form the evolutionary stages of its species: in the space of nine months, a human in utero passes from fish to reptile to mammal” (13).

project of imagining future alterities.⁴ To be sure, Faludi is not alone in noting the nation's indulgence in "rewrite" as opposed to a process of revision which might lead to the forging of new strategies of response. For instance, Donald Pease, in his analysis of the "transformational grammar" ("Global Homeland State" 1) constructed by the state to reshape public perceptions after the terrorist attacks notes that the phrases used by President George W. Bush in his September 20, 2001 address "alluded to mythological themes embedded within the governing fictions" (2). The ambivalent responses of the American 9/11 novel both participate in and resist this cultural dominant.

In an argument consonant with Faludi's analysis, Richard Gray asserts that the literary yield in the United States after the attacks suffers from a major weakness: 9/11 fiction resorts to "a familiar romance pattern—in which couples meet, romantic and domestic problems follow, to be concluded in reconciliation or rupture—books like this. . . simply assimilate the unfamiliar into familiar structures. The crisis is, in every sense of the word, domesticated" (134). According to Gray, the subgenre evades the responsibility of generating innovative imaginative structures reflecting this new crisis and instead adopts "the easy option of the immediate" (138).⁵ Expressing agreement with Gray, Michael Rothberg calls for "a supplementary form of deterritorialization. . . a fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship" (153). Instead of a centripetal aesthetics, Rothberg proposes

4. The hegemonizing power of this impulse to "rewrite" can be seen in the ways it has also tainted an ostensibly independent media. It was not only the state that indulged in cynical attempts to disinter and recalibrate notions of the American family. *The New York Times*, for instance, published as an advertisement for itself a digitally transformed version of Norman Rockwell's iconic painting *Freedom from Fear* (1943) in which it replaced the father's old newspaper with a copy of the *Times* dated September 12, 2001, with a photograph of the burning World Trade Center. In a compelling discussion of this digital alteration of the Rockwell painting, Francis A. Frascina notes that the altered Rockwell painting "has become a post-9/11 emblem of sentiment, familial security, and the nation under threat" (76).

5. Suggesting a way out of this crisis in representation, Gray looks toward the immigrant novel driven by the sense of "renewal, not repetition" (144). According to Gray, the ethic of the immigrant novel represents the U.S. as "a transcultural space" and explores "American spaces and places from extrinsic vantage points," thus yielding "altered geographies" (141).

a “centrifugal mapping that charts the outward movement of American power,” which would reveal “the prosthetic reach of that empire into other worlds.” Both Gray and Rothberg critique the subgenre of the American 9/11 novel for its narrow provincial outlook, its susceptibility to the sentiment of the domestic, and what they see as its consequent ignorance of or hesitation to engage with the culturally foreign and the other.

At the outset, I would like to foreground my agreement with the general import of Gray’s and Rothberg’s claims that 9/11 fiction ultimately resorts to the comfort provided by the domestic realm. Having noted their valuable transnational corrective, I will further risk the claim that in these novels’ engagements with the familiar rituals of the domestic, we can locate a site of ambivalence that both indulges in and resists the cultural dominant’s process of “rewrite.” While my own views are consonant with Rachel Greenwald Smith’s position that 9/11 novels, “while remaining formally familiar do indeed reflect the post-9/11 nexus of trauma, politics, and aesthetics with remarkable accuracy” (155), I wish to take her claim further by tracing how the subgenre effects an ethics of disturbance with regard to the concept-metaphor of the domestic that occupies a position of rhetorical centrality in the responses of the state and the popular media. The novels I examine render fluid and perhaps even overturn conventional notions of the foreign and the alien, the spaces of the interior and of the exterior. These texts inquire what makes a home, what a home is, and who is prepared to nurture a home. What if the home propounded by the Homeland Security state as its “object cause” (Pease, “9/11” 76) to defend and reinvigorate exhibits symptoms of instability? What if that home is threatened, not by bearded terrorists from the Tora Bora mountains, but by the internal elements integral to that structure? The turn to the domestic in these novels can, then, be read both as a gesture of retreat and the initiation of an incomplete process of interrupting the cultural dominant’s instrumentalized deployment of key terms in the public sphere.

The 9/11 novel’s conflicted attempts at imagining radical alterities can be read as a symptom of its entrapment in what Slavoj Žižek calls “the temptation of a double blackmail” (50).

To Žižek, the attacks presented a moral conundrum that was bookended by two opposite and mutually exclusive categories: “If we simply, only and unconditionally condemn it, we simply appear to endorse the blatantly ideological position of American innocence under attack by Third World Evil; if we draw attention to the deeper sociopolitical causes of Arab extremism, we simply appear to blame the victim which ultimately got what it deserved.”⁶ The political ambiguity of the 9/11 novel is an indicator of this “limit of moral reasoning,” and the genre foregrounds the difficulty of envisioning “the dialectical category of totality: there is no choice between these two positions; each one is one-sided and false.”⁷ But in making manifest the anxieties of listening to the other and the impossibility of imagining this Žižekian totality, the American 9/11 novel is a valuable marker. For it is initially, and perhaps only, in the realm of the ethical-aesthetic that any intimations of transcending this “double black-mail” will arrive.

The four 9/11 novels that I discuss—Ken Kalfus’s *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, Jay McInerney’s *The Good Life*, Lynne Sharon Schwartz’s *The Writing on the Wall*, and Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*—are threaded through by an engagement with the key concept-metaphor of the domestic. These texts foreground the problematic of the self and the other as they grapple with

6. Derrida also hints at this notion of a false choice when he distinguishes between two types of “impressions” regarding 9/11: “On the one hand, compassion for the victims and indignation over the killings; our sadness and condemnation should be without limits, unconditional, unimpeachable; they are responding to an undeniable ‘event,’ beyond all simulacra and all possible virtualization; they respond with what might be called the heart and they go straight to the heart of the event.” But there is also “the interpreted, interpretative, informed impression, the conditional evaluation that makes us *believe* that this is a ‘major event.’ *Belief*, the phenomenon of *credit* and of *accreditation*, constitutes an essential dimension of the evaluation, of the dating, indeed, of the compulsive inflation of which we’ve been speaking” (89).

