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RESEARCH

## "All that Howling Space": "9/11" and the Aesthetic of Noise in Contemporary American Fiction

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This article reappraises representations of "9/11" within a longer history of noise in the American novel. Consumed by the noise of the present, driven by the desire to speak loudly, and convinced of the importance of traumatic "event" both to the present moment and to the lives of future generations, novels of the political "now" are often afflicted by what Jacques Derrida refers to as "archive fever", a phenomenon that is characterized by an eagerness to dispose of the present into the past and to imagine how the contemporary world will be remembered by future generations (Derrida 1998, 68). In this way, this article argues that "9/11" fictions by Don DeLillo, John Updike, Jonathan Safran Foer, Jess Walter, and Amy Waldman are best understood as ideologically inflected narratives that emphasise the noise of contemporary culture, associating the present with the singular noise of "9/11" and thus limiting how novelists write a history of their contemporary moment.

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**Keywords:** 9/11; American fiction; Jacques Derrida; noise; contemporary fiction

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In November 2013, Manhattan resident Kenny Cummings sent an email of inquiry to his local newspaper. "Have you ever heard from neighbors about the wailing World Trade Center?" (*Tribeca Citizen*, November 29, 2013) he wrote, claiming that an "eerie sound" could be heard a couple of blocks away from the construction site of One World Trade Center. When the email was published, many Tribeca residents confirmed that the sound was real, posting comments and uploading videos of the tower's "wailing" to YouTube. "It's all the screams of those that died," one commentator suggested whilst others replied that the flute-like moaning sounded more like the opening of "a portal to heaven." In reality, the sound was created by the new building's acoustics and, as wind rushed past the so-called "Freedom Tower," its metal bars vibrated, creating similar sound waves to an Aeolian harp. Nevertheless, many New Yorkers believed that the building was haunted or screaming and the wind's natural vibrations reminded the public of the cacophonous noise of "9/11" long after "Ground Zero" had been cleared and the site rebuilt.<sup>1</sup>

The "wailing" of One World Trade Center provides us with a literal example of "9/11"'s sonic afterlife. The sound was the result of the tower's design; first noticed by residents during Hurricane Sandy in October 2012, it had ceased entirely by the time the building was completed in January 2014. Beyond its literal noise, however, this article conceives of the coordinated terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on the morning of September 11, 2001 as culturally dissonant in both a real and metaphorical sense. I want to suggest not only that the events of that day were loud, but that the terrorist attacks produced and inspired noise in their representation, ensuring that the cultural resonance of the attacks far-outlasted the scenes of destruction at "Ground Zero." By capitalizing on pre-existing ideas of American exceptionalism, writers and critics inherited the apocalyptic and "postlapsarian" (DeRosa 2011, 607) discourse of the Bush administration and, in

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to "9/11" in quotation marks and cite the date of the terrorist attacks in full as September 11, 2001 where possible because I believe that the terminology is ideologically problematic, perpetuating an idea of the events' exceptionalism by referring to the attacks as a symbol, "9/11," that removes the identifying year of the attacks and thereby implies the threat of its imminent repetition. I return to this idea, enumerated in Jacques Derrida's later philosophy, amongst many others, throughout.

raising their voices to protest the inhumanity of the attacks, the literary "response" to September 11, 2001 added to the cacophony surrounding them. That is to say, in the immediate aftermath, it was easier to conceive of September 11, 2001 as a moment that loudly divorced this century from the last than to track its continuities with the world as it was on September 10. It was easier, I argue, to conceive of "9/11" as an epochal "event" that would loudly and profoundly influence contemporary fiction than to claim the time for reflection and to quietly consider what Lauren Berlant describes as the "becoming-event" (Berlant 2012, 5) in which both the crisis and contemporary fiction were situated.<sup>2</sup>

This article therefore reappraises representations of "9/11" within a longer history of noise in the American novel. Consumed by the noise of the present, driven by the desire to speak loudly, and convinced of the importance of traumatic "event" both to the present moment and to the lives of future generations, novels of the political "now" are often afflicted by what Jacques Derrida refers to as "archive fever," a phenomenon that is characterized by an eagerness to dispose of the present into the past and to imagine how the contemporary world will be remembered by future generations (Derrida 1998, 68). In this way, I argue that "9/11" fictions by Don DeLillo, John Updike, Jonathan Safran Foer, Jess Walter, and Amy Waldman are best understood as ideologically inflected narratives that emphasise the noise of contemporary culture, associating the present with the singular noise of "9/11" and thus limiting how novelists write a history of their contemporary moment.

