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Terror, Performance, and Post 9/11 Literature

Elise C. Silva

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Terror, Performance and Post 9/11 Literature

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This project explores 9/11 as a performative act that is re-represented in post 9/11 fiction. Although many scholars have engaged spectacle theory to understand the event, this project asserts that performance theory gives a more dynamic and ethical reading of post 9/11 literatures like Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. The aforementioned post 9/11 texts showcase narrative performances and also give formal performances for an audience of readers. Theatricality in these texts promotes dialogue and healing through interactive communication.

Keywords: 9/11 Fiction, Performance Theory

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TERROR, PERFORMANCE, AND POST 9/11 LITERATURE

Rethinking Post 9/11 Literary Criticism

Modern Fiction Studies recently issued a special call for papers to examine post 9/11 texts. Specifically, the journal asked for essays that “reflect[ed] on fiction's and film's various responses to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001” and that “explored the . . . successes and failures of these narrative mediations” (660). The call for papers evidences the literary community’s continued attention about how best to approach 9/11 as a cultural event with lasting political and social effects. Assessing the “successes and failures” of post 9/11 narratives, *Modern Fiction Studies* invited the scholarly community to take part in theorizing the ethics of representation for an event that is ambiguous both in meaning and in cultural impact.

With the ten year anniversary of 9/11 fast approaching, critics continue to revisit the various frameworks used to consider both the event and the fiction following it. One major point of discussion among scholars is spectacle theory—a framework articulated in Jean Baudrillard’s *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2002). Baudrillard posits that as a spectacle, 9/11 exists outside of experience: “The terrorist violence here is not, then, a blowback of reality, any more than it is a blowback of history. It is not ‘real.’ In a sense, it is worse: it is symbolic” (29). The “symbolic” becomes a liability for Baudrillard because it distances spectators from the spectacle. Spectacle theorists also approach 9/11 with the understanding that it was a mass-consumed, “symbolic” event waiting to happen, and that it was in fact patterned after American fascination with disaster movies. In *Reframing 9/11* (2010), Reza Aslan contends, “[i]f [9/11] sounded like a plot to a Hollywood movie, it’s because that is precisely what it was.” Aslan then compares 9/11 to Hollywood blockbuster *The Siege* (1998) which “conjures up a New York City made so paranoid by a series of terrorist attacks that the government must declare martial law and send in the

military to police the petrified residents” (xi). According to these theorists, 9/11 cannot be conceptualized in the “real” because of its symbolic nature and its profound root in “the image” which is static, removed, and cinematic in nature. Both the image and the excessive violence of 9/11 are consumed by viewers through media representations of terror. This is problematic because audiences were distanced from the event’s abstracted horror, by what Glen McGillivray calls a “Manhattan disaster movie” (par 10).

However, while it may be true that 9/11 was a “spectacular” event, 9/11 warrants an examination of the ways in which its complex, staged performance functions in a postmodern, terror-filled world. Years before 9/11, terrorist analyst at the RAND corporation, Brian Jenkins said, “terrorism is theater,” asserting a symbiotic relationship between the media and terrorists (“International Terrorism” 4). Terrorists need spectators just as an actor needs an audience for the act to have meaning. What Jenkins’ metaphor suggests is far more reaching than a static spectacle because it invokes a complex production where actors and audiences are involved in making terror. Exploring the terror-as-theater metaphor allows us to unpack the nuanced performance of 9/11 in a way that considering an objectified “spectacle” does not. In addition, analysis of performance highlights the relationship *between* actors and audiences which focuses on movement and interaction, not removal and distance. Therefore, the notion of performance provides a fresh way of viewing not only the original event, but literatures dealing with the event that have emerged in the past ten years. Assessing the underanalyzed avenue of performances and performativity in the field of 9/11 literature illustrates the profound way that post 9/11 fictions act and react to the original theatrical event through questioning the boundaries of identity and ethics in the context of terror.

Most importantly, post 9/11 fictions highlight the many ways that communication happens in the context of terror and its intricate theater. Both Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) explore avenues of communication and meaning making in the face of an event that many critics suggested defied language, description, and expression.¹ Through immediacy and movement, these texts reject a closed and inert polarized interpretation of 9/11 and invite a pastiche of interpretations and interactions. Through this communicative connection, authors, texts, and readers convene to create a new solidarity in the light of extreme political divisions that occurred as an initial reaction to the event. Instead of relying exclusively on the world of symbol and static spectacle which stills communication, these texts attempt to reinstitute nuances and complexities that demand readers become a part of the story, history, and even the future of 9/11 studies through reading. Interactive spaces where actor and audience meet are interpreted as dynamic *and* symbolic, rather than completely outside the confines of language, conversation, and experience. After all, how can an event be completely outside of these modes? In these texts, communication occurs on various levels: through the actor/audience connection, the text/reader connection, the terrorist/victim connection, and even through the reality/fiction connection. As the texts implode these binaries, identities are confused, reformed, and most importantly, re-"acted" to consider multiple ways of responding to terrorism. Instead of taking part in the political dialogue and cultural backlash about 9/11 and culpability, these literatures point towards a future where healing actions and therapeutic conversations can take place through new avenues of conversation.