7. On a related note, Kristiaan Versluys writes, “September 11 shows the limits of tolerance and posits the problem of how to behave toward those who are intolerant of one’s tolerance” (152). Versluys argues that multiple resonances of alterity come into play in the responses to September 11. There is the “good” alterity of the Levinasian Other, which asserts responsibility toward the other as primal and antecedent to defining oneself as human. On the other hand, there is the “bad” alterity of “othering,” which “is an act of exclusion, whereby, through prejudice, ignorance, or both, one refuses to treat someone else fully as an individual” (150).

the local-global dynamic in the process of what Wai Chee Dimock calls the “broadening of the evidentiary ground” by which to comprehend the events (6). In becoming aware of the “daunting amplitude” (Dimock 8) of that evidentiary ground, some of these texts lean toward a processual attitude that interrupts the assumed totality of the local with a perspective derived from the global. But there are significant lapses on that front, too, as can be seen with DeLillo’s *Falling Man*. In mapping these novels’ responses, we come to a fuller understanding of the ways in which the aesthetic of the 9/11 novel remains inflected within the circuits of power.

The Inside-Outside Dynamic and the Terror of Twinhood

Both Ken Kalfus’s *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* and Jay McInerney’s *The Good Life* narrate the disintegration of families against the backdrop of the 9/11 attacks. The title of Kalfus’s text would seem to reference the disorder that Faludi notes in the American responses to 9/11:

The last remaining superpower, a nation attacked precisely *because* of its imperial preeminence, responded by fixating on its weakness and ineffectuality. Even more peculiar was our displacement of that fixation into the domestic realm, into a sexualized struggle between depleted masculinity and overbearing womanhood.

(9)

When Kalfus’s satirical novel begins, Joyce and Marshall Harri-man are already litigating bitterly over a messy divorce. The relationship between the couple has deteriorated to such an extent that Joyce experiences a near-orgasmic delight when she recalls that Marshall might have been present in the collapsed tower: “But Joyce felt something erupt inside her, something warm. . . a pang of pleasure, so intense it was nearly like the appeasement of hunger. It was a giddiness, an elation. . . she felt a great gladness” (3). Marshall, on the other hand, makes every effort to bankrupt his wife’s 401(k) balance and ruin his sister-in-law’s wedding celebrations.

Kalfus’s novel adumbrates the possibilities of *thinking* the global and the local concurrently. A perspective holding intact

the local-global nexus is visible, for instance, in Jessica Hagedorn's short piece "Notes from a New York Diary," where on seeing the burning World Trade Center, she remembers "the troubled Mindanao region of the Philippines. . . . Where the surreal and the real are one and the same. . . . Where an equally vicious sense of humor seems the only sane and logical response" (134).⁸ In Kalfus's novel, Marshall has such an experience toward the end of the narrative, when he has lost his job and "the future was an echoless void. He had no plans, no road map" (177). As he wanders the city streets, Marshall hears a loud noise: "the entire morning came down with an enormous crash." In the three or four seconds before he can identify the noise as coming from a "heavy steel grille being slammed shut on the back of a truck," Marshall places, nay *thinks*, that incident in connection to a suicide bombing in a Tel Aviv pizzeria which had occurred the day before, "seven time zones ahead." As the New York City pedestrians recover from the shock, the narrator notes that "within this moment they lived the terror as it had been experienced within the pizzeria, by the bomber and his victims together" (179). This scene goes beyond a mere comparative strategy and evidences a processual attitude in which the local is interrupted by the horizon of the global infinite.

This processual approach has been prepared for earlier by Marshall's rescue from the Towers of a stranger named Lloyd. While I am not arguing for an easily identifiable ethics of growth, Kalfus's novel reveals particular moments which suggest that the engagement with the other is necessary to produce versions of alterity that will lead to an expansion of moral sympathies. As Marshall leads Lloyd to relative safety, he confronts a moment of clarity: "A damp, cold confidence had enveloped him. What he was doing seemed right. . . . in these moments of peril, decision, and action [. . .] something was being revealed. He could discern hope. . . . at this instant, glimpse a vision of the man he

8. Hagedorn takes a walk farther down Greenwich Street, and on seeing the ruins of the Twin Towers, she is "immediately reminded of Smokey Mountain, the legendary garbage dump in the Philippines. Another awesome, burning landscape etched in my memory" (136).

could yet be" (14–15). Ignoring common sense, Marshall's actions approach self-abnegation: "Marshall knew he should go, but he hung back. He wondered about this reluctance, this sudden loss of instinct for his own preservation" (14). This "loss" can be comprehended within the ambit of Emmanuel Levinas's concept of a moral calling issued forth by what Levinas calls "the face of the other." According to Levinas, the other speaks to the self through "his nudity—his destitution, his mortality—straightaway imposes himself upon my responsibility: goodness, mercy, or charity. This nudity which is a call to me—an appeal but also an imperative—I name *face*" (*Is It Righteous?* 114–15). Marshall's relation to the dying Lloyd approximates what Levinas calls the

relation to the Face [which] is both the relation to the absolutely weak—to what is absolutely exposed, what is bare and destitute, the relation with bareness and consequently with what is alone and can undergo the supreme isolation we call death. . . the Face is also the "Thou Shalt not Kill." . . it is the fact that I cannot let the other die alone, it is like a calling out to me.

(*Entre Nous* 104)

In rescuing Lloyd, Marshall loses his primary instinct for self-preservation but locates a tremulous possibility of hope, thus enacting the paradoxical limits of the ethical, what Levinas terms "the very fact of finding oneself while losing oneself" (*Emmanuel Levinas* 118).