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<sup>2</sup> In philosophy, the "event" is commonly conceived as an object in time, though there is no universal definition and it would be antithetical to my project to attempt one here. In *L'Être et l'Événement*, for instance, Alain Badiou suggests that the event is any instance that is reliant on a set of rule changes that allow the event to occur and that are entirely exceptional from day-to-day life. Similarly, I am interested in Jacques Derrida's suggestion that narrative linearity suppresses difference, supporting teleology, conventionality, continuity, and the idea of truth with particular attention to Derrida's later concept of "archive fever" as well as Homi K. Bhabha's argument that the linear conception of history homogenises time by suggesting that the progression from national origins to the modern nation-state is a natural act.

## Fiction after "9/11"

In the weeks that followed September 11, 2001, fiction writers eager to explore the disruption of a "post-9/11" world published a deluge of articles, mostly autobiographical in nature. Ian McEwan wrote one of the earliest responses, lamenting the new frailty of "Our civilisation" and suggesting that after the attacks "the world would never be the same," in fact "it would be worse" (McEwan 2001, 2). By September 20, *The New York Times* had published essays by Joan Didion, Tim O'Brien, and Joyce Carol Oates and by September 30, Martin Amis, Peter Carey, Jeanette Winterson, and Amitav Ghosh had all published personal responses, reflecting on the future of authorship after the event.

In a particularly noteworthy gesture, *The New Yorker* devoted the entirety of its 'Talk of the Town' section to nine 700-word vignettes by contemporary writers to "reflect on the tragedy and its consequences" (*The New Yorker*, September 24, 2001). Just a week after the attacks, Jonathan Franzen observed that "the new world" was already "a different world," its newness generated by the shock of tragedy on US soil. Similarly, John Updike elaborated on the problem of representing September 11, 2001 by asserting that, after the attacks, reality appeared to be reflexive. The lines between fact and fiction, he believed, were irrevocably blurred by the attacks: "there persisted the notion that, as on television, this was not quite real; it could be adjusted; the technocracy the towers symbolized would find a way to put out the fire and reverse the damage." In the days after, novelists struggled to interpret their role, caught between two impulses. Should the artist respond rapidly to the event in an attempt to make meaning for the confused public, or should they take time to look beyond the initial spectacle, projecting the event's importance into an equally uncertain future?

The irony has been widely noted that many of the novelists who lamented the impossibility of authorship in the days and weeks after would write novels depicting the aftermath of "9/11."<sup>3</sup> McEwan, who published one of the earliest responses, was

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<sup>3</sup> For extended discussion of the general failures of a "9/11" literature as a trend and/or genre, see Rachel Sykes, 'A Failure of Imagination? Problems in 'Post-9/11' Fiction,' in *Recovering 9/11 in New York*, Robert Fanuzzi and Michael Wolfe ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2014), 248–263.

amongst the first to publish a work of fiction with the release of *Saturday* in 2005. Then, between 2005 and 2007, a number of prominent writers of fiction published novels based around the events in New York in particular. These included *Saturday*, Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), and DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), novels that are now studied as key examples of "post-9/11 fiction" because they recreate either the events of that day or the year that followed. More established authors would also reference the attacks: Paul Auster's *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005) used "9/11" to signal the end of the protagonist's nostalgic remembrance of late-Clinton era America, whilst in Philip Roth's *Everyman* (2006) the events of September 11, 2001 coincide with the protagonist's move to a retirement village and "the origin of his exile" (Roth 2006, 135) from society. Franzen, who did not depict the attacks directly, recreated the "post-9/11 slump" (Franzen 2010, 28) of the United States in his novel *Freedom* which broadly articulated the personal, economic, and political repercussions of the time. Similarly, a number of lesser known but critically acclaimed novelists published fictional accounts of the attacks within the same two year period: Jess Walter's *The Zero* (2006), Ken Kalfus' *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006), Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006), Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* (2006), and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007). Just four years after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, a trend was becoming evident. Novelists were not only incorporating "9/11" into their novels but attempting to depict and represent the attacks or their aftermath in sustained ways.