Performance Theory and Post 9/11 Fiction

Since 9/11, major performance theory texts like Richard Schechner's *Performance Studies* (2002), Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postelwait's *Theatricality* (2003), Samuel Weber's *Theatricality as a Medium* (2004), and Mathew Causey's *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture* (2006) have all weighed in on the implications of studying 9/11 as a theatrical event. Performance studies examines arts, religious rituals, language, politics, and social behaviors as constructed, rehearsed, and either consciously or unconsciously mimetic. In short, performance theorists are interested in *what* performances (as widely defined) accomplish and *how* they do so. The field is also interested in the ways that 9/11 reinterprets traditional understandings of staging, audience, and actor in order to comprehend the original event's intent. Traditional theater as basically defined lies within the realm of the performing arts: performances are staged, rehearsed acts. The post 9/11 moment is unique in its theatrical framework, however, and performance studies can help give vocabulary to an otherwise spectacularized and objectified event. 9/11 broke political and military convention in its asymmetrical symbolic attack, and thus warrants a rethinking of the parameters of both performance and performativity. How does one, then, define performance, performativity, and theatricality in the post 9/11 literary moment?

Gabriel Wieman suggests that 9/11 was different in its theatrical scope than any other previous act of terror. He writes,

From the theater-of-terror perspective, the September 11 attack on America was a perfectly choreographed production aimed at American and international audiences. Although the theater metaphor remains instructive, it has given way to that of terrorism as a global television . . . but the September 11 attack introduced

a new level of mass mediated terrorism because of the choices the planners made with respect to method, target, timing, and scope. (70)

The “production” of 9/11 initiated a “new level” of terrorist and theater studies, and marked a new level of literary response to grapple with new “methods” and “scopes” of violent communication. Although spectacularized, “global television” represents one way to discuss the theatrics of 9/11, and the complex theatrical “choices planners made” invite further scholarship by literary theorists in order to understand cultural artifacts responding to the event.

Post 9/11 performances in literature still follow the basic definitions of traditional performances—they are both staged and symbolic, and are directed towards an audience. Indeed, 9/11 was an event for which terrorists trained and executed on a media stage. In the context of 9/11, then, performances question the functionality of a stage and begin to break it down in order to more intimately involve audience members in the action. 9/11 texts portray these kinds of performances as both rehearsed and improvised staged events which act as focal points for audiences and actors to rethink 9/11’s initial media staging. Therefore, analyzing performances in post 9/11 texts involves unpacking instances of theater—mimetic moments of performing arts that imitate the drama of 9/11 in their execution.

Performativity and theatricality, however, are different than what one might imagine to be quintessential performance art. As Schechner contends, “There are limits to what ‘is’ performance. But just about anything can be studied ‘as’ performance” (30). Texts and characters considered “as” performative in post 9/11 fiction demonstrate theatricality in their behavior rather than their overt staging—having more to do with the *intent* of their “act” rather than the staged execution of such. Performativity is dramatic behavior. Performativity and theatricality are defined by Schechner in terms of movement: “any behavior, event, action, or

thing can be studied ‘as’ performance, can be analyzed in terms of *doing, behaving, and showing*” (32, my emphasis). If performances are symbolic behaviors, how do post 9/11 texts act? Interrogating post 9/11 texts “as” theater highlights the relationship between the “behavior” or performativity of the text in the context of an audience. Meaning is created not by just an author, reader, or a text—instead it is created through the open dialogue and communication between the three via action, interaction, and relation. As Schechner posits, “Performance isn’t ‘in’ anything but ‘between’” (24).

Thus, post 9/11 literatures “act” with an awareness of an audience from whom they invite reactions using dramatizations and showiness. Performance and 9/11 literature underlines the significance of fluid moments where objects and people meet—moments of contact, rather than moments of staged, objectified, distance. 9/11 as a performative was used to elicit fear in a national and international audience—it behaved theatrically in order to promote audience response through terror. Extending this definition, one could contend that every behavior or “act” is potentially performative in post 9/11 texts, and behavioral theorists using the concept of theatricality to unpack cultural performances would advocate this line of thinking. The behaviors that are the most intriguing in the context of 9/11, however, are the ones that carry out a specific purpose in relation to the original event, underlining the interest of performance studies in interrogating how performances achieve their intended aims. Performances and theatrics have desired outcomes—purposes that drive their staging. If 9/11 was meant to send a message of fear and terror, then it did so by executing an unprecedented performance in terms of its lasting destruction on US soil—pitting holy warriors against the infidels of the West. Likewise, initial nationalistic responses to 9/11 were equally polarized in their distancing the “us” from the “them.” Post 9/11 texts respond to the absoluteness of identity and terror with dramatizations to

rethink 9/11 and promote healing through “recasting” the complexities of seemingly absolute identities and histories.

Considering post 9/11 texts “as” theatrical involves analyzing the way they offer themselves up as dramatic focal points and stages of ideas and counternarratives. They do this in their dynamic exchanges between actors and audiences which promote identities defined by relationality rather than inert distance and polarization. As performance theorist David Román suggests, “Performance’s liveness and impermanence allow for a process of exchange—between artists and audiences, between the past and the present—where new social formations emerge [which] constitute a counterpublic that offers both respite and change from normative structures of being . . .” (1-2). By straddling different conceptions of theater, both by considering cultural artifacts *as* theater and by looking at the theatrical elements *in* those artifacts, literary theorists will be better able to explore the “process of exchange” that Román defines and avoid the uncritical use of the term “performance.” As such, post 9/11 texts question the roles of audiences, actors, and identities in the post 9/11 moment where many traditional boundaries of communication and symbol were shattered by an asymmetrical act of terror. As they respond, they attempt to open up new dynamic communication methods where neither the actor nor the audience is the sole meaning maker, and offer “respite” in a terror-filled world.

Performances in Post 9/11 Literature

Defining what constitutes a performance depends on context, history, and culture: “something ‘is’ a performance when historical and social context, convention, usage, and tradition say it is” (Schechner 30). In contemporary theatrical convention, something that is artistically presented on a stage, like a play, can be considered a performance. In the following

examples from Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, a street performer delivers a chilling act that forces his audience to rethink their identities by revisiting 9/11's horror.