The implications of the rescue never become clear to Marshall himself, referencing the general sense of moral confusion and chaos following the attacks. He keeps wondering about "that odd, ambiguous moment in the plaza" (37) and even dismisses the gesture later: "Why had he done that? What good had it done? He regretted that too" (217). But the rescue sets the tone for other moments wherein the text gestures toward what Judith Butler calls "an apprehension of the precariousness of life" (*Precarious Life* xvii). Referencing the Levinasian face, Butler explains: "Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not

at all" (*Frames* 14). The initial moment of rupture and self-abnegation in Marshall, which continues to haunt him "like an enormous hole in the sky" (18), prepares him for the realization that "We maintained elaborate fantasies of our autonomy, the idiotic belief that we created meaning in ourselves. He understood very well now. . . . all this held us in a fragile, shimmering, spidery web of meaning. A single act of malice could rip it apart. We held each other's significance in our hands" (48).⁹

Rather than a mere knitting together of the internal and the external, Kalfus's novel works by a logic of inversion that muddies preconceived notions of the domestic and the foreign. This strategy can be seen in the significant role played by the many ethnic restaurants in the novel, which function as enclaves to adumbrate a critique of the domestic. Incarnating the problematic posed by Derrida between hospitality and tolerance, these ethnic restaurants manifest how certain versions of the foreign are allowed into the domestic territory. Derrida writes that pure or "unconditional hospitality, hospitality *itself*, opens or is in advance open to someone who is neither expected nor invited, to whomever arrives as an absolutely foreign *visitor*, as a new *arrival*, nonidentifiable and unforeseeable, in short, wholly other" (128–29). Tolerance, on the other hand, "is a conditional, circumspect, careful hospitality. . . [it] remains a scrutinized hospitality, always under surveillance, parsimonious and protective of its sovereignty. . . . We offer hospitality only on the condition that the other follow our rules, our way of life, even our language, our culture, our political system, and so on" (128). The restaurants are the limited venues through which the other is

9. In his essay "Seeing Terror, Feeling Art," Michael Rothberg also detects an awareness of the precariousness of life in his reading of Don DeLillo's "In the Ruins of the Future." Analyzing the ending of DeLillo's essay, which depicts a Muslim woman on her knees praying in Manhattan, Rothberg writes: "[O]ur well-being—whoever 'we' are—is intertwined with that which *seems* most 'foreign,' most dangerous, just as the young woman's prayer is intertwined with the 'Manhattan grid.' Instead of retreating into an us/them logic based on a secular/religious or reason/fanaticism divide. . . DeLillo offers what might be considered a post-secular alternative: a vision that integrates private devotion into public space; a rooted cosmopolitanism that establishes a universalist 'fellowship with the dead' at the same time that it finds a place for 'half-dressed foreigners' and headscarf-clad citizens" (130–31).

funneled, accessed, and sampled. In short, they are versions of regulated and limited alterity. Functioning primarily as spaces wherein the foreign is allowed over the domestic threshold but only in the form of consumable and marketable commodities, the ethnic restaurants manifest the limit-point of tolerance and make visible the conditionality (what can the other bring to the table?) that lies at the heart of tolerance.

The text critiques the domestic structure by a strategy—which becomes visible in the events leading up to Flora’s wedding—that both inverts the inside-outside dynamic and foregrounds the fault lines contained within the monolith. . Kalfus describes the Ethiopian restaurant where the rehearsal dinner is held as “located in an eighteenth-century stone farmhouse, with exposed stone walls and hand-hewn cherrywood rafters supporting the high roof, but its interior was entirely African: tribal masks, woven baskets” (118). As the two families move from the familiar exterior to the interior space of the restaurant, with its alien foods and strange customs, the conventional representation of the foreign as exterior and the domestic as interior gets inverted: the two families confront the foreign in the interior spaces of the stone farmhouse. The waiters bring the food on doughy crepes to be used both as food to soak up the sauces and as napkins.

What materialize next are three responses to the alien customs. The first is Joyce’s, who “imagine[s] that they were no longer in Connecticut” (119). But the narrative immediately undercuts Joyce’s fanciful imagination by reminding us that the Ethiopian waitress who is “another token of a war-ravaged world, left the restaurant and drove down Connecticut roads to her Connecticut home to live among Connecticut people.” The second response is a reluctant engagement with the other; some of the wedding party either eat “the smallest pieces of crepe” or consume “small morsels of the food directly in front of them, with forks,” avoiding the crepes altogether. The third response, exhibited by the groom’s father, while masked as an empathetic one in his desire “to know the Ethiopian name for every dish and condiment,” ultimately remains the response of the gargantuan consumer. Harold “was alone in having a great time with the food, tearing

off chunks of crepe, standing to scoop up sauces and meats half-way across the table and shoving them into his mouth. A great red-brown stain blossomed on the upper part of his white shirt. He laughed at it." Revealing the partial responses of the American characters to the alien, this episode stages the problematic of engaging with the other in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Pervaded by a negative logic, the scene does not provide a clear solution and rejects the triangulated responses as playing no part in an ethical rejoinder.

The novel ends with a satirical dreamscape wherein the American forces achieve a definitive victory in Iraq, the Israelis and the PLO reach a territorial settlement and share sovereignty in Jerusalem, and Osama bin Laden is captured (234). The ending also reiterates the novel's strategy of critiquing the domestic structure by a process of inversion, by turning the domestic idyll inside out. What was once contained within the confines of the Harriman household—the uneasy core of the American domestic—is now out in the open. As Marshall joins the huge crowd gathered to celebrate the news of bin Laden's capture, he encounters his ex-wife and children. After they exchange awkward greetings, the crowd makes it impossible for them to separate (236). Hemmed in by the crowd, the divorced couple maintain a domestic facade. There is no resort to the comfort of the domestic in Kalfus's novel. Rather, the text ends with this public staging of the American cultural imaginary's predilection for the domestic idyll. Making the home no longer innocent and distant from global alignments, and foregrounding the difficulties of engaging ethically with the other, Kalfus urges us to question the logic that sequesters 9/11 from complicit forces at home.

Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* narrates the domestic and romantic entanglements that beset two New York couples—Russell and Corinne Calloway, Luke and Sasha McGavock—after the 9/11 attacks. Corinne falls in love with Luke during the aftermath of the attacks, and the novel depicts the shifting allegiances of the protagonists before arriving at an ambiguous ending that imperfectly attempts to resolve the fractures opened up by the narrative. The novel is built on a triadic structure: the first section depicts the urban family in crisis; in the second, the protagonists

fall in love and attempt to leave behind their crisis-ridden families in light of the opportunities presented by 9/11; and lastly, the resolution seeks to cap restrictions on the protagonists' efforts to recalibrate the family structure.