The novels listed above have become key texts of a body of "9/11" literature. However, by grouping these novels as a trend, period, or genre, it becomes clear that they are not "about" the events of September 11, 2001 in any cohesive way. DeLillo, Kalfus, and Walter produced fictional accounts of the survivors and their families, reimagining the experiences of those who escaped from the towers. Of these, DeLillo hypothesises about the psychological consequences of surviving the attacks in *Falling Man* whilst Kalfus and Walter undercut similar narratives with satirical portrayals of corporate life during the Bush administration. McInerney and Messud depict the experience of the wealthier residents of New York as they helplessly watch the events in Manhattan unfold and in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* Safran Foer adopts

the perspective of an equally powerless nine-year-old boy who grieves for the father he loses on that day. Demonstrating the breadth of the "9/11" genre, McEwan's novel, *Saturday*, engages indirectly with the attacks; the novel is set against the London demonstrations that preceded American and British intervention in Iraq and describes "9/11" in brief, as an "induction into international affairs" (McEwan 2005, 31) for the Western world. Uniquely, amongst these examples, Updike's *Terrorist* chronicles the thoughts of an American-born Muslim who attempts to blow up the Lincoln Tunnel between New Jersey and New York City and Hamid, with considerably more nuance than Updike, explores the motivations of a Pakistani-born American resident who comes to embrace a militant version of Islam after becoming exiled from the "growing and self-righteous rage in those weeks in September" (Hamid 2007, 94).

When considering novels that take September 11, 2001 as their direct subject, it is therefore possible to identify some common themes. A white middle-class context predominates and symbols of futurity, children, the elderly, and the fall of innocence implied by the attacks preoccupy the protagonists. However, the most common theme of any "9/11" novel is the novelist's fear that fiction may be culturally irrelevant at a time of crisis. Oskar Schell, the nine-year-old protagonist of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, is an "inventor" of narrative, continually creating scenarios of his father's death that he "can't stop inventing" (Foer 2005, 257). Through Oskar, Foer suggests that the creative impulse is a necessary part of healing in the wake of tragedy and, in doing so, validates his position as novelist. Similarly, in *Terrorist*, John Updike writes a parallel version of the attacks, representing the mind-set of a young extremist as he becomes disillusioned with America and plans his own act of terrorism to coincide with the September anniversary. Seizing the opportunity to write a version of the attacks in which the bomber repents and tragedy is avoided, Updike links the existence of terrorism to the amplifying dissonance of America's screens. On television, the novel's protagonist, Ahmad, searches for "traces of God in this infidel society" (Updike 2006, 196) but finds only noise and disruption. That is, whilst searching for spaces of peace and interiority, Ahmad encounters only the "jabber" (28) of news teams and the "electronic chatter" (47) of the Internet, the noisy harbingers



of the modern age that were equally integral to the spectacle of September 11, 2001. To Updike's horror, and as reflected in his article for *The New Yorker*, television mediated the public's experience of "9/11," representing and interpreting the attacks in ways that the novelist could not. And rather than adapting, reinventing, or accepting the position of the novelist at a time of crisis in the twenty-first century, Updike, Foer, and many of their contemporaries embraced the portrayal of noise in the hope that bigger, richer, louder novels would recapture the dissonance of "9/11" and preserve a record of the events for posterity.

### **Noise and contemporary fiction**

In my formulation, the "9/11" novel embodies an aesthetic of anxiety and noise, what Kathy Knapp describes as an "aesthetic of contingency" (Knapp 2014, xiii), that denies the time for reflection in the present and reveals a crippling fear of change in the literary establishment. This narrative disquiet predated the attacks, as many critics have rightly observed. Jeremy Green identified a "free-floating anxiety" (Green 2005, 4) in many pre-millennial forms of realist fiction and James Wood famously diagnosed the encyclopedic novels of DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Zadie Smith, and David Foster Wallace as "hysterical realism" (Wood *The New Republic*, July 24, 2000) for what he saw as the authors' obsession with the totalizing "noise" of the topical and the avoidance of silence, subjectivity, and reflection.