Falling Man showcases a performer who recreates the image of the iconic 9/11 falling man dropping to his death from the World Trade Center, therein questioning the boundaries of "art" and highlighting the symbiotic relationship between performer and audience. DeLillo's performer achieves this image as he hangs himself precariously upside down from buildings to reimagine the fall in "still life" form. This act causes a vehement response among most observers who do not want to be confronted with the falling man's depiction of death and horror. For example, one of the novel's protagonists Lianne, sees the falling man's act several times throughout the novel. She is initially disturbed by the image, noting:

Traffic was barely moving now. There were people shouting up at him, outraged at the spectacle . . . It held the gaze of the world, she thought. There was the awful openness of it, something we'd not seen, the single falling figure that trails a collective dread, body come down among us all. And now, she thought, this little theater piece, disturbing enough to stop traffic and send her back into the terminal. (33)

Lianne's progression in terming the episode a "spectacle" in the beginning and near the end a "theater piece" illustrates her changing perception of the "act." The spectacular nature of the falling man causes an immediate backlash as the audience's "outrage" boils over into "shouting"; yet, the act also makes Lianne reflect on the symbolism of the performance, a reinterpretation and re-confrontation of the "dread" of 9/11. In this confrontation, the performance asks Lianne to relive her raw fear and confusion as she originally experienced it. However, this time she relives it in an informed way—she now knows where the attack came from, why it happened, and the

initial political responses to the attack. It also gives her a chance to rethink her response to the original horror. The “openness” of the interpretation, furthermore, is where she connects with and responds to the falling man not as a spectacle, but as a “theater piece”—a piece in which she is implicated as the body descends, “coming down among us all.” More than a passive moment suggesting that Lianne consider 9/11, the act forcefully confronts her and incorporates her own interpretation as part of the experience within the “newness” of its execution. It is not overly prescriptive, but “open” enough to invite new counternarratives which challenge initial nationalistic and traumatic ones that emerged in response to the original man bodies from the World Trade Center (WTC).

Lianne’s further reactions to the falling man illustrate a budding self-awareness in which she begins to analyze her own actions in addition to the street performer’s act. The second time she witnesses the falling man, she wants to leave like she did the first time, yet she cannot take her eyes off of the figure: “She wished she could believe this was some kind of antic street theater, and absurdist drama that provokes onlookers to share a comic understanding of what is irrational in the great schemes of being or in the next small footstep. This was too near and deep, too personal” (163). Lianne notes that this type of “theater” stands on the edge of too private because it showcases the horror of an immediate death still fresh on the audience’s mind. For Lianne, this crosses an emotional boundary highlighting something so awful that she wants to forget rather than to revisit it. The repetition of the word “too” underlines an excess of feeling which Lianne does not want to face, but is forced to by the “drama.” Lianne yearns for a more emotionally distanced staging where “antics” and “absurdity” would create “understanding” in a superficial way. Conventional theater, Lianne thinks, would not implicate the personal so openly and painfully, but would instead respect the distance between the event and the reaction through

the absurd. The act is certainly “provoking,” but not in the way Lianne wishes; however, it still demands her attention. She begins to analyze her own perceived need for distance in relation to the performance, and she must look inward to do so. In the end, the “understanding” she finds in the drama is “personal” enough to make her uneasy—an intimacy in which she must come to terms with herself because she cannot simply melt into the crowd and run away. As an onlooker, Lianne is even more a part of this performance than she is the original performance of 9/11 which she cannot seem to stop watching over and over again. She admits, “Every time she saw a videotape of the planes she moved a finger toward the power button on the remote. Then she kept on watching” (134).

Indeed, the falling man’s performance is different than Lianne’s TV watching because there is no “remote” to distance herself from the action. She is also unable to emotionally distance herself because of the extremity of the falling man’s act. His performance is close, personal, and meant, Lianne thinks, to recreate the frantic response New Yorkers had to 9/11 as audiences are reconfronted with the haunting image of a falling stranger that could just as easily be a friend, coworker, or relative. She thinks, “Then she began to understand. Performance art, yes, but he wasn’t here to perform for those at street level or in the high windows. He was situated where he was . . . waiting for a train to come, northbound, this is what he wanted, an audience in motion, passing scant yards from his standing figure” (164). Although the performance is removed in physical distance, the emotional distance is collapsed as Lianne analyzes the falling man’s interaction with his specific audience. She is afforded a critical, meta-moment in which she imagines the people on the train reacting to his fall—a fall that they do not realize is staged so carefully: “She wondered if this was his intention, to spread the word this way, by cell phone, intimately, as in the towers and in the hijacked planes” (165). In her

assessment, the critical connection between the actor and his audience is the “motion” of the audience that is unachievable through watching a performance on a traditional stage, a news broadcast, or any other “spectacle”-like act featuring “antics” and “absurdist drama.” This “motion” moves away from the stationary television, or even the emotionally distanced performance, to a moving one in which the audience and the actor are involved “intimately” in a frighteningly real act. Some of the audience members are more startled than others by the performance because they are unaware it is an act, adding to the immediacy. The performance brings the falling man figure back to life in a way that no other gesture could. It extends the boundaries of “performance art” in its extremism and also reconnects audiences with the original event which was highly removed and emotionally distanced through media depictions.