The novel begins with Corinne and Luke in a state of alienated flux. Corinne recalls that she and her husband Russell had once been "such a model couple to their friends. . . . a kind of ideal, the golden girl and boy. . . . the example that everyone pointed to, the haven of domesticity for their single friends and later a harbor of solace and inspiration to which they returned when their first marriages foundered" (44). But now, Corinne's life has been "increasingly circumscribed by the rituals of middle age and motherhood" (13), and she remains trapped between "the theoretical bookends of her existence, the maternal and the romantic—the latter submerged and almost extinct" (4). In contrast, Luke's "place in the community was no longer clearly defined" (24). Having quit his job on Wall Street, Luke, as his wife puts it, is on "this whole finding-yourself kick" (22). Luke is trying to be a writer and attempting "to adjust to the solo formlessness and fluidity of his days" after spending half his life in the corporate world (50). Luke and his wife Sasha, a socialite and "a professional beauty" (21), no longer share a strong marriage bond.

The narrative impulse to inject an ethics of crisis into the domestic is prefigured in the fact of Corinne and Russell's "convoluted reproductive history" (43). Unable to conceive, Corinne had to request her sister Hilary to donate eggs, thus making Hilary the biological mother of the twins. This complex family dynamic is demonstrated in a scene where Russell administers a hormone injection:

The very nature of the high-tech reproductive enterprise was fraught with erotic and incestuous implications, the taboo attraction that he'd often felt for his wife's younger sister exacerbated by the thought that a month from now his sperm would be united with her eggs, if only in the confines of a petri dish, and that she would, if the project was successful, forever after be the natural mother of his child, conjured so unnaturally and with such effort and ingenuity out of the ether—all of these thoughts hovering

around him. . . while Corinne and Hilary stood in a sacramental hush beside the bed.

(228)

Corinne lives with a sense of perpetual threat that her family will not survive this internal schism: “she. . . had a sudden terrifying premonition that Hilary had come to take her children away from her. . . . But, of course, Hilary was more than his aunt—and that was the crux of the problem” (14–15). Corinne is always alert to Hilary’s presence in the family and regards her as a trespasser.

The 9/11 attacks provide an opportunity for Corinne and Luke to reassess their domestic roles. Much of this process is initiated at Ground Zero, where they volunteer in the soup kitchen, fall in love, and begin to entertain the possibility of dissolving their marriages. Ground Zero is part of the umbrella of terms invented or recalibrated by the state after 9/11, and what David Simpson calls “its manipulable iconicity” (16) plays a central role in the securing of public consent. Marita Sturken notes that while the term remembers the horrors of a nuclear blast and the evacuation of life and prior meaning, “it also, ironically, conveys a starting point, a *tabula rasa*” (167). According to Sturken, Ground Zero in the post-9/11 public domain is “a highly overdetermined space. . . . where practices of memory and mourning have been in active tension with representational practices and debates over aesthetics: a place, one could say, defined and redefined by a tyranny of meaning” (168). Ironically, the potency of the term also depends on erasing and cannibalizing the memories of other spaces, and not only of distant locales but even of domestic and immediate sites.¹⁰

10. Sturken writes that the term “also effectively erases the other events of 9/11, including the crash of American Airlines 77 at the Pentagon, which killed 189 people, and the crash of Flight 93 in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, which killed forty people” (167). Literary productions likewise seem to uncannily (unwittingly?) reflect this cannibalization. Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn note: “Literary representations of 9/11 focus almost exclusively on events in New York City. The destruction of the Pentagon and the crash in Shanksville, PA, while suggestive for film makers, have not proven as interesting to writers” (1).

The state's construction of the ideological imaginary of Ground Zero enables a recursive movement of power that shuttles between displays of weakness and strength. This movement, as Marc Redfield says, is "a ruse," effected by a "double gesture through which sovereign power is given away so as to be more securely reclaimed" (53). Through this construct, the state incessantly demonstrates a lack only to exercise perpetual hegemony. Palumbo-Liu notes this as "an inescapable contradiction" in the doctrine of preemptive action, which "must imagine always a potential state of (its own) weakness as a pretext to reassert its strength. It lives, therefore, in the gray zone between the empirical and the possible, shuttling between reaffirmations of both strength and weakness, of both invincibility and vulnerability" (152). As the sign that declares a perpetual wound, what Peter Schwenger calls "the yawning zero" (251), the state's version of Ground Zero legitimates an exceptionalist paradigm. As Amy Kaplan notes, such a paradigm asserts "that the illimitable response to terrorism must itself start from square one, from this original perpetration of evil. The response must match the full power of this traumatic rupture, for which no prior guidance, historical limits, or wider political context seem appropriate" (83). As a conflicted space that reposit the centrality of the past, Ground Zero in *The Good Life* both references and critiques the state's ideological construction in the public imaginary. In a stance somewhat oblique to the state's hegemonizing impulses, McNerney's Ground Zero is a site where the fault lines of the past and the present are revealed to initiate both a process of reconciliation and an ethics of action. Luke's rifling back through his palimpsestic memories to effect a future reconciliation with his mother and the failure of the lovers to generate a fresh start from Ground Zero are a comment on the state's exceptionalist paradigm, which would cynically invoke the past only to maintain a present and future hegemony.

In *The Good Life*, Ground Zero is primarily associated with Luke's attempts to exorcize the ghosts of his past. In the first of two main episodes, as Luke bites into a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, he is transported to the afternoon during his boyhood in Tennessee when he discovers his mother's infidelity. Rather

than locating an idealized, domestic past, this memory threatens domestic harmony. The other episode of what Luke calls his “little time warp” (150) occurs when he smells the burgers grilling in the soup kitchen. He recalls a Fourth of July cookout with his girlfriend, when he was fifteen. As they wait for the food, the girlfriend’s unmarried aunt kills herself. The resurfacing at Ground Zero of Luke’s unhappy memories approximates Amy Kaplan’s reading of the site as evoking the Freudian uncanny, which “entails the return of the repressed as something at once threatening, external, and unrecognizable, yet strangely familiar and inseparable from our own pasts” (84). Associated with infidelity and violence, Luke’s twin memories intermingle not only to communicate a sense of crisis, thus making it impossible to believe in a domestic bliss that never existed, but also to spur Luke to listen to his mother’s side of the story.