Of course, debates about the death of the novel are as old as the form itself, but it is my contention that questions of the novel's social worth often coincide with claims that society has become "too noisy" to represent. Throughout the twentieth century, the noise of society became increasingly inhuman through the roar of industry, the rattle of machine guns, and the noise of 'progress.' Still, modernism, as Marshall Berman suggests, "nourished itself on the real trouble in the modern streets, and transformed their noise and dissonance into beauty and truth" (Berman 1982, 31). In response to the increasing loudness of the culture, art developed a vocabulary of radical political, cultural, and aesthetic forms to articulate the new sounds of modernity and criticised works that focussed on reflection and interiority for their failure

to represent the noise of the present. Futurist art, for example, was composed of a "jabber of lines, planes, light, and noise" (Hughes 1980, 44) that refused to compress experience into a smaller picture, seeking louder, and broader, frames for experience. Similarly, Vorticism claimed to represent the "crude energy" of the world through "vivid and violent ideas" (Lewis 1914, 7), as declared in the manifesto for *Blast* in 1914 and the Dadaist Manifesto of Berlin, written in 1918, further characterised expressionists dismissively, as "people who prefer their armchair to the noise of the street" (Huelsenbeck 1918, 254). Importantly, these factions of modernism believed that art should account for noise as a symptom of modernity and diagnosed quietness as a failure to meet the radical, modernising, terrifying, and exciting changes that were happening in the culture of the time.

When postmodernist experimentation turned fiction away from "the noise of the street," the novelist invoked increasingly metafictional techniques to defend the novel from both the threat of technological advance and the weight of history. Again, debates about the usefulness of fiction were expressed in terms of noise and, by the end of the twentieth century, novelists and critics regularly conflated creativity with the need to speak loudly. In 1984, Salman Rushdie argued that "in this world without quiet corners" (Rushdie 1984, 123) fiction could not turn away from noise because history, in essence, is a "terrible, unquiet fuss." Indeed, many novelists suggested that the only way to write fiction was to write bigger, bolder, and louder novels. In 'Stalking the Billion Footed Beast,' Tom Wolfe famously criticised writers from Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov to John Barth and Robert Coover for displacing the novel's social function. Wolfe wanted to read novels of the cultural moment that would be filled with contemporary noise: "the big novels of the racial clashes, the hippie movement, the New Left, the Wall Street boom, the sexual revolution, the war in Vietnam" (Wolfe 1989, 49). His adjectives for fiction are as brash as they are loud, claiming that the form should be "confrontational," "radical," capable of representing "the American century, the century in which we had become the mightiest military power in all history"(50).

Through the 1980s and 1990s, literary critics also asked how the writer could continue to represent the experience of the present when "[t]he rate and magnitude

of change have outstripped the integrating powers of the psyche" (Birverts 1992, 127–128). Calls for what DeLillo described as "the big social novel" (DeLillo 1996) or what James Wood referred to as "the Great American Social Novel" (Wood *The Guardian*, October 6, 2001) promised to halt the death of the form by loudly affirming its social necessity. However, as this article suggests, the problem with associating the contemporary moment with ever increasing levels of noise is that it poses a limited for the novel, which is, after all, a silent form. It also suggests that the purpose of the novel rests almost entirely on the inclusion of overtly political, or loud, actions and events that will compensate for the silence of the printed word. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, many novelists therefore clung to "9/11" as an event that crystallised the louder reality of the moment in which they were writing. For novelist Zadie Smith, fictional renditions of the events of September 11, 2001 were also indicative of a broader crisis in a "breed of lyrical Realism" (Smith 2008) favoured by Wolfe, Franzen, and Updike, that has been culturally dominant for too long. These novels, she writes, are "so precisely the image of what we have been taught to value in fiction that [they] throw that image into a kind of existential crisis, as the photograph gifts a nervous breakdown to the painted portrait." And if, as Lilian R. Furst suggests, contemporary forms of realism can be diagnosed by the central problem of "how to translate an allegedly true (but necessarily subjective) vision into words" (Furst 1992, 3), in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the novelist increasingly turned from translation to depiction in order to compete with the visual records of the attacks that captured both sight and sound. For novelist and critic Andrew O'Hagan, on September 11, "[a]ctuality showed its own naked art" (O'Hagan 2011, 37) and non-fiction gained primacy over the "dead" metaphors of fiction, throwing the noisy dominance of realism into crisis.