Lianne’s second encounter with the falling man begins to break down the traditional boundaries between actor and audience and this collapse causes Lianne to critically rethink her positionality as an audience member who is suddenly required to react as an integral part of the artistic meaning making process. Lianne initially wishes that the conventions of traditional theatrics would be observed. However, just as 9/11 as an event did not follow conventions of traditional warfare and symbolic expression—it was asymmetrical, wider in scope than any previous act of terror, and represented the first major penetration of American defenses at home—the text seems to suggest that artistic representations of 9/11 must likewise push boundaries to make new sense of the original act. Thus, Lianne remains caught in the middle, trying to interpret this new mode of communication that is asymmetrical, intimate, and perpetually in motion. The communication happens through Lianne’s understanding of performance, and the vocabulary that goes with it, as she terms the experience everything from performance art to absurdist street theater.

For Lianne, the falling man's street theater symbolizes a responsive necessity because it represents excessive feelings. Performance theorist John Bell suggests that, although the 9/11 act cannot be termed "art" or "artistic," it can be thought of in terms of "performance," and in doing so, a deeper understanding of the event and reactions to it is possible. He contends:

Using the tools of performance studies to analyze how calculated violence is employed in media-saturated society is not an insult to the memories of those who died, but an essential means of understanding the undeniably symbolic level at which global conflict is now being played out. It is clear that such vivid terms as "Axis of Evil," "Homeland Security," and "Weapons of Mass Destruction" have been put into play with full cognizance of their semiotic value, and we will only understand the actual implications of these concepts and the actions connected to them—performatives all—if we are able to comprehend them on an equally sophisticated level of analysis. The concept of performance, and our studies of performance, can help us understand and respond to these new exigencies. (7)

Only through "sophisticated levels of analysis," particularly *self*-analysis, can Lianne begin to "comprehend" the act, the symbol, and the communication. In these analytical moments, like when she "began to understand. Performance art, yes" (164), we see Lianne's critical engagement with the falling man as she tries to understand his "actual implications" (Bell 7). Although perplexing, the "undeniably symbolic" acts (Bell 7) of the falling man are not lost on Lianne, and her interactions with his performance straddle her need to both relive and rethink the original event, and interpret it enough to move on.

Three years after her first two encounters with the falling man's performances, Lianne reads the falling man's obituary in the newspaper and decides to investigate his life further,

demonstrating her need to continue “interpreting” the performance and him. Searching for articles about the falling man, Lianne tries to find an image that captured the second performance she witnessed, but “there were no photographs of that fall. She was the photograph, the photosensitive surface. That nameless body coming down, this was hers to record and absorb” (223). On the one hand, the falling man’s legacy is Lianne’s need to connect, understand, and know him, fostering a relationship over her several encounters with his performance. However, in her searching, she becomes the “proactive” character continuing in his tradition. Because of Lianne’s interactions with and reflections on the falling man, she becomes “the photograph,” the interpreter, and the “record.” For Lianne, the performance means taking an active role in the theatrics, a role where she is responsible for more than mere observation. She is responsible for “absorbing” the act as well. Lianne’s “photosensitivity” refers to the transfer from actor to observer—a place of contact and transmittance via performance. Lianne’s act of absorption means to integrate the act into herself—to make it part of her. The performance forces her to cast her glance finally inward instead outward at the performance. As she does so, she is changed lastingly on an emotional level.

Lianne’s “absorption” also points out a deeper transfer that refers to more than a simple image transfer, but an affective dimensionality in which her newfound “sensitivity” is utilized. Lianne’s contact with the falling man affects her interactive “surface”—her understanding of the image—as well as her emotional profundity. This lasting emotional connection relates back to the original photographs taken on 9/11—the falling man’s performance restages the original free fall in such a way that Lianne’s mind *and* heart are affected, signaling her rethinking and *re feeling* 9/11. While researching the performer, Lianne remembers seeing the picture of the iconic 9/11 falling figure: “The picture burned a hole in her mind and heart, dear God, he was a

falling angel and his beauty was horrific” (222). Through reencountering the original fall through a performance of such, Lianne is lastingly touched (more deeply than her surface) in her “mind” and “heart” in a way that the original encounter with the iconic figure did not. Thus, the performance helped overcome the emotionally distanced image through Lianne’s proactive response and interpretation of it.

In contrast to Lianne’s active role as an audience member, Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* portrays its protagonist, nine year old Oskar Schell, as Yorick in a staged performance of *Hamlet*, therein thrusting him into the limelight, making him a meaning maker and symbol of 9/11’s violent communication. Oskar’s on-stage theatrics work to further redefine the relationship between actor and audience in the reimagining of terror and the “between spaces” where actor and audience meet—a meeting which proves to be both unconventional in execution and frightening in its violent implications. After his father was killed in the WTC attacks, Oskar searches through New York City trying to find a lock that fits a key his father left behind, getting to know a number of New York strangers in the process. In sum, he acts out the part of a detective in his search for the meaning of his father’s life, death, and his own relationship to it.

Oskar’s somewhat dramatic search for meaning, however, is thematized by a clearly staged moment of performance in his school’s production of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, a play that itself portrays an son avenging his father’s untimely and wrongful death. This parallel uncovers Oskar’s personal anxieties in his relationship to 9/11, his father’s death, and his own identity. In one of the most overt performances in the novel, Oskar’s portrayal of Yorick showcases his struggle to find meaning in these relationships. Oskar’s part is minimal at best—he is dressed up as a skull—and he does not deliver any lines. Instead, Oskar is acted upon by Jimmy Snyder, the