As the narrative moves toward an ambivalent ending, we get a hint of the power of domestic ideology when Luke and Corinne’s romantic escape to Nantucket is interrupted by the news that Ashley, Luke’s daughter, has run away from her drug rehab center. Ashley’s escape to rural Tennessee prepares the narrative for its conservative closure, as Luke reconciles with his mother Nora and returns to the city. The episodes of family bonding in Tennessee not only offer a contrast with the enervated city life of New York but also initiate an uneasy reimposition of the domestic. The episode of Corinne’s marital rape, together with Nora’s role in providing a renunciatory logic for the domestic, contributes significantly to the unease that ends *The Good Life*. The rape stages the incongruity of Corinne’s simultaneous attempts to hold on to her family and realize her personal freedom: “Yielding up her body, she tried to empty her mind so as to preserve two irreconcilable ideas—that she was surrendering of her own will, and that in resisting up to that point, she had remained true to Luke” (306). Even though Nora—who “did not share the ingrained belief of southern womankind in the dangers of the midday sun or of airborne pestilence” (270)—is a bit of a misfit in Tennessee, she nevertheless helps in preserving the domestic structure. As Nora and Luke resolve past misunderstandings, Nora’s decision to stay with her husband and her

words to her son that “Loving. . . [is] not about desire and self-fulfillment. . . it’s about wanting what’s best for the other person. . . about. . . letting go. Sometimes I think love is more about renunciation than possession” (317) presage the reimposition of the domestic that reins in Luke’s and Corinne’s disruptive desires.¹¹

The final scene of McInerney’s novel makes visible the architectonics by which the domestic structure is imposed against individual fulfillment. As Luke observes the familial rituals of the Calloways from afar, he notes, “If there was any constraint between the parents, he was unable to detect it as they started up the plaza with the solemn twins between them, an enviably handsome family that appeared, from this distance, to illustrate some cosmopolitan ideal” (349). Corinne and Luke are pulled apart and away from each other by their respective domestic responsibilities. *The Good Life* ends with the unresolved tension between the comfort accorded by the familiar—Luke “was grateful. . . to be participating in this ritual of family and community”—and the tenuous imagination of individual freedom sometime in the future when Luke might encounter Corinne in the streets of New York: “so he imagined—even as she rolled her eyes at the banality of the situation, the stiltedness of their exchange. Here we are” (353). The narrative closes with this demise of the individual quests of Corinne and Luke, but not before revealing the inner dynamics of the family as an ideological formation riven with unease and tension.

Local Dilemmas, Global Solutions?

Both Lynne Sharon Schwartz’s *The Writing on the Wall* and Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* are engaged with imagining possibilities beyond the process of grieving. The novels contrast structurally,

11. Benjamin Bird reads the ending of *The Good Life* as communicating “a more profound wisdom concerning the true nature of ‘the good life’. . . namely that, however intimate the relationship, the profound otherness of the other ought ultimately to be recognized and respected” (566). Bird’s reading needs to account for the ways in which this “wisdom,” propounded through Nora and later repeated by Luke, functions as an ideological imaginary to mask the ruptures opened up in the domestic.

with Schwartz's constructed as a quest narrative and DeLillo's remaining almost claustrophobic in its circularity. Both texts resort to the comfort provided by the domestic structure, but Schwartz's novel gestures toward overcoming past trauma, while DeLillo's makes grief a pervasive condition of the 9/11 narrative. In analyzing the different attitudes exhibited toward the nonlocal other in these texts, we can come to a fuller understanding of the conflicted ways in which the subgenre of the 9/11 novel responds to the attacks.

Schwartz's narrative revolves around the protagonist Renata's quest for domestic fulfillment. Renata has endured the wounds of losing her entire family: her twin sister Claudia died in a drowning accident at the age of sixteen; following this tragedy, her father became an alcoholic and perished in a car crash; her niece Gianna, the product of Claudia's incestuous relationship with her uncle Peter, has been kidnapped as a child and remains untraceable; and Renata's mother, Grace, has "relinquished memory" (48) and lives in a self-willed vegetative state, refusing to acknowledge the past. The 9/11 attacks set in motion a series of events through which Renata tries to compensate for the past by finding substitutes for her lost family.

The quest metaphor that drives *The Writing on the Wall* is emphasized right at the beginning when we find Renata, a linguist and a librarian, looking for "the pattern [that] hadn't appeared yet" (1). Renata maintains a folder of newspaper clippings called "Transformed Lives or Everyone Wants to be Changed" (10), keeping those clippings "as an act of faith. . . . She wanted to change as they had changed. Like them, she wished to begin anew." The quest metaphor is not limited to Renata's search for her lost family. In fact, that mission is inseparably entwined with her search for an authentic language to represent her experiences. Renata is searching "to hear truth in language that refreshes, now that the ambient language is so stale and sour that it reeks" (102). Schwartz's novel is teeming with languages, both local and foreign ones: Claudia and Renata's "private language," which they speak as children; the inauthentic language of the state and the media (primarily represented by the president's televised responses to the 9/11

attacks); the mute Gianna's language; the baby Julio's incoherent and innocent gurgles; and finally, several foreign and exotic tongues that Renata gains access to as a linguist. Renata's task is to craft a workable tool from this confusing conglomeration, a pliable medium through which she can verbalize her past experiences and move forward to a hopeful future.

The novel's narrative grid is built on Renata's rejection of or inability to access several of these languages. The "private language" that Renata and Claudia speak as children "was simple, really; it sounded alien only because the girls spoke it at top speed. They moved syllables around in patterns arrived at tacitly, but the patterns were consistent; mingled in were bits of the Sardinian dialect their mother's mother broke into every so often" (12). This private language ultimately becomes a repressive element preventing the twins from articulating their individual identities:

And because in this language they confided everything thoroughly, their memories merged and became common property. They couldn't say anymore which one had seen the dead cat floating near the edge of the river. . . . And so they had double memories, a richness of scenes witnessed that was like an extra layer of consciousness, each one possessing what the other had seen or heard.

(32)

This private language is lost when Claudia begins to distance herself from Renata. The secret language is a synecdoche for the oppressive singularity of twinhood and its inability to maintain a healthy tension between the self and the social. Claudia comprehends this oppressive quality much earlier than Renata and takes deliberate steps to initiate a scission:

To be separate. To get away from you. I couldn't take it anymore. You were always. . . *there*. You wouldn't let me be a person on my own. I used to envy [. . .] the ones who were separate. Everything I felt or did, you felt or did. It was creepy. It was like I had nothing of my own.

(61)

Schwartz's narrative is suspicious of the symmetrical perfection of twinhood, represented here by the language only the twins could understand. The novel suggests that a fracturing of this

singularity, however painful, is a necessary condition for ethical knowledge.