### **"9/11" and the aesthetic of noise**

If noise is a key theme in the first flush of "9/11" fictions, then it cannot be coincidental that one of the most studied examples of the "9/11" novel is Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. The event, the explosions, the screams of observers, the sound of bodies hitting the sidewalk, all contributed to a terrible

and cacophonous volume that held the public's attention. Foer's title alludes to the anxiety that afflicted the citizens of New York City when such noise happened in the confines of an urban environment and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* examines how the barrage of loud sounds associated with trauma is hard for the individual to process quietly. Oskar, Foer's nine-year-old narrator, wistfully imagines a future in which a siren warns people of imminent disasters. The warning is designed to sound above a disaster and, specifically, to allow people time to prepare for the process of grieving that will follow. "[W]hen something *really* terrible happened," he suggests, "– like a nuclear bomb, or at least a biological weapons attack – an extremely loud siren would go off" (Foer 38). Although the siren is a fantasy, the extreme loudness of Foer's novel is continually associated with terrible occurrences and Oskar's wish for a warning system is an attempt to rid noise of its disruptive potential. Loudness, Oskar notes, also keeps an event at the forefront of the mind. When Oskar arrives at his grandmother's house to find her mysteriously absent, he imagines possible scenarios and notes how "extremely loud" (235) his most pessimistic thoughts become. A terrible event is noisiest, Foer suggests, because of its negatively affective repercussions and associations and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* embodies the noise of traumatic experience by articulating how responses to trauma should warn others of oncoming danger.

Foer was not alone in aestheticising the noise of the attacks. Jess Walter's *The Zero* tells the story of New York City's recovery from the perspective of a "hero cop," Brian Remy, as he pieces together his memories in the days after the attacks. Searching through the wreckage of the World Trade Center, Remy believes that the site is "humming;" the rubble produces a constant sound that is occasionally punctuated by "the shriek of shifting steel" or by the hope "that someone was calling his name" (Walter 2006, 15). The wreckage of the World Trade Center emits a low rumble that is accented by real and imaginary noise, but Walter's description anticipates the "wailing" of One World Trade Center and the shrieks of steel that reminded residents of the "screams of those that died." Remy's desire that the dead should speak also hints at a wider discomfort about the state of quiet after a disaster. His longing to

hear cries amongst the silence of the rubble is a desire for human contact and a need to hear shouts above the noise of an event that had silenced so many voices.

For many novelists, then, quietness represented a collective loss for words. Martin Amis alleged that by September 12 many writers considered changing profession because they lost the confidence to speak with authority: "the voices coming from their rooms," he suggested, "were very quiet" (Amis 2002). Perhaps the most striking expression of authorial quietness was published two years later. Toni Morrison published a poem, 'The Dead of September,' in 2003 and suggested that the event might continue to defy representation. "I have nothing to say," Morrison wrote, "no words / stronger than the steel that pressed you into itself" (Morrison 2003, 1). The author has rarely published poetry, releasing just one short collection, *Five Poems*, in 2002. Morrison's choice of form, therefore, may also reflect her uncertainty about the event's representation in fiction. Of the responses previously noted, only Morrison's suggests that silence might be the best method of engagement, or that reflection over a longer period might be preferable to rapid responses. In the feature articles and novels discussed here, quietness seems to be an enforced state: a loss of nerve and conviction in the wake of terrorism. Morrison is unusual in recognising the "gift" of reflection at a time of crisis, as epitomised in the opening tautology of the poem and an idea first articulated by John Cage in his 'Lecture on Nothing' (1949): "I have nothing to say / and I am saying it / and that is poetry / as I need it" (Cage 1949, 109).