Hamlet character, who delivers the well-known line, “Alas, poor Yorick . . .” (144). Oskar, reflecting on his character’s immobility and the audience’s apathy, wonders, “What’s the point of giving an extremely subtle performance if basically no one is watching?” (143). Like the unsubtle performance executed on 9/11 (perhaps in response to American apathy towards competing world views) terrorists delivered a rude wakeup call to the West. In this sense, Oskar’s observation is strangely reminiscent of the symbolic acts of 9/11 which penetrated America’s economic and military heart. Paralleling Oskar’s frustration with the 9/11 terrorists points out a fundamental crisis in communication, for one could interpret the 9/11 act as a violent reaction to a nation that refused to pay attention to previous warnings. Post 9/11 security analysts like Brian Jenkins now suggest that listening is an important avenue to explore to preemptively stop attacks like 9/11: “If you want to know what [terrorists] are thinking about, listen to what they have to say” (*Unconquerable Nation* 61). In this instance of irritation, Oskar feels ostracized and silenced. Thus, it is not surprising that a few nights following Oskar’s frustrated observation, he imagines a not-so-“subtle” performance in his mind’s eye, a violent performance in which he becomes the lead actor of *Hamlet* and viscerally bashes in Jimmy Snyder’s head. For Oskar, this is his way of reacting to an indifferent crowd, and getting back at a bully.

Oskar’s imagined performance is unconventional because its make-believe break with convention provides a “safe” place that the imagined violence can be considered, played out, and rethought by readers. Oskar feels “on that stage, under that skull, incredibly close to everything in the universe, but also extremely alone” (145). Echoing the intense adverbs from the book’s title, Oskar’s emotions point to an excess of feeling much like Lianne’s encounter with the falling man that was “too deep.” To combat the aloneness, Oskar, in his mind’s eye, smashes Jimmy’s head, and his imaginary audience gives him a standing ovation and cries, “Thank you!

Thank you, Oskar! We love you so much! We'll protect you!" (146). Oskar's violence prompts a response because it forces the audience to pay attention and react. In his imagination, the reaction is a positive one because he is the hero of the show. The imaginary safeness promised by his audience takes place as Oskar, the stationary actor, takes control of and unconventionally "improvises" (145) a new play—one that is neither pre-scripted nor rehearsed. Oskar takes the role of the hero as he disposes of the bully, takes center stage through violence, and is finally heard. Instead of feeling distanced and "lonely" on stage, Oskar finally feels "love," albeit an imagined love. Thus, Oskar's reimagining of *Hamlet* functions on many levels. On the one hand, it represents Oskar's search not only to understand, but to be understood, and his improvised and imagined performance provides him a dynamic fictional connection with his audience standing and responding to him. However, on another level, the performance is a brutal one in which conventional means of communication are rescripted while Oskar rewrites Yorick's character. Instead of a stationary, dead character, Oskar imagines an active protagonist. His imagination brings Yorick to life and disposes of the traditional protagonist, Hamlet, by brutally hurting him. In the end, Oskar's rethinking of the play prompts audience support. In this reading, Oskar recognizes the potential for violence within himself, and that violence is directed at the bully of the show, Hamlet, or, if read allegorically in alignment with the political "play" of 9/11, the bully of the West.

However, Oskar does not really play out that brutality, but instead remains the inert skull, underlining the text's suggestion that the imagination constitutes a place where the original violence of 9/11 can be relived, rethought, and rewritten. Fiction itself seems to work in the same way as Oskar's imaginary, as a place of potential reworking of history. Oskar does not resort to actual violence, but stops himself in the world of his daydream. Oskar's act is on the one hand

vividly real—readers do not realize that it is imagined until after it plays out in the narrative. On the other hand, the act’s fictionality underlines an important move in post 9/11 literature collapsing the distance between fiction and reality in the eyes of the readers. *Literature after 9/11*’s editors Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn suggest that many post 9/11 texts explore “the space between the real and the imagined, between image and trope, and between the private realm of memory and the public realm of history. 9/11 literature impels us to see these spaces even as it forces them together” (2). Oskar’s moment of performance “forces” the imagined and the reality together for himself and the text’s readers. Through his acting out and uncovering of post 9/11 anxieties Oskar is able to process his contradictory feelings and the text’s readers witness and interpret the show. Even though his inner violence boils over in his *Hamlet* performance, it remains a “safe” place for Oskar and readers to rethink 9/11, consider actions that might have preemptively stopped it, and identify with those who executed the terror.

Even though the violent performance is imagined, Oskar’s real live performance still touches his audience, showing that even a passive performance requires some active audience interaction. Through audience members’ acknowledgement of Oskar, the elementary school performance, like DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, brings people together, albeit in a perplexing way. Like Lianne searching for meaning and understanding after witnessing the falling man’s performances, many of the strangers Oskar meets throughout New York City come to his play to connect with and perhaps try to understand Oskar through his Shakespearean rendition. Oskar notes that although many of the strangers in the audience know him, they do not know each other, and he uses his treasure hunts through Central Park as a hermeneutic to understand the connections. He says, “what was weird was that they didn’t know what they had in common, which was kind of like how I didn’t know what the thumbtack, the bent spoon . . . and all those

other things I dug up in Central Park had to do with each other” (143). Oskar’s performance, however, connects these disparate people through an event—a “common” experience that each person shares a moment of communication. His performance is the binding glue between each of the New Yorkers’ evenings, a relationality that provides a connection that did not exist before. After Oskar comes to from his imaginary performance, he looks “out across the audience from underneath the skull . . . I saw Abe Black, and he saw me. I knew that we were sharing something with our eyes, but I didn’t know what, and I didn’t know if it mattered” (147). Abe Black, one of the strangers that helped Oskar in his quest to find the lock, share “something” in the moment of the performance—the moment when the actor and the spectator acknowledge one another as more than actor and audience member, but as people. This “something” escapes Oskar’s comprehension just as the falling man eludes Lianne’s understanding: “The man eluded her . . . she could believe she knew these people, and all the others she’d seen and heard that afternoon, but not the man who’d stood above her, detailed and looming” (224). Even through the ambiguity, the moment of recognition promotes meaning, connection, and a mutual understanding and interest in the individual through the “act.” Both of these performances bring groups of strangers together—strangers who are connected to each other through nothing other than the theater.² These moments of connection also prompt readers to reconnect to the original performance of 9/11 not as passive spectators, but through taking initiative in the theatrical communication process by reintroducing personal connection into the interpretation of the symbolic act.