The state's language as it is broadcast via the television networks after the 9/11 attacks serves the purpose of extending the circuits of power and lacks the subtlety to comprehend private experience:

The President said, "Freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward. Freedom will be defended. Make no mistake, the United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts." There was no point trying to find comfort or enlightenment in the words. It was a public moment, that was all; the occasion required that his mouth move and English syllables emerge.

(64)

In contrast to the state's empty language, "Julio's loud happy nonsense syllables. . . the mystery tongue no linguist has yet decoded" is uncorrupted and belongs to the spiritual realm (135). Renata tells us about the Amazon tribe who believe that "a baby's inchoate burblings are the fading remains of the language used in the spirit world before birth, among those waiting to be born" (135). Julio's baby talk with its connection to the spiritual world remains an asocial ideal against which the corrupt languages inhabiting the text are measured.

The communication between Renata and the young mute girl she rescues from the streets and renames "Gianna" in memory of her lost niece is another kind of language:

Now that she's getting used to it, Renata finds it oddly relaxing to speak to someone who never answers. No disagreement or conflict or strain, no wondering what the words might be concealing, no nuances or misunderstanding, at least on this simple level of keys and groceries. No ambiguity. No lies. She almost wishes Gianna would never speak, so she'd never have to figure out who's behind the compliant face.

(181)

Gianna is an empty slate for Renata wherein she can act out the fantasies of reclaiming her lost family. The interaction between them does not amount to a true language, for as the narrative suggests, real communication must emerge from human conflict, from the negotiation between self and other. It must resist the

oppressive singularity of twinhood (where the self sees only itself in the other), as well as the hermetic order where the self does not hear the other.

Renata's engagement with these teeming languages and her struggle to voice a workable language stages a crucial aspect of Levinasian philosophy. To Levinas, ethical meaning emerges in the fissures and overlaps between what he calls the "said" and the "saying." "The said refers to the sheer materiality of language:

"Language qua said can then be conceived as a system of nouns identifying entities, and then as a system of signs doubling up the beings, designating substances, events and relations by substantives or other parts of speech derived from substantives, designating identities—in sum, *designating*.

(*Otherwise* 40)

Levinas asserts that communication cannot be reduced to the content of the said. The saying is prior to and exceeds the said; the saying is the relation to the other:

[W]e must go back to the saying which signifies prior to essence, prior to identification, on the hither side of amphibology. Saying states and thematizes the said, but signifies it to the other, a neighbor, with a signification that has to be distinguished from that borne by words in the said. This signification to the other occurs in proximity.

(*Otherwise* 45–46)¹²

The saying is the ethical condition and horizon for communication:

Saying is not a game. Antecedent to the verbal signs it conjugates, to the linguistic systems and the semantic glimmerings, a foreword preceding languages, it is the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification.

(*Otherwise* 5)

12. To Levinas, "Proximity is quite distinct from every other relationship, and has to be conceived as a responsibility for the other; it might be called humanity, or subjectivity, or self. . . . Nothing is more grave, more august, than responsibility for the other, and saying, in which there is no play, has a gravity more grave than its own being or not being" (*Otherwise* 46).

In contrast to the signifying and identifying role of the said, the saying introduces a processual and pre-ontological ethics of alterity that disrupts identity, selfhood, and being. As Amit Pinchevski eloquently writes:

Whereas the Said seeks closure, the Saying remains open-ended, offered to the Other. In attempting to bring the world into language, the Said moves in Ulyssean circles: it sets out only to return to its origin, to the self. The Saying, conversely, sets out on a journey without return; like Abraham, it is forbidden from ever coming back to its place of origin.

(87)

Renata's tentative solution in her search for the appropriate medium to verbalize her experience can be read as a gesture toward the Levinasian saying, wherein she initiates a processual attitude. Her language holds the private and the public, the local and the global, the self and the other, the saying and the said in an unresolved nexus of hyphenation. In other words, it is a medium that constantly interrupts the provincial-domestic with a perspective derived from the global infinite. The process of disrupting the local and the domestic through the trope of language can be seen in Renata's comparative strategy of juxtaposing the stress language of English with the complex tonality of a foreign tongue:¹³

Reading all those endangered-species languages, she comes across dozens of fine distinctions absent in English. . . . a simple example. . . . Etinoi also has separate words for the varieties of loss: loss of a small object. . . loss of a large object. . . loss of a person, exactly as we mean it in English, by death; loss of a situation or way of life. . . loss of a state of mind or being. . . . And each of those distinct words for loss can be modified by suffixes that indicate whether the thing lost can possibly be regained—*tanfos-oude*, the misplaced object found, or *tanfanori-oude*, success somehow regained—or whether, in the case of death or destruction, it is lost for good: *tanfendi-noude*.

(43–44)

13. In a tonal language, pitch and tone are employed as fundamental parts of speech that radically change the meanings of words. In a stress language like English, tone and pitch play a much more limited role, perhaps only to mark changes in emotions or attitudes.

Renata's awareness of the poverty of her language is also an awareness of the richness of the life of the other. In other words, the explorations of language in *The Writing on the Wall* gesture toward the Levinasian saying, in which the subject is unhoused from its hermetic self:

Out of any locus, no longer *dwelling*, not stomping any ground. . . . The subject is not *in itself*, at home with itself, such that it would dissimulate itself in itself or dissimulate itself in its wounds and its exile, understood as acts of wounding or exiling itself. Its bending back upon itself is a turning inside out. . . . A concave without a convex.

(*Otherwise* 49)

This process of recursively interrupting the local extends beyond the trope of language. For instance, Renata's narrating of her actions in terms of foreign customs highlights the inadequacy of the local and also leads to a processual perspective that holds the global-local in a nexus of codependence to generate meaning. As Renata brings Gianna in from the streets, she rationalizes her decision in terms of a foreign culture:

Like a good Etinoian, Renata is simply honoring the concept of *ahmintu*. . . yielding to the circumstances that come her way. . . . You can't leave a child alone on the street in a city in chaos, with nothing but the clothes on her back and a paperback book and the remains of twenty dollars in a plastic bag.