Just as Morrison's poem echoes earlier expressions of postmodernity in confronting the impossibilities of representation, discussion of the insufficiency of language at a time of crisis was not new. In the Western tradition one parallel can be found in the responses of the New York Intellectuals to the role of literature after the Holocaust. Reflecting on the relationship between society and cultural criticism in 1955, Theodor Adorno famously suggested that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (Adorno 1955, 34) echoing what Lionel Trilling had argued two years previously: "There is no possible way of responding to Belsen and Buchenwald" (Trilling 1953, 256). What is demonstrated by biographical and fictional responses to the events of September 11, 2001 is that fiction writers, particularly those based

in New York, felt what Adorno described as "the drastic guilt of him who was spared" (Adorno 1966, 363). Revisiting his statement on Auschwitz in 1966, Adorno identified a cultural form of survivor's guilt made manifest in the artist, who is caught between capturing an event's singularity and negotiating it into the past. Burdened by a sense of duty to those who have died and an accountability to those who remain, Adorno claimed that "By way of atonement [the artist] will be plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all." Any event presented as a rupture in the teleological narrative of the nation-state draws the artist into a temporal loop, unable to relegate the event's significance to the past and projecting its legitimacy into the future. Caught in a stasis, art is unable to evolve because the artist thinks in terms of ruptures instead of progression. In other words, "he is no longer living at all" and the event looms larger, and louder, provocatively extended throughout the past, present, and future whilst simultaneously limiting the artist's innovative and transgressive capacity to write it.

Indeed, I argue that *any* focus on a singular event is noisy as a narrative conceit. For postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhaba the "linear equivalence" (Bhaba 1994, 140) of event had always been an exclusionary structure and signified "a holistic cultural identity" that suppresses the diversity of a culture. By the end of the twentieth century, Bhaba argues, Western society had entered a "beyond" (1) time when experience could no longer be conceived by its singularities and national event no longer symbolised the collective experience of the present. Seven months prior to the attacks, in February 2001, Jacques Derrida published *Dire l'évènement, est-ce possible?* a volume that discussed the ongoing difficulties of articulating the event as a temporal structure. Here, the philosopher turned the idea of event on its head, suggesting that it was not the event, per se, but the contemplation of it that revealed a "certain impossibility" (Derrida 2007, 445) of representation. Unlike Bhaba, Derrida contends that event is *never* singular, "as a structure of language, it is bound to a measure of generality, iterability, and repeatability" (446). However, Derrida suggests that the "iterability" of event also leads to the homogeneity that Bhaba identifies and similarly restricts the potentiality of the present as a performative space.

To Derrida, the event is a fascinating contradiction, but only full of possibility in its linguistic *impossibility*. However, in the weeks following "9/11," fiction writers and critics remained attracted to the idea of the event's singularity, unable to escape the catastrophic images they had seen, but equally unable to articulate what was unique about the tragedy. The notion of the event as a temporal rupture is no more apparent than in the most studied example of "9/11" literature, Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. In the novel's opening pages, DeLillo introduces the reader to the city of New York in the minutes after the collapse of the World Trade Center when "The roar was still in the air, the buckling rumble of the fall" (DeLillo 2006, 3).<sup>4</sup> Later in the novel, New York City is described as historically "loud and blunt" (69) but in the moments after the attacks the loudness of the city extends, becoming both terrifying and inescapable. "The noise lay everywhere," DeLillo writes, "they ran, stratified sound collecting around them, and he walked away from it and into it at the same time" (4). Moving away from the towers, and down the street, the loudness of the event follows Keith, reaching him through "the trembling air" (5) as the second tower falls and "a soft awe of voices" rises in the distance. Tellingly, the noise of the attacks echoes around New York, showing no sign of stopping, and as DeLillo's protagonist, Keith Neudecker, emerges from the wreckage of the North Tower time itself seems to have stopped.