Such meetings and connections are significant in that they promote relationality in an otherwise fractured and broken post 9/11 world, a world which Kristiaan Versluys suggests broke limits in an already cracked existence. In *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*,

(2009) Versluys extrapolates upon the indefinable event of 9/11: “in the instantaneity of its horror and in its far flung repercussions 9/11 is unpossessable. It is a limit event that shatters the symbiotic resources of the culture and defeats the normal processes of meaning making” (1-2). Although it is a crushing “limit,” 9/11 prompts a new discussion of “meaning making processes” in a horror-filled post 9/11 context. Even with communication difficulties in this context, fictions responding to the event still try to make meaning even amid 9/11’s “shattering of resources.” They all face the same quandary: if the event is seemingly outside of language, definitions, and possession, how is it to be represented? Even if one posits that nothing *can* exist outside of these sign systems, Foer’s and DeLillo’s texts innovatively reimagine these systems by suggesting that although the event seemingly defies words, it did not defy communicative processes.

Communication that promotes a back and forth dialogue between various speakers and actors is fulfilled through the texts in theatrical moments where staged symbols are open enough for audiences to connect, share, and grow. Therefore, because of the nature of the *exchanges* between Lianne and the falling man, Oskar and Abe Black, a recognition becomes apparent in the exchange between actor and audience, and a self awareness comes to play within the main characters themselves. Without the exchange, interaction, and new mode of communication, the recognition would not take place and the performance would remain static and “unpossessable.”

Post 9/11 literature as Performance

Not only do post 9/11 texts focus on theatrical episodes within their narrative structures, but their formal composition also explores performance’s role as textual, both mimicking and re-representing the original terror of the event. As Schechner comments, “Both bin Laden and Bush reduced the complexities of the situation to a performative either/or by casting the other side as ‘evil.’ Categories such as ‘good’ and ‘evil’ and terms such as ‘tragedy’ and ‘jihad’ (holy war)

invoke a highly theatrical protagonist-antagonist conflict” (265). Post 9/11 fiction’s representations necessitate audience involvement through the audience’s physical movement in “reading” the texts—an active reading that reintroduces “complexities” back into a nuanced event in terms of its scope and ramifications. In the context of an event that is oftentimes interpreted as a distanced spectacle, post 9/11 fiction’s formal performativity collapses audience distance in order to promote open dialogues where authors, texts, and readers work together to make meaning. As such, the behavior of post 9/11 fiction defies the event’s polarizing effect by examining 9/11’s nuanced symbolism through equally symbolic performatives.

To regain the complexity that was lost in the face of political performances following 9/11, literatures like *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* require significant effort on the part of the audience. Audiences are asked to engage with the text not only through physical movement and immediate response that comes from the physical act of scanning a page, but also through critical analysis as much of the meaning from the theatrics remains as “open” as the falling man’s performance—ambiguous and undefined. Interactive texts require readers to wrestle with meanings as well as physically engage with the text in such a way that readers can add their voices to the convoluted theater of 9/11 through visual invitations like open spaces on the page. Opening up new communication pathways, post 9/11 texts formally act out the paradoxes and complexities that came to light through the original attack. They also offer themselves up as new stages of audience interaction and interpretation focusing on communication and communion rather than detachment and inertness.

Through interaction, the texts create new spaces of thinking about 9/11 where the event is not out of reach, but is brought back into the limelight of public discourse and ethical discussion. Indeed, this assertion follows in line with a general understanding of

postmodernism's self-aware textuality. It also, however, furthers the understanding of what texts and readers alike can accomplish in the context of terror, namely, to reclaim an act that some posit exists outside of language and experience through action and communication. In his famous essay "From Work to Text" (1971), Roland Barthes distinguishes between a work and a text in terms of the interactivity needed to interpret texts. Reading his theatrical vocabulary in the light of 9/11 literature's performativity make this connection even more important: "The work is held in the hand, the text is held in language: it exists only when caught up in a discourse. The text is experienced only in an activity, in a production" (237). The theatrical "production" of post 9/11 literature in this case relates to its staging of 9/11 narratives that require audience involvement to overcome the unmoving space separating audiences from the event. As Barthes suggests, texts must be "experienced" through "activity" and "discourse." Post 9/11 texts achieve this activity through prompting audience response in terms of movement and dynamic interpretation.

Post 9/11 texts "act" as complex the original event, mixing fiction and nonfiction, diverse narrative techniques, text and graphics, and shocking audience expectations to provoke an active response—a response that requires readers to rethink and interact with 9/11 and terrorism on an intimate level. In the confusion, trauma, and fear following 9/11, Americans scrambled in their shock to try to define an enemy and fill in unanswered questions in the face of horror—who did it, why, and how? John C. Cawelti asserts that this moment was used as a political stage: "[t]he Bush administration was able to use the ideological fragmentation and polarization . . . to intensify the public's fear and uncertainty in the aftermath of 9/11 (212). Texts like *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* revive the original confusion before the polarization of the American public through formal strategies. For example, the text mimics "uncertainty" and "fragmentation" and, instead of giving answers to confusion, recreates the blank spaces of 9/11

for readers to fill in. This “fill in the blank” move creates a new dialogue between the text and its readers as readers must confront the original confusion and fear that 9/11 represented without political filters.