(178)

While this rationalization is certainly a self-serving move on Renata's part, it is also a strategy that repeatedly interrupts the assumed totality of the local. The recursive interruption of the familiar that defines Renata's thought process renders the totality of the domestic as a structure in flux. Even as Rothberg claims that "the novel retreats back into the reified world of domesticity and 'emotional entanglements'" ("Failure" 154), Schwartz's narrative, by this repeated process of interrupting one's language and assumptions, prompts a reconsideration of the domestic sphere. If it ever was, it is no longer possible or adequate to articulate oneself solely through the local. As the narrative speeds forward to a resolution, Renata meets her uncle Peter on his deathbed and pieces together her sister's last moments. Her

mother Grace demonstrates some concern for Renata, pointing out that she must stop using Gianna as compensation for the lost past. Emerging from her delusionary state, Renata returns Gianna to her parents and is able to leave the past behind: “As for the rest, the past, there’s nothing more there” (294). But this closure does not prevent the narrative from articulating an ethics, what Levinas calls “the risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, the breaking up of inwardness” (*Otherwise* 48) that constantly interrupts the local with insights derived from the outside.

Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* presents a series of vignettes centered on a New York couple—Keith and Lianne Neudecker—who have been separated for eighteen months when the attacks occur. Linda S. Kauffman aptly describes the novel as “a mosaic of arrested moments, still lifes of paintings, a frieze of memories” (654). The text, in fact, evidences a deep suspicion of what it calls “plot,” understood not merely as a narrative ordering of events but as a totalizing tendency that can become the justification for violence. Describing the minds of the terrorists as they prepare for the attacks, the narrator notes:

They felt the claim of danger and isolation. They felt the magnetic effect of plot. Plot drew them together more tightly than ever. Plot closed the world to the slenderest line of sight, where everything converges to a point.

(174)¹⁴

As opposed to this aggregating tendency, *Falling Man*’s ethos of disconnection mirrors the disconcerting atmosphere after the attacks while also attempting to keep options open through a nonlinear narrative that fudges the border between form and content, as the structure of the text becomes emblematic of the counternarrative that DeLillo proposes.¹⁵

14. Imagining the mind-set of the terrorist in his essay “In the Ruins of the Future,” DeLillo writes: “Plots reduce the world. He builds a plot around his anger and our indifference. He lives a certain kind of apartness, hard and tight” (34).

15. Linda S. Kauffman has noted that the “circular structure” of the text “compresses the action of the novel into a few minutes between the moment the plane approaches the north tower and the moment Keith stumbles onto the street, miraculously alive” (652).

It is certainly the case that the novel's deliberately elliptical narrative structure is indicative of what Kristiaan Versluys calls "a trauma with no exit, a drift toward death with hardly a glimpse of redemption" (20). To Versluys, *Falling Man* manifests a "transcendent grieving, which allows for no proper mourning or working through," thus denying the comfort of closure (48). DeLillo's own pronouncements also indicate the primacy of grieving before beginning the search for answers. As he writes in his essay "In the Ruins of the Future":

Before politics, before history and religion, there is the primal terror. People falling from the towers hand in hand. This is part of the counter-narrative, hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel.

(39)

This ethical affiliation that attempts to transcend binarizing and totalizing structures is visible in the first chapter. The description of the attacks is based on a binary grid between the chaotic events outside and the emotional core of Keith, between the events on the ground and those up in the air:

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

Things inside were distant and still, where he was supposed to be.

(3)

But the narrative immediately inserts a third presence beyond the binaries it has described:

The world was this as well, figures in windows a thousand feet up, dropping into free space. . . .

There was something else then, outside all this, not belonging to this, aloft. He watched it coming down. A shirt came down out of the high smoke, a shirt lifted and drifting in the scant light and then falling again, down toward the river.

(4)

This image of the disembodied white shirt that bookends the novel represents a third space of recursive victimhood that seems to erase the self-other dichotomy.

The protagonists of the novel make some tentative overtures toward responding to the event beyond the process of mourning.

For Keith and Lianne, the attacks disrupt their “certain symmetry, the steadfast commitment each made to an equivalent group” (29). After their separation, Keith takes refuge in his once-a-week poker games, where the group “liked creating a structure out of willful trivia” (98). The games give Keith “the one uncomplicated interval of his week, his month. . . the one anticipation that was not marked by the bloodguilt tracings of severed connections” (27). The deaths of two players in the attacks end the poker-night routine. Following this disruption, Keith enters into a short affair with a fellow survivor, Florence Givens. Keith and Florence are drawn together by their shared experience of the attacks, and their meetings enable them to restage this victimhood: “She talked about the tower, going over it again, claustrophobically, the smoke, the fold of bodies, and he understood that they could talk about these things only with each other, in minute and dullest detail, but it would never be dull or too detailed because it was inside them now and because he needed to hear what he’d lost in the tracings of memory” (90–91).

Unable to break out of the process of grieving, Keith distances himself further from his family: “He was self-sequestered, as always, but with a spatial measure now, one of air miles and cities, a dimension of literal distance between himself and others” (212). Telling Lianne that he is “not set on doing anything permanent” (215), he enters a poker tournament in Las Vegas three years after the attacks. The poker tournament, as Magali Cornier Michael has noted, lends Keith a certain tentative agency, as it provides him structure and rules; poker “allows Keith to re-experience the possibility of individual agency, even if that agency remains severely limited given that poker remains at base level a game of chance” (84). But at the same time, the tournament is Keith’s way of forgetting history by substituting the intolerable with the mundane:

There were no days or times except for the tournament schedule. He wasn’t making enough money to justify this life on a practical basis. But there was no such need. There should have been but wasn’t and that was the point. The point was one of invalidation. Nothing else pertained. Only this had binding force.

(230)

Keith's quest to "invalidate" himself in Las Vegas is driven by his need to achieve "free fall," which "is the fall of a body within the atmosphere without a drag-producing device such as a parachute. It is the ideal falling motion of a body that is subject only to the earth's gravitational field" (221). Keith's actions thus repeat the anguish of the people who jumped from the Twin Towers and approximate those of the performance artist known as Falling Man, at least on the surface. Lianne, on the other hand, is spurred by the attacks to refocus her energies on the story-line sessions that she organizes for patients in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. Lianne's investment in the writing sessions is primarily driven by a need to make peace with the memory of her father, who killed himself to escape senile dementia: "She needed these men and women. . . . needed these people. . . . There was something precious here, something that seeps and bleeds. These people were the living breath of the thing that killed her father" (61–62). The patients fight a losing game and wait for "the lapse into eventual protein stupor" (125), as they battle heroically to retain their subjectivities in the face of receding memories and language.