DeLillo's prose therefore reflects the notion of temporal rupture as perpetuated in "post-9/11" discourse. "These are the days after," DeLillo mourns, "Everything now is measured in after" (138). Crisis is often conceived in terms of the post-apocalyptic and in *Falling Man* the moment in which the towers fall is the moment in which the world ends. Neudecker fatalistically decides, "Nothing is next. There is no next. This was next" (10) consigning the events of September 11, 2001 to a unique bubble, frozen in the present and with no real future. As Donald Pease has suggested, the Bush administration invoked the attacks as "one sociopolitical compact"; the event

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<sup>4</sup> DeLillo had written similarly about the sound of the attacks in his biographical essay, 'In the Ruins of the Future,' published in *Harper's* in December 2001. He described the fall of the towers as a "low drumming rumble" that echoed throughout the city. DeLillo, 'In the Ruins of the Future,' *Harper's*, December 2001, 40.

was conceived as a crime committed against the American people that "exonerated any and every wrong (past, present, or future) for the actions that it would take in redressing wrong worldwide" (Pease 2006, 101). Similarly, *Falling Man* is a novel that is consumed by the event's importance to the present and unable to leave "9/11" in the past: the narrative begins just after Keith's escape from the North Tower and ends whilst he is still looking for a way out. Keith is stuck in a temporal loop that forces him to circle back to the event with no hope of a resolution or route into the future. Even the "falling man" of the title is a fictional performance artist who suspends himself with a rope and harness in a recreation of Richard Drew's image of 'The Falling Man.'<sup>5</sup> The artist hangs provocatively from the buildings of the city, introducing his performance and its associations into the everyday lives of New Yorkers so that the event's symbolism becomes literally inescapable. Crucially, the "falling man" is a disruptive presence but also a symbol of stasis because the performance does not recreate the act of jumping or of falling but depicts a man hanging over the city in a suspended state.

DeLillo's characters are stifled, then, by the idea of the event's singularity and the unreliability of memory. Like the cacophonous noise echoing through the city, the impact of the event spreads at an alarming rate; from the opening line of the novel, the attacks open up the geography of the city, "not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night" (DeLillo 2007, 1). Ideas of history and memory are nevertheless tied to the structure of the city and just as the famous skyline of New York is reconfigured by the attacks, memory is dissolved and personal identities erased. When Keith comes to rebuild his memories of the day, he is unable to fully access them and speaks only of constructs. "It's hard to reconstruct," he says, "I don't know how my mind was working" (21). The trauma of "9/11" does not lie in forgetting in *Falling Man*, but rather in failing to remember anything but dissonance. Indeed, the speed with which observers have to process the event appears to inhibit the archiving of memory. As Derrida suggests, the *Mal d'archive* burns with a

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Drew's series of nine images became known by this single shot, 'The Falling Man,' which came to represent the 200 or so people who fell, or jumped, to their deaths that day.



passion, never resting in its desire to uncover some kind of meaning from an event that will ultimately have no "originary origin" (Derrida 1998, 97). The event therefore provides a grand narrative, reconstructing memories that the public may have forgotten to appear pointedly necessary to the periodization of the present. DeLillo wrote of this process in his 2001 essay, 'In the Ruins of the Future,' when he suggested that the writer should attempt "to give memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space" (DeLillo 2001, 40). However, as *Falling Man* progresses, Neudecker is left with even fewer memories. He begins an affair in order "to hear what he'd lost in the tracings of memory" (DeLillo 2007, 91), yet this experience also fades. As memory is shown to be unreliable, there is nothing holding relationships together in the present and no private sense of memory left for the characters to "hear" and to help retrieve their lost connections. The process of archiving is therefore seen to fail in *Falling Man* and DeLillo traces its passing back to the noise of "9/11."

What the essay 'In the Ruins of the Future' demonstrates most significantly is how the "totalising" qualities of "9/11" were characteristically loud to DeLillo as a writer of fiction. Despite the supposed impossibility of representing the event that he struggles with in *Falling Man*, DeLillo remains convinced of the event's enduring importance and that it is the "job" of the novelist to record it. Describing how the physical destruction of Lower Manhattan seems to threaten the fabric of reality, DeLillo writes that, with reality compromised, the writer's thoughts should be consumed by assigning meaning to what has been left behind: "In its desertion of every basis for comparison, the event asserts its singularity" (DeLillo 2001, 40). DeLillo argues that it is the writer's job to form memories for the reader, to make meaning out of events that many struggle to comprehend, and to create art from the "howling space" that remains. I would argue, however, that the contradiction at the heart of DeLillo's analogy is resonant of the loudness of the event. The physical destruction of the World Trade Center left a hole in the New York skyline and a "space" in the heart of Manhattan that was suddenly defined by its absence. As Manhattan resident Kenny Cummings complained, the void appeared to produce noise, even to howl, long after the site itself had been cleared and, similarly, DeLillo suggests that the

mere existence of Ground Zero spoke of what had happened with such volume that the writer must create a work of equal noise to make sense of the ongoing din and to recover our collective memory of the event.