The ways in which Foer’s text employs formal unconventionality to recall and revisit post 9/11 psychologies are illustrated by a scene in which Oskar eavesdrops on his mother and his psychologist. In this moment, Oskar has to work to fill in the gaps of the conversation. As Oskar tries to listen in, he uses a stethoscope but he hears only snippets of the dialogue. As he is faced with the unintelligible spaces, the audience is formally faced with them as well. Oskar hears, and the audience sees, the broken conversation: “used to be someone me a question, and I could say yes, or but believe in short answers anymore” (204). In this formal move, the voice of Oskar’s mother and the doctor are confused as neither one is identified by the text. This performance not only leaves the meaning of the spaces ambiguous, but it also collapses the distance between the voice of authority and the common perspective—bringing the confusion of the terrorist attacks to the forefront of the conversation and letting the audience decide how to fill in the open spaces that are too wide to be occupied with simple “short answers.” As words and roles are scrambled, Oskar and the audience are left to interpret in the blanks in a highly symbolic moment of the novel, one in which the falling man image is inserted into the middle of the overheard conversation. The audience identifies with Oskar in this moment as his inability to understand his own psychological lapses following 9/11 reflects the audience’s inability to fully grasp the literal and figurative “blank spaces” that were left after the Twin Towers fell. The towers fell both literally, crumbling to pieces and leaving a gaping hole in the New York skyline, and figuratively, symbolizing the United States’ attacked economic stability. Confronting the image along with the white spaces works to remind readers of 9/11 and the

literal and figurative open questions lingering after the event. As readers attempt to discern the conversation, they become part of the text's dialogue, and also add their interpretations to a highly complex event of 9/11.

In another instance, Foer's text presents an indecipherable page that readers must try to interpret and make sense of, therein mimicking the confusion experienced by Oskar, his family, and others, in the post 9/11 fray. Again, this formal experiment invites readers to take a dynamic part in the retelling of the post 9/11 narrative. In this instance, the text includes one page where the uniform lines of prose lose the conventional spacing separating lines of horizontal text and diverges into an unreadable overlapping "script." Narrated by Oskar's grandfather, the section states, "there won't be enough pages in this book for me to tell you what I need to tell you, I could write smaller, I could slice the pages down their edges to make two pages, I could write over my own writing, but then what?" (276). Consequently, the audience is confronted with the question of "what happens" when there is not enough room to fully express "what [one] need[s] to tell." As the narration continues, the text acts out the question by beginning to overlap itself, and asks the audience to respond to this problem through its formal questioning of textuality. The story continues with the account of the grandfather meeting his grandson and Oskar sharing his father's last words before the towers collapsed. At this point, the text converges upon itself and the line spacing diminishes as the text literally "writes over [its] own writing." In this symbolic gesture, the text suggests that there is not enough room, and will never be enough room, to tell the 9/11 story completely—and the audience is faced with such a realization visually.

The most important part of this novel's performance, however, is the audience's role in visual interpretation. The text demands that readers rethink traditional modes of written communication, and also conventional modes of textual analysis. In the blackness of the

confused text, readers must confront the “rubble” of 9/11, where language has failed. It also provides a place where the fill in the blank episode and the blackness coincide to create open areas of audience response. These responses may range from reactions to 9/11, answers to the questions posed, or moments of self-awareness where the audience must critically self-assess before adding an answer to the void. The moment is intimate in its demand of audience interaction—an interaction that causes the connection between reader and text to grow even in its ambiguity. Thus, the overlapping text suggests overlapping interpretations.

The final instance of Foer’s formal theatrics forces readers to physically interact with the text by flipping through the last pages of the book, thereby solidifying audience interaction to the end. At the close of the text, what Mitchum Huehls calls “the flip book’s cinematic” (43) comes into play. These pages show the falling man drifting upward through the air as the audience scans the final image-based “flip book.” For Walter Kirn and Timothy Dow Adams, this is one of the overly sentimental parts of the novel where Foer’s “avant-guard” toolkit is little more than a regressive move (182). This critique might relate to the fact that flip books were traditionally made for a young audience, and therefore it is a “regressive” positioning of an adult reader, yet the flip book puts readers into the innocent and helpless role of a child like Oskar Schell, trying to make sense of the horrific falling man image. Just as many adults who watched the events on 9/11 felt helpless and confused, the text attempts to recapture a sense of innocence and vulnerability. In the novel, Oskar imagines the falling man falling up instead of down—a reversal in time to a place where everything would have been okay. This flip book represents a strangely hopeful image in the face of the horror—a reversal in which Oskar’s dad would have been alive. It also puts the book into “motion” like in DeLillo’s text where the falling man’s moving audience creates a sense of immediacy for the actor. Foer’s audience is forced to once

again be involved in the performance—a performance that Huehls explains requires one to “quickly flip through the last few pages of the book, bringing [the] cinematic . . . to the reader’s own fingertips and making the novel performatively coextensive with Oskar’s journal” (43). Building off of this movement and audience interaction with the flip book, readers are asked to be actors. The structure of the ending forces them to physically be a part of the text’s performance. A highly charged moment in its performative nature, the text simultaneously acts out two roles: the ending of both Oskar’s journal and the novel. In a strange way it is also a call to action at the book’s close, a physical movement that requires audience participation to have meaning. As readers create the “flip book’s cinematic,” they are confronted with a choice: to accept Oskar’s vision or to reject it, to flip through the images, or to remain immobile.