While both Keith's and Lianne's responses to the terrorist attacks shuttle between paradigms of self-obliteration and self-recovery, Martin Ridnour, the European lover of Lianne's mother, lends a peculiar nebulosity to the novel. He is a former member of Kommune 1, which resisted the excesses of the fascist German state in the 1960s. Ridnour is a man without a city; he is always in transit, and it is difficult to pinpoint his exact national affiliation except that he adheres to a broad paradigm of "history. . . politics and economics" in his reading of the post-9/11 situation (47). As Lianne tells Ridnour, "even when you're here, I think of you coming from a distant city on your way to another distant city and neither place has shape or form" (42). Ridnour's narrative purpose is twofold: he serves as a contrast to the entrenched views of Nina Bartos, Lianne's mother, who exonerates the West for the terror attacks. Referring to the social background of the terrorists, Nina believes: "It's not the history of Western interference that pulls down these societies. It's their own history, their mentality. They live in a closed world, of

choice, of necessity. They haven't advanced because they haven't wanted to or tried to" (47). Ridnour and Nina's relationship becomes strained because of their political disagreement. Secondly, Ridnour offers Lianne glimpses into her mother's youthful past: "She wanted to hear him talk about Nina and he did. It seemed all she'd known of her mother for an extended time was Nina in a chair, Nina in a bed. He lifted her into artists' lofts, Byzantine ruins, into halls where she'd lectured, Barcelona to Tokyo" (193). Lianne values Ridnour because "he was a link to her mother. . . . Ten or fifteen minutes on the phone with him. . . and she'd feel both sadder and better, seeing Nina in a kind of freeze-frame, vivid and alert" (192). For Lianne, Ridnour, like the Alzheimer's story-line group, facilitates a happier relationship to the past.

Magali Michael argues for a tentative positive note in DeLillo's novel in the sense that the text "in subtle ways ultimately works to counter the reactionary bent of the dominant narratives created and disseminated by the media and the Bush administration following 9/11, which overtly reasserted and championed traditional notions of heroic, militarized masculinity that privilege physical strength and the power accorded by such strength" (73–74). The novel's return to domestic responsibility, at least for Lianne, forms a counterweight to self-destructive adherence to the past: "She was ready to be alone, in reliable calm, she and the kid, the way they were before the planes appeared that day, silver crossing blue" (236).¹⁶ It might very well be the case, as Michael claims, that DeLillo's choice of the domestic narrative (a genre not commonly associated with masculinity) and his representation of the domestic space as one enabling recuperation and a critical reexamination of the self (wherein Keith and Lianne refashion their lives to assert their agencies) are indicative of the critical potential of 9/11 fiction to resist some of the state's egregious displays of bravado.¹⁷ But this tentative positivity in *Fall-*

16. I am grateful to an anonymous reader of *Contemporary Literature* for this point.

17. Michael argues that *Falling Man* "creates a narrative in which the communal ties of family accentuated by an ethics of care, the familiar physical spaces that create a conception of home, and the rituals of daily bodily existence provide a kind of psycho-

ing Man needs to be read alongside the narrative's notable political limitations, such as the fleeting appearance it gives to Ridnour's call to the United States to renew itself as a nation in a nonmilitaristic fashion. The text neutralizes this possible fracture by compressing Ridnour's perspective with a display of American cultural might verbalized by the library director:

Despite everything, we're still America, you're still Europe. You go to our movies, read our books, listen to our music, speak our language. How can you stop thinking about us? You see us and hear us all the time. Ask yourself. What comes after America?

(192)

DeLillo does not make Ridnour's lament that he does not "know this America anymore. . . . recognize it. . . . There's an empty space where America used to be" (193) integral for comprehending and contextualizing the 9/11 attacks. In fact, *Falling Man* defangs any possible radical residue in Ridnour's perspective by excluding Ridnour from the rhetorical center of the text and incorporating him into an encapsulating discourse that claims to understand him, as articulated by Lianne at their last meeting: "Maybe he was a terrorist but he was one of ours, she thought, and the thought chilled her, shamed her—one of ours, which meant godless, Western, white" (195).

The performance artist known as the Falling Man would seem to provide a suggestive response to the attacks, although the novel's descriptions of his intentions leave the reader confused. In one episode, Lianne sees the artist waiting for the train so that he can time his jump to coincide with its arrival. Lianne comprehends the artist's intentions thus: "The train would bust out of the tunnel. . . . It would pass and he would jump. There would be those aboard. . . all jarred out of their reveries or their newspapers or muttering stunned into their cell phones" (164–65). While part of the Falling Man's performance recuperates the anguish of the victims in free fall, "arms waving like nothing in this life" (246), it is not clear if the performance also amounts to

logical grounding for the shattered self and a means of beginning to recover a sense of shared humanity in the face of inhumanity" (75–76).

a resolutely political art that seeks to engage and awaken the audience. The narrative retracts from the performance's agitprop potential by reminding the reader that Lianne has been ventriloquizing for the Falling Man: "She wondered if this was his intention, to spread the word this way. . . . Or. . . . She was making it up, stretched so tight across the moment that she could not think her own thoughts" (165). We are not left with a clear vision of whether the artist means to keep the lines of communication open between himself and his audience or if Lianne is imagining this for him. While *Falling Man* masterfully represents the grief and disorientation of the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, the novel, in hesitating to fully engage with the potentialities of Ridnour's call for nonmilitaristic renewal and the Falling Man's agitprop art, ultimately falls short in imagining alterities in the post-9/11 condition.

The ethical-aesthetic visions of the four 9/11 novels that I have examined do not lead to what Richard Gray calls "altered geographies" (141), but they certainly interrogate the dynamic of home and the foreign, the self and the other in an attempt to prevent those concepts from coagulating into unexamined univocalities that serve the purposes of power. Arriving at a time when, as Jack says in *The Writing on the Wall*, "we have no perspective yet" (295), the subgenre of the American 9/11 novel does not completely abnegate the solace provided by the domestic, but it leaves the door open to more radical versions of alterity. In mapping the subgenre's struggle toward alterities opposed to the instrumentalized ideological imaginaries of the state, we come to a fuller realization of the significant responsibility of the ethical-aesthetic in envisioning alterities in a time of crisis.

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