### **"On a quiet day"**

After the first flush of "9/11" fictions were published, the American novel remained concerned with the totalising noise of "9/11." In Jennifer Egan's Pulitzer-prize-winning novel, *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (2010), characters glimpse the former World Trade Center site as they go about their day, noting the "blazing freeways of light" (Egan 2010, 12) where the Twin Towers once stood and suggesting that, after five years of having "nothing there" (38), the city continually circles the moment of the attacks. In Gary Shtyengart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), the author imagines a future in which the Freedom Tower is complete and stands over the city as a symbol of imperialism: "empty and stern in profile, like an angry man risen and ready to punch" (Shtyengart 2010, 96). Most notably, Amy Waldman's debut novel, *The Submission*, was published to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the attacks and subsequently hailed as the latest, greatest "9/11 novel." The novel opens as a committee meets to approve a permanent memorial on "Ground Zero"; two years after the attacks, artists, city planners, and the bereaved struggle to choose between two final designs, "The Void" and "The Garden," concerned that the former will be seen as hopeless and that the latter will appear too soft.

In my reading, *The Submission* explores the ongoing tension between loud and quiet responses to the event. History is represented as a continual noise that runs loudly through everything, from personal names, "the ring – theological, historical, hysterical – of Mohammed" (Waldman 2011, 96), to the legacy of the dead. A mother whose son dies whilst rescuing people trapped in the towers also suggests that the attacks have removed the quietness of grief:

Sometimes I wish Patrick had died in a regular fire. No firefighter dies a private death, not if he dies on the job. But to have all these politics moved in – I don't like it, all . . . the noise. Grief should be quiet. A memorial should have the silence of the convent. (89)

Set in 2003, though published in 2011, Waldman's novel remains consumed by the "howling space" DeLillo described in October 2001. Particularly in this passage, noise is explicitly linked to "the politics" surrounding the event, making "9/11" almost impossible to ignore but pointedly cacophonous in its unrepresentability. Furthermore, in suggesting that no firefighter dies a "private death," Waldman's character links the noise of the tragedy to its public nature. For a brief moment, the loudness of "9/11" becomes unnatural, a disruption of the natural order and the process of grief rather than the embodiment of a nation's contemporary experience. Perhaps most revealing of all, the design that is ultimately and controversially chosen to build over the horrors of "Ground Zero" is "The Garden," a design selected to "encourage contemplation" (114), restoring an aesthetic of quiet to the memorialisation of an event that has been conceived primarily by its loudness.

In September 2002, Arundhati Roy made a plea for a quieter understanding of the moment in which she was speaking when she concluded her lecture, 'Come September,' with an entreaty to America. "Welcome to the world," she declared:

Perhaps things will become worse and then better. Perhaps there's a small god up in heaven readying herself for us. Another world is not only possible, she's on her way. Maybe many of us won't be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing. (Roy 2002, 75)

Roy asked her audience, and specifically the United States, to trust in the continuities of the wider world in an attempt to understand how history repeats itself. There is something transcendent, Roy suggests, something that exists independent of the material world, that can be heard when the day is quiet but that will be ignored if individuals, or nations, do not take the time to listen. Similarly, in this article, I have argued that the literary response to "9/11" represents a failure to reflect, to be calm, and to be quiet, a failure to meet the loud timbre of public tragedy with the quiet balm of reflection. If each generation believes their present to be louder, then the impulse to meet the noise of the present with increasingly louder forms of expression is equally symptomatic of a kind of exceptionalism that dismisses the present's

continuity with the past and equates loudness with a narrative of progress. "9/11" provided the twenty-first century with an event that loudly declared the tenor of a new century, but that simultaneously limited the interpretative powers of contemporary writers to conceive of the diverse ways in which people experience the present.

## Competing Interests

[[COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT TO BE PROVIDED]]

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