Foer’s choice to end with image and movement is at once responsive to the profound visuality of 9/11, and resistant of the objectified spectacle that it represents. Experimenting with new modalities of communication, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* asks readers to overcome the static, removed images of 9/11, and collapses the distance between action and the observer. And yet, post 9/11 texts at large cannot sidestep completely the image-based event and response. Speaking of context, Dana Heller explains that images played “a major role in managing the disaster imagery . . . On average, Americans watched eight hours of television news coverage on September 11” (7). It comes as no surprise, then, that post 9/11 literature is likewise self-aware of its visuality and performs such in its restaging of 9/11 events and culture. Huehls points out the use of images and performance in relation to temporal representation in Foer’s use photographs and graphic images of the falling man figure. For Huehls, the image based performance is a representation of “the US struggle to manage its own timely traumas since 9/11” as the US struggled to figuratively “connect the dots” of 9/11 and respond in real

time to a fragmented event (43). Indeed, the performances and representations in these texts require an interactive audience that must respond to contextual imagery and text while rethinking its relationship to 9/11. As both texts—Foer’s and DeLillo’s—make extensive use of the falling man figure, they confuse the distance between the “true” image, and fiction’s response and use of the image. In doing so they argue that the “true” image’s static nature emotionally distances viewers and stifles interaction with 9/11 through its immobility.

Dramatic Conclusions

As performance theorist Robert Brustein noted about the overt performative nature of the terrorist attacks, “In an ominous coincidence, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon occurred around the beginning of the Second Millennium, a time traditionally associated with Apocalypse. In a slightly less apocalyptic synchronism, September 11 also coincides with the beginning of every new theater season” (242). Post 9/11 fictions like Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* and Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* showcase plot-driven moments of performance and formal performativity to highlight the relationships between actors and audiences in the post 9/11 moment. They do this to reinsert complex characters into cultural memories about the event, and with the ten year anniversary of the attacks approaching, revisiting these texts allows for a dynamic view of 9/11’s cultural impact.

By demanding significant readerly responsibility from their audiences through formal theatrics like page flipping and graphics, post 9/11 literatures require interactive communication methods that lead to synergetic conversation. Indeed, post 9/11 texts point to none other than their readers as a site of critical interpretation and possible ethical response to 9/11—and so by opening up a dialogue between reader, writer, and text. These fictions do not reduce the

complexities of culpability and trauma as issues, but instead complicate them by restaging the event to elicit new responses. Many characters are at “play,” and in considering performances, readers take on one of the most important “roles” in the process of meaning making and interpretation. The texts take the conversation out of the realm of political banter, and philosophical theory, and put the process back into meaningful communication processes.

Perhaps the most important implication of studying 9/11 fiction and performance is the acknowledgement that these fictions refuse to be mere spectacles for hungry readers to objectify. For critics and common readers alike, post 9/11 literatures play with their audience in such a way that they refuse to be consumed. They implode the static distance that inherent in a spectacle, and confront readers through movement and ambiguity, and as such, retain dynamic personalities by attempting to create new exigencies of reader response in the face of 9/11’s tragedy. Their self-aware textuality both works in conjunction with other postmodern texts that deal with trauma, as well as furthers the textual production process in the context of communication. Barthes posits, “The text requires an attempt to abolish (or at least deminish) the distance between writing and reading, not by intensifying the reader's projection of the work, but by linking the two together.” (239). In this theatrical “linking” neither the actor or the audience member is placed above the other, but the traditional stage is broken down to promote open dialogues and *communion*. Post 9/11 literature invites “practical collaboration” and inhabits a “social space” that actively eliminates distance and promotes therapeutic conversation (Barthes 240-41).

If communication’s base is communion, post 9/11 texts reduce stagnant reactions to horror by promoting both vertical and horizontal moments of recognition. Actors and audiences connect through post 9/11 fictions just as strongly as audience members become aware of their positionality in relation to other audience members. Through this communion, 9/11 fiction’s

examination of performance in the context of the event overcomes the horrific media staging of the original act by its own breaking down of historical, social, and political stages. Instead of advancing the assertion that 9/11 changed everything, post 9/11 fictions attempt to change everything about the way critics and citizens alike think about 9/11.

End Notes

1. Kristiaan Versluys gives a broad overview of the different ways critics have relegated 9/11 outside the boundaries of language. He writes, “The writer Star Black calls the collapse of the buildings ‘a sight without reference,’ while Dori Laub, a psychoanalyst well known for his work with Holocaust survivors, states that ‘9/11 was an encounter with something that makes no sense, an event that fits nowhere.’ Similarly, James Berger declares: ‘Nothing adequate, nothing corresponding in language could stand for it.’ For Jenny Edkins, 9/11 is a traumatic event that ‘is outside the bounds of language, outside the worlds we have made for ourselves’” (*Out of the Blue* 2). Jeffery Melnick contends that in this loss for words has created a new language that presented itself to describe the event. He says, “‘9/11’ is a language. It has its own vocabulary, grammar, and tonalities” (6). Versluys succinctly overviews the many ways in which citizens and scholars alike have relegated the event of 9/11 as outside of the definable and the expressible, and Melnick suggests that because of such, new vocabularies have grown to surround the discussion of the event.

2. In a similar way, 9/11 connected communities across the United States through fundraising, blood donations and television coverage. Along with the surge in patriotism, fundraisers and blood donations were a common way that Americans showed support for the victims of the attacks. Simone Glynn et al in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported “...the number of blood donations in the weeks after the September 11, 2001, attacks was markedly greater than in the corresponding weeks of 2000 (2.5 times greater in the first week after the attacks; 1.3–1.4 times greater in the second to fourth weeks after the attack)” (289).

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